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ARTICLE

Ethnic Boundaries and Territorial Borders: On the Place of Lezgin Irredentism in the Construction of National Identity in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

The 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 the 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 and 1996, I argue that the movement contributed to consolidating the territorial vision of the Azerbaijani nation as incorporating 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.

Keywords: borders; territorial nationalism; irredentism; Azerbaijan; Lezgins

Introduction

The impact of Lezgin irredentism on nationalism in Azerbaijan is rarely considered in scholarly discussions of the subject. The rise of nationalism in late Soviet and early post-Soviet Azerbaijan is usually linked to the violent conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, which unfolded in the late 1980s and remains unresolved to this day. While the impact of this conflict on Azerbaijan's post-Soviet development can hardly be overstated, the focus on Armenia and Armenians as Azerbaijan's pre-eminent "Other" has overshadowed the role of relations with other minorities in the development of Azerbaijani nationhood. In this article, I examine the perceptions of early post-Soviet Lezgin irredentism in Azerbaijan and argue that unlike the conflict with Armenians, it has contributed to the development of the territorial, rather than ethnic view of the Azerbaijani nation.

Emerging in the late 1980s, the Lezgin national movement became most active after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when it opposed the division of its ethnic "homeland" by the new state border between Azerbaijan and Russia. Headed by an organization named "Sadval" (Unity), the movement demanded unification of all Lezgin-populated areas into one political entity. It thus put forward direct territorial claims towards Azerbaijan – claims that were perceived as an exaggerated threat to both the state and the nation in the context of the ongoing violence in Karabakh. On another front, these claims challenged the territorial bases of Azerbaijani nationhood, bases that have been central for the construction of Soviet Azerbaijani identity (Yılmaz 2013).

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Some scholars note that Sadval's territorial demands, along with the conflict with the Iranian-speaking Talysh minority in the South, played a role in the turn from ethnic to territorial nationalism in Azerbaijan (Tabachnik 2019a; Tokluoglu 2005). Yet the impact of the Lezgin national movement on the process of construction of post-Soviet national identity in Azerbaijan remains little understood, as the scholarship on nationalism in Azerbaijan remains strongly focused on the Karabakh conflict.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of territory for Azerbaijani nationhood (Broers and Mahmudlu 2021; Tabachnik 2019a, 2019b), territoriality plays a relatively little role in current analyses of nationalism in Azerbaijan. In this article, I attempt to extend and refine our understanding of the role of territoriality and minority relations in Azerbaijani nationalism by exploring the representations of the Lezgin national movement in Azerbaijani media narratives. This movement is a particularly visible case from which to examine these issues. At the heart of Sadval's activities and the mobilization it initiated is the process of border-making, both in a territorial and symbolic sense. The majority of Lezgins live in the borderlands between Azerbaijan and Russia; furthermore, the new border between the two states was the direct object of the movement. Symbolically, however, Lezgins occupy a rather contradictory position in Azerbaijan: they are at the same time a distinct group, with their distinctive language, and yet are culturally and religiously close and share the same "Caucasian" identity with Azerbaijanis. Most Lezgins in Azerbaijan are also fluent in Azerbaijani and often are so well integrated that Lezgin nationalists accuse Azerbaijan of assimilation (Matveeva and McCartney 1997).

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

The article is structured as follows. I begin by outlining the conceptual framework of the study and briefly describe the data and the method used. This is followed by background information on the border between Azerbaijan and Russia, the Lezgin national movement, and national identity debates in Azerbaijan. The next section presents the results of the analysis of the 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 (1998) even claimed that the two are "the sides of the same coin" (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).

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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 the social construction of communities and identities. In this sense, I understand Soviet administrative boundaries between republics as primarily symbolic boundaries while recognizing their partial institutionalization in determining access to social services, the extent of different language policies, and so on.

The nation-state ideal, which has become the main normative principle of modern statehood, is based on the principle of congruence between state borders and cultural boundaries, most often understood as ethnic boundaries. While this ideal remains unattainable in most states, it has given rise to a multitude of national movements aimed at creating states for ethnic groups that do not yet have statehood on the one hand, and multiple nationalizing policies aimed at engendering cultural integration within the borders of existing states, known as nation-building, on the other. Although in post-Soviet states most nation-building was based on the idea that there is a core, state-forming ethnocultural nation (Brubaker 1996), in recent years there has been a more diverse set of practices based on either ethnic or territorial nationalism (Tabachnik 2019c). I draw on Tabachnik (2019b, 2019c) in using the term “territorial” rather than “civic” nationalism, as it better reflects the case of Azerbaijan.

Transborder ethnic groups can pose significant challenges to the nation-state ideal. Their members who live in two or more different states often have different or multiple citizenships, are subject to different nationalizing processes and policies, and can be variously integrated or excluded from the states where they live. Often, such groups form minorities in one state but have also a “kin-state,” or an “external homeland,” where their co-ethnics form a core nation (King and Melvin 2000; Liebich 2019; Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006). Transborder ethnic groups can be found all over the world, but the phenomenon has become particularly politicized, and at times securitized, in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where the state borders that emerged after the disintegration of empires and multinational states often aspired to represent ethnic distributions of populations but generally failed to do so (Liebich 2019). As a result, many borderlands in the region are populated with such groups, who often have competing national narratives and images of the homeland with the core nation. In some cases, the complex relations between transborder groups and the states where they live can lead to irredentism – movements and policies aimed at changes of the existing borders and uniting co-ethnic populations residing in different states. The dissolution of the Soviet Union gave rise to several irredentist projects, most of which were not realized (Diener 2015; Sato 2008; Ter-Matevosyan and Currie 2019; Zabarah 2012). In fact, contrary to initial expectations, irredentism in the post-Soviet space mostly gave way to various forms of diaspora politics (Waterbury 2009).

In contrast to much of the recent research on transborder groups, which focused on international and transnational dimensions of this phenomenon (Liebich 2019; Kaiser and Nikiforova 2006), in this article, I focus on the national scale of identity construction and examine the impact of irredentism on nationalism in the state of residence. I build on Paasi’s (1996) analytical approach which identified four dimensions of border-related discourses: “we/here” which underlines social integration within boundaries, for example, in the nation-state; “we/there,” which refers to social integration across boundaries, for example, in the case of diasporas; “other/here,” which indicates othering processes and separation within a given territory, for example, in relations with ethnic

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minorities; and "other/there," which refers to cultural difference beyond the borders. These will be used to evaluate the extent to which Lezgins are seen as belonging to or excluded from the Azerbaijani nation.

