

ETHNIC RELATIONS AND POPULATION MIGRATION

GEORGIA'S AZERBAIJANIS: PROBLEMS OF CIVILIAN INTEGRATION

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Georgia is a polyethnic country; according to the 2002 population census, 16 percent of its population belongs to ethnic groups other than Georgian. Azerbaijanis are the most numerous among them; they live mainly in compact groups and have nothing to do with Georgia's public and

political developments, which makes it hard to integrate them into Georgian society. The velvet revolution of November 2003 brought to power new leaders who have already launched radical reforms. So far, there have been no visible changes in the civil integration of ethnic minorities.

Migration and Distribution

In Georgia, Azerbaijanis mainly live in the historical-geographical province of Kvemo Kartli in the southwest corner, in Kakheti and Shida Kartli (in the east), as well as in Tbilisi and Rustavi. The majority of them are Shi'a Muslims, though there are Sunnis as well. Driven by military and political circumstances, their ancestors came from Persia and Turkey in the late feudal period with the aim of settling down in the southeastern provinces of Georgia. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the number of Azeri migrants was much smaller than of other ethnic groups. In the latter half of the 20th century, their number started to grow at a fast pace,¹ until finally they outnumbered all the other ethnic groups that had moved to Georgia.² In Soviet times, the birthrate among the Azerbaijanis was one of the highest: while in 1989 there

¹ While in 1959 there were 153,600 Azerbaijanis (3.8 percent of the total population) living in the republic, by 1979 there were 255,700 (5.1 percent); by 1989 their number reached 307,600 (5.7 percent) (see: *State Department for Statistics of Georgia. Statistical Yearbook of Georgia*, 2001, pp. 37-38, in Georgian).

² See: V. Djaoshvili, *Population of Georgia in the 18th-20th Centuries*, Tbilisi, 1984, pp. 231-232 (in Georgian).

were 16 newborns per 1,000 Georgians, the figure for Azerbaijanis was 28 per 1,000. In the 1990s, this factor attracted the close attention of the nationalist forces; the republican media carried articles expressing displeasure with the rapid natural numerical growth of Azerbaijanis.³

Judging by the results of the population census of 2002, the number of Azerbaijanis in Georgia dropped to 284,761, even though their share in the total population increased to 6.5 percent.⁴ According to the All-Union population census of 1989, Azerbaijanis were the third largest ethnic group in Georgia (after the Armenians and Russians). Today, they have moved into first place.⁵ This is especially evident in the Marneuli District of Kvemo Kartli, where Azerbaijanis comprise 83 percent of population; the figures for the other districts of the same province are: Dmanisi, 68 percent; Bolnisi, 66 percent, and Gardabani, 44 percent.⁶

It was in the 1990s that emigration acquired mass proportions: the demand to separate from the Soviet Union was accompanied by nationalist slogans and, in some cases, open or latent oppression of ethnic minorities. At that time, the patriotic rhetoric of politicians often developed into nationalism causing apprehension among the non-Georgian population groups, even though there was no direct danger. People left out of fear of an uncertain future and possible persecution. Cases of persecution were registered mainly in Kvemo Kartli. In the context of the nationalist upsurge in Bolnisi and Marneuli, there were clashes between Azerbaijanis and Georgians. There were demands to set up the “autonomy of Borchalo.”⁷ The ethnic conflicts in the autonomous units of Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) that flared up in the early 1990s taught the authorities to expect similar developments in other regions. The preventive measures in Kvemo Kartli stemmed the open demands for autonomy.⁸

In 1992, Zviad Gamsakhurdia was deposed; Eduard Shevardnadze, who replaced him, abandoned the nationalist policies of his predecessor. His friendship with President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliiev increased the confidence of the local Azerbaijanis in the Georgian authorities; their emigration acquired a social-economic nature. Recently, when Mikhail Saakashvili’s National Movement—Democrats came to power, the fear of nationalism was revived. By way of confirmation of Saakashvili’s anti-Azerbaijani sentiments, people mention an episode that happened during the 2002 local elections when Saakashvili and his supporters described the Azerbaijanis brought from Kvemo Kartli to support Shevardnadze as “pitiful people.”⁹

Later, in January 2004, during his visit to Baku as the president of Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili described the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia as “his country’s national treasure.” Part of former confidence was restored, yet there are still many Azerbaijanis who continue to nurture fears and think about emigration.

