

**WHITHER THE VƏTƏN?
THE FRAMING OF *HOMELAND* IN OFFICIAL DISCOURSE
VIS-À-VIS GEORGIA'S AZERI-TURK POPULATION¹**

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Abstract. *This article unpacks the notion of “homeland” as it has developed in post-Soviet Georgia and Azerbaijan vis-à-vis the Georgian Azeri-Turks of Kvemo Kartli. The author engages in top-down analysis of homeland-framing in official Georgian-Azerbaijani discourse from 1992-2017 to answer the following query: How and why have leaders of Georgia and Azerbaijan framed their respective territorial states as the vətən, or “homeland”, of Georgian Azeri-Turks since 1991? Findings demonstrate that Georgia’s Azeri-Turk population is effectively caught between the rhetoric of two homelands, one autochthonous, or “organic” (i.e. Azerbaijan), the other allochthonous, or “inorganic” (i.e. Georgia). Both states benefit from the inclusion of Georgian Azeri-Turks into the conception of the “worldwide Azerbaijani Diaspora”, albeit for different reasons; while Azerbaijan grows its politically motivated “worldwide Diaspora”, Georgia benefits from Azerbaijan-sponsored investments within disadvantaged minority communities. Through the triangulation of data from official statements and speeches, original interviews, participant observation, and landscape analysis, this article seeks to shed further light upon the implications of such homeland-framing within the lives, livelihoods, and subject positions of Georgian Azeri-Turks.*

Key words: *homeland-framing, Georgian Azeri-Turks, Georgia, Azerbaijan, nation-building, identity, South Caucasus*

On October 21, 2017, something rather unprecedented took place in the Georgian border region of Kvemo Kartli: a “non-Georgian” was elected mayor of the Marneuli municipality. The election of Teymur Abbasov — a young and charismatic Tbilisi-born Georgian Azeri-Turk—to the post of Marneuli Mayor in autumn 2017 is notable because such posts have tended to be conferred upon “ethnic Georgians” themselves, even in locales like Marneuli, where non-titular Georgians are in the majority. Many local Facebook users considered Abbasov’s autumn 2017 mayoral victory as a victory for the Georgian Azeri-Turk people

¹ A previous version of this article appeared as a chapter within the author’s article-based doctoral dissertation, *The Dynamics of Identity Negotiation in a Border Region: The Case of the Georgian Azeri-Turks of Kvemo Kartli*, defended within the University of Eastern Finland’s Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies in December of 2019. See: Storm 2019b.

as a whole, given that members of Georgia's Azeri-Turk population have served in lesser positions at the local, regional, and even national level, but never as the highest links in the chain of command in post-Soviet Georgia.¹ Reflected in this status quo is the centrality of the "nation-state-territory" trifecta in both Georgian and international politics as well as the associated truism, visible on world maps, that the world is made up of political units that are led and legitimated by members of representative "nations" within their rightful "homelands". The situation is nowhere near as simple as such mappings of the world would lead us to believe. In this article, I unpack the notion of "homeland" as it has developed in post-Soviet Georgia and Azerbaijan vis-à-vis the Georgian Azeri-Turks of the Kvemo Kartli region. In so doing, I seek to answer the following question: How and why have leaders of post-Soviet Georgia and Azerbaijan framed their respective territorial states as the *vətən* ("homeland" in Azerbaijani) of Georgian Azeri-Turks? By engaging in a top-down analysis of what I call "homeland-framing" by the Azerbaijani and Georgian states from 1992 to 2017, I hope to open the door to future research concerning how individuals, families, and communities perceive, respond to, and perhaps even ultimately effect state-led endeavors to create, frame, and instill national identity narratives within popular consciousness.²

A plethora of material exists concerning minorities' integration in Georgia, much of which is sponsored by non-governmental organizations and think-tanks the likes of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI, cf. Wheatley 2005 & 2009a), Civic Development Agency (CiDa 2011), Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD, 2002), Human Rights Monitoring Group of National Minorities (MRMG, 2011) and International Crisis Group (2006) in addition to consortiums linked to the Organization for Peace and Security in Europe (OSCE, cf. Zviadadze et al. 2018) and the United Nations (cf. United Nations Georgia, 2013). Additionally, scholars including Berglund (2016, 2017), Broers (2008), George (2009), Wheatley (2009) focus upon key issues impeding the integration of Georgia's minority groups within Georgia's economic, political, and socio-cultural spheres. Work relating specifically to Georgian Azeri-Turks and the relationship between the Azerbaijani state and members of this collective, however, is comparatively paltry. The recent OCSE-backed report of Zviadadze et al. (2018), for example, provides a good general analysis of identity-related issues among Georgian Azeri-Turks, yet the scope, size, and methods of analysis of the data included evince significant theoretical and methodological shortcomings. The recent work of scholars like Berglund (2020) and Storm (2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2019a-c) represent positive steps toward the bridging of the aforementioned gap in the literature. The

¹ Abbasov's mayoral was short-lived, however, following his arrest in the summer of 2018 and his alleged role in the assault and humiliation of a local citizen. See Azerbaijani language source, *Azadliq Radiosu*, 2018.