The study analyses the public narratives (Somers 1994) on the Azerbaijani nation and Lezgi national movement presented in Azerbaijani print media in the early to mid-1990s. Narrativity has long been recognized as a fundamental social process and an "ontological condition of social life" (Somers 1994). In particular, it is a basic process of construction of identity. Somers (1994) identifies four features of narratives: (1) relationality of parts, (2) causal emplotment, (3) selective appropriation of events, and (4) location in time and 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 Kinvall 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 Abulfaz 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 1993[1]. 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 Aliyev, who was at the time exiled to his home in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, to Baku. From June 1993, the political positions of the two newspapers were clearly defined.

Zerkalo was a major Russian-language independent newspaper that was published between 1992–2014. In the 1990s, Russian was still a major language used in the media and public debate. At the same time, Russian speakers have been consistently criticized in Azerbaijan for their lack of patriotism and insufficient devotion to national values and aims (Garibova 2009). As an independent newspaper, *Zerkalo* was chosen to present views that would not be necessarily influenced by the political orientations of the editorial teams.

The material was collected by monitoring physical copies of the newspapers held by the Azerbaijani National Library (ANL). There is some asymmetry in the availability of the newspapers. For the covered period, all issues of *Azərbaycan* were available, often in multiple copies; most of the issues are also available electronically. In contrast, *Azadlıq* and *Zerkalo* are only available in hard copies, and some issues were missing. In addition, in 1993–1994 state censorship of media was imposed, and some of the issues are printed with gray squares in place of articles that did not pass the censorship. Furthermore, *Azərbaycan* is a daily newspaper that has had a stable publishing history. In contrast, *Zerkalo* was initially a weekly newspaper; in 1994 it began to be published 2–3 times a week and became daily in 1996. *Azadlıq*, although formally a daily newspaper, had some financial problems and had to disrupt printing on several occasions. The biggest limitation of the study is the missing issues of *Azadlıq* between March and May 1996, which includes the period when the results of the investigation of the underground attack were announced.

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Table 1. Articles by newspaper name

Newspaper	News reports/ press releases	Interviews	Official statements	Analytical/ opinion	Total no. of articles
Azadlıq	15	2	3	12	32
Azərbaycan	16	4	4	10	34
Zerkalo	17	0	0	4	21
Total:	48	6	7	26	87

In total, 87 articles were selected from the three newspapers based on the keywords "Lezgin," "Sadval," and "border." Of these, emplotted narratives were mostly found in longer pieces, such as interviews, statements by state officials, and analytical/opinion pieces. Shorter pieces such as news reports and press releases rarely contain full narratives, but many common tropes are present.

Lezgin Irredentism and Azerbaijani Nationalism

The border between Azerbaijan and Russia became international in 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The border, which follows the bed of the Samur river until its delta, used to divide Dagestan, Derbent, and Kuba khanates prior to the incorporation of the East Caucasus in Russia in 1813 (Kolossov and Sebentsov 2015). After some administrative reshuffling, in 1860 the territory of the former Kuba Khanate was incorporated into Baku province, while the territory of Derbent Khanate was merged with Dagestan Oblast (Mostashari 2006, 53–64). The boundary between the Baku province and Dagestan Oblast has been the basis for all subsequent border-making in the region. From 1918 to 1920, the boundary briefly served as an international border between the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR)[2] and Dagestan, albeit a highly transparent one. It was also the basis for the boundary between Azerbaijan SSR and the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) during the Soviet years.

The border between Azerbaijan and Dagestan has never coincided with the ethnic distribution of the population. Besides Lezgins, several other transborder groups live on both sides of the border. Dagestani Avars, Rutuls, Tabasarans also have small minorities in Azerbaijan, while the ethnic Azerbaijani minority also lives in southern Dagestan, particularly in the city of Derbent, where they form almost a third of the city's population[3]. Yet Lezgins are the largest of these groups, divided by the border almost in half. According to the last Soviet census, 171,395 Lezgins lived in Azerbaijan and 204,370 in Dagestan in 1989 (Goskomstat SSSR; Goskomstat Rossii).

Lezgins are an ethnic group that is considered indigenous to the North-East Caucasus (Shnirelman 2018). Their language, which has three distinct but mutually intelligible dialects, belongs to the Caucasian group of languages and differs sharply from Turkic Azerbaijani. Lezgins were among the first Dagestani peoples to adopt Islam at the end of the 7th century (Ware and Kisriev 2010, 5). Currently, the majority of Lezgins identify as Sunni Muslims. They thus differ from ethnic Azerbaijanis in both linguistic and religious senses, since the majority of ethnic Azerbaijanis identify as Shia (Balci and Goyushov 2010). Lezgins also have a tradition of multilingualism that predates the Soviet period, with Azerbaijani (Turkic) language serving as a *lingua franca* in what is now Southern Dagestan until the 20th century (Johanson 2006; Tabachnik 2019c, 146).

In the hierarchical Soviet ethno-federalist system, the status of the titular nation was crucial for securing resources for cultural development. Lezgins have never held titular status, and thus their language and culture received less state support. Yet in institutionally multi-ethnic Dagestan, Lezgins occupy a middle ground between minority and titularity, being the fourth largest group in the Republic and one of the officially recognized indigenous groups (Ware and Kisriev 2010, 39). In Dagestan, Lezgins had relatively more access to education in their native language, although

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Russian is still more widely used in education. In Azerbaijan, Lezgin as the language of instruction in primary schools was abolished in 1938 (Goff 2015, 29). Currently, Lezgin is taught twice a week in primary and secondary schools only in one district (Qusar); in other Lezgin-populated areas some primary schools offer Lezgin language classes (Gerber 2007, 31). Lezgins have also been better represented in Dagestan's complex ethnic power-sharing arrangements than in Azerbaijan's political elite (Ware and Kisriev 2010, 39–87; Kotecha 2006, 42). This has led to recurrent grievances and complaints about Lezgins' rights in Azerbaijan. Lezgin national protests have been documented since 1936 (Goff 2015). Language rights have been the main issue of concern in the protests and petitions organized in the Khruschev period as well (Goff 2015, 32–35; Zisserman-Brodsky 2003, 126–127). Although most of the petitions appealed to the laws of the AzSSR and avoided confrontational language, the idea of an autonomous Lezgin region, Lezgistan, was voiced as early as 1936 (Goff 2015, 30).

