MEMBER PROFILE

LEZGHIN

Federal Lezghin National and Cultural Autonomy

Last updated: October 2017
Status: Ethnic group lacking a legal status

Population: Estimated 474,000 living in the Russian Federation with 382,240 in the Republic of Dagestan (2010 Russian Federation census) and 650,000-800,000 living in Azerbaijan (Azerbaijani government statistics). One million living in diasporas all over the world

Areas: Republic of Dagestan (Russia), predominately in the Southern part and North-East Azerbaijan

Language: Lezghian, Russian and Azerbaijani

Religion: Predominately Sunni Muslims with a Shi’a minority living in the village of Miskindjia, Dagestan

Ethnic Groups: Balkan Caucasus family - Tabasarans, Aghuls, Rutuls, Budukhs, Kryts, Tsakhurs, Archi, Jeks, Udi and other Northeast Caucasian peoples

UNPO REPRESENTATION: Federal Lezghin National and Cultural Autonomy

The Federal Lezghin National and Cultural Autonomy (FLNCA) is the representative of the Lezghin people at UNPO and a full representative of the Lezghin people before the State authorities of the Russian Federation. The core objectives and tasks of the FLNCA are the protection, preservation and development of the national and cultural interests of the Lezghins. To fulfill its intentions, the FLNCA works in close cooperation with political and public organisations of the Russian Federation, including the Federal Assembly, the Administration of the President, the Government of the Russian Federation and the United Russia political party. The purposes of the FLNCA’s foundation are to solve issues and restrictions surrounding the status of the Lezghins, to preserve the uniqueness of the Lezghin people, as well as to develop their language, education and national culture. The FLNCA aims at improving the situation of Lezghins in the region. Lezghins in Azerbaijan and in Southern Dagestan share the same culture, religion and habits but live in two different societies which undermines their political, cultural and religious unity.

In 2008, the FLNCA and the State Duma’s Committee for Nationality Affairs released a report condemning the division of Lezghins and the “ethnocide” that occurred in the 1920s.

In 2013, the UNPO coordinated a fact-finding mission to Dagestan and Azerbaijan to assess Lezghins’ human rights situation in the region. The mission shed light on the critical state of democracy and minority rights in oil-rich Azerbaijan, where human rights violations are constantly committed towards Lezghins and other ethnic minorities.

Between 18 and 20 November 2014, representatives of the FLNCA had the possibility to discuss the current situation of the Lezghins at the European Parliament in Brussels. The FLNCA advocated for the EU to provide support to about 1.5 million Lezghins in the region. EU representatives expressed their commitment to protect human and minority rights and to promote democracy and the rule of law in Eastern Partnership countries such as
Azerbaijan. These advocacy meetings provided a clear basis for future cooperation and actions to protect the Lezghins’ rights not only at the European level, but more importantly in Dagestan and Azerbaijan.

The FLNCA had the opportunity to highlight Lezghins’ dire situation in the Caucasus to scholars, students and academics during a lecture at one of Brussels’ universities in February 2016. FLNCA Vice-President Ruslan Kurbanov presented the organisation’s main goal: the protection of Lezghins’ cultural, educational and economical rights in Azerbaijan and Dagestan.

That same year, the FLNCA implemented a key project called “Dagestan against terrorism and extremism”, in the framework of which leading experts helped participants to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to escape from an extremely dangerous and pernicious ideological totalitarianism.

In February 2016, a FLNCA delegation travelled to New York City to attend the United Nations Committee on NGOs, in order to advocate for the respect of Lezghins’ human rights.

OVERVIEW

History

The Lezghins formed a separate Nation with a language of their own in ancient times. The ancestors of the modern Lezghins had acquired their statehood long before the Current Era. Later on, the Lezghins and related Lezghin Nations have lost and restored their statehood and political independence several times. In its present form the Lezghin Nation has been identified as a separate Nation in the Soviet period of its history. Academic science in Russia, Azerbaijan and the rest of the world see the Lezghins as an independent Nation. However, at present times the main problem of the Lezghins is their lack of legal status, preventing them from securing their rights as a distinct historical community and Nation in the territory of their traditional residence. As a result, the ethnicity of the Lezghins is being blurred and their socio-economic situation is deteriorating.