Problems of Education

The local Azerbaijanis can study in secondary schools in their native tongue—there is no discrimination in this respect. Quite often, however, it is said that these school may be closed. For example, Alibaba

³ See: A. Totadze, “National Composition of the Population of Georgia,” *Eri*, No. 22, 22 May, 1991 (in Georgian).

⁴ Azerbaijanis in Georgia often complain that the official figures are deliberately understated because allegedly the state does not want the ethnic minorities acquiring the land they are living on. In the 1990s, when nationalism was very strong in Georgia, it was generally believed that given the high birthrate among the Azerbaijanis they might ask for large tracts of land; as a result certain areas would be owned by ethnic groups other than Georgian. According to the local Azerbaijanis, their numerical strength is no more than 400,000.

⁵ This was mainly caused by the outflow of Armenians and Russians from the republic. Some of the local Azerbaijanis also emigrated, but their number, as already mentioned, is supported by a relatively high birthrate compared with other ethnic groups. According to the 2002 population census, there are 284,761 (6.5 percent) Azerbaijanis in Georgia; 248,929 (5.7 percent) Armenians; 67,671 (1.5 percent) Russians (see: *State Department for Statistics of Georgia. Results of the First National, General Population Census of 2002*, Vol. 1, Tbilisi, 2003, p. 110, in Georgian). According to the 1989 population census, Armenians were the largest group—37,200 (8.1 percent), then came Russians 341,200 (6.3 percent), while Azerbaijanis came third, 307,600 (5.6 percent) (see: *State Department for Statistics of Georgia. Statistical...*, pp. 37-38).

⁶ See: *State Department for Statistics of Georgia. Results...*, pp. 113-116.

⁷ Sometimes, Azerbaijanis call Kvemo Kartli Borchalo; the name is derived from the Turkmenian tribe of Borchalu that settled in the Debedskoe Gorge in the 17th century.

⁸ The autonomy of Borchalo was first mentioned in Kvemo Kartli in the late 1980s when a certain amount of ethnic tension appeared. It was the nationalist-minded groups that first spoke of autonomy; the people refused to support them. When the commotion died down, there were no open talks about the autonomy. Those who do raise the issue risk arousing the displeasure of the locals; they are regarded as provocateurs.

⁹ *Rezonansi*, No. 135, 21 May, 2002 (in Georgian).

Askerov, chairman of Heyrat, an organization that represents Georgia's estimated 500,000-strong Azerbaijani minority, told the Caucasus press on 6 April that the Georgian authorities are planning to deprive Azerbaijani schools of state funding in the wake of an allegation by regional Governor Soso Mazmishvili that they provide instruction in Islamic fundamentalism.¹⁰ It should be admitted that the number of schools with teaching in other than Georgian tongues is diminishing mainly for lack of pupils. In 1996, there were 165 Azerbaijani schools in Georgia, in 2003, 8 thousand fewer students attended 164 Azerbaijani schools.¹¹

In anticipation of their children's future in Russia, many families prefer Russian schools; recently Georgian schools have also received their attention. However, devout Muslim families avoid Georgian schools because the religious lessons there are mainly devoted to Christianity.¹²

Ignorance of the State Tongue as the Main Obstacle to Integration

The Azerbaijanis living in the capital and some other regions of Georgia are more or less integrated into Georgian society and know the state tongue to a certain extent. In Kvemo Kartli practically nobody knows Georgian.