The Lezgin national movement was revived with perestroika, along with many other national movements that sprung up across the Soviet Union. Sadval ("Unity"), the most vocal organization of the movement, was officially established in July 1990. Between 1992 and 1994 they organized many mass protests in various locations along the Azerbaijani-Russian border. Yet, the numbers of the people involved in these protests and the extent of mobilization remain questionable.

Organizationally, Sadval was organized in a multi-level structure. The lowest level of organization was the primary organization. In regions with three or more primary organizations, they could unite in a regional organization, with its own regional committee. Congress, comprised of regional delegates and called once a year, was Sadval's main governing body. In-between congresses general management was to be carried out by the Board, elected at the Congress (Article 2.5, Sadval Charter). There is no available data on the actual numbers of members.

According to Article 1.2 of Sadval's Charter, the unification of Lezgins and the 'restoration of national statehood of Lezgin people in the boundaries of a unified Lezgin state entity' was its main objective. In the Resolution of 1991 Sadval Congress, the issue is put forward even more strongly, and the term "Lezgistan," referring to the Lezgins' homeland, is first used (Resolution 1991). In addition to its irredentist agenda, Sadval was also particularly critical of the situation of Lezgins in Azerbaijan: Azerbaijani authorities were accused of systematic discrimination against Lezgins and of pursuing assimilation policies, leading to underreporting of true numbers of Lezgins by as much as two thirds (Hill 1995, 86–87). For example, Nagiyev, one of Sadval's founders, claims that the true number of Lezgins in Azerbaijan in 1989 should have been 800,000 (Nagiev 2013). Although Sadval's official documents call for the restoration of statehood, at times their demands were more moderate and the organization considered confederation of Lezgistan within Dagestan. Some sources also claimed that in the mid-1990s a cleavage emerged in Sadval leadership, with a radical wing, headed by General Muhiddin Kahrimanov, seeking an independent Lezgistan, and a moderate wing, headed by Ali Ashuraliyev, opting for territorial autonomy within Russia and Azerbaijan (Alekseiev et al. 2006; "Sovet dlia vsekh lezgin," *Novoye Delo*, March 1, 1996). Sadval's claims received no official support. In Dagestan, they were unpopular, as they held the potential of strengthening Lezgins and thus upsetting the delicate ethnic balance in this multi-ethnic region. Moscow also never officially endorsed any of Sadval's claims. Yet, Sadval continued to receive official registration in Russia[4], which in Azerbaijan was interpreted as tacit support of its irredentism ("Tunelde Bomba," *Azərbaycan*, June 26, 1996). Only in 1996, at the 6th congress of Sadval in Makhachkala, the movement officially abandoned irredentism and recognized that its claims led to the deterioration of relations between Azerbaijani and Lezgin people (Matveeva and McCartney 1997, 233). From the late 1990s, the organization became rather dormant. The combination of rather modest levels of mobilization, lack of autonomous administrative structures, cleavages within the leadership, and lack of external support were the reasons for movement's eventual decline, similar to other "conflicts that did not happen" in the former Soviet Union (Ter-Matevosyan and Currie 2019; Sato 2008).

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In Azerbaijan, an alternative Lezgin organization "Samur" emphasizing peaceful relations and friendship between Lezgins and Azerbaijanis was established in Baku in 1990 with state support (Matveeva and McCartney 1997, 238; Ləzgi Milli Mədəni Mərkəz İctimai Birliyi n.d.). The perception of Sadval as an extremist organization was confirmed after the investigation of a terrorist attack on the Baku metro in March 1994, which killed 14 people and injured 49 people. In 1996, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan convicted 12 Sadval activists for carrying out the attack on the Baku metro ("V Verkhovnom Sude," *Zerkalo*, April 20, 1996). The investigation also claimed that the perpetrators cooperated with Armenian special forces in preparation for the attack. Although the Sadval leadership denied any involvement in the attack, it was afterward declared a 'terrorist organization' and banned in Baku.

Lezgin irredentist claims took place in the context of the heated debates on national identity in Azerbaijan itself. During the late 1980s, ethnolinguistic Turkish nationalism gained popularity in Azerbaijan, as a reaction to both Armenian territorial claims and Russian/Soviet domination. Azerbaijani Turkish nationalists define the dominant nation in Azerbaijan as "Turks," often with a geographical qualifier Azerbaijani/Azeri, and emphasize kinship links with other Turkic nations, most importantly with the Turks of Turkey as the culturally and linguistically closest nation[5]. The adherents of Turkish nationalism in Azerbaijan have sought to recover the pre-Soviet pan-Turkist notions of nation articulated by early 20th century intellectuals Ali-Bek Huseyn-Zade and Mammad Emin Rasul-Zade. These intellectuals defined the dominant nation in Azerbaijan as Caucasian or Azerbaijani Turks (Balayev 2015). This strand of ethnic Turkish nationalism was endorsed and promoted by the Popular Front movement (PFA) and its leader, President Abulfaz Elchibey (1992–1993). In 1992 the Popular Front government adopted a law on national language, where it was called "Turkish (Turkic) Language" (*Türk dili*) (Garibova 2009, 16). Although supporters of the PFA often point out that their Turkism does not infringe on the rights of other ethnic groups and that PFA was determined to guarantee the protection of minority rights in Azerbaijan, Turkish nationalism is often blamed for the aggravation of inter-ethnic relations in Azerbaijan, particularly with regards to Armenians, Lezgins, and Talysh (Tokluoglu 2005; Tabachnik 2019a). Turkish nationalists in Azerbaijan thus distinguish clearly between ethnic and territorial dimensions of nationhood and use "Azerbaijani" (*Azərbaycanlı*) in the strictly territorial sense to refer to all citizens of Azerbaijan, and "Turks" to refer to the majority ethnic group in Azerbaijan (Garibova 2009; Tokluoglu 2005).