Language & culture

The Lezghins speak Lezgian, which belongs to the Lezghin subgroup of the Nakh-Daghestani group of the North Caucasian language family. The Lezghin ethnic group is native to Southern Dagestan and Northeastern
Azerbaijan. Three dialects are closely related to Lezghian: Kurin, Samur and Kubin. Lezghian uses a Cyrillic alphabet.

It is taught as a foreign language in areas where many Lezghins are settled, but unfortunately teaching resources are scarce. In addition, Lezghin textbooks come from Russia and are not adapted to local conditions. Although Lezghin newspapers are available, the Lezghins have also expressed concern over the disappearance of their rich oral tradition. The only Lezghin television broadcasting available in Azerbaijan is received over the border from Russia. The status of the Lezghin people and language is not set in the law. This absence of appropriate status of the Lezghian language is extremely detrimental to its development, reproduction and use in various spheres of life.

Lezghins mostly grow cereals, beans, vegetables, produce wine and breed mostly cattle. They weave carpets, felts, process wood and produce mostly metal armory and jewelry. Chungur, saz, tar, zurna, pipe, reed-pipe and the tambourine are the Lezghins’ traditional instruments. Their social life is based on a patriarchal and rural system. They are predominately Sunni Muslim although many of them are still very attached to spiritual and amnestic rituals.

**Geography**

The territory of the Lezghin people is now divided into two parts, in-between two countries. The Northern part is located in the Republic of Dagestan – one of the regions of the Russian Federation – while the Southern part is situated in the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the Republic of Dagestan, the Lezghins are one of the 14 “titular” Nations. This separation has a heavy impact on the Lezghin ethnicity, as the people are divided between two countries. The State border with Azerbaijan broke the family, social, domestic, economic and cultural ties within the unified Lezghin nation. Without proper determination of their status, the preservation of the identity of the Lezghins is under great threat.

**POLITICAL SITUATION**

The government authorities of Dagestan are formed taking into account the ethnic composition of its population, but without clear regulations. This leads to obvious imbalances in political institutions and the underrepresentation of Lezghins in governing bodies. The Lezghins expressed their concern over this issue in the Azerbaijani Parliament (Milli Meclis) after a shift away from proportional representation during the parliamentary elections of November 2005. The Lezghins had been represented by two members of
parliament in the previous parliament, but are now represented only by one. Lezghin mayors have also been ousted from their positions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Lezghins' ancestors lived in their ethnic territory in ancient times. The Northern area of the settlement of the Lezghins and related peoples covers the Southern part of the Republic of Dagestan and consists of 10 districts (Akhtynsky, Derbentsky, Dokuzparinsky, Kurakhsky, Magaramkentsky, Rutulsky, Suleyman-Stalsky, Khivsky, Agulsky and Tabasaransky) and two cities (Derbent and Dagestanskiye Ogni). The Southern part of the Lezghin territory is located in the Northeastern region of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Quash, Khachmaz, Kabalinsky, Quba, Ismaili, Oghuz, Shaki, Goychay, Agdash and Zaqatala). The State border between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan divides a compact area where a single ethnic minority, the Lezghins, live.

Lezghins are a Northeastern Caucasian ethnicity, descendants of the ancient State of Caucasian Albania, located in the Eastern part of the Caucasus. In the first century AD it included the territory of present Southern Dagestan. In the 6th century AD, the Kingdom of Lakz was formed as part of Caucasian Albania and after its collapse, it became a single political entity. The Lezghins (Laks) inhabited Báb al Abwab (Derbent), the northern part of Caucasian Albania. They also lived in the south, in the historic areas of Arran and Shirvan, also located on the territory of Caucasian Albania. The Kingdom was ruled by Arab conquerors in the 8th century AD and started to be Islamised.

