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## Identity & Language

**'Azeri' vs. 'Azerbaijani'**
Jala Garibova

## New Caucasus Emerging

**Achieving Full Resolution to the Karabakh Conflict**
Steven J. Klein

**Spotlight on Normalization**
Gulshan Pashayeva

**Winning the Peace**
F. Murat Özkaleli

**Security and Economic Implications for Georgia**
Mamuka Tsereteli

## Geopolitics Along the Silk Road

**What Do Energy Sanctions Say About the World?**
Aurélie Bros

**The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor**
Ali Haider Saleem & Arhama Siddiqa

## Profile in Leadership

**Azerbaijan's Educator-Statesman at Eighty**
S. Frederick Starr

# 'Azeri' vs. 'Azerbaijani'

## Language and Identity in Nation-building

*Jala Garibova*

Whether in everyday conversations, media discussions, or social media, not infrequently do we hear assorted debates regarding the use of the term 'Azeri' in reference to the titular ethnic group and the titular language of the Republic of Azerbaijan (as well as those who belong to this same group and speak this same language beyond its borders). While the use of 'Azeri'—although restricted to certain domains—can be traced back many years, debates around the use of this term (and its derivatives) have intensified within the framework of national revival tendencies in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The main focus of these debates is whether using 'Azeri' versus 'Azerbaijani' as the name of the titular group and/or language is correct, appropriate, and conceptually comprehensive.

Some find the term 'Azeri' fallacious; others produce arguments in its support on the basis of various sources, notably including the *Prose Edda*—an Old Norse account of historical sagas and mythologies written or compiled in Iceland by 13th-century scholar and politician Snorri Sturluson. Proponents of the latter approach point to certain toponyms and ethnonyms found in that text—including 'Asgard,' 'As(as),' and even 'Asia,' as well as to the deity name 'Æsir'—and on that basis claim the existence of a relationship between these, on one hand, and the root of the word 'Azer/Aser,' on another hand. To this can be added the fact that, aside from being the term used to identify the principal pantheon of Nordic mythology, 'Æsir' is also used in the *Prose Edda* to designate people from Asia. Moreover, Sturluson himself claims the existence of a link between 'Æsir' and the origin of 'Turks/Tyrks,' the people who lived in "Tyrkland." According to this medieval Scandinavian historian, the former left Troy (an ancient city immortalized by Homer and located on the present territory of the Republic of Turkey), where 'Turks/Tyrks' lived, to settle in Europe and, in particular, in Scandinavia.

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Still others go back to certain reference made by various medieval Islamic scholars and travelers (including Ahmad Al-Ya'qubi, Al-Masudi, and Ibn Hawqal) to languages spoken in northwestern Iran to link them with the terms 'Azeri/Azari,' which, according to this point of view, are either of Iranian or Turkic origin.

We will certainly not discuss in detail the veracity of the claims made by Sturluson or the medieval Islamic authors, as this would require an approach far different from one appropriate to a policy journal such as *Baku Dialogues*. We will, however, attempt to shed light on the elements of identity construction discourse in post-Soviet Azerbaijan—of which references to the above-mentioned claims are a part—and also on the reasons the term 'Azeri' has produced active debates and sometimes resulted in misunderstandings and even disagreements, both in Azerbaijan and abroad. In order to have a comprehensive picture of the realities (both synchronic and diachronic) surrounding these debates, we have incorporated some degree of a historical-comparative perspective into this article whilst avoiding as much as possible the use of technical and specialist terminology.

### *National Revival Dynamics*

As post-colonial countries, the authorities of the former-Soviet Muslim states—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—have placed strong emphasis on national revival since achieving (or re-achieving) independence. In the wake of more than 70 years of having had to share a common Soviet identity—during which time national languages

and identities were constructed as umbrella identities to dominate over, and often suppress, national/ethnic identities of Soviet peoples (although to varying degrees)—the concept of language and affiliation (both ethnic and national) has acquired a significant role in the respective nation-building processes in the former-Soviet Muslim states. Thus in the early 1990s, language and identity became platforms from which to achieve national integration and societal cohesion. This has been sustained, to one degree or another, into the present in those six countries (and of course elsewhere in the Silk Road region). Even today, national revival remains quite an expressive tendency, as we observe the continuing development of linguistic policies and planning, identity politics, education policies, and public and social media discourse strategies taking place in many of these states.

Contemporary tendencies of identity construction in the former-Soviet Muslim States could be viewed as part of a unique post-Soviet phenomenon shaped on the basis of common features. Overall, the post-Soviet quest for identity in all six of the aforementioned states reflected a tendency of self-redefinition (mainly through changing identity symbols), with a further common goal of achieving self-representation in a global (and regional) setting characterized by geopolitical and socioeconomic rearrangements. This generic tendency is rooted in the commonality of the historical experience of the six countries. Each entered its newest stage in history heavily burdened with the traumatic experience of the Soviet influence on their respective identities. In fact, one can plausibly assert that perhaps never and nowhere in the world but in the Soviet Union were aspects of the national identities of various nations manipulated so skillfully and with such obvious results—the repercussions of which are likely to be felt for generations to come.

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The strategic goal of the Soviet nationalities policy was the creation of a unique *Homo Sovieticus* (to refer to the term coined by Alexander Zinoviev in his 1974 satirical monograph)—what the authorities called a "New Soviet Person" understood as an idealized, social archetype shaped by ideological conformity and cultural commonality. The Soviet political system needed such a commonality for the consolidation of the Union—an empire in all but name. A key element of this required the abolishment of existing identity repertoires (whether national/ethnic or corporate) of the nations or communities falling within the borders of the USSR. In spite of the implicit nationalistic tendencies of certain groups of people—mainly representing intelligentsia in the "sovereign" nations of the 15 constituent republics, but also in lesser administrative strata—Soviet decisionmakers were able to create and to some extent implant into the minds of the broad masses feelings of belonging to a large-group, supra-national identity.

For the New Soviet Person, this was expressed in the comprehension of the USSR as the primary motherland, and Russia as "the elderly brother." In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union was unexpectedly shocking for many (even for those who had longed for it for years). First puzzled by the sudden disconnection with Moscow, the new states then embarked on journeys to establish their own independent polities, and the commonality of the historic experience in the Soviet Union informed not only the content but also dictated, to varying degrees, the direction of their respective future tendencies.

## *Language and Identity*

Language has become an important angle from which political and social tendencies in the six post-Soviet Muslim countries are often analyzed. In fact, language has long been a contributing factor to both the politicization of society and social stratification within each of these states.

Nevertheless, language use and ethnic/national affiliation in Azerbaijan and Central Asia were not necessarily mutually dependable for many centuries, although language is often viewed as the main pillar for the construction of identity and the development of affiliation. Starting from the Middle Ages, the use of Persian, along with Arabic, was spread among educated Muslims. While Arabic was learned and used as the language of the mosque (being the language in which the Holy Quran was composed), Persian became the language of officialdom, literature, and culture in many Muslim states, including those established or run by Turkic clans. In particular, Persian was the cultural

language of Azerbaijani Turks and Central Asians until the beginning of the 20th century. The Turkic literary language, in which a huge number of precious literary works were created, had a significant share of Persian and Arabic borrowings. In reality, the use of the Persian language was a class marker: an indicator of social prestige and education level. It was not necessarily an expression of ethnic or national affiliation or identity.

