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**THE MUSAVAT AZERBAIJAN POLICY TOWARDS KURDS:
PARALLELS WITH POST-SOVIET AZERBAIJAN'S ETHNIC POLICY****

Abstract: *The three censuses conducted in Azerbaijan during the post-Soviet period (1999, 2009, and 2019) reveal a significant decline (more than 300 percent) in the number of Kurds in the country over 20 years (1999-2019). This trend is consistent with Azerbaijan's policies towards indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. In this context, the situation parallels the experiences of other ethnic groups residing in Azerbaijan, including the Talysh people, Lezgins, Avars, and others. The primary objective of the present article is to examine the underpinnings of Azerbaijan's policy towards indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, with a specific focus on the Kurdish case. In terms of timeframe, the authors specifically chose the period of the first republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920). This decision is based on the recognition that, when investigating the ethnic policy of Azerbaijan within this timeframe, the researcher is not necessarily obligated to address whether Azerbaijan could pursue an independent policy separate from the center (Moscow). This specific question gains relevance in the subsequent 70 years, covering the Soviet period, but does not apply to the years 1918-1920. When examining the issue, priority was given to the historical-comparative method by the authors. Accordingly, in selecting the temporal starting point for the examination, the period when Turkism was in action as a viable ideology in Azerbaijan was deemed pivotal.*

Keywords: *Musavat, Kurds, post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Talysh people, ethnic policy, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, Khosrov bey Sultanov, Koturly*

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Introduction

The existing studies on the Kurds of the Eastern Transcaucasus (the main area of the present Republic of Azerbaijan) are predominantly focused on the Soviet period (Čursin 1925; Bukšpan 1932; Pčelina 1932; Vil'čevskij 1938; Miller 1956; Bakaev 1965; Aristova 1966; Müller 2000; Cavadov 2000: 135-166; Yilmaz 2014; Tonoyan & Misakyan 2022; etc.), with a lesser emphasis on the post-Soviet period (Evoyan 2014; Hamid 2020; etc.). From a purely field-oriented perspective, the conducted studies can be categorized into several groups, namely ethnographic (e.g., Chursin 1925; Aristova 1966; etc.), historical-political (Bukšpan 1932, Müller 2000; Yilmaz 2014), demographic (Müller 2000; Cavadov 2000), and linguistic (Vil'čevskij 1938; Miller 1956; Bakaev 1965).

This study aims to examine the policy of the first republic of Azerbaijan (1918-1920) towards the Kurds, elucidating its principal directions and features, and identifying the key factors that shaped this policy. This endeavor seeks to fill a gap in existing scholarly works and broaden the temporal scope within which, as previously noted, the exploration of this topic has been confined.

The reference to this topic appears relevant for filling the gap in scientific literature and addressing content propagated by certain directions of present-day Azerbaijani propaganda. Specifically, it challenges notions of purported historical and contemporary tolerance in Azerbaijan. This study aims to counter the false assertions that the rights of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples are invariably respected and protected in both past and current Azerbaijan, fostering a more objective discussion of the issue.

The examination of the mentioned problem and the study of its historical depth have perhaps become more relevant after the last Artsakh war in 2020 and the new military aggression, along with total ethnic cleansing, carried out by Azerbaijan against Artsakh in September 2023. In light of these new realities, where Armenians no longer inhabit Artsakh, the political elite of Azerbaijan persists in cultivating anti-Armenian sentiments within the country on the one hand while simultaneously engaging in diametrically opposite propaganda on the international stage. There are ongoing efforts to persuade the international community that Armenians can safely return to Artsakh and live there as an ethnic minority within Azerbaijan. In this context, it is crucial to comprehend Azerbaijan's ethnic policy through the case of the Kurds because historical experience can best illustrate Azerbaijan's approach to the non-Turcophones of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) and adjacent territories.