During the 11th century AD, Lakz was divided into the Western Lakz and the Eastern Lakz, which then were broken up into smaller entities. Since the 16th century AD, separate free Lezghin societies emerged such as Akhty-para, Dokuz-para, Alti-para and Rutul (partially inhabited by the Lezghins), which existed until the entry into Russia in the early 19th century. The Lezghins also lived in the area of Kurakhdere and separate small rural unions of Kura which were combined into the Kyurinsky Khanate (State) in the late 18th century, affiliated to the Soviet Union a century later. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Quba, Shirvan and Shaki khanates (States) were formed in the South, where the Lezghins lived together with other peoples. In the early 18th century, the State of Shirvan was inhabited by the Lezghins and lead by Haji Dawood Myushkyursky, recognised by the Russian Empire and the Porte (the Ottoman Empire).

In the early 19th century (1813-1828), the Lezghin territory became part of the Russian Empire. In the mid-19th century, the "Northern Lezghins" lived in the Kyurinsky and
Samursky districts and the city of Derbent, Dagestan region, formed the territory of the modern southern Dagestan. In 1921, the Dagestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was formed as part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), which in turn became one of the Soviet republics of the Soviet Union in 1922. The territory of residence of the “Southern” Lezghins was included in a number of districts of the Baku and Elisabethpol Governorates. In 1920, these areas became part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, which also became one of the republics of the USSR. Under the USSR, in the 1980s, Lezghins were offered the possibility to set up public entities fighting for the preservation and development of the Lezghin language and culture.

The situation changed after the fall of the Soviet Union. In 1991, the Dagestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic became the Republic of Dagestan – one of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation – and the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic became the independent Azerbaijan Republic. Leghzins saw their territory divided into two independent Republics along the Azerbaijani Dagestani Border.

Since the very start of independent Azerbaijan, the authorities have implemented assimilation policies to unify its peoples. Yet, this has damaged the Lezghin linguistic and cultural heritage by forcing them to switch to a Turkic language. The Lezghins have traditionally suffered from unemployment and a shortage of land. Resentments were fueled by the resettlement of 105,000 Azeri refugees from the Karabakh conflict on Lezghin lands in 1992 and by the forced conscription of the Lezghins to fight in the conflict. This contributed to increased tensions between the Lezghin community and the Azeri government over issues of land, employment, language and the absence of internal autonomy. A major consequence of the outbreak of the war in Chechnya in 1994 was the closure of the border between Russia and Azerbaijan. As a result, the Lezghins were for the first time in their history separated by an international border restricting their movements.

The Lezghins’ request for a separate territorial and administrative unit dates back to the 1960s but was quickly revoked. It is in 1990 that the organisation Sadval was created by Lezghins from Southern Dagestan to advocate for the unification of Lezghin-populated regions. Sadval has fought for different causes. In 1996, a State National Policy came into light and the Federal Law on “Ethno Cultural Autonomy” was adopted in Russia. This allowed ethnic minorities to acquire a special status and develop mechanisms to preserve their language and culture within the Russian Federation. It is in 1998 that federal ethno-cultural autonomies were created, one of them being the FLNCA. In 2013, Lezghins protested against Azerbaijan’s overuse of water from the Samur River, which endangers the ecosystem of Dagestan’s Magerramkent district.
CURRENT ISSUES

Lack of legal status

The main problem faced by the Lezghins is their lack of legal status, preventing them from securing their rights as a distinct historical community and Nation in the territory of their traditional residence. As a result, the ethnicity of Lezghins is being blurred and their socio-economic situation is deteriorating. Represented by the FNLCA, Lezghins started to resist to this backlash, rejecting and denouncing the discriminatory policy applied by Dagestani and Azerbaijani authorities on them.