A similar linguistic pattern of behavior was observed during the period when Russian was the dominant language on the territory of Azerbaijan and the five former-Soviet Central Asian states. More or less from the onset of Russian expansion into these areas, the Russian language became a means for receiving education, developing career opportunities, and, hence, becoming wealthier and more socially prominent. An intelligentsia from what were called the "backward Muslim communities" was being formed mainly thanks to those who had received education in Russia or in educational establishments where the language of education was mainly in Russian. Therefore, Russian was gradually securing a place in the repertoire of educated Muslims, which naturally contributed to positive changes in their linguistic attitude towards this language.

The widespread promotion of the Russian language in the Soviet Union resulted in the decrease of available domains for the expression of native languages, particularly in urban settings. Since the Russian language opened opportunities for better education and cultural development—mainly in the face of lacking native language resources and worse equipped, or totally lacking, native language schools—native languages in urban circles were often looked down upon and associated with backwardness and rural belonging.

The continued use of national languages in rural settings in the peripheries during the Soviet era was among the strongest factors preventing the disappearance of the everyday use of these languages. In Kazakhstan, for example, people in rural areas even credit themselves for preserving the native language and culture, which is obvious from their referring to urban Kazakhs—many of whom do not (or at least did not until recently) know the native language—as "asphalt Kazakhs."

In Azerbaijan, the situation was somewhat more favorable for the native language. Azerbaijani was always used as a language of instruction not only at the primary and secondary





school level but also in higher education. (Azerbaijan was one of only three constituent Soviet republics—the other two were Georgia and Armenia—that recognized its titular language as a state language in its own constitution.) Moreover, Azerbaijani was a required subject in Russian-medium instruction schools at all levels. Therefore, if the urban elites in Central Asia (especially in Kazakhstan) were, for most part, Russian monolinguals, in Azerbaijan they were mostly bilingual, although in many cases their Russian was much better than their Azerbaijani, and some of their family members either did not want or were not able to use their native languages in everyday discourse.

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However, both in Azerbaijan and the Central Asia states, language preference shifts of any degree were not expressions of shifts in ethnic affiliation (although these were, as noted above, strong social markers); the bottom line was that linguistic aptitude in Russian did not mean one had become Russian. This was due at least in part to the fact that the Soviet regime did not aim at making everyone Russian; rather, the purpose was to shape a Soviet citizenry (along the New Soviet Person archetype) able to communicate in a common language yet representing differing ethnic backgrounds.

Painting in broad strokes, one could say that the Soviet nationalities policy was based on the recognition and development of distinct nationalities (understood within acceptable ideological parameters) with distinct cultures and languages. Hence, the spread of Russian, which was promoted to dominance over other languages spoken by the various nationalities inhabiting the Soviet Union, did not imply the elimination of national languages. The nationalities were to keep their national languages and create literature and art in these and with a sort of native spirit. This would reach out to the broad masses in order to spread the Soviet ideology among them. Certainly, the results of the prevalence of the Russian language—particularly in the main cities of Azerbaijan and the five Central Asian republics—often

led to Russian monolingualism and resulted in shifts from native language usage among city elites; and in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan this additionally brought about sweeping changes in urban language ecologies (in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan demographics were another significant factor, as the major cities in these republics became heavily populated by Russians). In fact, the Soviets had to mainly rely on peripheries in the enforcement of their nationalities policy: on people who were powerful channels in transmitting folklore, music, customs, traditions, and literature in their respective native languages, the content of which was also ideologized.

An interesting illustration of the Soviets' appeal to national spirits in shaping the Soviet identity is a 1948 Politburo resolution regarding the ethnic-Georgian composer Vano Muradeli's opera *The Great Friendship* that had recently had its premier. While the main target of the criticism in that resolution was the alleged falsification of historic facts in the libretto (Stalin took a personal interest in this affair, which reminded him of the suicide of one of his formerly close collaborators, after attending one of the opera's first performances in Moscow), a number of composers (among them Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev) were also slammed for formalism, rejection of melody, and for engaging in some anti-art and anti-people directions that the denied traditional foundations of music and high expectations of the Soviet peoples. The resolution called on "Soviet composers to imbue themselves with the high spirit and refined taste with which the Soviet people make demands on music and [...] to ensure such an upsurge in creative work that will quickly move the Soviet musical culture forward."

National languages were also prime sources and useful instruments for spreading Soviet ideology among the masses. Moreover, the Soviet version of Russian culture was not able to make significant inroads into the core of existing socio-cultural practices as manifested on occasions like weddings, funerals, cuisine, music, dances, marriage patterns, naming practices, and so on. Even preserved religious affiliations remained strong. Although attending religious ceremonies was banned in various phases (and when allowed, always frowned upon), people nevertheless continued to follow religious rituals associated with holiday in familial settings. Nor was the Russian language able to penetrate into traditional practices. Even those who





were not fluent in Azerbaijani used that language (though at the informal level), not Russian, for the performance of wedding speeches, for the expression of best wishes during traditional holiday gatherings, for the conveying of condolences during funerals, and so on.

On the contrary, Russian generally served—as we have already noted—as a language that provided better opportunities for education and employment in the entire region. It was, hence, viewed as a social, not national marker, and was not equivalent to national identity. At most, it was a marker of "being urban" and "more cultural," and was utilized as an instrument of prejudice against the non-urban. And, of course, it served as the pan-Soviet *lingua franca* (Russian continues to perform this function across most of the former-Soviet space today).

So, in reality, the linkage between language and identity in the former-Soviet Muslim states is, first of all, of a social character. Thus, in the context of social integration and national solidarity, what mattered (and still does) is not only who you are and what language you speak; what is also at least of equal importance is how you (and others) define your ethnic belonging and native language.

## *The Case of Azerbaijan*

Azerbaijan, one of the five Turkic-speaking (and one of the six majority Muslim) sovereign republics of the Soviet Union, regained its independence in 1991. As in the case in all former-Soviet republics, the drive for independence was, in one form or another, partly (and implicitly) initiated by processes that had begun to emerge in embryonic form in the late 1980s, especially through the implementation of the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

However, the degree to which the immediate post-Soviet nation-building processes were smooth or painful, quiet or intensive, slow or speedy, soft or radical could be linked to various factors. These included previous statehood experiences, previous or existing territorial or ethnic conflicts, history of socio-cultural development, literary traditions, history of media, as well as the status, use, and development of the literary language. All these factors, whether taken one at a time or collectively, varied among the former-Soviet Muslim countries. Azerbaijan was among the countries where the nation-building process was accompanied with vigor and expressiveness, but also with a degree of pain and trauma due to the onset and

subsequent outcome of the First Karabakh War.

The major nation-building ideology of post-1991 Azerbaijan can be said to be what has come to be known as "Azerbaijanism," which constituted the core element of identity construction. A close review of nearly three decades of Azerbaijan's post-independence development shows three main strategies of identity reconstruction: policy formulation and legislation (laws, presidential decrees, etc.), construction of symbolic and discursive resources (creating or recreating narratives), and social engagement (active patriotism). The first two strategies were more characteristic of the first two decades after independence, while the third one gained more salience during the third decade of independence. The main focal point in identity construction, in particular in the early years of independence, was language and national/ethnic affiliation." Interestingly, one of the strongest points of debate for Azerbaijanis was not only the issue of language use per se, but also the issue of its name, to which both of the below questions were simultaneously relevant: a) how do (and should) we call ourselves and our language; and b) how do (and should) others refer to us and our language.