In their attempt to recover pre-Soviet national identity, Azerbaijani Turkish nationalists also sought to deconstruct the Soviet Azerbaijani identity, which they consider imposed by the Soviet authorities with the aim to separate Azerbaijani Turks from their ethnic kin, particularly in Turkey (Tokluoglu 2005; Altstadt 2016, 1992). The Soviet Azerbaijani identity was based on the historical narrative which claimed that Azerbaijanis are not really Turks, but rather an amalgamation of indigenous groups who resided in historical Azerbaijan (including the parts that are now located in the South Caucasus and in Northern Iran). These groups are believed to have adopted the Turkic language beginning from the 11th century onwards, with the invasions of Turkic tribes such as Seljuks, Timurids, etc. (Yılmaz 2013). This view was developed in the 1920s, and it became the basis for the change of the ethnonym "Turk" to "Azerbaijani" in the Republican constitution of 1937 (Yılmaz 2013). This re-definition of the dominant ethnic group in Azerbaijan served to assert the indigenous status of Azerbaijanis in a context where indigenousness was perceived as a basis for territorial nationhood, for instance among Armenians and Georgians. This explicitly territorial redefinition also opened the way for Soviet assimilationist policies, when many minorities were coerced into identifying themselves as "Azerbaijanis" (Hadjy-zade 1997).

This Soviet Azerbaijani identity which stressed territoriality served as the basis for the second major national ideological project in post-independence Azerbaijan, namely "Azerbaijanism." Azerbaijanism was introduced by Heydar Aliyev, Soviet-time leader of Azerbaijan, when he returned to power in 1993 (Hadjy-zade 1997). This concept was aimed at overcoming "the chauvinistic nationalism and ethnic separatism" of the early 1990s and offered an integrative

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alternative based on common adherence to statehood, territory, and shared traditions acquired through centuries of cohabitation in the same territory (Mehdiyev 2003, 93). In the explanation provided by Ramiz Mehdiyev, chief ideologue of Aliyev's regime, Azerbaijanism is in essence a neo-conservative ideological project which underlines the importance of the state as the final integrative force of the nation. While adherents of Azerbaijanism do not deny kinship with other Turks, they emphasize the inclusiveness of Azerbaijanis and openness to influences from other cultures, for example Persian and Russian (Tokluoglu 2005). The adoption of this framework as state ideology has led to important policy implications, such as the re-naming of the state language as "Azerbaijani" by President Heydar Aliyev in 1995 and the removal of ethnicity (nationality) from identity documents and all legislation (Garibova 2009; Tabachnik 2019c).

Azerbaijanism and the policy changes that it generated aimed to encourage the development of civic/territorial nationalism, but the results of these policies have been ambiguous. Some research shows that the efforts to create overarching Azerbaijani national identity have been successful, particularly among the younger generation (Luscombe and Kazdal 2014; Siroky and Mahmudlu 2016). However, the process is ridden with many problems and controversies. Despite the proclamation of multi-culturalism and national unity, the question of what, or rather, who constitutes the territorial Azerbaijani nation lacks clarity. It appears that citizenship and membership in the nation do not completely coincide (Brubaker 2010). Secondary school textbooks on the history of Azerbaijan, for example, mostly teach the history of Muslim Turks (Huseynova 2012). Huseynova (2012, 131) further argues that in practice the proclaimed unity of the Azerbaijani people means adopting the "tribal" customs of Oghuz Turks by other ethnic groups. The deemphasizing of ethnic difference, even if it was intended to serve the aims of integrating the population, in practice turned into the blurring of the boundaries between ethnic and territorial understandings of nation. With no official means to prove one's ethnic identity, the demands for native language education may be undermined. One of the consequences of this policy has been the shrinking of state support for minority languages (Ulasiuk 2013, 32).

Given the contested nature of terms denoting nation and ethnicity in Azerbaijan, a clarification is in order. In this article, I use the term "Azerbaijani" rather than "Azeri" or "Turk." Because of the existing blurring between territorial and ethnic understandings of the term, for the sake of clarity, I specify whether I refer to the territorial or ethnic sense.

Analysis

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

Ethnic and National Boundaries

The boundary drawn between Lezgins and ethnic Azerbaijanis in the newspaper publications is relatively clear and unproblematic. It is based on the primordial understanding of ethnicity, where Lezgins are perceived and represented as a distinctive group based on their origin and language. It is, in fact, more problematic to define Azerbaijanis than Lezgins: in 1992–1993 journalists of both *Azərbaycan* and *Azadlıq* use the term "Azerbaijani Turks" (*Azərbaycan Türkləri*) to distinguish ethnic Azerbaijanis; the territorial nation is usually expressed with the term "Azerbaijani people" (*Azərbaycan xalqı*). These terms are also used by Lezgin intellectuals residing in Baku, but not by the local Lezgin population in the border area. In the border areas, the term "Azerbaijani" retains ethnic connotations. Thus, a local Lezgin elder in Qusar district complained that Lezgins and members of

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other minorities who gave their lives for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in the Karabakh war, were given a title of "Azerbaijani National Hero" rather than "People's Hero," thus implying that the title strips them of their own national identity ("Ləzgi Kartı Necə Oynamalı," *Azərbaycan*, May 5, 1993).

While Lezgins' ethnic distinctiveness is recognized, they are seen as a part of the "Azerbaijani people," both in *Azərbaycan* and *Azadlıq*. As the author of one of the articles put it, "the Lezgin world is a part of the Azerbaijani world" ("Bizim Ləzgilər, Siz Kimsiniz?" *Azadlıq*, May 1, 1993). Along with Lezgins, two other minority groups were named recurrently as part of the "Azerbaijani people": Kurds and Talysh ("Azərbaycan: Türkləşmə, Kürdləşmə, Ləzgiləşmə, Talışlaşma Ya Da Siyasətimizdəki Çatlar,"*Azadlıq*, January 30, 1993; "Ləzgi Kartı Necə Oynamalı," *Azərbaycan*, May 5, 1993). In one case, Tabasaran is also included in this listing ("Şimal qapısı," *Azadlıq*, March 2, 1993). The inclusion of these particular groups in the Azerbaijani people, and exclusion of other, even larger minorities (Russians, Georgians, and most conspicuously, Armenians) indicates important criteria for inclusion into the territorial nation.