Language

In the Republic of Dagestan (Russia) the Lezghins represent one of the 14 "title" Peoples, whose languages are State ones. This status is not fixed and is only de facto recognised. It is indeed a language of instruction, but only in mono-ethnic rural areas and for the first two years of school. Besides, language manuals and teaching resources are becoming scarcer. Only in towns and mixed settlements is the Lezghin language a school subject. This is far from sufficient, especially given the fact that the quality of education is lower. Pupils and their parents are losing motivation to learn their native language since the usefulness of the Lezghin language is limited. It has become a rare language in Dagestan, particularly since it is not mandatory (with few exceptions) to speak it nor to write it. As a result, the number of people who know the Lezghin language is being reduced considerably.

In Azerbaijan the situation is worst. In 2001 the transition from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet for both the Azeri and Lezghin languages raised great concerns. This transition prompted widespread protest from the Lezghins, who feared that cross-border contact with their Lezghin kinship in Dagestan would be further complicated. Besides, there are no local newspapers in Lezghian and the scarce Lezghin TV programs are only available at the Russian border. Baku is not implementing infrastructure nor developing the economy in the major Lezghin areas, thus enhancing a further division and assimilation of this ethnic group. There is little education in Lezghin language and overall there are no initiatives to keep the language alive. Baku continues to repress and forbid all kinds of initiatives relating to the history, language and ethnic culture led by Lezghin representatives. In the Kusary district, 95% inhabited by Lezghins, a ban on the Lezghian language has been applied, prohibiting any inscription and plaques written in Lezghian. Lezghins are being forcibly resettled from their native villages. In 2015, the FLNCA reported that another Lezghin village - Ksyunet, in the region of Kabala - disappeared. There is a lack of willingness from Azerbaijani authorities to face and solve the problems Legzhins face. This is partly due to
the existing bias against Lezghins, whose culture and identity are still misunderstood in Azerbaijan. There are very limited opportunities for Lezghins to develop their culture and language.

**Discrimination in Southern Dagestan**

The Lezghins in Dagestan are disadvantaged because of the Republic's geographical location, far from the heart of power. In addition to this, the lack of officially-established quotas for positions in public offices and an unwritten rule to exclude Lezghin representatives from holding any of the three major posts in Dagestan, clearly affect the Lezghin community as a whole.

Dagestan also suffers from a very high level of corruption and a clan system which affects the welfare of the Lezghins. In Southern Dagestan the level of unemployment is very high, leading in turn to the abandonment of their lands by the Lezghins.

Shortly after Ramazan Abdulatipov came to power in 2013, interethnic relations began to worsen in Dagestan. Abdulatipov has imposed an Avar-centric version of the history of the region to all ethnic minorities living in multinational Dagestan. Lezghin politicians have been ousted from power, thus isolating Lezghins from political life. Abdulatipov's government didn't stop systematically targeting Lezghins.

In March 2016, Nazim Gajiev, leader of Lezghin activist movement Sadval, has been found stabbed to death in Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital. His death occured a year after former Sadval leader Ruslan Magomadragimov's death in March 2015. Both deaths have raised questions among the Lezghin population. Lezghin Derbent Mayor Imam Yaraliyev has also faced tremendous persecution, forcing him to quit. Key positions were given to ruling party politicians, despite the Lezghin majority living in the district. Ramazan Abdulatipov perpetuates an ethnic discrimination policy towards the Lezghin community that was already in place under Abdurahman Daniyalov, the former head of the Soviet Republic of Dagestan. Abdulatipov considers himself as Daniyalov's disciple and follower. And this does not augur well for Lezghins.

**Assimilation in Azerbaijan**

The situation of the Lezghins in Azerbaijan differs substantially from that of the Lezghin living in Dagestan. Lezghins are concerned about their absence in the country's political life. They are associated with direct and indirect assimilation policies initiated or supported by the Azerbaijani authorities. These policies lead to a misconception and misunderstanding of Lezghin culture and architecture. Many cultural achievements of the Lezghins are misrepresented as those of the Azerbaijani and names of cultural and architectural monuments are being distorted. The name of the "Lezgi mosque", for example, which is a
UNESCO World Heritage Site in the city of Baku, was changed to “Ashurbek”. Azeri authorities continue to close Sunni mosques and allocate them to Shi’a communities. The Lezghins are also rarely mentioned in official Azerbaijani history. In general, the process of linguistic assimilation is much more intensive than in Russia and is accompanied by a change of ethnic identity. The status of the Lezghin minority as well as its language is not clearly stated in the law. This contributes to the impoverishment of the Lezghin culture and to the disappearance of the rich oral tradition.