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The years immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in Azerbaijan saw intensive Turkification in almost all spheres including politics, foreign relations, language policy, and narrative shaping. These were years characterized by strong and highly expressive tendencies of romantic nationalism, when Turkism took prevalence over other identity paradigms: the term 'Türk' was a preferred form of reference, both for the country's titular ethnic group and its language. It appeared in formal documents, laws, media, textbooks, and public discourse, thus replacing the term 'Azerbaijani' for a time.

Clearly, this was a response to the identity trauma caused by Soviet identity politics and a tendency that both resulted from and then accompanied (but also enhanced) the process of de-Sovietization. Supported mostly (and often in its more radical form) by more nationalistically oriented political groups (and the political elites represented by these groups), Turkification tendencies lost their intensity when the New Azerbaijan Party, headed by Heydar Aliyev, came to power in 1993—although here it must be stressed that the recognition of the Turkic roots of Azerbaijan's titular nation was not denied and continues to remain a significant background element in the country's identity discourse.

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The debates over the terms 'Azerbaijani' versus 'Turkish/Turkic'—but also those centered on adopting the existing Turkish alphabet versus a distinct Azerbaijani one as part of the process of shifting away from the Cyrillic script that had been in use throughout most of the Soviet period—lost salience with the adoption of the 1995 Constitution, which stated the name of the titular language to be 'Azerbaijani.' However, this also produced a concessive paradigm of 'Azerbaijani Turk' ('Azərbaycan Türkü') as the name of the country's titular group and 'Azerbaijani Turkish/Azerbaijani Turkic' ('Azərbaycan Türkcəsi') as the name of the country's titular language. Both became reference points for groups for whom Turkicness was an important part of identity expression. While these terms did not make inroads into official domains in the country, they did become part of public discourse and scholarly parlance and were (and still are, in some quarters) used simultaneously (and somehow competitively) with the term 'Azerbaijani.'

What has often produced intensive debates in traditional media (television, print) and on various social media channels was not so much related to the competition between proponents of these two categories of terms but rather to their competing representations in formal and informal discourse. Both terms appear in two forms, where we encounter either the element 'Azerbaijani' or its reduced form 'Azeri.' Here we come to the crux of the matter.

The term 'Azeri' is basically used by foreigners, including citizens of Turkey, and most frequently in reference to the name of Azerbaijan's titular language. While many foreigners that opt to use the form 'Azeri' genuinely believe they employ the correct term for referring to the country's titular language, the use of this reduced form usually sparks an emotional reaction among Azerbaijanis. To some, the reduced form—particularly if used formally—is considered a disparagement, as it allegedly depreciates the importance of the name of the nation and its language. Thus, these people take it as a mark of disrespect towards the people of Azerbaijan and their language. Others believe that many foreigners use the reduced form because they think this is the right one to use and that these foreigners simply need to be informed about the correct form. Still others see the term 'Azeri' as dangerous, as it implicitly links Azerbaijan's titular ethnicity to some hypothetical group that would be, by implication, non-Turkic (we will come to a discussion later on about how this hypothetical ethnicity is termed 'Azer' by some). Consequently, these people prefer the use of a term that can be directly associated with at least the geographical origin of the titular nation (i.e., with Azerbaijan) in the absence of the name that would clearly show the Turkic origin of the titular nation.

## *History of Identity Construction*

Let us now take a step back by examining the nature of these debates in the context of the historic route along which the terms describing the ethnic name and language of the titular group took shape. Historically, the titular ethnic group in Azerbaijan was 'Turk,' although the majority of Azerbaijanis used the word 'Muslim' as self-reference. As a result of great power competition and several wars and resulting peace treaties, the geographic space inhabited by ethnic-Azerbaijanis became divided between the Russian and Persian empires in the early 19th century (around the time the Napoleonic Wars were being fought in Europe). At some point thereafter, Azerbaijanis living in the Russian Empire also came to be called 'Tatars,' a term imposed by imperial discourse. Azerbaijanis living in Iran, on the other hand, were and still are referred to as 'Turks.'

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Again, for Azerbaijanis living in the Russian Empire the popular form of self-reference was 'Muslim.' The word 'Turk' gained significance among Azerbaijanis in the Russian Empire only towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, when the intelligentsia began to promote Turkicness (affiliation with the Turkic root) as a platform from which to promote a national awakening. Turkicness (or Turkism) was not promoted as a political platform but rather as a liberal socio-cultural movement within the framework of which the intelligentsia representing the Turkic communities, including Azerbaijanis (or Azerbaijani Turks), tried to solve problems of literacy and education within their communities, establish media in local languages, and launch alphabet/language reforms.

Turkism also became an important element in the national-liberation movement of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia at the beginning of the 20th century—the movement that led in the formation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR), which existed between 1918 and 1920. The ideology on which the Republic was grounded incorporated Turkism as one of the basic elements—the other one being Azerbaijanism. The name 'Azerbaijan' was introduced by the ADR's founders on the basis of linguistic and cultural proximity with the population living in the Azerbaijan province of Iran. Mahammad Amin Rasulzade, whose words and deeds stood at the root of the ADR's state ideology, also claimed that the south-eastern part of the Caucasus was also historically referred to as "Azerbaijan." Historians claim that the name 'Azerbaijan' as a political term based on geographic affiliation was chosen also for the purpose of accommodating non-Turkic minority groups: thus 'Azerbaijan' was also seen as a supra-ethnic identity from the perspective of the ADR's founders.

Thus, the paradigm that incorporated Turkism as an ethno-cultural affiliation together with Azerbaijanism as a citizenship affiliation played a significant role in shaping the national identity of Azerbaijanis in the first decades of the 20th century. That Turkism was a strong element—and that it was promoted also within the context of Azerbaijanism—is obvious from even a cursory examination of *inter*

*alia* the constitution, laws, official declarations, and parliamentary speeches of the two years during which the ADR existed. On the other hand, an examination of the literature and journalism produced during those and surrounding years also reveal, for the most part, a type of discourse elevating Turkism as a strong element of ethnic affiliation together with Azerbaijanism as a framework of a societal/statehood affiliation within which Turkism should be promoted.

Turkism was still a strong point of discourse even in the first years of Soviet state-building and language-planning initiatives. In official domains, the name of the titular nation and its language was known as 'Türk' (Turkish/Turkic) and textbooks teaching the mother tongue were published under the title *Türk Dili* (meaning "Turkish/Turkic language"). In particular, during the years of what was known as "indigenization" (or "rootedness" or "nativization"—the term in Russian is 'korenizatsiya'), members of the local intelligentsia were coopted, their native language-promotion and literacy initiatives were favored, and local cadres with knowledge of the local titular languages were trained and incorporated into the nomenklatura. Inspired by this (but probably also by the close relations between Ankara and Moscow in the early days of both the Republic of Turkey and the USSR), the local intelligentsia placed strong emphasis on Turkism as a building element for language and alphabet reforms, including the development of a common Turkic script and terminology, which would bring all Turks of the Soviet Union closer together and allow them to benefit from one another and from certain achievements in Turkey in relevant fields.

