

**FEDERAL LEZGHIN NATIONAL
AND CULTURAL AUTONOMY (FLNCA)**

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Statement of the Federal Lezghin National and Cultural Autonomy (FLNCA)

(Translation)

FLNCA is going to make a Statement on the most acute problems in the Caucasus – the division of Lezghins (including Rutuls and Tsakhurs), and the situation with this ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan. The division by the Russian-Azeri border. These people were cut into two halves by this border which drew the line now surrounded by border guards and customs controls. This border cut the families, relatives, sisters and brothers.

Our main goal is to find the ways to improve the situation of the divided people and other indigenous people living in Azerbaijan, to change their status, to protect their rights in accord with the international laws and regulations, to work our unanimous approaches that will allow Lezghins and other peoples of the Lezghin family divided by the border to exist as unanimous nations.

Spiritual and cultural unity is a natural addition to the geopolitical factor. Despite their own will Lezghins became subjects of two different political, cultural and religious systems which undermined their political, cultural and religious unity. Their division became their tragedy, cultural, public and political.

Azerbaijan is a friendly republic of Russia and our friendly ties with Azeri people have a very long history. Despite the acuteness of the problems Lezghins are facing, the majority of the problems could be resolved if Azeri authorities were not so biased with regards to Lezghins who are indigenous in Azerbaijan. I mean the lack of schools with subjects taught in native languages, absence of newspapers journals, TV programmes in Lezghin language supported by the state.

Our peoples residing in Azerbaijan have very limited opportunities of cultural and language development.

In the beginning of the 90s the deep crisis and the collapse of the USSR that followed it brought about the tension between different peoples. The war in Nagorny Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the wars in Georgia in the republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia changed drastically the political borders. The major reason standing behind these events was the fact the authorities of the emerging states completely ignored any ethnic interests of their minorities. The territories settled by the Lezghin were divided between two states – the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan and the state border cut the historical Lezgistan into two parts. Since the very beginning the leadership of the independent Azerbaijan started to adhere the policy of ethnic unification of its peoples. Ethnic Lezghins, Avars, Talyshes, Rustuls, Tats, etc. were forced to give up their ethnic identity and switch to Turkish (Azeri) language. Any public initiatives

relating to the history, language and ethnic culture made by representatives of these ethnicities were openly rejected and cruelly repressed by the Azeri authorities.

The discrimination is often implemented by representatives of indigenous peoples either bribed or scared by the authorities. Thus, the Head of Kusary (Azeri region by 95% inhabited by Lezghins) place a ban on speaking Lezghi language in the region, removes any plaques or inscriptions and persecute those who disobey his instructions. Lezghins are being forcibly resettled from their native villages. These days one more Lezghin village – village of Ksyunet in Kabala region - seized to exist.

Persecution for religious views are also destructive for Lezghins who are Sunnites (the majority of Azeri are Shiites). The State closes Sunnite mosques and hand them over to Shiite communities. The famous Lezghi Mosque of the 12th century is located in the downtown of Baku. It was recognized by UNESCO as belonging to the World Heritage Sites and survived with this name even under the communist regime. Despite of all this it was renamed into Ashurbeckskaya Mosque to delete the word Lezghin from the history of Azerbaijan.

The same way the Azeri authorities falsify demographic data. The number of Lezghins and other ethnic minorities is purposefully decreased by several times. Azeri ethnicity is forcibly imposed on Lezghins to assimilate them and create a mono-ethnic state. In the 50s of the previous century when Azerbaijan was a part of the USSR where education was free of charge the Azeri authorities managed to ensure free of charge education only for Azeri people and young and talented Lezghins had nothing to do but to change their ethnicity in passports remaining Lezghins by their ethnic and cultural identity. Currently no less than half of the Lezghin who are educated and reached high status in Azerbaijan are officially registered as Azeris but consider themselves Lezghins and hand over their Lezghin identity, language and culture to the young generations.

After Azerbaijan acquired its sovereignty Lezghins living in Azerbaijan started to demand observance of their rights. Azerbaijan signing various international documents aimed at protection of ethnic minorities and claiming to be a multi-ethnic country in fact pursue a tough policy of assimilation of ethnic minorities. Those who do not wish to be assimilated are forced to leave the Republic. Leaders and activists of Lezghin movements are persecuted and repressed. Many of them are thrown to prisons and are recognized by human rights activist in Azerbaijan and some European human rights protection organizations as political prisoners. The territories settled by Lezghins in Azerbaijan are to a high extend militarized.

We fully share human values, human rights and right of minorities as well as all other achievements of the European democracy and we wish that Azerbaijan observe scrupulously all those democratic principles.

Lezghins are against separatism and they do not claim any sovereignty, they just demand that basic human rights of Lezghin people are observed in the Republic of Azerbaijan in accordance with all international documents dealing with human rights protection.

Recommendations

- 1) Conduct accurate census of the population numbers, disaggregating it to take into account minority groups;
- 2) Adopt laws that will give the opportunity to the entire minorities divided by the state border to hold dual citizenship;

- 3) Establish quotas for the State service for ethnic minorities;
- 4) Observe ethnic balance in sending conscripts to the frontlines of the Nagorno-Karabakh border;
- 5) Develop the educational system in minority areas, including through construction of schools, the development of quality scientific and educational material in minority languages, the inclusion of native languages as a mandatory option of the school curriculum, and specific trainings for minority language teachers;
- 6) Ensure regular broadcasting in minority languages and publishing of newspapers and other periodicals in these languages;
- 7) Give legal status as a regional language of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Lezghin language;
- 8) Guarantee freedom of conscience in the country, notably by removing obstacles created for the registration of Sunni communities and functioning religious institutions relating to them;
- 9) Recognize and promote the existence of minorities' cultural heritage in Azerbaijan, and stop the process of modification of the toponymy in minority areas;
- 10) To allow creation of all-Azeri cultural, linguistic and other associations of Lezghin people;
- 11) Improve the living conditions in minority areas, including construction of adequate infrastructure, facilities, and development of communications and transportation networks;
- 12) Create conditions for unhindered functioning and development for Lezghin NGOs in the Republic of Azerbaijan.