In Soviet times, Russian was the language used by different ethnic groups when speaking among themselves; some of the local Azerbaijanis studied in Russian schools because in the Soviet Union good command of Russian opened the doors of higher educational establishments and promised good careers. The Russian language gradually gave way to Georgian in the social and political spheres when the Soviet Union fell apart. Azerbaijanis have found themselves in a new situation and outside the stream of political events.

Significantly, the Azeri youth in Kvemo Kartli has recently opted for the native tongue as the main spoken language, which makes it very hard to teach Georgian to the local Azeri population. Only 120 people chose to attend the Georgian language courses for civil servants organized by the State Language Chamber. The money paid under a special program to the teachers of Georgian in non-Georgian school proved feeble inducement.¹³ In addition, the local people complain that Georgian is poorly taught in the local schools.¹⁴

Because of their ignorance of Georgian, the Azerbaijanis of Kvemo Kartli are living in an information vacuum.¹⁵ They receive no information in their native tongue either.¹⁶ For technical reasons, the Azerbaijani service of State Radio has been unable to broadcast its programs since 2000; the *Gurjistan* newspaper published in Azerbaijanian and party funded by the state is not popular among the local people. For this reason they know nothing about what is going on in the rest of the country; they learn everything from Azeri and Russian TV channels.¹⁷ Bad command of Georgian forces the local authorities to use Russian in official documents as it was during Soviet times. It should be said that even though Geor-

¹⁰ See: L. Fuller, "Azerbaijani Schools in Georgia Threatened with Closure," *RFL/RL Newslines*, Vol. 8, No. 68, 13 April, 2004, Part I.

¹¹ Information supplied by the Ministry of Education of Georgia about the non-Georgian schools functioning in Georgia in the 2003/2004 academic year.

¹² For this reason the new state flag of Georgia with five red crosses against a white background adopted after the revolution and obviously connected with Christianity caused certain friction. Later, Azerbaijanis did not protest about it (see: L. Fuller, R. Giragosian, "Georgian Leadership Woos Armenian, Azerbaijani Minorities," *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 8, No. 25, February 2004, Part I, 9.

¹³ See: Z. Mikatadze, "The Linguistic Problem in Kvemo Kartli Threatens the Country's Future," *Rezonansi*, No. 165, 21 June, 2004.

¹⁴ See: Z. Baazov, "Georgian Azeris Locked Out by Language," *CRS*, No. 145, 5 September, 2002.

¹⁵ The story widely known among the local people says that during the 2000 presidential elections in Georgia, the Azerbaijanis were looking for the name of Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliiev in their ballot papers.

¹⁶ It was only after the revolution that the local people started receiving 15-minute long broadcasts in their native tongue.

¹⁷ See: Z. Agaev, "Georgia's Azeris Want Media in Their Language," *Baku Sun*, Vol. 6, No. 13, 11-17 April, 2003.

gian as the state tongue should be used for the document flow across the country, in many places Russian or languages of other ethnic minorities are used.

Azerbaijanis find discussions of the draft law on the state tongue important. For certain reasons they believe that today knowledge of the state tongue should not be made obligatory for all citizens.¹⁸ They are also convinced that civil servants should not be obligated to know the state tongue. If a provision about obligatory knowledge of the state tongue is approved as part of the law, say Azerbaijanis, it will be regarded as a discriminatory measure against them.¹⁹ These convictions are shared in all regions with compact non-Georgian settlements where the knowledge of the state tongue is poor.

Economic Problems

The socioeconomic situation in Kvemo Kartli is very similar to that in other Georgian regions: communication means are falling apart; the majority of the local enterprises are idling; the irrigation systems are either too old or ruined. The local population lives by producing agricultural products, so the irrigation systems are especially important. The province feeds itself and sells the surplus outside the region. For many years corruption hampered this type of economic activity: it was especially evident on the highway that connected the region with the capital. The new authorities managed to partly curb it.