This sort of thinking was also given pride of place at the First Turkology Congress, which was held in Baku in 1926. In retrospect, however, this event came to represent the beginning of the end of the "Turkism era" in the Soviet Union. Those who were active promoters of Turkic language unification and who referred to the cultural and linguistic closeness of all Turks were labeled as "Pan-Turkists" and punished severely. Many of them went on to become victims of Stalin's Great Purge of the late 1930s.

In this period, the term 'Turkish/Turkic' came to be squeezed out gradually from public discourse and replaced by the term 'Azərbaycan,' which stands for both 'Azerbaijan' and 'Azerbaijani' (e.g., 'Azərbaycan dili' meaning 'Azerbaijani' or the 'Azerbaijani language'), as well as the term





'Azərbaycanlı,' which stands for the word 'Azerbaijanian' or 'Azerbaijani'—a reference to ethnic affiliation. It has been noted in several sources, though, that before late 1930s (when the term 'Azerbaijani' came to be used to refer to the titular ethnic group), the term was used to cover the entire population of Azerbaijan. The late 1930s thus represents the start of a historic stage that marked the onset of an era of identity reshaping for the people of Azerbaijan: affiliation with the Turkic world began to wane, whether this be understood in terms of language, history, or culture. Histories were rewritten to overshadow or de-emphasize the titular nation's Turkic roots and its natural links with the Turkic language and culture. As a result, the titular ethnic group of Azerbaijan was gradually pulled away from recognizing its ethnic roots, true history, and longstanding affiliation with the greater Turkic world.

Although some claim—based on a few cases of the usage of the term 'Azerbaijani' as a reference to a citizen of Azerbaijan (in particular before late 1930s)—that the word 'Azerbaijani' was invented as a corporate term to encompass all ethnicities living in Azerbaijan, Soviet-era records and statistical accounts clearly show that ethnic minorities had retained their original names. Thus, in the Soviet era, the word 'Azerbaijani' was not an umbrella term for the entire population of Azerbaijan, but only for the titular ethnic group; and it was only the titular group whose name had undergone intervention. As such, even in contemporary Azerbaijan, minorities can formally claim both ethnic and citizenship identity levels whilst for the titular group there is no such two-layer identity paradigm—at least at the level of formal discourse (understood as official documents, legislation, decrees, speeches by state leaders, and so on).

Certainly, self-perception among representatives of the titular group became more nuanced in the process of de-Sovietization. This process, we can note, saw a huge shift in historical narrative with regards to the ethnic roots of the titular nation, as well as produced a *rapprochement* in bilateral relations with Turkey not only in political but also in educational and cultural spheres, in turn contributing to an overall *rapprochement* between the two countries and the heightened popularity of the phrase "one nation, two states." Thus, more and more Azerbaijanis, in particular those of younger age, emphasize the underlying Turkic identity of the titular nation and make a relevant reference to it in informal

discourse, media debates, and social media interaction. This has also been affected by Azerbaijan's increasing role in the activities of Turkic integrative academic and cultural networks like the International Organization of Turkic Culture (Türksoy), but also the Turkic Council.

However that may be, the use of the word 'Azerbaijani' to refer to a supra-ethnic identity is predominantly a new, post-Soviet approach. The term 'Türk,' which laid at the foundation of the immediate post-Soviet identity construction in Azerbaijan, was not met with unequivocal favor, however, and was contested by some groups for whom 'Türk' referred only to the Turks of Turkey. Of course, Soviet nation-building had done its job: for many, true knowledge about the ethnic composition of the titular nation had already gone into oblivion.

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Certainly, there were other groups in Azerbaijan that, while recognizing the historic roots of the titular group, still preferred the term 'Azerbaijani' as a discrete identity that had already been shaped as a distinctive paradigm over a period of decades. This position was also defended by minority groups and Russian-speaking Azerbaijanis for whom the terms 'Azerbaijani' was a safer paradigm in terms of preserving their ethnic or cultural identity.

Azerbaijaniness as an ethnic identity began to be enhanced in 1993 with the adoption of a series of laws and legislative acts. The 1995 promulgation of a new Constitution—whereby the name of the ethnic group and its language was officially established as 'Azerbaijani'—represents a further milestone. Separately, the term 'Azerbaijani' is also used to imply the entire people of Azerbaijan, including both the titular group and the country's ethnic minorities—although the titular ethnic group is still referred to as 'Azerbaijani' (not 'Turk') in formal discourse and many people in Azerbaijan prefer to identify themselves as Azerbaijanis to explicitly distinguish themselves from the Turks of Turkey. In other words, according to this latter conception, an 'Azerbaijani' is defined as a citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan.





Our observations of the discourse dynamics of the past few months have revealed a strengthened self-perception of identity as 'Azerbaijani' in the context of the return of Karabakh and the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity brought about by its victory in the Second Karabakh War. This historic event has not just become a factor in restoring national sentiments of justice and dignity for Azerbaijanis; it has also strengthened the concept of citizenship identity that has come to express not only peaceful co-existence between the titular and minority groups in Azerbaijan but also contributed to the further unification of all ethnic groups living in the country by providing an opportunity to genuinely come together in common cause.

Here we can also note other factors that have contributed to the enhancement of the citizenship identity among Azerbaijanis. Multiculturalism, which was declared as Azerbaijan's state strategy in 2013 and has been communicated through various national pride initiatives since then, should be seen as an additional factor shaping a stronger citizenship identity. Although much remains to be achieved in the practical sphere, this strategy has generated a significant level of discourse within the country regarding not only tolerance but also, more broadly, the cross-cultural dimensions of Azerbaijani society; this has in turn generated feelings of pride among Azerbaijanis and deepened the harmonious coexistence of different cultural, linguistic, and religious group within the country.

Efforts undertaken in the construction of an agentive identity through engaging social agency, as noted above, should also be viewed as another serious factor enhancing citizenship identity. With the progress of nation-building, top-down identity policies themselves produce and encourage social engagement by enabling social agency. Social agency includes the incorporation of active involvement by various groups and the contribution of various types of experience into the overall identity ideology. Discourse in the country has recently focused on social agency and action as expressions of national spirit and patriotism, which, in turn, has been accompanied by a number of important steps taken to engage younger citizens as active participants in the construction of a new Azerbaijani society.

Such steps include the financing of the education abroad and the recruitment of young people (including those educated through

such sponsored education programs outside Azerbaijan) in newly established social service structures (such as the DOST Agency, the ASAN service), government offices, research think-tanks, and international culture and sporting events. Recent political discourse has also emphasized the importance of constructive patriotism for modern nation-building. It can be predicted that the country's citizenship identity shaped through such and similar processes will become a strong stimulus for further enhancing citizens' self-perception as 'Azerbaijani.'

Here it might be useful to add that similar tendencies of redefinition have recently been taking place in Kazakhstan: although observed mainly among Russians, there is a new trend in the country to use the term 'Kazakhstani' (i.e., someone or something from Kazakhstan) interchangeably with the term 'Kazakh' (the term used for the titular ethnic group of the country). The term 'Kazakhstani' is used in popular and sometimes academic literature, mainly in the Russian language, as a reference to the entire population of the country. As a reaction to this, there even appeared some debates in the country's press as to whether the name of the country should be changed to something like 'Qazaq eli' ('Kazakh land').