Turkism as a key element in the national policy of Musavat Azerbaijan

Representatives of the military-political elite of the first republic of Azerbaijan, proclaimed at the end of May 1918 as bearers of the ideology of Turkism or Turkic nationalism, endeavored to establish the dominance of Turkic narratives in the public and political domain of Azerbaijan from the very first days of the newly created republic. At the same time, the mentioned ideology was extensively employed in the nation-building process, which took place with active military-political support from the Ottoman Empire in that area characterized by a mixed ethnic composition. The military presence and supremacy of the Ottoman Empire in Musavat Azerbaijan manifested through the Islamic Army of the Caucasus (Hovhannisian 1982, 167), aimed not only to extend the borders of Ottoman Turkey's military and political influence, reaching the western and southern shores of the Caspian Sea and, subsequently, Central Asia, but also to conduct ideological engineering. The ultimate goal was to create a homogeneous society with a pan-Turkic identity in Musavat Azerbaijan. It should not be considered a coincidence that, when marching to Gandzak (Ganja) and then to Baku, the commander of the Islamic army of the Caucasus, Nuri Pasha, and the rest were accompanied by Ahmed Aghaoglu, a well-known ideologue of pan-Turkism, serving as an adviser (Shissler 2002, 163-164).

In general, the policy of Musavat Azerbaijan towards non-Turkic peoples was based on the following two components specific to the Ottoman Empire at the end of its history:

- In the case of non-Turkic Muslims, their assimilation and integration into the dominant "Turkic element"
- In the case of non-Muslims, particularly Christian Armenians, ethnic cleansing and displacement¹.

Consequently, to understand the policy of Musavat Azerbaijan towards the Kurds, as a starting point, we must accept the realities listed above. It is also an important circumstance that, although certain Kurdish figures held particularly influential positions in the military-political elite of Musavat Azerbaijan, such as Prime Minister Fatali Khan Khoyski, Minister of Defense Khosrov bey Sultanov, Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Nurmammad bey Shahsuvarov, and others (Hamid 2020), and occupied high positions, it was due to their ideological orientation as carriers of the pan-Turkic ideology². The facts supporting this

¹ As an example, see the Armenian massacres in Baku in September 1918 (Kazemzadeh 1951, 143-144).

² In general, the reports and opinions of the British military, diplomats and politicians are extremely interesting regarding the moods and orientations of the military-political elite,

assertion include the rise of Khosrov bey Sultanov, a figure of Kurdish origin, to the position of Minister of Defence, and subsequently, his harsh policies towards the Kurdish population residing in the southern parts of the former Elizavetpol' guberniya (province). Musavat Azerbaijan's military sphere fell under the Ottoman Empire's control from its inception. In essence, the Islamic Army of the Caucasus, led by Nuri Pasha, a relative of Enver Pasha, played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Azerbaijani army. Consequently, the individual occupying the position of the military minister in Musavat Azerbaijan was expected to align with the standards required for the Caucasian policy of Ottoman Turkey, including in the ideological plan.

In this regard, interesting parallels can also be found in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, particularly during the administrations of Heydar and İlham Aliyev, when several Kurdish figures, including Beylar Ayyubov, Kammaladdin Heydarov, Vasif Talibov, Ramiz Mehdiyev, Rovnag Abdullayev, and others, held high government positions (Evoyan 2014, 99-100; 103-104). However, this did not in any way prevent the discriminatory policy towards the Kurdish population or the reduction of their numbers.

The geographic distribution and demographics of Kurds during the Musavat rule

During the period of Musavat rule, Kurds primarily inhabited two main areas: Nakhijevan and the Ałahēčk district of the historical Armenian province Siwnik (Syunik), along with the adjacent areas extending up to the Araks valley. In other words, this pertains to the region stretching from Berdzor (formerly Soviet Lachin) to (V)orotan (formerly Soviet Kubatlu), where Kurds primarily settled after the Russo-Persian wars of 1804-1813 and 1826-1828 (Aver'janov 1900, 24; Aristova 1966, 36-37; etc.). From 1918 through 1920, Musavat Azerbaijan, with active support from Britain, sought to establish control over this area and rely wholly on Artsakh. After the wars mentioned above, the Kurdish tribes, whose main occupation was nomadic cattle breeding, moved to Ałahēčk and

