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Precarious Future for an Urban Minority: Ethnic Azeris in Russia

By Rafik Kurbanov

The threat by Russian authorities to introduce a visa regime and a ban on trade, financial transfers and air travel with Azerbaijan has shocked the Azeri community, which views this as a new step in an existing pattern of prejudice and pressure. This campaign of ethnic intimidation aims at two related goals: creating an obedient, frightened minority from which bribes can be extorted easily, and achieving political popularity among Russians by means of “keeping the blacks down.” The third and external objective is to pressure the Azeri government into concessions on a variety of issues.

The Chechen conflict and official propaganda have added a new twist to traditional Russian prejudice toward peoples from the Caucasus. Thus, his consideration of additional punitive policies further increased Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's popularity among a majority of Russian citizens, just as Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov has garnered a great deal of popular support by implementing an especially heavy-handed policy toward minorities. Luzhkov “is hunting down Caucasians, has turned Moscow into a screening camp, and is eliciting a chauvinistic wave in this multinational state,” according to Samara Governor Konstantin Titov. (Novye izvestiya, 25 Sep 99; Middle East News Items, via lexis-nexis)

The sudden influx into Russia of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Azeris, starting in the late 1980s, was the result of two related processes: the Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh and economic deterioration in

Azerbaijan. Russia was the natural destination due to its geographical proximity, unrestricted access and social and cultural familiarity. Now there are about 2 million ethnic Azeris living in Russia (most of them in Moscow) who have become an urban minority -- a new phenomenon in ethnic dynamics for post-Soviet Russia, which previously had faced mostly territorial aspects of ethnic relations. In some cases, such ethnic-territorial problems were peacefully negotiated (i.e., Tatarstan) while other conflicts became very violent (i.e., Chechnya). The urban minority issue, therefore, presents an unfamiliar dilemma for the new Russian state, which at this point has opted for a policy of police repression. In economic terms, most Azeris in Russia filled a niche as small retail traders/street vendors, not a profession particularly favored by Russians. The nature of this profession leads to daily encounters with an economically vulnerable Russian population, unhappy with high prices, so that Azeris are often accused of "profiteering" (spekuliatsia), when they sell goods at a price which seems too high. However, high prices are the result of constant bribery of -- and extortion by -- the police, while traders take the blame. [Nor is extortion limited to officials. In October, Azeri traders at a Russian market were attacked by carloads of Russian men wielding iron bars. According to one of the traders, the assault stemmed from the traders' refusal to pay inflated entrance fees (raised from 172 to 1,400 rubles). (The Moscow Times, 14 Oct 99; via lexis-nexis)]

Indeed, street vendors are easy prey for police and other officials. Some estimate that Azeri traders and businesses pay the equivalent of about US\$200 million each month as tax payment, fees, registration, etc. (Compatriot newspaper, Jan 99) The amount of bribes is often equal to the taxes paid. In any case, even by conservative estimates, the total extorted from the Azeri community in Moscow alone reaches millions of US dollars each month -- a very large amount by Russian standards.

The Azeris are politically vulnerable because they lack representation in governing organs that could protect them from the police. Currently, there are

attempts to create some kind of organizational structures for self-protection; however, this is unlikely to be successful in the face of governmental repression. Moreover, there is a fear that anything beyond a purely cultural association may be labeled a "terrorist" organization. Thus, the September 1999 issue of the popular weekly newspaper *Versiya*, featured an article that called the only high school in Moscow with some Azeri curriculum a potential terrorist training camp.

Economic pressure is combined with other forms of repression, such as police brutality and racial targeting (profiling). Besides rounding up dozens of vendors on the open markets and conducting strip searches without a warrant or probable cause, such repression often includes confiscation of goods and willful destruction of legally obtained residence documents. (*Segodnya*, 18 Sep 99) Indeed, reports of police harassment of Caucasian peoples in Moscow have become commonplace. (*The Scotsman*, 19 Nov 99) The absence of a sound judicial system and the vulnerable immigrant status force the Azeri minority in Russia to keep a low profile and to avoid seeking recourse from Russian courts.

The situation has worsened since the Chechen war began, as ethnic minorities from the Caucasus are often identified as a potential source of terrorist activity. During security sweeps this fall, following the spate of bombings, more than 20,000 persons were detained, a majority of whom were dark-skinned. However, even in normal times, "police officers routinely stop individuals to check their documents; overwhelmingly, they are darker-skinned people (typical of the Caucasus region) known in Russia as 'blacks.'" (*Inter Press Service*, 27 Sep 99; via lexis-nexis) In the latest moves, the Russian government has discussed options for introducing a visa regime with Azerbaijan and establishing some sort of control over Azeri citizens in Russia, as well as restricting money transfers to Azerbaijan (thereby affecting the livelihood of thousands of Azeri families whose only source of income are the sums sent from Russia by relatives).

In Moscow, Mayor Luzhkov has already taken steps to establish internal control

by signing an order demanding that all “visitors” re-register with the authorities; police comb the streets and check documents. Masked police officers reportedly are grabbing dark-skinned men from their stalls in open-air markets and dragging them away. (The Gazette (Montreal), 26 Sep 99; via lexis-nexis) This increased pressure on the community, which stops just short of open deportation, may at some point lead to more violence if the level of police brutality becomes intolerable. Taking into account the numbers of Azeris in Russia and the fact that they are predominantly young males, such reaction may add another factor of instability in a very unstable Russia. Another possibility is that a mass exodus of Azeris from Russian may occur.

It seems that the Azeri community in Russia is being used to exert pressure on the Azeri government to prevent any potential support for the Chechens, although there is no factual basis to support Russia's allegations of Azeri aid to Chechnya. The Azerbaijani government repeatedly has said that it supports Russia's territorial integrity. Discrediting the current Azeri government is another possible outcome of these policies. However, significant destabilization of Azerbaijan could result in an unpredictable outcome. While Russia may hope that such destabilization would produce a more friendly regime in Azerbaijan, the example of Iran in 1979 shows that such situations are unpredictable and unmanageable. Russia exerts influence over Azerbaijan through the economic lever of allowing the Azeri business people to operate in Moscow and other cities. If these people leave, Azerbaijan will be destabilized, but Russia will also lose, because it will have wasted its leverage.

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