² Rather than to focus upon the brief, controversial presidencies of Ayaz Mutabilov or Ebulfez Elchibey in Azerbaijan (from 1991-92 and 1992-93, respectively), this article emphasizes the presidencies of Heydar Aliyev (1993-2003) and his son, Ilham Aliyev (2003-present) in discussions of homeland-framing vis-à-vis Georgian Azeri-Turks in official Azerbaijani discourse. Problems facing Georgia's Azeri-Turks began to be raised more systematically between Georgian and Azerbaijani diplomats under Aliyev Sr.'s guidance. It was during this time as well that Azerbaijani officials began codifying citizenship policies and elaborating upon the ideology of "Azerbaijanism" to counter pan-Turkism and separatist sentiment in the country. For more on these issues, see: Kamrava 2001; Tabachnik 2019; Tokluoglu 2005 & 2012.

present article is intended to encourage greater discussion and research on the subject of national identity construction in contexts of socio-cultural, linguistic, and/or religious diversity — in Georgia as well as elsewhere throughout the world.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Since the emergence of the nation-state system from the West in the late-17th century, political and cultural elites the world over have engaged in nation-building initiatives intended to shape narratives of nationhood and embed them within popular consciousness (Anderson 1983; Connor 2004; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). An important element of these narratives has been to emphasize the characteristics that make members of one *nation* different from others and to invent traditions that celebrate and popularize this uniqueness (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Territory has been a crucial element in the formation of nationhood, as primordial links have tended to be drawn between titular peoples — as “first peoples” — and particular lands as the *homelands* of particular nations (Kaiser 1994; Tishkov 1997). Irrespective of the historical commonalities that have gradually developed between particular groups of individuals (as, for example, speakers of a particular language or adherents of this or that religion) (cf. Smith 1991), the staying power of the nation in popular consciousness is owed in large part to the ability of the nation — as an emotive idea — to transcend spatio-temporality (Anderson 1983). States propagate particular narratives of national identity that emphasize the characteristics of their respective *nations* and the primacy of said *nations* within the territorial confines of the state (Paasi 1996, 2011, 2015; Newman 2011). Ideally, these territorial confines will coincide with the boundaries of the so-called national “homeland,” allowing members of particular nations the legitimate right to govern the lands from which their ancestors supposedly emerged.

Obscured by the traditional model promoting the existence of a unified *nation* within its historical *homeland* are hierarchies of power relations that are embedded in particular spatio-temporal contexts. The idiosyncrasies of these power relations determine who has the power to make decisions regarding the content of national narratives and how they are implemented. Furthermore, people very seldom fit neatly within the confines and categories assigned to them. For the most part, border drawing is a political process instituted by those in power, leaving individuals the option to either “fall in line” or exist somewhere in an uncomfortable, unaccommodating “in-between” of a system that favors members of the titular, “autochthonous” nation. The internalization of borders within the national imaginary both reproduces and reaffirms the importance of territoriality to nationhood and mediates individual perceptions and experiences of their surroundings.

Territoriality is a central component in the creation, development, and dissemination of national identity narratives (Kaiser 1994; Brubaker 1996; Smith 1991; Paasi 2011; Newman 2011) that mold geographic territories into nationalized *homelands*, or points of origin for members of the nation, distinguishable from members of other such groupings by certain shared socio-cultural characteristics. Territoriality, or the manifestation and expression of territorial or spatial identity at various scales, is but one

type of social or collective identity, yet the role it plays in the development of both individual and group identity is remarkable. Territoriality and rootedness in a *homeland* are both formative elements of nationhood as well as abstract, emotive affiliations that serve to connect individuals from otherwise diverse backgrounds and life experiences to one another as mutually recognizable members of the nation (cf. Hardwick and Mansfield 2009). For Özkan (2012),

“The concept of homeland, the essential part of the nation-state paradigm establishing the link between the people and the territory, territorializes the national identity by creating a sense of belonging to the sacred soil and turning the imagined boundaries into physical ones. ... while homeland provides physical space for the nation-state, it also reinforces the national identity by generating symbolic acts about the territory through geographical imagination” (Özkan 2012: 1).

Furthermore, Tölöyan (2010) refers to *homeland* as a type of “Bank of Symbolism, as the root and trunk of the cultural identity of the nation”, stating that, “Metaphorically, the land is not only the body of the nation, but the site where its soul — what we now call the identity of the collective self — survives” (Tölöyan 2010: 35–36).