Small business is another source of income among Azerbaijanis. For many years they made a living by smuggling. Azerbaijanis bring agricultural products and Turkish and Azerbaijani consumer and industrial goods to Georgia. The shuttle traders crossed the border illegally through the Krasny Most (Red Bridge) checkpoint: thus they avoided rather high import taxes and satisfied the civil servants, who got rich by encouraging smuggling.²⁰ As soon as contradictions between the mainly Georgian civil servants and Azeri traders arose, they immediately acquired ethnic hues and were interpreted as discrimination of Azerbaijanis.²¹ Before the revolution, fighting corruption at checkpoints and smuggling was a mere formality.

The revolutionary leaders began an anti-corruption campaign at the checkpoints in earnest; the corresponding state structures are working hard to stem smuggling inside the country; several of the Azeri shuttle traders caught smuggling were detained.²² This naturally caused displeasure in the Azeri diaspora and was described as discrimination. The sudden changes in lifestyle enjoyed by a considerable number of the local people for many years caused economic problems. Since the authorities failed to offer alternative (read: legal) employment, mounting discontent among the local Azerbaijanis and destabilization in Kvemo Kartli were bound to follow.

The local people had pinned their hopes for a better economic and social future on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline; it turned out, however, that they were given no part in the project, apart from unskilled and low-paid manual work on a very limited scale. According to a Heyrat spokesman, there are only 30 Azerbaijanis among the 1,960 employed in the project.²³

Distribution of Arable Land

I have already written that Azerbaijanis are mainly village dwellers and are engaged in agriculture, therefore the land reform started in the 1990s directly affects them. According to the opinion shared by

¹⁸ Speech by Suleiman Suleimanov, Chairman of the Union of Azerbaijanis of Georgia, at the Conference "Georgia is a Multinational State." Tbilisi, 4-5 March, 2002, p. 19.

¹⁹ See: Z. Baazov, op. cit.

²⁰ See: L. Iremashvili, "Georgia's Red Bridge Ordeal," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), Caucasus Reporting Service*, No. 147, 20 September, 2002.

²¹ See: Z. Kechakmadze, "The Situation between the Non-Georgian Population and Georgian Border Guards in the Mameuli District Became Complicated," *Rezonansi*, No. 252, 16 December, 2002.

²² See: F. Ismailzade, "Georgia's Treatment of Azeri Minority Raises Concerns," *Eurasianet Organization*, 23 June, 2004.

²³ See: M. Mamedov, "Azerbaijantsev ne privilekaiut k stroitel'stvu gruzinskogo uchastka BTD," *Zerkalo*, 3 October, 2003.

many in Kvemo Kartli, the state is deliberately trying to deprive them of arable land in this region. Azerbaijanis live in great numbers along the state border while the 21 km wide border zone has been made a special zone occupied by unprofitable military agricultural enterprises. According to the local people, however, this land is perfectly suited for tilling. Since the law bans privatization of this land, the local people believe that the zones were set up to deprive them of their land.²⁴

At the initial stage of the land reform, the local people could not obtain reliable information because they did not know Georgian; individuals and private firms exploited their ignorance to privatize vast tracts of the best land and rent out small plots of it to the local people. After the revolution, people insisted on a just solution to the problem and were promised that this would be done.²⁵ Some of the local Azerbaijanis believe that the promise remained unfulfilled because most of the land in the region was rented out to Georgians, while much smaller areas were distributed among the Azerbaijanis.²⁶ They insist that they should stop being treated as “second-grade” citizens; this causes justified discontent among them and interferes with their integration into Georgian society.

Involvement in Sociopolitical Life

There are practically no non-Georgians in the central power structures, partly because of their inadequate knowledge of Georgian, and partly because ethnic minorities are deliberately kept away from high posts.²⁷ Even in Kvemo Kartli there are few Azerbaijanis among civil servants: the high posts in the local administrations and the judicial and law enforcement structures are mainly filled by Georgians; this is true even of lower posts in the state structures. This adds ethnic overtones to all contradictions between the state structures and the local Azeri community.