First, religion appears to be of greater importance for the construction of territorial nationhood in Azerbaijan than is usually accorded. Although many contemporary scholars underline the secular character of nationalism in Azerbaijan (Cornell et al. 2016; Motika 2009; Ergun and Çitak 2019), Muslim identity appears to be an important criterion for inclusion into the nation. All of the groups listed as parts of the "Azerbaijani people" are traditionally Muslim. Common religion is often evoked as an important unifying factor between ethnic Azerbaijanis and Lezgins. In a letter addressed to the Lezgin people, the Democratic Congress of Azerbaijan, an umbrella organization consisting of several parties that were formed after the end of Communist Party monopoly, states "Even if we come from different ethnic roots, we are united by a thousand of years of common culture. We have one God, one Prophet, one religion" ("Demokratik Konqresin Ləzgi Xalqına Müraciət," *Azadlıq*, April 28, 1993). Similarly, in an open letter to *Azərbaycan* newspaper, an ethnic Lezgin professor of chemistry from Baku State University underlines the ties of "blood, religion and heart" (*qanı bir, dini bir, canı bir*) between Lezgins and ethnic Azerbaijanis ("'Ləzgi Kartı' – Ləzgi Xalqının Öz əlində Olmalıdır," *Azərbaycan*, April 22, 1993).

Historical rootedness, rather than current residence in the territory of Azerbaijan, is the second criterion of belonging to the Azerbaijani nation. As an article in *Azərbaycan* ("Ləzgi Kartı Necə Oynamalı," *Azərbaycan*, May 5, 1993) makes clear, the Azerbaijani people include all those ethnic groups who 'historically lived on these lands and consider them their homeland." Indeed, all of the included minorities are indigenous. Russians, for example, who are not included in the list despite being the largest minority in 1989, are both non-Muslim and recently settled. Similar logic is likely applied to Armenians, the second largest minority in 1989, whose claims to indigenousness in the territory of Azerbaijan are strongly denied (Tokluoglu 2011). At the same time, included minorities do not have an "external homeland," unlike Russians, Georgians, Armenians, and even Jews, including the tiny Mountainous Jews community indigenous to northern Azerbaijan. Belonging to the Azerbaijani nation is therefore seen as exclusive and not compatible with belonging to some other nation[6]. Representatives of other minorities may be included in the "Azerbaijani people" in the constitutional sense, as individuals, but not as sub-groups within the larger nation.

A final criterion of belonging in the nation is the participation in the Karabakh war. Fighting in the Azerbaijani army is seen as evidence of loyalty to the nation and the state; this trope can be found in various texts, including analytical articles and interviews, expressed by both ethnic Azerbaijanis and Lezgins ("Qafqaz Qazanı"nın Qaynamasını Gözləyən Var," *Azərbaycan*, October 31, 1992; "Ləzgi Kartı Necə Oynamalı," *Azərbaycan*, May 5, 1993). Consequently, draft evasion by Lezgins is either denied as foreign-instigated lies ("'Qafqaz Qazanı'nın Qaynamasını Gözləyən Var," *Azərbaycan*, October 31, 1992) or interpreted as a betrayal ("Azərbaycan: Türkləşmə, Kürdləşmə, Ləzgiləşmə, Talışlaşma Ya Da Siyasətimizdəki Çatlar," *Azadlıq*, January 30, 1993).

These findings suggest important correctives to the generally accepted view of territorial nationalism in Azerbaijan. While territory is clearly of utmost importance, residence per se does not guarantee membership in the nation, to borrow Brubaker's (2010) term. A degree of cultural

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proximity, with Islam serving as its proxy, and pre-modern history of co-habitation in the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, are other important factors.[7] The two criteria of inclusion that I identified (cultural proximity based on religion and history of co-habitation which pre-dates Russian conquest) suggest an implicit view of the nation as basically a pre-modern formation. In this, it aligns with the Soviet conceptualization of the nation as rooted in primordial affinities.

Overall, the narratives on Lezgin-Azerbaijani relations emphasize inclusiveness, friendship, and strong neighborhood ties. Most publications deny the existence of problems that are specific to Lezgins ("Prava Lezgin Ne Uschemliaiutsa," *Zerkalo*, October 10, 1992). An article tellingly entitled "There is no Lezgin problem in Khachmaz, only problems of Lezgins" claims that Lezgins have problems that "are common to the whole country" ("Xaçmazda 'Ləzgi Problemi' Yoxdur, Ancağ Ləzgilərin Problemləri Var," *Azərbaycan*, February 25, 1993). In a similar vein, an article in *Azadlıq* claims that it is not Lezgins per se, but rather individuals who have problems, just like "Turks, Tabasarans, Kurds, etc." ("Şimal qapısı," *Azadlıq*, March 2, 1993). In a few articles, some problems related to the exercise of cultural rights are recognized, such as insufficiency of instruction in the Lezgin language in schools and a lack of textbooks ("Milli Azlıqda Qalan Azərbaycanlıların Dillərinin Tədrisi Məsələləri," *Azərbaycan*, October 31, 1992). Publications of the first period are adamant that these problems are the legacy of Soviet "imperialism," and that the democratic government will eventually resolve them ("'Qafqaz Qazanı'nın Qaynamasını Gözləyən Var," *Azərbaycan*, October 31, 1992; "Samur Necə Kükrəyir Ki, Ləzgilərin Bundan Xəbəri Yoxdur?" *Azərbaycan*, February 11, 1993; "Azərbaycan: Türkləşmə, Kürdləşmə, Ləzgiləşmə, Talışlaşma Ya Da Siyasətimizdəki Çatlar," *Azadlıq*, January 30, 1993). In several publications in 1992, President Elchibey's Decree on National minorities (adopted in 1992) is seen as the first step for resolving these problems and creating conditions for the development of minority cultures ("Xalqlarımızın Birliyi Naminə," *Azərbaycan*, September 25, 1992; "Samurcular Xalqlarımızı Siyasi Oyunlara Çəkmək İstəyənlərin Niyyətinə Qarşı Çıxdı," *Azərbaycan*, January 23, 1993; "Azərbaycan: Türkləşmə, Kürdləşmə, Ləzgiləşmə, Talışlaşma Ya Da Siyasətimizdəki Çatlar," *Azadlıq*, January 30, 1993). Yet, in 1993 in one publication it is recognized that the Decree only exists on paper and is not implemented in practice ("Ləzgi Kartı Necə Oynamalı," *Azərbaycan*, May 5, 1993).