Paasi’s (1996, 2015) concept of *spatial socialization* has been particularly influential with regard to the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study. Paasi (2015) defines *spatial socialization* as “the process through which actors become members of territorial entities and internalize narratives and memories related to collective identities and shared traditions (Paasi 1996: 8),” and notes the ways in which the process “modifies citizens’ subjectivities and consent” (4). Taking my cue from Paasi (1996, 2015) and Paasi and Prokkola (2008), my goal here is to identify and analyze the ways in which both the Georgian and Azerbaijani states have attempted to spatially socialize Georgia’s Azeri-Turk population—greatest part of which resides in the border region of Kvemo Kartli—with regard to designations and perceptions of *homeland*.

The “cartographic anxieties” (cf. Kabachnik 2012; Krishna 1994) produced by the dissolution of both the internal and external boundaries of the Soviet Union and the subsequent ethno-territorial conflicts — concerning Nagorno-Karabakh for Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia for Georgia — led to greater attempts by leaders of both states to cement the position of each titular nation within its *homeland*. Azerbaijani and Georgian officials are engaged in *homeland-framing*, continually (re)affirming the unique and inherently *national* characteristics of the *homeland* and framing the territorial state — including the contested territories — as the historical *homeland* of Azerbaijanis or Georgians, respectively. It is important to note, however, that the ways in which Georgia and Azerbaijan have engaged in homeland-framing following independence differ in more or less subtle ways, depending, for example, on the idiosyncrasies of each country’s system of governance, demographic makeup, relationship with internal and external actors at various scales, and the hierarchy of power relations embedded within each. To put it very generally, post-Soviet Azerbaijan’s resource wealth, historically positive relationship with neighboring Turkey, and relatively homogenous demographic composition have helped give the leadership of Azerbaijan the tools necessary to develop political and social institutions as it sees fit, irrespective of the disapproval it might garner from state and non-state actors in the West or Russia, for

example. Georgia, however, lacks resource wealth of the nature and extent found in Azerbaijan, the Georgian population is the most heterogeneous in the South Caucasus, and Georgia does not enjoy the same type of relationship with its neighbors that Azerbaijan does with Turkey. From the outset of independence from the Soviet Union, Georgia has had to rely more upon the goodwill of Western actors to aid in the development of its social and political institutions as well as to help strengthen its territorial integrity and political autonomy against foreign (read: Russian) interests than Azerbaijan has been obliged to do. This is of course but an extremely simplistic explanation of the many and multifaceted differences in the developmental paths undertaken by post-Soviet Georgia and Azerbaijan, but it does help demonstrate the ways that events occurring at multiple scales interact and inform contemporary contexts. These varying contexts underlie the different approaches to homeland-framing in post-Soviet Georgia and Azerbaijan vis-à-vis Georgian Azeri-Turks.

In order to identify and analyze state-led attempts to frame the Azerbaijani and/or Georgian territorial states as the *homeland* of Georgian Azeri-Turks, I engage in content and discourse analysis of official policy documents, state and non-state media sources, and my own fieldwork interviews with representatives of state-affiliated bodies and non-governmental organizations. I make regular usage of official online archives, including, for example, M. Saakashvili's Presidential Archives, and H. Aliyev's "Heritage" International Online Library, and the websites of the current Presidents of Azerbaijan and Georgia for the identification and analysis of official speeches and statements. Additionally, participant observation and symbolic landscape analysis have proven to be particularly fruitful research methodologies in the context of my research.

Georgia's "Azerbaijanis/Azeris": What's in A Name?

Deeper meanings and symbolisms underlying terms like "Azeri," "Azerbaijani," and "Georgian" are evocative of much more than nationality or citizenship. Inherent in the use of these and other such terms are categories of meaning and belonging. What does it mean to be Azeri/Azerbaijani and/or Georgian, for example? To whom are these labels attributed in official and/or popular discourse? Multi-scalar forces of inclusion and exclusion help mediate individual and collective self- and other-recognition. States play a central role in determining who belongs to the *nation* and who does not, subsequently determining for whom the territorial state is or is not a *homeland*.

In both the English and Azerbaijani languages, the adjectives "Azerbaijani" and "Azeri" are often used interchangeably to refer to the people of Azerbaijan or their language, history, culture, etc. In this article, "Azerbaijani" refers to the government as well as the titular nationality of the territorial state of Azerbaijan. "Azeri-" refers to individuals sharing certain socio-cultural and linguistic traits with the titular people of Azerbaijan, yet whom have neither Azerbaijani citizenship nor permanent residence. "Turk" is meant to serve as both a bridge and distancing device between individuals with greater or lesser ideological and felt ties to the Azerbaijani and/or Georgian territorial states (for more on these issues, see: Storm, 2019 and 2019b).