formed mainly from the large landowners of Azerbaijan, in the region under investigation. The following words of Earl Curzon, which he said while discussing the Caucasus during the meeting of the Eastern Committee on December 2, 1918, are noteworthy: "*The difficulty about the Government of Azerbaijan at the moment is this, that it is violently pro-Turk, violently anti-Armenian, violently anti-Persian, - in fact, it is everything we do not want it to be. The Government is in the hands of the Tatar land-owners who hate Armenians with a deadly hatred, hate the Bolsheviks equally well, and, for racial and selfish reasons, are inclined towards the Turks. The aspirations of this small State of Azerbaijan are for recognition, which we have never yet given, and for the expansion to the South*" (Hovhannisian 1982, 175-176, cit. no. 16).

predominantly settled in the villages of Zerti, Minkend, Bozlu, Kamally, Kalacha, Cherakhly, Agjakend [I], Karakeshish, Ag-Bulakh, Sheilanly, Katos bina, Chai bina, Shurtan, Soiukh-Bulakh, Zailik, Agjakend [II], Orujlu, Khalanly, located in the Berdzor (former Lachin) and Karvachar (former Kelbajar) districts (Bukšpan 1932, 62-63; Müller 2000, 55-56). According to data published by Aristova in the later years of the USSR, particularly in the 1960s, Kurds established in the historical Ałahēčk were Shia Muslims. They resided in 20 villages, some of which had heterogeneous populations by the 1960s, as Azerbaijanis lived alongside Kurds (Aristova 1966, see Table 1).

Table 1. Settlements of Kurds established in historical Ałahēčk and neighboring areas as of 1950-1960 (Aristova 1966, 64)

Region	Village
Kıarvaçar (former Kelbajar)	Lower Shurtan
	Middle Shurtan
	Upper Shurtan
	Zailik
	Agjakend
	Orujlu
Berjor (former Laçin)	Minkend
	Karakeshish
	Kamally
	Bozlu
	Kalacha
	Cherakhly
	Upper Zerti
	Lower Zerti
Orotan (former Kubatly)	Zilanly
	Selali
	Mirzakverdli
	Kürdmahruzlu
	Lower Mollu
	Upper Mollu

While there is no clear information about the number of Kurds during the years of the first republic of Azerbaijan, the Soviet agricultural census of 1921, the closest available data in terms of time, recorded 29,741 Kurds across the entire country (Müller 2000, 47; Harutyunyan 2023a, 72). Their primary area of residence was mostly the territory of the later so-called “Red Kurdistan” (1923-1929). According to the census data, the number of Kurds in the Jevanshir uezd was 14,682 (17.3%), in Kubatli uezd 13,994 (35.4%), in Karyagin (Jabrayil) uezd 571 ($\approx 0.8\%$), in Aghdash uezd 413 ($\approx 0.8\%$), and in Shushi uezd 81, which accounted for about 0.1 percent of the entire population of this county (Müller 2000, 46-47).

In addition to the agricultural census data of 1921, the number of Kurds in the territory known as “Red Kurdistan” exceeded 35,000 by 1924, constituting 80.7% of the population of that area (Čursin 1925, 2; Müller 2000, 50). Furthermore, according to Čursin, who conducted on-site field research, only half of the 35,000 Shia Kurds were proficient in their mother tongue, Kurdish (Čursin 1925, 2).

Thus, based on statistical data recorded during the years 1921-1924, it can be inferred that in the preceding years of 1918-1920, Kurds were primarily concentrated in the historical Armenian Aghahechq and its adjacent areas, which were temporarily under the control of Musavat Azerbaijan with British support. During the period under examination, the number of Kurds should not have differed significantly from the figures of 1921-1924 and is estimated to have ranged from approximately 25,000 to 30,000.