State Border

In 1992–1993 the new state border, while still open, nevertheless plays an important symbolic role in determining belonging and exclusion. Many publications distinguish between Lezgins living in Azerbaijan and outside of it. It is thus "Azerbaijani Lezgins," often described as "our Lezgins" (Togrulbey, "Bizim Ləzgilər, Siz Kimsiniz?" *Azadlıq*, May 1, 1993) and "brothers" ("'Qafqaz Qazanı'nın Qaynamasını Gözləyən Var," *Azərbaycan*, October 31, 1992), who are seen as part of the territorial Azerbaijani nation. From their side, Lezgin authors and interviewees, both in Baku and in the border areas, describe Azerbaijan as their "homeland" (*Vətən*) ("Samurcular Xalqlarımızı Siyasi Oyunlara Çəkmək İstəyənlərin Niyyətinə Qarşı Çıxdı," *Azərbaycan*, January 23, 1993; "Bizim Ləzgilər, Siz Kimsiniz?" *Azadlıq*, May 1, 1993). While "our Lezgins" are "brothers," the attitudes towards Dagestani Lezgins are more ambivalent. In some articles, they are also considered "friends" and "neighbors" (but not brothers), along with other Dagestanis ("Dağıstan Azərbaycanlılarının I Qurultayına," *Azərbaycan*, October 30, 1992). But many publications underline that the territorial claims, protest activities, and the individuals who organize them often referred to as "provocateurs" ("Sabitliyi Pozmaq Cəhdi," *Azərbaycan*, March 23, 1993) come from the other side of the border ("Şimal Küləyi," *Azadlıq*, June 20, 1992; Haziyev, "'Ləzgi Kartı' Kimin əlində?" *Azadlıq*, April 8, 1993; "Prava Lezgin Budut Obespecheni," *Zerkalo* June 20, 1992; "Ləzgilər Rusiya Səfirliyin Qarşısında Piket Geçirdilər," *Azərbaycan*, January 8, 1994). In some articles, it is even claimed that the participants in the protests on the Azerbaijani side are brought over by buses across the still open and unguarded border ("Şimal Küləyi," *Azadlıq*, June 20, 1992).

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This depiction of the state border is in line with Paasi's (1996) discourse of integration, where Lezgins on the Azerbaijani side of the border are part of "we/here." In contrast, Lezgins from Dagestan belong to "other/there." In the early post-Soviet period Lezgins as a transborder ethnic group did not constitute a significant "Other" against which the Azerbaijani nation defined itself. But the state border did already mark the difference between the safe, familiar, domestic space and the foreign space as a source of threat. This opposition between the outside as the space of danger and chaos and inside as the space of peace and order is classic in border studies (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 inter-republican 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 place alongside continuing kinship relations and communication across the fully open and transparent boundary. The challenge to the border intensified territorialization of Azerbaijani nationhood.

In this respect, it is significant that it is not Azerbaijan that seeks the strengthening of the border, but Russia. From the point of view of traditional state security, where border marks the extent of sovereign control, it would be logical to expect the government of a newly established state to seek to strengthen its control over its territory. This is especially so in a situation when the bordering state (Russia) is seen as a source of threats, as I detail below. Yet, in practice, it was Russia, not Azerbaijan, which sought to strengthen the border. For Azerbaijan, the economic benefits of maintaining an open border and reducing the risks of unrest among Lezgins were at the time more pressing concerns, trumping sovereign control ("'Qafqaz Qazanı'nın Qaynamasını Gözləyən Var," *Azərbaycan*, October 31, 1992; "Ləzgi Kartı Necə Oynamalı," *Azərbaycan*, May 5, 1993; "Vnov' podnimayetsa vopros o Respublike Lezgistan," *Zerkalo*, December 10, 1992). The rights of the transborder national minority to cross the border freely was even stipulated in the Presidential Decree on National Minorities (1992, article 4). At the same time, security concerns cited by the Russian side, such as the entry of third-country nationals to Russia via the Azerbaijani-Iranian border, are dismissed as exaggerated ("Sərhədlərimiz: Həm Daxili, Həm də Xarici Müdaxilə Var," *Azərbaycan*, May 21, 1993).

After 1993, the border and Lezgin issues gradually become decoupled. In 1994, the Lezgin issue disappears from the agenda, with the decline of protest activities organized by Sadval. At the same time, the border with Russia remains a problematic issue, especially when it becomes closed by Russia in connection with the conflict in Chechnya in December 1994 (Hill 1995, 76; Matveeva and McCartney 1997, 223). But it is now more of an inter-governmental issue between Azerbaijan and Russia, and no longer the problem of nationhood challenged by irredentism. For example, the extensive coverage of the negotiations between President Heydar Aliyev and the administration of the Russian Federal Border Service in *Azərbaycan* newspaper ("Azərbaycan Prezidenti Heydər əliyev Rusiya Federal Sərhəd Xidməti Direktorunun Müavini Qəbul Etmişdir," *Azərbaycan*, January 26, 1996; "Azərbaycan Prezidenti Heydər əliyev Rusiya Federal Sərhəd Xidməti Direktoru Andrey Nikolayevi Qəbul Etmişdir," *Azərbaycan*, February 15, 1996) contains no references to Lezgin issues whatsoever, but plenty of references to the Chechen conflict and Russian accusations of Azerbaijan's presumed cooperation with Chechen rebels. Still, the hardening of the border regime, and the closure of the border in December 1994 continue to be seen as Russia's instrument of political pressure on Azerbaijan in oppositional *Azadlıq* and independent *Zerkalo* ("Rusiyanın Azərbaycanla Sərhədləri Bağlaması Növbəti Təzyiq Vasitəsidir," *Azadlıq*, December 27, 1994; "Opasnost' s Yuga ili Opasnost' dlia Yuga?" *Zerkalo*, January 20, 1996). The issue of the border dividing an ethnic group is raised only once, referring not to Lezgins but ethnic Azerbaijanis. In an

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article with a telling title "The Samur became worse than the Araxes," thus referring to the division of Southern and Northern Azerbaijan in 1828, the author laments the difficulties that ethnic Azerbaijanis (called in the article "Azerbaijani Turks") face in trying to communicate with their kin in Derbent and claims that these difficulties are the result of intentional actions of unnamed forces (Seferli, "Samur Çayı Arazdan Betər Olub," *Azadlıq*, January 9, 1996).