Looking at the historical roots of the Georgian Azeri-Turk population, it is important to call attention to the region's tumultuous past and the many centuries of warfare waged therein between powerful actors, including, for example, the Seljuk Turks, Ottomans, Persians, and Mongols as well as Greeks, Romans, and Russians. Suny (1994) does an admirable job detailing struggles with these and other powers for influence over Georgian territories as well as the influence these struggles ultimately had in the development of a Georgian national identity. Still, one interested in pinpointing the exact point of descent for Georgia's Azeri-Turk population will find that there is in fact no such one single point. Instead, what we see is a gradual intermixture of various Turkic and Persian tribes within contemporary Georgian territories and their eventual adoption of common socio-cultural and linguistic traits. This intermixture of peoples likely took place gradually between the 12th and 19th centuries alongside the region's various power struggles and the resultant in- and out-migrations of peoples.

By the time of the region's first census in 1897, all of the territories of present-day Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia (along with a portion of present-day Turkey) were part of the Caucasus Viceroyalty of Imperial Russia. The territories encompassing today's Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia were divided into five governorates, one of which was the Tiflis Governorate. The Tiflis Governorate consisted of territories that are now part of Georgia and Azerbaijan, and the areas of settlement of Turkic and Kartvelian peoples around its borders problematized the demarcation of borders following the Russian Empire's collapse and the establishment of the three independent states of the South Caucasus (1918–21). One of the ten districts of the Tiflis Governorate, Borchali, was an area heavily populated by the descendants of today's Georgian Azeri-Turks. The borders of the Borchali district coincide partly with the contemporary borders of Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region, bordering today's Armenia and Azerbaijan. Prior to the incorporation of these territories into the Russian Empire following the Imperial Russian-Persian Treaty of Gulistan of 1813, they were part of the Borchali Khanate under nominal Persian rule (1607–1755). Like other territories elsewhere in the region, the territories in question were subject to competing territorial claims and conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and Persia as well as local rulers (cf. Minahan 2016: 203; Gasimov 2018: 66–67). Azerbaijanis and local Georgian Azeri-Turks point to the historical concentration of Turkic peoples in Borchali as evidence of the deep roots of present-day Georgian Azeri-Turks within the Azerbaijani and/or Georgian territorial states.

Taking a closer look at the first and final census of Imperial Russia in 1897 and the subsequent Soviet censuses conducted from 1926-1989, one finds that, in 1937, the term "Azerbaijani" replaced the prior designations of Turkic peoples in the South Caucasus region as "Turks," "Tatars," and/or "Moslems." Yilmaz (2013) points to Stalin's desire to create as much distance as possible between the developing nationalisms of neighboring Turkey and Iran and Soviet Azerbaijan as a significant impetus for this change. Deteriorating relations between the Soviet Union, Turkey, and Iran in the 1930s and internal ideological changes pertaining to Soviet historiography necessitated the creation of a unique and primordial Azerbaijani national identity (ibid). Thus, from the time of the 1937 census on, this official change in national classification was applied to the Turkic peoples of Eastern Georgia as well as Azerbaijan. The official classification of

the Turkic-speaking, Moslem population of Eastern Georgia as “Azerbaijanis” has persisted in Georgia since independence. The descriptive label given to the latter group of individuals implies a socio-cultural and historical link to the territorial state of Azerbaijan, a link that is broadly encouraged by the government of Azerbaijan as bolstering the size and strength of its politically motivated “Diaspora.”

Georgian Azeri-Turks Today: Their Numbers and Geographic Areas of Concentration

Significant demographic changes and population shifts between the last Soviet census of 1989 and the first census of independent Georgia in 2002 resulted in the number of Georgian Azeri-Turks exceeding those of Armenians, Russians, and other non-titular groups. Prior to this point in time, Armenians had been the most numerous minority group in Georgia, followed by Russians, with Georgia’s Azeri-Turk population as the third most populous minority group. The number of Georgian Azeri-Turks decreased as well during this period (from 307,556 in 1989 to 284,761 individuals in 2002) in response to Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s nationalistic rhetoric and the eruption of economic and social strife following Georgia’s declaration of independence in 1991 (cf. GEOSTAT 2016; Khundadze 2016). Still, the scale of out-migration of other non-titular groups (primarily Armenians and Russians) eclipsed the decrease in the size of the Georgian Azeri-Turk community during this period.

As per the most recent census data (2014), Georgian Azeri-Turks continue to be the country’s largest minority group, comprising 6.3 percent of Georgia’s population of approximately 3.7 million people. This is a slight decrease from 2002, at which point Georgian Azeri-Turks made up 6.5 percent of the population of nearly 4.4 million people. Official figures place the Georgian Azeri-Turk population at approximately 233,000 in 2014, although official figures pertaining to the population size of Azeri-Turks in Georgia have been a point of contention between representatives of this community in Georgia and in Azerbaijan since independence. Unofficial figures pertaining to the size of the Georgian Azeri-Turk community in Georgia range from 300,000–500,000 (Storm 2016: 182; see also Abbasov 2011).¹ The tendency of members of this group to travel back and forth between their homes in Georgia and locations in neighboring Azerbaijan, Russia, and/or Turkey (primarily for economic reasons) complicates the task of pinning down exact numbers. Furthermore, instances of unregistered births are known to be higher in Kvemo Kartli, the region of their primary concentration, as well as in Guria and Kakheti (Hakkert 2017, 3).