As a result of the 2002 local elections, Azerbaijanis have practically no representatives in town administrations in three out of the four predominantly Azeri Kvemo Kartli districts (Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi); they comprise an absolute majority only in the Marneuli administration of the same province.²⁸ This cannot be explained by linguistic problems or latent discrimination alone. The Azerbaijanis in Georgia prefer to keep away from politics and concentrate on economic and social problems. In the Javakheti District, for example, with a predominantly Armenian population, Armenians dominate in the local administrations; this is explained by their involvement in local politics.

In the republic's highest legislature, the number of Azeri deputies dropped compared with the previous convocation. (In the 1999-2003 parliament they were elected by the list of the pro-presidential Union of the Citizens of Georgia.) Their bad command of Georgian did not allow them to actively participate in legislative activities. Their presence on the pro-presidential list indicates their loyalty to the previous leadership.

Only three Azerbaijanis were elected to the parliament in the early 2004 elections. The local Azerbaijanis are obviously displeased. According to former deputy Izumrud Kurbanov, there are only three Azerbaijanis in the parliament and five Armenians, while the percentage of Azerbaijanis in Georgia is larger than that of Armenians.²⁹

Political passivity is not the only factor behind the small number of Azeri deputies in the elected structures: the specific nature of the local election campaigns is also to blame. Since the 1990s election

²⁴ See: *Azerbajjanskaia obshchina v Gruzii. Etnokonfessional'nye gruppy i problemy grazhdanskoj integratsii v Gruzii*, Kavkazskiy institut mira, demokratii i razvitiia, Tbilisi, 2002, p. 17; see also: A. Stepanian, Z. Khalilov, “Polozhenie etnicheskikh men'shinstv v gruzinskome obshchestve,” *Oдно obshchestvo, mnogo etnosov—etnicheskoe mnogoobrazie i grazhdanskaia integratsia v Gruzii*, Kavkazskiy institut mira, demokratii i razvitiia, Tbilisi, 2003, p. 101.

²⁵ See: M. Verdoshvili, “People of Kvemo Kartli Demand Land,” *Dilis gazeti*, No. 68, 23 March, 2004 (in Georgian).

²⁶ See: *AzerNews*, 3 June, 2004.

²⁷ Members of national minorities frequently complain that it is latent discrimination that keeps them away from civil service.

²⁸ For more detail about the 2002 local elections in Kvemo Kartli, see: *Handbook on the 2002 Local Elections*, National-Democratic Institute, Tbilisi, 2003, pp. 155-172 (in Georgian).

²⁹ See: *AzerNews*, 3 June, 2004.

results in Kvemo Kartli were determined mainly by the central and local authorities rather than the voters. As a result, President Shevardnadze and political organizations loyal to him gathered nearly 100 percent of the votes.³⁰ The opposition parties had no chance there. The leaders of Azerbaijan, who reacted badly to the protests against the then Georgian president, called on the local people to support Shevardnadze.³¹

It was during the November 2003 election campaign that the question of Azeri participation became even more acute. It was at that time the political opposition finally reached this province with its slogans. On 26 September, Mikhail Saakashvili's National Movement opened the election campaign in the Bolnisi District, and the opposition and the local powers clashed in the village of Talaveri.³² Even before the elections, the local authorities hurled accusations at the opposition leaders: it was said, in particular, that they were not pure Georgians. A. Askerov, leader of the Heyrat Party and deputy to the parliament, himself an Azerbaijani, insisted that Mikhail Saakashvili, one of the leaders of the opposition National Movement party, was known among the local Azerbaijanis as a radical nationalist and pro-Armenian politician.³³ The local Azerbaijanis especially disapproved of Kamal Muradkhanov, an Azerbaijani who joined the opposition party. In the eyes of the common people he betrayed his nation.³⁴