Beyond the familiar trope of Russia's attempt to maintain its general influence in Azerbaijan, *Azadlıq* mentions the concrete issue of the choice of the Main Export Pipeline Route for carrying Azerbaijan's oil to the world market ("Rusiyanın Azərbaycanla Sərhədləri Bağlaması Növbəti Təzyiq Vasitəsidir," *Azadlıq*, December 27, 1994). Russia lobbied the so-called "Northern route" through Dagestan and Chechnya, while Western governments supported the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route which was finally chosen in 1999 (Hill 2004). The official *Azərbaycan* is much more cautious in its commentary on relations with Russia. This indicates a beginning divergence of governmental and oppositional narratives on Russia: while the government began to pursue a more balanced foreign policy that considered Russia's regional interests, the opposition remained critical and distrustful of Russia's intentions towards Azerbaijan.

External Threat

The portrayal of relations between Lezgins and Azerbaijanis as friendly and harmonious is in obvious contradiction with the protests organized by Sadval and rising tensions in the borderlands. This contradiction is resolved in the media by projecting responsibility for the protest activity outside of the territory of Azerbaijan. Such projection comes in two main forms: the attribution of responsibility to Lezgins from Dagestan, discussed above, and plotting by foreign powers, in this case, Russia and Armenia. This narrative can be found in the statements by various officials, analytical essays, and op-eds, as well as opinions of a few interviewed locals. The perceived Russian involvement comes in two forms. First, the very idea of strengthening border control is often presented as Russia's instrument of pressure on Azerbaijan, particularly in the context when Azerbaijan refused to join the CIS and pursued an independent foreign policy. Second, the specific demands of the Lezgin movement and Sadval's protests are presented as instigated by external forces, in particular some groups in Russia and Armenia. These groups have specific aims of "destabilizing" Azerbaijan and creating "cleavage and conflicts between Azerbaijani Turks and minorities who live in Azerbaijan" ("Hidayat Orucov: 'Imperiya Ucqurunda Muəmmali Mətləblər Çoxdur,'" *Azərbaycan*, October 10, 1992). According to this narrative, Russia's main objective in creating these conflicts is "to maintain its influence in the republics that were gaining independence" ("'Qafqaz Qazanı'nın Qaynamasını Gözləyən Var," *Azərbaycan*, October 31, 1992). The external plotting, albeit without clear attribution of blame, is implied even in a text by President Elchibey himself. In a congratulatory letter to the first summit of Dagestan's Azerbaijanis, President Elchibey expressed "hope that the malevolent intentions of those who try to create confusion and conflict will not stand in the way of the wisdom of a thousand years of the next-door neighborhood" ("Dağıstan Azərbaycanlılarının I Qurultayına," *Azərbaycan*, October 30, 1992).

The media publications present Armenia and "the Armenian lobby" in Russia as another party interested in destabilizing ethnic relations in Azerbaijan ("Hidayat Orucov: 'Imperiya Ucqurunda Muəmmali Mətləblər Çoxdur,'" *Azərbaycan*, October 10, 1992). "The Armenian lobby," as presented in the media, is thought to include ethnic Armenians within the Russian political elite and various Armenian sympathizers who can influence political decision-making. A prominent example of the former is Andranik Migranyan, a political scientist and a former advisor to Boris Yeltsin, who is cited as the author of the proposal to create a two-chamber parliament in Azerbaijan – a measure which is seen as a step towards the federalization and eventual disintegration of the Azerbaijani state ("SOS! Federativ Dövlət Təhlükəsi," *Azadlıq*, May 5,1993). Yet the most often mentioned representative of the "Armenian lobby" is Galina Starovoytova (1946–1998), a Russian

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ethnographer and an active champion of the Armenian cause in Karabakh ("Lezgins' rights will be protected" *Zerkalo* 20.6.1992). An article in *Azərbaycan* ("'Qafqaz Qazanı'nın Qaynamasını Gözləyən Var," *Azərbaycan*, October 31, 1992) suggests that it was upon her advice that President Yeltsin proposed to harden the border after she held a meeting with Sadval leadership.

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

1994 Underground Attack, Sadval, and the "Armenian hand"

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 terrorism"[8] 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 the attribution of blame ("'20 Yanvar' Stansiyasında Faciə və yaxud Diversiyaların Qarşısı Necə Alınmalıdır," *Azərbaycan*, March 23, 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 ("Son Terror Aktı: Hakimiyyət Düşməni Daxildə Axtarmaqda Davam Edir," *Azadlıq*, March 24, 1994; "Azərbaycanda Növbəti Terror Aktı," *Azadlıq*, March 24, 1994; "Bakı Metropolitenində Partlayışla əlaqədar Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsinin Milli Məclisə Müraciəti," *Azadlıq*, March 24, 1994). One article provides an extensive account of the history of terrorist actions against Turkey and Azerbaijan by various Armenian organizations 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 July 7, 1994, which was officially recognized as caused by technical problems. One of the articles (Osmanoglu, "Metroda Ucuz Ölümlər, Bayırda Nəticəsiz İstintaqlar," *Azadlıq*, July 5, 1994) expands the circle of "foreign forces" involved in these 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.[9] The first reports from the Supreme Court hearings mentioned "Sadval activists" and the involvement of Armenian special forces ("V Verkhovnom Sude," *Zerkalo*, April 4, 1996; "V Verkhovnom Sude," *Zerkalo*, March 30, 1996; "Azərbaycan Respublikası Milli Təhlükəsizlik Nazirliyinin Məlumatı," *Azərbaycan*, April 1, 1996). Analytical articles that were published after the announcement of the verdict on May 8, 1996 further stressed the involvement of Armenian special forces in the recruitment and training of the perpetrators.

At about the same time that the results of the investigation became publicized, *Azərbaycan* published two articles discussing relations with Lezgins. They reiterate familiar tropes from the earlier period about the "unbreakable ties of friendship, … tested by hundreds of years" ("Namərddən Sirdaş Olmaz," *Azərbaycan*, April 24, 1996) and about Azerbaijan being the

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homeland of Lezgins ("Namərddən Sirdaş Olmaz," *Azərbaycan*, April 24, 1996; "Samur Ləzgi Milli Mərkəzinin Qurultayı," *Azərbaycan*, May 22, 1996). In a meeting with Lezgin leaders, President Heydar Aliyev also mentions Lezgin heroes who fought against Armenian aggression ("Namərddən Sirdaş Olmaz," *Azərbaycan*, April 24, 1996). It is interesting to note that two facts from the investigation materials undermine the dominant narratives of internal unity and external threat. First, all the perpetrators were Azerbaijani citizens rather than outsiders from Dagestan. Second, one of the perpetrators was recruited by Armenian special forces while serving in the Azerbaijani army. However, none of these facts is elaborated upon in the articles examined in this study.