Data from the 2014 census puts Kvemo Kartli’s population at 423,986 individuals, of which 51.2 percent are designated as “Georgians,” and 41.7 percent as “Azeris/Azerbaijanis.”² Georgian Azeri-Turks make up the absolute majority in the districts

¹ Zaur Khalilov of the Civic Integration Foundation (CIF) estimates the population of Georgian Azeri-Turks to be 320,000. Alibala Askerov of ‘Geyrat’ Public Movement (GPM), however, places their number at more than 400,000 individuals (Author’s unpublished interview (AUI) with Khalilov, Tbilisi, September 2016; AUI with Askerov, Marneuli, March 2016).

² Data obtained from author’s personal email communication with Ms. Donora Rukhadze of Georgia’s Office of National Statistics (GEOSTAT), Jan. 17, 2017.

of Marneuli (83.7 percent), Bolnisi (63.3 percent), and Dmanisi (65.5 percent), while Gardabani's population comprises a greater mixture of Georgians and Georgian Azeri-Turks (at 54.2 and 43.5 percent of the population, respectively).¹ Compared to the 2002 census data, the results from 2014 show a slight decrease in the overall population of Kvemo Kartli among Georgians as well as Georgian Azeri-Turks.² Still, the region's population (nearly 424,000) comprises 11.4 percent of the country's overall population of 3.7 million individuals. Sizable communities of Georgian Azeri-Turks reside in the Georgian regions of Kakheti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and Shida Kartli as well (ibid).

The Aliyev Sr. – Shevardnadze “Bromance” and Homeland-Framing since Independence

The idea of a geographical *homeland* is central to official conceptions of national identity in contemporary Azerbaijan and Georgia. The loss of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan in the early 1990s and, likewise, the Georgian losses of both Abkhazia in the 1990s and South Ossetia in 2008 have left deep impacts upon the respective societies of each state. The loss of these territories — territories framed as being of particular significance in national identity narratives in Azerbaijan and Georgia — and their associated perceptions of injustice and victimization feature prominently in both official discourse and popular sentiment. These themes resound in officials' speeches as well as web-based and face-to-face discussions with average individuals pertaining to questions of territorial integrity. The loss of Nagorno-Karabakh for Azerbaijan and Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Georgia is an important feature framing the official relationship between the two states since independence. It has provided a sense of mutual understanding and commiseration between the post-Soviet leaders of Georgia and Azerbaijan and has provided leaders with a key issue upon which they can and do express support for one another. Support for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia and the return of the “occupied territories” of each by their respective usurpers is an important site of diplomatic support between Azerbaijan and Georgia. Another important impetus to maintain an overall positive diplomatic relationship is the mutual benefits to be obtained by both sides through economic cooperation.

The foundations of bilateral relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan — as set down by H. Aliyev and E. Shevardnadze — were primarily based upon economic and political, security-related cooperation (and commiseration on the subject of territorial disputes) (cf. United Nations 2000). The overall positive nature of these relations was further solidified by the longstanding friendship between the two former Soviet apparatchiks. As independent Azerbaijan began to reap the benefits from further developments to its oil and natural gas industries, Georgia gradually benefited as well. Georgia's location as the so-called “bridge” between the East and West presented the Azerbaijani leadership with an alternative for the transport of its lucrative natural resources to Turkey and onto Europe, bypassing Armenia and Russia.

¹ Author's email correspondence with Ms. Rukhadze of GEOSTAT.

² For more on these issues, see Khundadze, 2016.

Whereas Azerbaijan's natural resource wealth helped to gradually stabilize the country's economic situation following independence, the situation in Georgia was nowhere near as fortuitous. Coupled with the civil war of the early 1990s, the conflicts between Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia wreaked havoc upon the Georgian economy. Zviad Gamsakhurdia's brief time in office and the upsurge in ethno-nationalism that accompanied it had resulted in a precarious situation with regard to majority-minority relations in Georgia. It was a time of mutual suspicion and distrust, as the words and the actions of the then-leader of the Georgian state supported a doctrine of "Georgia for Georgians!" rather than an inclusive doctrine of "Georgia for all". This particular period remains controversial in official as well as popular consciousness. Today, some Georgian state representatives deny that hundreds of Georgian Azeri-Turks were ever forced from their homes in Georgia, despite evidence to the contrary.¹ The numerous official changes of Turkic village names in Kvemo Kartli that took place between 1990 and 1991, too, persist within the memories of local Azeris as an attempt by central leadership to reassert authority over territories long inhabited by non-ethnic Georgians.²