The problem of primary sources

In general, understanding and describing Musavat Azerbaijan’s policy towards indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, specifically the Kurds, is challenging due to the lack of necessary sources. In this context, the works of researchers who conducted fieldwork in the areas where these peoples, particularly the Kurds, resided in the early years after the establishment of the Soviet order in the Caucasus are crucial sources. These works (Čursin 1925; Sysoev 1927; Bukšpan 1932; Pčelina 1932; etc.) are important for two reasons. Firstly, they are temporally close to the Musavat period, and secondly, they offer insights into various issues (especially Bukšpan 1932), reflecting the memories of the local Kurdish population regarding the realities of the Musavat period.

D. Müller acknowledges the fact that Musavat’s policy towards the Kurds is known to us mainly through Bukshpan’s work published in 1932; however, he deems this work a “problematic source” (Müller 2000, 46). Notably, Müller does not provide any explanation as to why Bukshpan’s book should be considered problematic. It could be related to Bukshpan being a Soviet author, coupled with

the fact that, in the early 1930s, the so-called “counter-revolutionary” discourse still held sway in the political life of the Soviet Union. This circumstance could influence the subjective nature of Bukshpan’s information regarding Musavat’s discriminatory and assimilatory policy towards the Kurds. Nevertheless, whether through the analysis of statistical data from 1921-1924 or comparison with the information provided by others (such as Steklov), there is reason to believe that Bukshpan was relatively objective in the information he presented. While the author may have adopted a somewhat harsh tone in describing the events, this does not cast doubt on the reliability of this valuable source.

Accordingly, an attempt has been made below to present the policies of Musavat functionaries toward the Kurds in three directions (tax-economic and legal policy, military conscription policy, and language policy).

Tax-economic and legal policy

In his 1932 work, Bukshpan reported remarkably significant information about Musavat Azerbaijan’s tax policy, alongside systematic looting and captures, and gross violations of property rights towards the Kurds, citing as a source the stories he had heard from the local Kurdish population who had survived the Musavat period. In particular, according to the mentioned author, the tax and legal policies of Musavat towards the Kurds became severe and particularly cruel, especially when Khosrov bey Sultanov, the first military minister of the first republic of Azerbaijan (May-June 1918), was appointed the temporary governor-general of Artsakh and Zangezur in January 1919 with the consent of the command of the British South Caucasus Army, particularly Lieutenant General Sir William Montgomerie Thomson.

Although Khosrov bey Sultanov was born into a Kurdish family in the Qurddağı village of the Berdzor (former Lachin) district, ideologically he aligned with the group of Turkish nationalists. In 1917, he became a member of the Musavat party and later joined the Ittihad party with an Islamic ideological base.

Bukshpan’s reports on the tax policy implemented by Khosrov bey Sultanov towards the Kurds make it evident that he and the beks of Koturly, who enjoyed his patronage, not only imposed heavy taxes but also engaged in brutal looting in the Kurdish villages. In this regard, Bukshpan particularly notes: “The [Kurdish] population of Lachin and Kubatli was in economic slavery imposed by the Sultanovs and subjected to unprecedented pressures. These were manifested not only by heavy taxes and various obligations but also by the inhuman cruelties of wild parties and violence, including the right of the first night” (Bukšpan 1932, 27).

According to Steklov, the tax policy of the Sultanovs led to extreme dissatisfaction among the Kurds. The already heavy tax burden they bore during

the years of the first republic of Azerbaijan was further compounded by new types of taxes with the direct participation of the Sultanov clan (Steklov 1928, 40).

Based on stories heard from the Kurdish population, Bukshpan provides valuable information about the violence and murders committed by the Sultanovs against the Kurds: “The peasantry of Kelbajar and Lachin still cannot calmly pronounce the names of their former oppressors. We were given endless examples of illegal confiscations, robberies, violence, mass mutilations, and murders carried out by the Sultanovs during their rule in Kurdistan” (Bukšpan 1932, 27).