Lezghins are not effectively represented in local, regional or national governments. Official data on the Lezghin population is constantly falsified: in 2009, Lezghins amounted to 180,300 (2.02% of the population) which contradicts other figures from Lezghin and independent entities revealing numbers between 600,000 and 800,000. The disparity between these two last figures can largely be explained by the success of Azeri assimilation policies which have forced many Lezghins to denounce their Lezghin identity in order to avoid discrimination and poverty. Azerbaijani authorities want to create a mono-ethnic State. Officially more than half of the Lezghins who have pursued an education in Azerbaijan are registered as Azerbaijanis. There is no possibility for Lezghins to express their ethnic identity, be it through culture, politics or business. Those who refuse forced assimilation are obliged to leave the country and Lezghin activists and leaders are repressed or imprisoned. Many of them are considered by human rights activists in Azerbaijan and some European human rights protection organisations as political prisoners.

The fate of villagers evicted from former Russian exclaves in Azerbaijan, such as the village of Hrah-Uba, remains worrying. Arbitrary arrests on bogus charges, mainly through drug planting, target ethnic dissidents within the context of a wider crackdown prior to the 2013 Presidential elections. The territories in which Lezghins settle in Azerbaijan are to a high extent militarised. These actions happened despite the fact that Azerbaijan has signed several international documents guaranteeing the protection of ethnic minorities. In the framework of its 2013 fact-finding mission, the UNPO found that some Lezghins have tried to run for the 2013 elections but have been prevented from doing so, noting that Azeri authorities do not wish to promote Lezghin personalities to positions of influence. If the situation does not change in the near future, a sharp decrease in the number of Lezghins in Azerbaijan will continue to happen. This dire situation leads to the suppression of the national consciousness of the Lezghins, to a sharp decrease in the number of Lezghins in Azerbaijan and to the annihilation of Lezghin native speakers in the country.
UNPO PERSPECTIVE

UNPO has a resolute commitment to the peaceful and nonviolent campaign for the recognition of the Lezghin people as an ethnic group with a legal status, their language and political rights and the restoration of their inalienable rights as a distinct historical community and Nation in the territory of their traditional residence. UNPO believes that the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan should proceed towards the full restoration of the rights of the Lezghins in accordance with the universally-recognised principles of international law and in dialogue with the Lezghin community representatives. UNPO promotes the engagement of the international and particularly European communities to support the process of restoring the rights of the Lezghins.

UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

UNPO and the FLNCA aim at shedding light on the current aggressive policy happening nowadays in Dagestan and Azerbaijan. There is a clear ethnic discrimination in both republics. For their development the Lezghins, divided by State borders, should be granted a legal status in their historical lands, which will make it possible to preserve the Lezghian culture and language and to get protection from the government.

In this regard, it is necessary to create a national-territorial autonomy similar to a Canton in the federal system of Switzerland with extended rights for Lezghin speakers, both in the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Lezghian-speakers should get extended rights and their language should become a language of political leaders, government employees, civil servants and representatives of business and nonprofit organisations which work with the population. The Lezghian language should be used widely in the media and in all other spheres. This could guarantee the progressive development of the Lezghin communities and will eliminate the threat of their assimilation and disappearance. In Russia, this should cover the territory of the Southern Dagestan, thus uniting in one constituent entity not only the Lezghins but also other peoples of the Lezghin language group, whose rights must also be protected.

It should be noted that the FNCLA does not ask for sovereignty but for the full respect of the basic human rights of the Lezghin people in Azerbaijan and Southern Dagestan, in accordance with international human rights documents.