After resigning from his Politburo post in 1987 and returning to Azerbaijan, Aliyev Senior began putting policies into motion that would create an ideology of what he termed "Azerbaijanism", an ideology that would become an important facet of post-Soviet Azerbaijan's official identity discourse. December 31st would become "the Day of Solidarity of World Azerbaijanis" shortly following its proclamation by Heydar Aliyev in Nakhchivan in 1991, and his presidential term (1993–2003) witnessed many meetings with groups of individuals included in the official conception of the "Azerbaijani Diaspora" and efforts to further institutionalize and strengthen it. According to Rumyantsev (2017), the creation of an Azerbaijani diaspora in the early years of Azerbaijani independence was an effort to counter what was and still is considered to be a powerful Armenian diaspora in the West and to influence the ways other societies and their leaders view Azerbaijan and its interests. Indeed, H. Aliyev's speeches commemorating the Day of Solidarity of World Azerbaijanis and/or speaking with "compatriots" living abroad from the early 1990s–early 2000s openly acknowledge the importance of loyalty to one's nationality. Such "loyalty" was to be expressed through adherence and retention of common linguistic, socio-cultural, and religious attributes as well as efforts to educate others about the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict and the territorial and human losses sustained by the Azerbaijani side.

As will become evident over the coming pages, the brand of Azerbaijani-ness marketed to Georgian Azeri-Turks is not entirely representative of what some scholars see as the largely inclusive, territorially-based ideology of Aliyev Sr.'s "Azerbaijanism" (cf. Cornell 2015, p. 259; Tabachnik 2019, pp. 3-6). Whereas the instillation of Azerbaijanism within Azerbaijani political discourse in the mid-1990s did indeed help to quell separatist sentiments along the country's northern and southern borders by offering an alternative to Elchibey's pan-Turkism, Azerbaijanism contains elements of *jus soli* as well as *jus*

¹ Author's unpublished interview with official from Georgia's State Ministry for Diaspora Issues, Tbilisi, 2016.

² Author's unpublished interview with Huseyn Yusubov, Chairman of the Congress of Azerbaijanis of Georgia (GAK): Marneuli, Sept. 2016.

sanguinis conceptions of nationhood and is not a manifestation of purely one or the other. Official speeches and press releases by key Azerbaijani political figures referencing so-called diasporic populations, including Georgian Azeri-Turks, evince a mixture of ethnic and territorial conceptions of national identity. The Azerbaijani language, territory (i.e. Azerbaijan as the territory of one's birth/citizenship or those of one's parent/s), Muslim spiritual values (albeit in a secular context), recognition of Armenian enmity, and respect for the Aliyev dynasty, for example, are all emphasized in discussions of Azerbaijanism. Although it is not within the scope of this article to dissect Azerbaijanism in great detail, the information presented within these pages demonstrates that, while engaging in homeland-framing vis-à-vis Georgian Azeri-Turks, the national identity being marketed is not purely territorial. After all, when many, if not most, Georgian Azeri-Turks were neither born in Azerbaijan nor possess Azerbaijani citizenship, the same commonly being true for their parents, then how does one explain Azerbaijanism as being territorial as opposed to ethnic? There appears to be a disconnect between rhetoric, policy, and action when comparing the ideologies of Azerbaijanism and the "Worldwide Azerbaijani Diaspora". If only certain individuals can be credibly deemed members of this diaspora, irrespective of having been born in Azerbaijan or having Azerbaijani citizenship, then the type of identity being propagated clearly includes a mixture of both inclusive and exclusive elements.

Georgian Azeri-Turks were folded into the official Azerbaijani conception of "Diaspora" almost immediately following the return of H. Aliyev to Azerbaijan and the establishment of official diplomatic relations with Georgia, irrespective of whether or not members of this community or their relatives had ever stepped foot within the territories of Soviet or post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The post-Soviet Azerbaijani state has consistently framed itself as the historical *homeland* of Georgia's Azeri-Turk population since the early 1990s. Initially, such portrayal was evidenced primarily in speeches and public statements made during bilateral visits of top Azerbaijani officials to Georgia.

The struggles of the Georgian Azeri-Turk population from the late 1980s–early 1990s did not escape Heydar Aliyev's attention. In his 1994 address to Colonel-General Fedor Reut, then-commander of the Russian troops placed in the South Caucasus, H. Aliyev expressed his concern:

"... we are concerned about the situation in Georgia on the whole, because we cannot be indifferent to the situations in the neighboring country, especially about the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia. There are a lot of Azerbaijanis in Georgia, according to our information it's about 600 thousand. In some regions, as for instance, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Gardabani they live compactly. We receive alarm signals: at times about the facts of violence against separate Azerbaijanis, injustice and so on. ... I have had a telephone conversation with Edward Amvrosievich Shevardnadze, he said that the measures were being taken to restore order and create appropriate conditions for the citizens of these districts of the Azerbaijani nationality... These persons of the Azerbaijani nationality are the citizens of Georgia and they lived there for many centuries. Georgia is their native land, homeland and it is necessary to ensure their security, normal life and labor... If we do not prevent some negative cases, it will lead to more serious consequences" (HAHIOL1994).