## *Avowed vs. Ascribed Identity*

If we consider the identity repertoires of Azerbaijanis through the lens of avowed versus ascribed identities—in other words, if we look at the identity repertoires as they are expressed by various social groups themselves—then we can observe that there is no single choice of identity format for Azerbaijanis in terms of ethnic/national affiliation. Moreover, what is most frequently observed is a co-existence of, and sometimes a clash between, different identity paradigms in a single repertoire. We must note here that while identity is certainly a multi-layered phenomenon in itself—and that each identity paradigm undoubtedly includes several components—the historical record suggests that one or two of its components emerge as most distinct and most salient in most cases. Thus, it is possible to distinguish at least five distinct identity paradigms, each of which will be examined briefly in turn.

*First*, the discrete national identity format of Azerbaijanism. This format is most preferred by those within the titular group who wish to identify themselves discretely and distinctly as Azerbaijanis and reject Turkism as a format which, according to them, overshadows the discrete Azerbaijani identity. For them, identification with Azerbaijan as a geographical term and/or as the name of a state is a basis for identifying the titular ethnic group: most important is the territory and the state to which they belong rather than to the greater Turkic world from which their ancestors originate. Also, some of those who adhere to the term 'Azerbaijani' reject the term 'Turk' because they think that the ethno-genetic structure of Azerbaijanis is a complex one, since the dominant Turkic element in the ethno-genesis of Azerbaijanis has mixed with a variety of other elements (including Iranian and Caucasian ones) through many centuries following the migration of the Seljuk Turks from Asia in the 11th century (and possibly earlier migrations of Turks, as many scholars in both Turkey and Azerbaijan claim the presence of Turks in this part of the world long before then). This identity format is also preferred by those groups, whether titular or minority, for whom the citizenship identity is prior to the ethnic identity. These groups see Azerbaijanism as an umbrella paradigm covering both titular and minority groups at the level of citizenship. In this context, it is possible to view this paradigm also as a social/societal identity format.

*Second*, the corporate identity format of Turkism. This paradigm is mostly preferred by groups representing the titular ethnicity for whom affiliation with a larger group is more important than the identity provided by citizenship. It should be noted in this context that various corporate identity models based on religious, cultural, ethnic, and sometimes geographical ties have emerged in Azerbaijan at different stages of history and played a powerful role in the structuring of the states that emerged on the territory of today's Azerbaijan (and the north-west part of Iran), as well as in the development of national or social identity. Today, however, the most salient corporate identity among Azerbaijanis is Turkism. Although a corporate Muslim identity has also emerged as a post-Soviet phenomenon, it is not as widespread and not active due, first of all, to the prevalence of secularism in Azerbaijan.

*Third*, a mixed identity format that has various representations, including Azerbaijani+Turkic; Azerbaijani+ ex-Soviet; Azerbaijani+ ethnic non-Turkic; Azerbaijani+ Caucasian, Azerbaijani+cosmopolitan, etc. This paradigm is claimed by those who prefer to identify themselves through a dual or a more complex affiliation. For some (in particular for minorities

living in Azerbaijan), this duality is constructed as ethnic+national/citizenship identity; for others, this is a paradigm that has at least two layers: a primary ethnic (or ethnic-national with respect to those for whom Azerbaijani is both ethnic and national identity) layer and a secondary one that is associated with a broader geography (e.g., Azerbaijani+Caucasian, which is the least popular but may emerge as a growing tendency in the context of post-Second Karabakh War peacebuilding endeavors and the growing emphasis on regional co-existence), a grander ethnic layer (in particular, Azerbaijani+Turkic), a cultural past (Azerbaijani+ex-Soviet or Azerbaijani+Russian), a mixed family background (Azerbaijani+Russian, Azerbaijani+other ethnic minority, etc.), or an international education background that adds cosmopolitan elements into the identity paradigm (Azerbaijani+American). Unlike the corporate identity format, wherein the smaller segment merges into the bigger one, the mixed identity format accommodates two or several segments, which allows these to co-exist more or less without tension.

*Fourth*, an ethnic identity format that is claimed by two groups: a) representatives of ethnic minorities for whom ethnic affiliation is prior to their citizenship identity; b) representatives of the titular group who consider the term 'Azerbaijani' as an ethnic identity to be delusive since it implies a geographical as opposed to an ethnic affiliation. These groups identify themselves as Turks of Azerbaijan, and their identification is different from those for whom being a Turk is a more generic concept that equals to being a member of a common Turkic family. As distinct from the latter, the former recognizes and adheres to a distinct format of Turkicness that has developed on the territory of Azerbaijan for centuries. To a degree, this can be compared to another discrete Turkism paradigm—namely, Turkestani Turkism—claimed by Central Asians, in particular by Uzbeks, who often claim that they, not the Turks of Turkey, are the world's real, pure, and authentic Turks.

*Fifth*, identity as an individual that is claimed by a small, marginal group composed mainly of young people with liberalist, libertarian, or sometimes anarchist tendencies. Individuals belonging to this category—especially those identifying themselves as libertarian or anarchist—reject any kind of affiliation with the nation-state, or with national or citizenship identity, and prefer to identify themselves as individuals qua individuals, and even avoid any strong emphasis on ethnic affiliation.





## *'Azeri' or Not 'Azeri'*

Here we should make an additional yet critically important point. None of the above discussed identity paradigms imply any relationship with the aforementioned old ethnic Iranian group that falls under the moniker 'Azer(i)/Azar(i)' that—as alleged by one of the founders of Pan-Iranism, the Iran-based scholar Ahmad Kasravi, in his famous treatise *Azari or the Ancient Language of Azerbaijan* (1925)—were ancient Persians and lived in Azerbaijan before the arrival of the Seljuk Turks and were then assimilated by Turks to become present-day Azerbaijanis/Azerbaijani Turks, losing their original language in the process. (Here we can add that Kasravi basically had in mind the province of Azerbaijan, which occupies the north-western part of Iran, as he never accepted the name 'Azerbaijan' for the territory on the other side of the Arax river, namely, the present-day Republic of Azerbaijan identified by him as Caucasian Albania.) Neither do any of the five paradigms imply any relationship with the would-be language under the name 'Azeri' spoken by this alleged 'Azer/Azeri/Azari' group.

Kasravi's ideology, known also as Kasravism in Azerbaijani scholarship, is rejected by many scholars, writers, and public figures in Azerbaijan (including Adalat Tahirzade, Nasib Nasibli, Aydin Balayev, Gazanfar Kazimov, and Shirvani Adilli) who do not accept the delusive term 'Azeri' to denote an extinct Iranian language. They see Kasravi's hypothesis as a strategy towards denying Azerbaijanis' Turkic roots and presenting them as Turkified Persians: Kasravi claimed that Azerbaijanis were of Iranian, not Turkic origin, and that their language was Turkified with the migration of the Seljuks when the influx of Turkic words into their native 'Azeri/Azari' language began. Following the above-mentioned Azerbaijani scholars and writers, we would like to emphasize here that there is simply no basis on which to prove this hypothetical 'Azeri' language. In fact, Kasravi and his followers (some also from Azerbaijan) have not provided any illustration whatsoever confirming the existence of the 'Azeri/Azari' language or a particular ethnic group speaking this purported language. Kasravi claimed that 'Azari/Azeri,' or 'Old Azari/Old Azeri' is

an ancient Iranian dialect that was once widespread in almost the entire province of Azerbaijan (in Iran) up to the Arax river and became extinct after the migrations of Seljuks. Some scholars who came in his wake and expanded his hypothesis (particularly Boris Miller) claimed that 'Old Azeri/Old Azari' was spoken in Ardabil, a city in northwestern Iran, and that some Tati varieties spoken in Iranian Azerbaijan (in particular, Harzandi and Karingani) are remnants of this extinct language.