In continuation, the same author notes: “The taxes paid to Sultanov are soaked with the sweat and blood of Kurdish villagers. Even now, one can still meet people who were beaten almost to death [by the Sultanovs]” (Bukšpan 1932, 27-28).

Bukshpan reported that during the brief period of Musavat’s rule, the Kurds faced economic and political pressures unprecedented even in the darkest times of their history (Bukšpan 1932, 68).

As mentioned above, Kurdish villages were also affected by the attacks of the Koturly beks, who were affiliated with the Sultanovs and encouraged by them. These attacks were much more destructive and cruel compared to the gangs operating directly under the authority of the Sultanovs. According to information published by Bukshpan, when the Koturly begs detachments entered Kurdish villages, residents were compelled to flee. Only a few villages attempted armed resistance, though often unsuccessfully (Bukšpan 1932, 71). Furthermore, men who were captured faced forced labor supervised by escort guards. This labor was unpaid and was accompanied by whipping. The captive Kurds were required to provide their own food (Bukšpan 1932, 71).

During the attacks orchestrated by the gangs sent by Musavat authorities, members of the Kurdish tribes endured indescribable terror and witnessed the shootings and murders of their fellow villagers. Villagers reported that after the shootings, the Koturly bandits demanded payment from the villagers for the spent bullets. Refusal by the villagers led to the confiscation of property and complete looting. Those who resisted, and especially those who managed to organize mass resistance, were brutally killed by Musavat gangs. Simultaneously, such incidents served as convenient pretexts for organizing new bloodshed against the Kurds (Bukšpan 1932, 71-72).

Bukshpan reported that for every bey killed due to Kurdish resistance, entire Kurdish tribes faced extermination, and people related to them by blood were forced to leave their native settlements and flee (Bukšpan 1932, 72).

Bukshpan, rightly attributing the atrocities against the Kurds during the years 1918-1920 to the direct patronage of Musavat authorities, notes in this regard: “The

conquest, accompanied by bloodshed, looting, and subjugation of the Kurdish population in Lachin and Kubatlu districts by the Sultanov Beks, also served as inspiration for the Musavat gangs of Koturly, propelling them toward new atrocities. These acts were carried out with the direct patronage and permission of the central Musavat authorities” (Bukšpan 1932, 72).

Military conscription and “Cossackization” policy

According to Bukshpan, on the way to solving the problems of its adopted “national policy”, Azerbaijan decided to use the Kurds as “cannon fodder” in the fight against its neighbors and at the same time solve the so-called “Kurdish issue” (Bukšpan 68-69). In this context, Steklov’s information is particularly interesting regarding the “Cossackization” of the Kurds, coupled with attacks and looting of Kurdish villages by Musavat groups. Steklov elucidates the policy’s objectives: “As a barrier against potential encroachments by Armenian allies on Karabakh through Armenia, the Ministry of Defense is developing a project to create “Azerbaijani Cossack regiments” from the Kurdish population of Karabakh. According to this plan, following the established military conscription law for the Kurds, they are to serve in Kurdish units situated in the Zangezur region” (Steklov 1928, 43).

It should be mentioned that according to the project developed by the Musavat regime, a Kurdish infantry battalion of 400 people was established as part of the Azerbaijani army’s infantry division, along with a mounted battalion of 200 people as part of the cavalry division (Steklov 1928, 43). Compulsory military service was set at 2 years, and the regulations stipulated for the Kurds stated that, during times of war, Kurdish battalions could be deployed to the borders of Karabakh (Steklov 1928, 43-44).

In addition, at the military academy in Baku, a “Kurdish” department was established to train 20 cadets. The organization of these “Kurdish” troops began in late October 1919 but was not completed by the time Sovietization occurred the following April (Müller 2000, 46).