CULTURE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Lezghins have a rich intellectual and material culture. The oral folk arts of the Lezghins have preserved their memory of historical events, some of which having occurred two thousand years ago. The heroic story of “Sharvili” is one of the most important within their folk arts and a record of the complicated history of the Lezghin people. Its hero, Sharvili, is a collective character which represents all of the Lezghin people, who protected its lands from its conquerors, including Romans, Iranians, Khazars, Arabs, Oghuzes and Mongols. In
honor of Sharvili, the annual celebration is held in the Akhtynsky District of Dagestan, which has gained popularity and national recognition.

The brightest holiday which unites all Lezghins is Yaran Suvar, the day of vernal equinox, which is celebrated on 21 March. This original holiday is one of the symbols of the Lezghins. It can be seen as a repository of their traditional culture. Moreover, the Lezghins still celebrate other holidays, such as the holiday of “flowers” and “bird cherry”. The dances and musical heritage of the Lezghins are very rich and diversified. Their famous “lezginka” dance is a landmark for the Lezghin people and is spread throughout the Caucasus.

Traditional crafts have reached a high level of development and many craftwork items have great artistic value. Lezgin carpets, both pile carpets and nap carpets called sumakhi are very popular, many of which are true works of art. The other well-developed fields are ceramic production, including the famous Ispic ceramics, manufacturing of knives and jewelry and other crafts. However, at present all crafts are in decline and without their revival the cultural identity of the Lezghins will disappear.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The UNPO fact-finding mission in Southern Dagestan and Azerbaijan in 2013 concluded in 5 recommendations to be followed by the Republic of Dagestan of the Russian Federation:

- To adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation on gender, disability, sex, age, race/ethnicity and religion with the aim of adequately protecting the religious and ethnic minorities in the country;
- To simplify procedural rules for registration and, in general, the functioning of NGOs and other entities in the country;
- To engage in wider consultation with Lezghin communities awaiting resettlement as a means of building confidence and helping to avoid uncertainty and rumormongering;
- To facilitate and encourage cross-border exchanges between Dagestan and Azerbaijan as a means of laying the foundations for social stability, cultural exchange and opportunities for economic development;
- To give attention to the role and symbol of the city of Derbent as a centre of nonviolence and tolerance in the region, as recognised by UNESCO but sadly largely overlooked by the international community at large.
At the 2015 Human Dimension and Implementation Meeting of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) participating States, the FLNCA released 12 recommendations to Azerbaijan in regard to Lezghins’ human rights protection. These recommendations build upon the ones elaborated after UNPO’s fact-finding mission in South Dagestan and Azerbaijan in 2013 (see above):

- To conduct an accurate census of the population, disaggregating it to take into account minority groups;
- To adopt laws that will give the opportunity to the whole of the minorities divided by the State border to hold dual citizenship;
- To establish quotas for the State service for ethnic minorities;
- To observe ethnic balance in sending conscripts to the frontlines of the Nagorno-Karabakh border;
- To develop the educational system in minority areas, including through the construction of schools, the development of quality scientific and educational material in minority languages, the inclusion of native languages as a mandatory option in the school curriculum and specific trainings for minority language teachers;
- To ensure regular broadcasting in minority languages and the publishing of newspapers and other periodical publications in these languages;
- To give legal status as a regional language of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Lezghin language;
- To guarantee freedom of conscience in the country, notably by removing the obstacles created for the registration of Sunni communities and functioning religious institutions relating to them;
- To recognize and promote the existence of minorities’ cultural heritage in Azerbaijan and put an end to the process of modification of the toponymy in minority areas;
- To allow for the creation of all-Azeri cultural, linguistic and other associations of Lezghin people;
- To improve the living conditions in minority areas, including through the construction of adequate infrastructure, facilities and the development of communications and transportation networks;
- To create the conditions for an unhindered functioning and development of Lezghin NGOs in the Republic of Azerbaijan.
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The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

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