The release of the results of the investigation of the 1994 attack re-activate two narratives from the 1992–1993 period, namely on relations with Lezgins and external threat. All three newspapers make it very clear that they separate Sadval terrorism from the Lezgin people. Narratives on ethnic boundaries retain the dual emphasis on the ethnic distinctiveness of Lezgins and their inclusion into the territorial Azerbaijani nation. The narrative of external threat is reconfirmed in the framing of the attack as an incident of Armenian, rather than Lezgin terrorism. Once again, Sadval is presented as a puppet organization coordinated by the enemies of Azerbaijan and not a genuine Lezgin movement. However, in contrast with earlier representations of Sadval, the role of Russia as a mastermind behind the movement is not as prominent. Although Russia's tacit support in the form of registration is still recognized ("Tunelde Bomba," *Azərbaycan*, June 26, 1996), Armenia rather than Russia is the culprit behind the attack. At the same time, terrorism becomes strongly linked to secessionism and irredentism. This linkage has important and long-lasting consequences, as it contributes to securitization not only of secessionism but also of any ethnic activism beyond the state-sponsored ethnic organizations (Kotecha 2006). In the long run, the link between secessionism and terrorism contributed also to the securitization of Islam particularly in the Sunni regions along the Russian-Azerbaijani border (Wilhelmsen 2009). Thus, a discursive connection linking Lezgins, Islamists, and terrorists was created.

Conclusion

This article examined the impact of Lezgin irredentism on the re-territorialization of state and nation in Azerbaijan in the context of post-Soviet border-making between Azerbaijan and Russia. Similar to the Karabakh conflict, with which the movement coincided in time, it challenged the territorial integrity of the young post-Soviet Azerbaijani state and highlighted the inter-ethnic tensions between the titular majority and non-titular minority groups. But in contrast to the Karabakh conflict, which gave rise to ethnic nationalism and the revival of Turkism, the challenge to the state border presented by the Lezgin national movement contributed to the strengthening of the alternative, territorial vision of the Azerbaijani nation. This study thus confirms previous research which underlined the impact of minority challenges on territorial nationalism in Azerbaijan (Tabachnik 2019a; Tokluoglu 2005). But it also goes beyond the existing studies and refines our understanding of territoriality in Azerbaijan. Membership in the territorial nation was extended to those minorities who are recognized as indigenous, have pre-modern history of cohabitation with ethnic Azerbaijanis, and have supported Azerbaijan's struggle for territorial integrity in the Karabakh war.

The study also confirmed the importance of Soviet republican borders for post-Soviet nation-building. Lezgins, for example, are seen as either part of "us" or part of "them," depending on the side of the border on which they find themselves. While such a vision may be at odds with Lezgins' own views of their ethnic kin across the border, it points to the importance of the state border as both a practical and symbolic boundary of belonging and exclusion.

The research also showed that there is little difference in the attitudes towards the Lezgin minority between the proponents of Turkism and Azerbaijanism. Under both approaches, Lezgins are seen as a part of the Azerbaijani territorial nation, or Azerbaijani people. Early responses (before 1994) were virtually indistinguishable, and the publications of both *Azərbaycan* and *Azadlıq*

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emphasized the rights of indigenous minorities and harmonious relations between Lezgins and ethnic Azerbaijanis. More differences can be seen in the approaches to the titular majority, which Turkists distinguish as a state-forming nation. There are also differences in approaches towards ethnic kin outside of Azerbaijan, such as ethnic Azerbaijanis in Dagestan. The publications on Lezgins presented here show that the public master narratives of "Turkism" and "Azerbaijanism" converge in their approach to territoriality as the pillar of Azerbaijan's nationhood.

The study also revealed that Lezgins are not seen as a significant "Other" for Azerbaijani national identity. Even at the height of the ethnic tensions, the threat was perceived to emanate from the Armenian state and Armenians, including those from the diaspora, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. The role of Armenia was made especially visible in the coverage of the attack on the Baku underground in 1996. Yet the invisible, but powerful hand of Russia had been a persistent trope in the coverage of Azerbaijani-Lezgin relations. This points to Russia's important role of the "Other" for Azerbaijani nation-building, a role that has been obscured by the trauma of the Karabakh conflict and the official discourses of Alievs' regime, which emphasize historical partnership with Russia. This view is different from that of most of the opposition, who often see Russia as a threat to Azerbaijani statehood and security. This study helps to trace the earlier sources of different views on Russia: while conspiracy narratives dominated oppositional *Azadlıq*, they disappeared from the official *Azərbaycan.*

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Notes

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.
2 For the purposes of convenience, I use the conventional term "Azerbaijan Democratic Republic" used in English to denote Azərbaycan Xalq Cumhurriyəti, although a more correct translation would be "Azerbaijan People Republic." I thank an anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing out this inconsistency.
3 According to the 2010 Census, ethnic Azerbaijanis composed 32.7% of the population of Derbent (http://xn——7sbiew6aadnema7p.xn–p1ai/sity_id.php?id=138#population).
4 According to the Russian Federal Tax Registry, Lezgin People's Movement "Sadval" was registered between 1993 and 2011, reg. number 1060500002122.
5 On the early debates about the use of ethnonyms "Turk" and "Azerbaijani" see Altstadt (2016: 14–15) and Yılmaz (2013). For the post-Soviet rift between pro-Turkist and Azerbaijani nationalists, see Tokluoglu (2005). It is important to note that in Azerbaijani language there is no distinction between "Turkish" and "Turkic."
6 Similar observations have been made by Goff (2015), who notes that Soviet Azerbaijani authorities applied more assimilationist language policies to the Muslim Georgian minority (Ingilo), while Christian Georgians were to some extent protected by having Georgia as a "patron."
7 see also Tabachnik 2019c, 142–148 on the importance historical experience of cohabitation for modern national identity in Azerbaijan and Moldova.
8 This refers to political violence against Turkish diplomats and some civilians by several Armenian 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; Tololyan 1992; Dugan et al. 2008). The aim of this political violence was to draw international attention to the killings of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey in 1915. "Armenian

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terrorism” is believed to have ended by mid 1980s; yet in Azerbaijan, the Karabakh violence is often seen as its continuation (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)

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