The hostile stance of Musavat Azerbaijan’s military elite towards the Kurds is further evident in the approved order, which stipulated that a Kurd conscripted into the army must present himself with a suitable outfit, weapons, and necessary soldier accessories. Additionally, a Kurd assigned to the cavalry division should, beyond the mentioned requirements, possess a suitable horse and the necessary accessories for the horse. Furthermore, the responsibility for the suitability of all military equipment and accessories rests with the Kurdish community, tribe, or family to which the infantryman or rider belongs. The tribe or family of the Kurdish soldier should bear the cost of replacing any accessories deemed unsuitable by the receiving committee (Steklov 1928, 43-45).

In general, the policy of the leaders of Musavat Azerbaijan to create armed detachments from Kurds and use them against Armenians is typologically very similar to the policy of Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II towards Armenians and Kurds. This similarity is particularly evident in the creation of Kurdish armed squads called “Hamidieh” in 1890 and their use against Armenians. The goal behind this strategy was threefold: to undermine the rapprochement of Armenian-Kurdish relations, to assimilate the Kurds into the state by weakening their strong tribal system, and ultimately, to deploy the Kurds against the Armenian liberation movement (Baibourtian 2013, 139-148; Astourian 2021, 28). Regarding the last point, V. Minorsky also expressed the same opinion, stating: “*The Turks chose the Kurds as a crude instrument to counteract the Armenian national movement*” (Minorsky 1915, 11, apud. (Baibourtian 2013, 142).

Language Policy

Thanks to Bukshpan’s valuable work, the information we have about Musavat Azerbaijan’s language policy towards the Kurds further confirms that within the framework of its “national policy”, this state initially employed all possible means to oppress the Kurds and eventually sought to assimilate them. The language policy of Musavat rule towards the Kurds did not differ in content and nature from the political line discussed in the preceding sections related to tax-economic and legal policy, as well as the military conscription and “Cossackization” policy. Thus, Bukshpan described in detail the situation in which the Kurdish language began to be gradually pushed out of use during the rule of the Musavats, becoming a marginal and so-called “closed” language, the scope of which was narrowed and limited only within the walls of the house: “Alongside the atrocities and persecutions against the Kurdish language, and Kurds, in general, became objects of ridicule. Musavat functionaries regarded Kurds with mockery and scorn, gradually influencing sentiments among the particularly backward population of the area. During this period, vows to renounce the Kurdish language became common, as Kurdish was a subject of irony, jokes, and mocking names (for example, kır-vır, kıra-vıra, etc.). We documented numerous instances where Kurds collectively vowed to abandon their mother tongue throughout entire villages, such as the village of Kamally in the Lachin region” (Bukšpan 1932, 72).

The persistent targeting of the Kurdish language, the cornerstone of the ethnic identity of the Kurdish people, by the Musavatists hastened the process of assimilation and “turcization” of the Kurds (Bukšpan 1932, 72-73). However, the Musavat government of Azerbaijan was not satisfied with this alone. By force of the law, a “legal provision” was established, declaring “Turkish” as a “dominant language” and categorizing it as an “open language” (Turk. açık dil). This implied

that the Kurdish language itself became a “closed language”, intended only for usage and contact within the walls of one’s own home, and communication in public places was to be carried out only in the “open language”, i.e., “Turkish” (Bukšpan 1932, 72).

In this context, the fact that the first statistical bulletins concerning Azerbaijan during the Soviet period shows a continuous decrease in the number of those who know the Kurdish language and consider it their mother tongue is not at all accidental. Thus, if according to the data of 1924, only half of the 35,000 Kurds of the Kurdistan region knew Kurdish (Čursin 1925, 2), that is, about 17,500 people, then according to the data of the first Soviet census of 1926, only 16.5% (6808 people) of Kurds registered in Azerbaijan stated Kurdish as their mother tongue. The remaining Kurds indicated “Turkish” as their native language (Müller 2000, 51). Judging by the picture reflected in the statistical data, the process of language decline, which started as a result of the language policy carried out by the Musavat, particularly the “de-prestigeization” of the Kurdish language, did not stop after the establishment of the Soviet order and, as a result, greatly affected the change in the ethnic identity of the local Kurds.