As soon as the opposition came to power, people changed their attitude toward it. On the eve of the early presidential elections, Mikhail Saakashvili met members of the Azeri diaspora and asked for support. In Kvemo Kartli he won the absolute majority of votes.³⁵ The province supported Saakashvili's election bloc, National Movement—Democrats, with 76 percent of the votes in the early parliamentary elections of 28 March, 2004.³⁶ When in power, Shevardnadze won a similar share of the votes. The local Azerbaijanis themselves explained that the far from simple relations between the largest ethnic minority and the central authorities were behind their loyalty. They said that they feared the opposition could change its opinion and forget about them, so they preferred to support the central authorities.³⁷

Two Names for One Village

Local toponyms are very important for the Azerbaijanis of the Bolnisi District of Kvemo Kartli. Early in the 1990s, under nationalist pressure, the Azerbaijani names of all villages were replaced with Georgian ones. Those who represented Shevardnadze in the province were convinced that the 35 changed names of Azerbaijani villages (this happened in 1993) never bothered the local people.³⁸

Today, many villages and rivers have two names³⁹: an official (Georgian) and an unofficial (Azerbaijani) used by the local people. This, naturally, causes problems. The locals are convinced that in this way the central authorities are trying to deprive them of their historical memory, which cannot but hamper their further integration.

³⁰ Even though under Shevardnadze the social-economic situation of the local Azerbaijanis did not improve, he had the support of these people, who remembered Gamsakhurdia and the nationalist organizations only too well. Friendship between Shevardnadze and Aliev, who was highly respected by the local people, also played its role.

³¹ To help Shevardnadze win, the leaders of Azerbaijan even sent their close relatives to Georgia. On the eve of the parliamentary elections of 2 November, 2003, Heydar Aliev's brother came to Kvemo Kartli to support Shevardnadze (see: Z. Kechakmadze, "Aliev's Brother Helps Georgian Authorities on the Eve of Elections," *Rezonansi*, No. 272, 7 October, 2003).

³² See: T. Mchedlishvili, "The Most Dangerous Scenario of the Election Campaign," *24 Saati*, No. 257, 27 September, 2003 (in Georgian); L. Nuri, "Osobennosti gruzinskoy izbiratel'noy kampanii," *Zerkalo*, 2 October, 2003.

³³ See: E. Alekperov, "My podderzhivaem Eduarda Shevardnadze," *Ekho*, No. 189, 3 October, 2003.

³⁴ See: M. Mamedov, *op. cit.*

³⁵ For detailed information about the results of the early parliamentary and presidential elections visit the website of the Central Election Commission of Georgia [www.cec.gov.ge].

³⁶ See: M. Miri, "Saakashvili rasschityvaet na podderzhku azerbaijantsev," *Zerkalo*, 15 December, 2003.

³⁷ See: T. Lobzhanidze, "Georgia: Azerbaijanis opt for Saakashvili," *IWPR's Caucasus Reporting Service*, No. 225, 1 April, 2004.

³⁸ See: M. Bagirov, "Aktzii protesta azerbaijantsev v Gruzii spravedlivo," *Ekho*, No. 196, 14 October, 2003.

³⁹ For example, the village that bears the Georgian name of Talaveri is known as Fakhralo among the Azerbaijanis; the Georgian Mamkhuti-Sarachlo (Savaneti Imirasan) is called Nakhiduri-Arakhlo.

C o n c l u s i o n

The above shows that the largest ethnic minority of Georgia has many serious problems which interfere with its civil integration. Their command of the state language is poor, therefore, unable to receive information, they are left by the wayside of public and political activities. The state should help them master the state language.

It is hard for them to get employed by state structures. Any disagreement between Azerbaijanis and a state structure staffed with Georgians acquires ethnic hues and is interpreted as discrimination. If educated Azerbaijanis were invited to participate in the state structures, any disagreement would immediately be deprived of its ethnic overtones and would help the Azerbaijanis to integrate into society.

Azerbaijanis mostly work in agriculture and are very much affected by all the problems relating to land ownership. Just distribution of land and even minimal support of these hard-working people by the state (or at least its non-interference) would transform them into a positive force and weaken the factors isolating the Azerbaijanis from the public and political activities of the Georgian state.