Moreover, there are scholars in Azerbaijan who claim that the Talysh language is also a descendant of this alleged 'Azari/Azeri' language. First, it is unlikely that a widely-spoken language would go extinct without leaving any traces (it takes a long time even for less widely-spread languages to go extinct): if Iranian languages and dialects of various scopes and breadths have survived in Iran and Azerbaijan since ancient times to our days, then how come such a widely-spoken language—namely, the hypothetical 'Azeri/Azari'—has not survived at all? Also, as Shirvan Adilli indicates, in the medieval period when verbal (as opposed to written) communication prevailed, assimilation was hardly possible: quite simply, it is difficult to imagine the rapid assimilation of an entire ethnic group and its widespread language disappearing without a trace. If a language is to be considered extinct, then there will be no lingering remnants. Furthermore, the Tati language, with its varieties, is a language in its own right and its different dialects have been spoken in northwestern Iran for ages: Tats are mentioned as early as in Herodotus' account of the Achaemenids, and, with the sole exception of the hypothesis put forward by Kasravi and his followers, they have never been identified as 'Azeris/Azaris' in any historical record. As far as the Talysh language is concerned, the term 'Talysh' has been existent in history since ancient times and the origin of the ethnonym is linked to the term 'Cadusi,' an ancient Iranian group, which is also mentioned in Strabo's work. These facts speak against both the Tati and the Talysh languages being secondary to, and descending from, an illusionary language identified by the term 'Azeri.'

Kasravi and his supporters refer to a few medieval Arabic scholars and travelers who, it is claimed, used the word 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya' (the Arabic letter representing the second letter of the word 'Azariyya' is pronounced somewhat between *z* and *d*, like the English dental sound represented by the letter combination *th* as in in the word 'that,' hence the two versions of spelling) when describing languages spoken in some parts of the territory of present-day northwestern Iran—historically known as Atropatene, a kingdom established by the Persian/Achaemenid satrap Atropates in 323 BC, which according to some scholars, including Tadeusz Swietochowski, also lies at the source of the name 'Azerbaijan.'

However, although these Arabic sources refer to different languages spoken on the territory of Atropatene, these references do not imply any linkage between the word naming a language and the name of an ethnic group speaking that same language. For example, the Arabic sources to which Kasravi refers describe these languages using such collocations as 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya,' 'al-Fahlaviyya/al-Pahlaviyya,' and 'al-Dariyya.' None of these are the names of ethnic groups (at least during the time when these sources appeared) or the names of languages pertaining to a particular ethnic group: Pahlavi (although the term derives from the form *Parthawik*, which means "Parthian") was known as the official language of the Sassanid Empire but was also used by medieval scholars as a reference to the Iranian dialects spoken in the western and northwestern parts of Iran. 'Dari,' which literally means "court language," is a political name given to New Persian since the 10th century but is also used by medieval-era scholars as a reference to the Iranian dialects spoken in the eastern and northeastern parts of Iran. It is thus evident that the medieval Arab scholars and travelers to whom Kasravi referred were making references to particular areas where those languages and dialects were spoken or to particular populations living in those areas, and not to ethnicities. Nothing more.

As far as 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya' is concerned, many scholars claim that this is a reduced, modified, or distorted form originating from a longer name 'Azerbaijan,' which evolved from the word 'Atropatene' while being subject to various transformations in Arabic and Persian including *Aturpatkan, Adurbadagan, Adarbadgan, Âzarâbâdagân*, etc. Moreover, as Kazimov indicates, in a number of Arabic sources the above-mentioned collocation appears in the form 'al-Azarbi(yya)/al-Adarbiyya' or 'al-Azarbicide/al-Adarbicide' (Kazimov refers to one medieval source where the author uses the collocation 'ba-l-Azarbicide/ba-l-Adarbicide' to imply "in the language of people of Azerbaijan"). Also, as we examine

the scholarly interpretations of the reports made by medieval Islamic authors, we see that only a restricted number among them—including Al-Masoudi (10th century) and Yaqut al-Hamawi (12-13th centuries)—referred to 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya'; there were others—e.g., Ibn-al-Muqaffa (8th century), Ibn-Hawqal (10th century), Hamza Esfahani (10th century), and Al-Moqaddasu (10th century)—who mentioned other names when describing the languages of northwest Iran. For example, Ibn-al-Muqaffa mentioned that the languages spoken in the Azerbaijan of Iran were called 'Pahlavi/Fahlavi' and Ibn Hawqal referred to them as 'al-Farisyya' (Persian languages). Al-Moqaddasi stated that the languages and dialects spoken in the Azerbaijan of Iran were partly Dari and partly convoluted, all of which are known as Farsi. The word 'al-Azariyya' is indeed mentioned by Ya'qubi (9th century), but again as a reference to Persians from a particular area: "The people of Azerbaijan are a mixture of Ajams of 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya' and old Javedanis." (To clarify, 'Ajam' is an Arabic word meaning a non-native of Arabic often used to indicate Iranians, and 'Javedanis' is used to identify followers of Javidan, the leader of the Khurramites, a 9th-century Iranian political and religious movement.)

However obscure this journey into scholarly disputations may appear to some readers, it is in many ways necessary to refer to them notwithstanding the fact that this essay should not be considered to be an extension of the debate about whether the languages referred by the aforementioned Arabic authors belonged to Turkic, Iranian, or some other language family/group; in fact, this issue should be of no importance with respect to the main points of the present essay. Indeed, these Arab travelers could have encountered a variety of languages and dialects belonging to both Iranian and Turkic language families spoken on the territory of today's Iranian Azerbaijan at that time.

When speaking about different vernaculars, Al-Masoudi refers to the spread of these varieties on a vast territory stretching from Azerbaijan (in Iran) and Derbent across to Armenia, Arran, and Baylaqan. Al-Masoudi refers to these languages as being "Persian," which was a generic term used at that time also to replace the term 'Iranian': it is certain that what Al-Masoudi had witnessed across such a vast territory were not only vernaculars of Iranian origin. On the other hand, while the Turkic languages gained dominance as they expanded throughout the vast territory, indigenous Iranian languages and dialects continued to be present, and some even thrived: if they disappeared, this most probably happened due to intra-family language contact rather than due to the Turkic influence.

It should also be noted that many Arabic scholars pointed to the difference between 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya' and other vernaculars spoken on the territory of Atropatene—sometimes these languages were so different that they were mutually unintelligible—which might well mean that what they had actually encountered was either a Turkic language or a hybrid code formed from the mixture of Turkic and Iranian vernaculars, or even code-mixing between Turkic and Iranian vernaculars. Taking the fact of unintelligibility into account, many scholars (including Kazimov) consider that what the medieval authors referred to as 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya' were in fact Turkic language(s).