On the Turkish influence on Musavat policy towards the Kurds

The Turkish approach to the Kurdish question, under whose ideological and military influence the first republic of Azerbaijan operated from its inception, significantly impacted Musavat Azerbaijan’s policies towards the Kurds. In this context, it is crucial to note that, despite the Ottoman Empire actively utilizing Kurds in the conflict against Armenians within its territory since 1890, it also grappled with the challenge of addressing the Kurdish question itself. Kurdish nationalism, which intensified in the late 19th century, emerged as a significant threat to the Turks, particularly towards the end of the First World War and thereafter. The arming of the Kurds and their use against the Armenians was motivated by specific promises, which stipulated the granting of autonomy to the Kurds in the concentrated areas of Armenians once the Armenian question was resolved with the involvement of the Kurds. Therefore, at the moment when the first republic of Azerbaijan was being established, it became almost evident to the Kurds that the Turks had no intention of granting autonomy or status to them. It is not coincidental that the timeframe spanning from the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3, 1918) to the Armistice of Mudros (October 30, 1918), and subsequently to the opening of the Paris Peace Conference (on January 18, 1919), aligned with the emergence of Kurdish nationalist movements and marked a new phase in the struggle for autonomy and independence (Baibourtian 2013, 207-270).

After the conclusion of the First World War, Turkish authorities grew more sensitive to the Kurdish question, and these sentiments were also conveyed to their ideological followers who held sway in Azerbaijan, within the Musavat political elite.

Therefore, the policy of the Musavat authorities towards the Kurds has typologically repeated the Kurdish policy of the pan-Turkic authorities of Turkey. This involved, firstly, arming the Kurds and using them against the Armenians. In the second phase, it entailed oppressing and persecuting the Kurds to solve the Kurdish question.

Parallel with the post-Soviet Azerbaijan's ethnic policy

The ethnic policy of post-Soviet Azerbaijan has many similarities with the policy of Musavat Azerbaijan towards the Kurds. It is noteworthy that, according to the first post-Soviet census conducted in Azerbaijan in 1999, the number of Kurds was reported as 13,100 (Junusov 2001). However, in the second census in 2009, this figure dropped to 6065 (PSEE 2009), and in the third census in 2019, it further decreased to 4,000 (Azadlıq 2023). In other words, based on the official census data of Azerbaijan, the number of Kurds in the country declined by more than 300% between 1999 and 2019.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this decrease occurred despite overall population growth in Azerbaijan. According to state census data, the entire population increased by more than 2 million, representing over 25% growth, from approximately 7.9 million in 1999 to 10 million in 2019. This emphasizes the significant and disproportionate decline in the number of Kurds within the context of the overall population growth during the same period.

Although the same tax code applies to all peoples in post-Soviet Azerbaijan and the legislative and legal acts are the same for all, in the northern, i.e., Lezgian and southern, i.e., Talysh-inhabited zones, such a policy is conducted that does not allow the development of these areas and forces the residents, in particular Lezgi and Talysh peoples, either to emigrate or to enter the contract military service in the armed forces of Azerbaijan due to domestic needs. Naturally, in the case of emigration, the specific weight of these peoples in the proportion of the population of Azerbaijan weakens, and in the case of contractual military service, they become "cannon fodder" on the borders of Artsakh and Armenia, like the Kurds in Musavat Azerbaijan. In all the wars with the participation of Azerbaijan in the post-Soviet period, but especially in 2016 and after, the geography of the conscription places of the majority of those killed is proof of this reality.