As the official ideology of the Azerbaijani diaspora continued to develop, issues pertaining to the quality of life of Georgian Azeri-Turks and their integration into wider Georgian political, social, and economic structures continued to appear as items on the agendas of meetings between the Georgian and Azerbaijani heads of state. As the speeches and joint statements from official visits between H. Aliyev and Shevardnadze from the 1990s up until the early 2000s demonstrate, the well-being of Georgian Azeri-Turks was a continual theme of discussion alongside ever-increasing economic cooperation, historically fraternal/brotherly relations, and statements of political and ideological support between the two states. The language used to describe the national affiliation of Georgian Azeri-Turks was very measured, with both leaders taking care to acknowledge the bi-rootedness of members of this community in both Georgia and Azerbaijan:

“About half a million Azerbaijanis live in Georgia. They live in their homeland, in the historic land, they are indigenous people... Eduard Amvrosievich refers to the Constitution today at a press conference. Yes, the Constitution is fundamental. However, if the state, especially its head, does not take appropriate measures to solve these issues, the Constitution itself does not resolve them. As Eduard Amvrosiyevich said today, during the difficult period [the late 1980s–early 1990s], 800 Azerbaijani families had been expelled from their hometowns. All these discriminatory attitudes towards the Azerbaijanis were stopped after Eduard Amvrosievich re-appointed Georgia. Therefore, the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia have always been grateful to their brothers—the Georgian people for their centuries-long existence in friendship and brotherhood” (HAHIOL 2000b).

The violent transition of leadership from Gamsakhurdia to Shevardnadze led to a period of relative stability between titular and non-titular Georgians. It was a balancing act between the appeasement of Western, aid-giving organizations and the values of a rather conservative populace just beginning to recover from civil war, political disarray, and economic collapse (Jones 2013). Little attention was devoted to the investigation of issues at the root of the social, cultural, political, and economic isolation of Georgia’s non-titular groups from wider Georgian society. Although Shevardnadze helped to create an environment wherein the religious and cultural rights of minority groups would be better represented in official parlance, his tendencies were more toward what Jones (2013) calls “pragmatic nationalism” in that he did what needed to be done to satisfy external, Western-based bodies and funding agencies while carefully maintaining the ethno-national hierarchy of power. By the time that Shevardnadze faced reelection in 2000, however, his base of support had eroded significantly, and opposition figures decried the presidential elections of that year as fraudulent and corrupt. Allegations of further official tampering in the parliamentary elections of 2002 culminated in widespread disillusion with Shevardnadze and his leadership and brought the Rose Revolutionaries and their leader, the young, charismatic and Western-educated lawyer, Mikheil Saakashvili, to the political fore.

The Aliyev Jr. – Saakashvili “Bromance”: Homeland-Framing in a New Era?

The final months of 2003 saw the removal of Aliyev and Shevardnadze from their central posts, but for very different reasons. Aliyev’s health was in rapid decline, and his son, Ilham Aliyev, who had been groomed to resume the presidency following his father’s death, became Prime Minister in August and President in October 2003 with nearly 77 percent of the vote, albeit in elections criticized by international monitoring organizations for failing to meet the minimal democratic standards. In contrast, Saakashvili was elected President in January of 2004 after having received approximately 96 percent of the popular vote, and the aforementioned monitoring bodies deemed the elections to be a positive indicator of the potential for further democratic development in Georgia (cf. OSCE’s 2003 reports on presidential elections in Azerbaijan and Georgia).

The bloodless Rose Revolution of November 2003 and subsequent election of Mikheil Saakashvili to the presidency in January 2004 ushered in a period of significant political and economic change in Georgia. The revolutionary turn of events that resulted in the ouster of Shevardnadze and his replacement by Saakashvili was cause for concern among some of the country’s minority populations, including Georgian Azeri-Turks, as well as in neighboring countries like Azerbaijan and Russia, whose political leadership feared similar political upheavals in their respective states. Whatever threats might have been perceived by the young Ilham Aliyev following the Rose Revolution and Saakashvili’s ascendance to the Georgian presidency, however, were quickly abated. Baku was the third foreign capital visited by the new Georgian President in 2004, following visits to Washington and Moscow. Saakashvili seemed eager to assure his Azerbaijani counterpart that the revolutionary wave that washed over Georgia in 2003 was a uniquely *Georgian* phenomenon and that he had no interest in meddling in the domestic affairs of Azerbaijan (Aliyeva 2005).

A friendly personal relationship quickly developed between the two young South Caucasian leaders, despite their seemingly incompatible political ideologies and leadership styles. An important motivating factor behind the positive official relationship between Tbilisi and Baku likely had much to do with Saakashvili’s ambitions to drastically improve and develop the Georgian economy. The Georgian state needed the income provided by cooperation with Azerbaijan in the energy sphere. Additionally, however, the restoration of Georgia’s territorial integrity, allegedly the “goal of his [Saakashvili’s] life,” continued to be a basis for bilateral commiseration between leaders of independent Georgia and Azerbaijan (*Civil.ge* 2004a). The continual strengthening of the Azerbaijani economy and its increased visibility in the international community due to massive stores of oil and natural gas were powerful motivating factors for Saakashvili and his administration to maintain cordial ties with its neighbor to the east.