*There is no basis to accept the existence of a particular ethnic group identified as 'Azeri/Azari' that spoke a particular 'Azeri' language and that disappeared with the Seljuk expansion.*

The general point we have attempted to make in the last few paragraphs is that there is no basis to accept the existence of a particular ethnic group identified as 'Azeri/Azari' that spoke a particular 'Azeri' language and that disappeared with the Seljuk expansion. The historical record is clear that the Seljuk Turks who migrated to Asia Minor were protectors rather than eliminators of Iranian languages and cultures. The Persian language was always highly esteemed and embraced by the Turkic ruling elites, first as the language of high poetry (the rules of Persian poetry became the very foundations of the elite Divan literature) and then as a social marker defining high social hierarchy.

Furthermore, if Azerbaijanis (or Azerbaijani Turks) are descendants of Iranians, what then happened to the Turks who massively migrated to, and settled in, their multiple states, empires, and kingdoms on the territory of northwestern Iran? Who and where are *their* descendants? Therefore, what the medieval scholars implied by referring to the term 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya' was most probably some combination of languages, dialects, and vernaculars—whether Turkic, Iranian, both, a hybrid between them, or mixture thereof (mixed codes)—spoken on the

territory that was known as Azerbaijan. Last but not least, even if, somehow, a hypothetical 'Azeri' ethnic group could be imagined and a link could then be established between this alleged group and its hypothetical (extinct) language, this would still not demonstrate a link between this purported group (or its would-be language) and the toponym 'Azerbaijan,' as the segment '-baycan' does not denote affiliation with, or belonging to, a geographical place (as does, for example, the element '-stan'). Neither would it serve as a basis for speculating about any relationship between the hypothetical 'Azeri' language and the name of today's Azerbaijani, which is (politically) formed as a name given to an Oghuz Turkic language on the basis of geographical affiliation. To be clear: we do not debate the possibility of less popular dialects or smaller vernaculars (into which we certainly cannot place Kasravi's hypothetical 'Azari/Aseri') disappearing or merging into stronger and wider-spread ones as a result of language contact. What we question here is the identity of a particular language and an ethnic group with the name 'Azeri,' which was clearly fabricated by proponents of the aforementioned hypothesis with the purpose of denying Azerbaijanis in Iran their Turkic roots.

Thus, the term 'Azeri' as a reference to the language or ethnic affiliation of Azerbaijanis, at least as promoted by Kasravi, is illusory. Therefore, all possible informal references by Azerbaijanis themselves, or by foreigners, to the name of the nation or its language in the form of 'Azer' or 'Azeri' should be seen, first of all, as nothing but patterns resulting from shortening in accordance with the Principle of Least Effort, which in the context of linguistics claims that language changes or evolves because speakers simplify their speech in various ways, including by the use of abbreviations.

The use of the shortened form by foreigners can also be explained by a lack of etymological knowledge regarding the word 'Azerbaijan' (plus derivatives) and its structural peculiarities. On the other hand, it is also possible for foreigners to come across the shortened form in the speech of Azerbaijanis themselves or to read it from media (including social media), where this form appears sometimes even as part of formal discourse. Certainly, many Azerbaijanis could have heard this version from their elderly family members and relatives who lived in the immediate post-Stalinist years, when the term 'Azeri' was used in both official and public discourse. In this period,





textbooks were published under the title *Azəri dili* (meaning "Azeri language"), and media texts, literary pieces, and formal documents also contained the word 'Azeri.'

This usage, however, should be understood as part of the language policy of those years, which was to a great extent informed by the theories of the Georgia-born linguistic paleontologist Nikolai Marr. Although the term 'Azeri' did not live long in official parlance, it did make its way to certain sources and literary works. According to Marr's theory, all the languages of the world are related to each other and concepts such as proto-language, root language, and parent language do not hold up. Marr claimed that the development of languages was not a process of one language further fragmenting and splitting into many "newborn" languages. Rather, as Marr claimed, languages were formed as an outcome of a clash of different varieties from different parts of the world, resulting from factors like migration and language contact, with further fusion into one language. Thus, according to Marr, the genetic relationship of languages was not a valid theory.

Marr also claimed that the fusion of all of the languages of the world would be completed in the era of communism. His theory had considerable influence on Azerbaijani linguistics, in particular, in the 1930s and 1940s. One of Azerbaijan's famous Soviet-era linguists, Mammadagha Shiraliyev, assigned much credit to Marr's theory, referring to it as the "New Language Theory." This is how Shiraliyev explained the root of the Azerbaijani language based on Marr's theory in 1939: "The closeness between the Turkic system of languages is not the result of a false 'mother tongue' concept, but rather a historical combination of different tribal languages."

Alienation of Azerbaijanis from their Turkic roots constituted a part of the Soviet Union's politics of nation-building. The rejection of the Turkic origin of Azerbaijan's titular group was also exercised through holding to false ethnic terms such as 'Azer/Azeri,' even though some of the proponents of this approach would, as a result, need to artificially link the titular nation to Iranians or Caucasians. In a word, everything that was not Turkic was considered to be suitable. The term 'Azer/Azeri' also resonated with the historical narrative of those times, which focused on depriving the ethnogenesis of Azerbaijanis of their Turkic elements.

Thus, the use of the term 'Azeri,' which was associated with Kasravi's theory claiming the Iranian origin of Azerbaijanis, did not con-

flict with the nation-building discourse that the Stalinist regime had designed for Azerbaijan.

The same destiny had reached Ahiska or Mesketian Turks who formerly lived in Meskheti, a highland area in Georgia, before they were deported from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944 under Stalin's decision accusing them of treason and espionage during World War II. Their destiny during Soviet times is broadly discussed by Ayşegül Aydıngün, Çiğğdem Balım Harding, Matthew Hoover, Igor Kuznetsov, and Steve Swerdlow in their 2008 paper titled "Meskhetian Turks: An Introduction to their History, Culture, and Resettlement Experiences." As the authors indicate, the identity of Ahiska Turks was manipulated in several different ways with the establishment of the Soviet regime in Georgia in 1921. The early years of this regime saw the persistent denial of the Turkic roots of the Ahiska Turks: they were proclaimed and presented as ethnic Georgians who were Turkified and adopted Islam during various Ottoman invasions of Georgia. They were nevertheless allowed to study in Turkish at school.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, Soviet policymakers started to call them 'Turks' and thus returned their Turkic identity to them. Interestingly, between 1935 and 1939, Meskehtian Turks were identified as Azerbaijani and during this period the Azerbaijani language was introduced as the language of instruction at their local schools. Later, starting in 1939, the Soviet regime again reidentified Ahiska Turks as Islamized and Turkified Georgians. We should also note that the term 'Azerbaijani' was used to imply some other Turkic groups living in the USSR (probably mostly in the South Caucasus), not only the Ahiska Turks. Thus, an editor's comment to the 1939 Soviet population census reprinted in 1992 reads: "Many Turks living in the USSR were registered as Azerbaijani in 1939. This was due to the policy of Azerbaijanization of Turks starting from 1926. During the passportization of 1930s, many Turks were registered/recorded as Azerbaijani."