According to statistical surveys among the Talysh people and interviews with national figures advocating for their rights, 7,500 Talysh were deployed to the

front during the first Artsakh war (Diyarmirza 2021; Khabarfarsi 2021). Both the first Artsakh war (1991-1994) and the second 44-day war in 2020 resulted in at least 1,000 Talysh casualties each (Diyarmirza 2021; Khabarfarsi 2021). Interestingly, based on the lists provided by the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan, the number of Azerbaijani casualties during the 44-day war was approximately 2900 (MDRA 2021). This implies that over 34 percent of the Azerbaijani casualties were Talysh. In contrast, according to the official census data in 2019, Talysh people constituted only 0.88% of Azerbaijan's population, i.e. 87,508 people (Turan 2023).

In terms of language policy, "Turkish" has been called the state language both in Musavat Azerbaijan and post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Both in Musavat Azerbaijan's Declaration on the State Language of Azerbaijan and in the Law on Language adopted in post-Soviet Azerbaijan in 1992, "Turkish" is mentioned as the name of the state language³, which in both cases showed the desire to give priority to the ideology and principles of Turkism in the matter of national policy and the unfriendly and hostile attitude towards the identity and language of other non-Turkic-speaking peoples living in Azerbaijan.

There are many cases when the representatives of Talysh people in post-Soviet Azerbaijan were targeted not only for speaking in Talysh language but also for not hiding or not being able to hide the accent and intonation specific to Talysh language when speaking in Azerbaijani.⁴

As in the case of the Kurds in Musavat Azerbaijan, as well as in the case of the representatives of Talysh people in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, attempts have been made, and are currently being made, deliberately with the encouragement of central authorities to target the Talysh language and the Talysh people as objects of ridicule.

Finally, like the Kurds in Musavat Azerbaijan, as well as all the Iranian-speaking (Talyshes, Tats, and Kurds), Lezgi-speaking, and Avar-speaking peoples in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, they are deprived of the basic rights to receive proper

³ For details, see Garibova 2009, 15-16.

⁴ For example, on January 9, 2015, a young man of Talysh origin from Astara participated in the program "Among the People" (Turk. "Adam içində") on the Azerbaijani channel ANS. Lacking singing talent, he received justified criticism from the jury. This seemingly ordinary event took an unexpected turn when one of the jury members, Khalida Akhmedova, asked the participant about his origin, and then with a piece of chewing gum in her mouth, she bluntly told him: "Go, son, first clean your mouth of the Talysh accent, then come" (Iskandari 2015).

general education in their mother tongue and to have radio, newspapers, and television.⁵

Conclusion

Summarizing the policy of Musavat Azerbaijan towards the Kurds and comparing it with the policy towards the Iranophone and Caucasian peoples living in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, the following commonalities can be noted:

- The policy conducted in Azerbaijan towards non-Turkic peoples has a lot to do with the dominant ideology in that area, particularly with the actions imposed by Turkism.
- Both in Musavat Azerbaijan and different parts of the history of post-Soviet Azerbaijan (1991-1994 and from 2016 to the present day), Turkism, as a dominant ideology, had supremacy in the political system, which is due to the intensification of the policy of oppression, assimilation and "Cossackization" towards the non-Turcophone Muslims.
- The struggle and wars against Artsakh and Armenia were and are of significant importance for Azerbaijan in terms of getting rid of other peoples and reducing their number in the proportional composition of the population, and this is evident from the features of the politics of both the Musavat and post-Soviet periods of Azerbaijan.

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⁵ For details, and especially for the Talysh case, see the Alternative report on implementation of Council of Europe Framework Convention on Protection of National Minorities, prepared by the Public Council of the Talysh People in Azerbaijan. The mentioned alternative report accused the government of assimilatory policies, violation of educational and language rights, and the arrest, prosecution and murder of minority rights activists (*An alternative report prepared by the Public Council of the Talysh People in Azerbaijan on implementation of the CE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in the Republic of Azerbaijan for the protection of Talysh people, covering the period of 2016 – 2021 years*, Baku, 2021, 5-15. <https://www.irfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/An-alternative-report.pdf>). For legal problems concerning the ethnic minorities of Azerbaijan, see also the recent study by the Baku Research Institute (Gayibov 2023)

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