We should note, however, that the term 'Azeri' was not a pure creation stemming from the Stalinist era. As underscored a few years ago by Badirkhan Ahmadli of the Nizami Institute of Literature of the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, the term 'Azeri' was used by one of the founders of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, Mahammad Amin Rasulzade, in a 1919 article entitled "Azerbaijan and Iran" and elsewhere. The word 'Azeri' was further used as a synonym for the word 'Azerbaijani' by writers, media representatives, and scholars living both in the times of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and in early years of the Soviet regime.

We should also note that this very fact—namely, that the word 'Azeri' was used not only as a reference to the hypothetical Iranian ethnic group but was also encountered in the discourse of the founders of Azerbaijan Democratic Republic—has encouraged some intellectuals, including Ahmadli himself, to propose the consideration of the term 'Azer' as an ethnic name for Azerbaijan's titular nation. These views are also based on the fact that the word 'Azerbaijan' is a geographical name and that the derivative form 'Azerbaijani' does not necessarily imply an ethnic affiliation. Ahmadli's opinion is supported, on a slightly different level, by some other scholars, including Gazanfar Kazimov, who, as we noted above, think that the term 'Azeri/Azari,' which appears as 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya' in medieval Arabic resources, was used to denote the language of a Turkic population that inhabited northwestern Iran and that, therefore, the term 'Azeri' should have been inherited to identify the Turks of Azerbaijan. We can certainly see these opinions supporting the aforementioned fourth identity paradigm, through which attempts are made to justify a lengthy history of the discrete Turkic identity of Azerbaijani people.

There are other scholars—including philologist Firudin Jalilov, who served as Azerbaijan's education minister in the early 1990s—that claim the term 'Azer' is traceable back to the root 'Az/As,' which was allegedly the name of an ancient tribe within the Turkic ethnic group. The tribe with the name 'Az/As' is encountered in ancient Turkic texts (more precisely, on ancient monument inscriptions), is mentioned by renowned Turkologists such as V. V. Bartold and is referred to in the Old Norse work *Prose Edda* (a reference to which served the starting point of this essay). Jalilov also claims that the element 'az/as' has survived not only in the toponym 'Azerbaijan,' but also in some other toponyms such as 'Astrakhan,' 'Astara,' 'Kazan,' and 'Kaspi.' Whether or not the aforementioned Iranian ethnic group 'Azer' and the Turkic tribe 'Az/As' has ever existed in history is a separate issue of inquiry, and we will not consider it here. (Moreover, it is not possible to say, based on references made by literally a few medieval scholars, whether the form 'al-Azariyya/al-Adariyya' implied

Iranian-proper or Turkic-proper languages: both would be ideologically (and probably also politically) imbued positions.) However, as many scholars also claim, no substantial ground has been uncovered thus far to allow us to link any of these two alleged groups to the toponym 'Azerbaijan.'

## *Fostering Cohesion*

Consequently, prevailing public and scholarly opinion in contemporary Azerbaijan does not support the use of the term 'Azeri.' Some have sought to compare it to the shortened form 'Brit,' which has come to be used interchangeably in some circles (primarily in the UK) with the term 'British.' To many this comparison is fallacious, confusing, artificial, and, frankly, to some degree degrading.

*Consequently, prevailing public and scholarly opinion in contemporary Azerbaijan does not support the use of the term 'Azeri.'*

There is also the argument that the term 'Azeri' can neither be linked to any ethnicity, geography, or ideology, and therefore should be avoided. Moreover, the use of the term 'Azeri' is also discouraged in public discourse, and it does not appear in official domains. Neither is it consistent with the official language policy of Azerbaijan, with the country's Constitution, and with any relevant legislation, according to which the correct term for referring both to the titular nation and to its language is 'Azerbaijani.'

Here it is useful to recall that in the early 2000s discussions took place both at the governmental level as well as in popular media outlets in the context of a process to create localized versions of Microsoft products. Many academic voices came out against using the term 'Azeri' in Microsoft interfaces and commands, and some operational regimes were even considering changing the form 'Azeri' into 'Azerbaijani.' The initiative seems not to have been supported by the company's implementation plan, as many operating systems still use the form 'Azeri.' Many do not regard the interface-level appearance of the word 'Azeri' as an important problem and think the reduction is applied for the purposes of linguistic economy.

We also cannot fail to mention that the opposition to the term 'Azeri' to denote language is also continually





observed among Azerbaijanis living in Iran who call themselves 'Turks.' This rejection has recently been made manifest more frequently in public discourse, in particular among Iran's intellectuals and political activists who are ethnically Turks. During recent television debates organized for presidential election candidates in Iran, Mohsun Mehralizade, an ethnic-Azerbaijani Turk candidate, protested the use of the term 'Azeri language' used by his competitor, Ebrahim Raisi, a candidate from the conservative wing, who thanked Azerbaijani Turks for supporting him during his election campaign. Mehralizade opposed Raisi with the following words: "I would like to bring a correction to the word 'Azeri' used by Mr. Raisi. We don't have people who speak Azeri in our country. Both in Western and Eastern Azerbaijan [i.e., two Iranian provinces], across from Hamadan, Zanjan, Isfahan, Ardabil, Khorasan, and Huzistan, we have people who speak Turkic, not Azeri. Therefore, I think the respected presidential candidate should be more careful when using the word 'Azeri.'"

*Using the term of identity contained in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and thus established as the formal name of the titular nation and its language, should remain the unified reference word in formal documents and scholarly literature.*

On the basis of this brief examination of identity in Azerbaijan, one can conclude that we are far from imposing the use of this or another term as reference or self-reference in informal discourse. People identify themselves the way they feel comfortable or confident, and they certainly choose—for the purpose of identifying themselves (and sometimes their compatriots)—a linguistic form that appeals to them for a variety of reasons. Someone might choose to use the word 'Azeri' just because it is easier and shorter. Some may opt for the 'Azeri Turk' form (instead of 'Azerbaijani Turk') for the same reason. Others may wish to identify themselves as 'Turks,' as a reference to their Turkic roots. Moreover, as much as people are free to choose a linguistic form, so they are free to oppose a term ascribed to them.

We will certainly continue to bear witness to informal discussions, social media debates, and even media disputes sometimes imbued with high emotions, mutual accusations, annoyance, and indignation.

However, as far as formal discourse is concerned, standardization in usage is that towards which we should continue to aim. Using the term of identity contained in the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and thus established as the formal name of the titular nation and its language, should remain the unified reference word in formal documents and scholarly literature. As some other ethnonyms (e.g., Norwegian, Ukrainian) show, terms established as references to an ethnic group and/or its language do not always follow a logic within which an ethnonym may be justified linguistically. Furthermore, some languages take their names from ethnic groups that are formed—often politically, as part of a nation-building or national identity-construction strategy—by a principle that German linguist Heinz Kloss identified as "Ausbau" (translated variously as 'expansion,' 'development,' or 'shaping').

None of these or other similar reasons has ever been considered as a justifiable reason for the arbitrary use of the name of an ethnic group or its language in formal discourse, once such name has officially been established. Azerbaijani is the official name determined for Azerbaijan's titular ethnic group and its language. While debating these terms in academic journals or elsewhere is normal and should cause no concern, and while the use of a shortened form is normal in informal discourse, the use of these various debated or contracted terms as references in both official and scholarly discourse may add to confusion and inconsistency and should, naturally, be avoided. BD

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