Azerbaijani investment in the Georgian economy deepened, and together Saakashvili and Aliyev saw the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (2005-06) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (2006) pipelines and the Kulevi oil terminal (2008). They expanded their cooperation in the energy and transport sectors further via agreements the likes of those concerning the Energy Bridge (electricity between Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey), Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP), and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. Georgia became

increasingly dependent upon Azerbaijani rather than Russian natural gas, especially following the pipeline explosions of 2006 that temporarily halted the supply of natural gas to Georgia. Occasional moments of tension did arise, of course, such as brief reinvigoration of the Davit Gareji border dispute in 2012 and Azerbaijani dismay over Saakashvili's pointedly anti-Russian remarks during an official visit to Baku during the same year (cf. *Civil.ge* 2012; Valiyev 2013). Despite these short-lived disagreements, however, the positive nature of Georgian-Azerbaijani relations appeared to be essentially unshakable.

When it came to issues concerning Georgian Azeri-Turks, both Baku and Tbilisi continued their overall approaches, albeit with greater vigor than that of their predecessors. Throughout both terms of his presidency, Saakashvili made repeated reference to the historical development of the Georgian value of tolerance and the role such tolerance has played in the formation of the Georgian nation, a nation united in its diversity, yet unique in the cultural characteristics of its main titular nationality. Berglund (2017), George (2009), Jones (2013), Storm (2019), and Wheatley (2009) all note Saakashvili's tendency of blending elements of ethnic nationalism with rhetoric in support of civic nationhood. Wheatley (2009) refers to the management of "ethnic" diversity in Georgia since independence as having taken "one step forward, two steps back", moving from ethnic chauvinism under Gamsakhurdia to Shevardnadze's inclusive Law on Citizenship (1993) and constitutional protections of minority rights and cultural autonomy (1995)—without any further real dedication to the integration of minorities into Georgian society—and on to the mixed messages of Saakashvili regarding the parameters of membership in the Georgian nation.

Although a close examination of various speeches and public statements made by Saakashvili during his two terms as President reveal countless references to the Georgian nation as being inclusive, based upon the common goal of working together for a strong, prosperous and united Georgia, the ideological underpinnings of his championed policies often suggested an alternate view of the nation. For example, a study of the country's key pieces of national iconography since independence shows that, while Saakashvili did indeed ultimately make greater room for the country's minority groups in official narratives of national identity in Georgia than his predecessors, his reliance upon traditional, Orthodox Christian symbolism reinforced traditional, exclusive boundaries of membership in the Georgian nation (Storm 2018).

Storm (2016) and Berglund (2017) both highlight the significance of the Georgian language in the nation-building project under Saakashvili's leadership, noting the Georgian government's reliance upon educational reforms and the acculturation of minority groups to the Georgian language as being key to the socio-cultural, economic, and political integration of minorities into Georgian society. Berglund (2017) additionally points to Saakashvili's infrastructural improvements, particularly with regard to the construction or repair of roads, schools, hospitals, energy infrastructure, etc. in minority-populated regions, as being instrumental to lessening the geographic isolation of minority groups like the Armenians and Georgian Azeri-Turks and bringing them closer to the "center" physically, economically, and socially. Indeed, the following excerpts from

Saakashvili's public speeches during his attendance of *Novruz* festivities in Marneuli demonstrate the importance his administration placed upon the Georgian language and infrastructural developments to the overall integration of the Georgian Azeri-Turk population:

“Beginning today with the decision of our government, graduates of Azerbaijani language schools will readily be accepted to Georgian universities. The purpose of this is to keep Georgian citizens, be they Azerbaijani or other national minorities, from leaving for other countries... The young people gathered here today are the future of Georgia. They mustn't stray far from Georgia. Before I became President, the situation in Marneuli was very bad. There was no gas or electricity. Today, thanks to our friend, Azerbaijan, Marneuli as well as the whole of Georgia has gas... Georgia is not a single nation-state, it is the state of every Azerbaijani, Abkhazian, and Ossetian. Georgia ought always to be friends with Azerbaijan. I thank Azerbaijan for coming to Georgia's assistance in times of trouble” (*Musavat* 2010).

The *Novruz* festivities of 2011 occasioned similar expressions from then-President Saakashvili:

“The fact that you feel part of Georgian society and this country, makes me more proud than new roads (which of course is a reason to be proud), those beautiful buildings which have been, and are being built, new education system (which in future will guarantee our success) and all other achievements which Georgia has made. The main target of the current Government is to create a state, where all its citizens, regardless of his ethnic or religious viewpoints, feel that he or she is an indivisible part of Georgia... It is very important to maintain our Azerbaijani culture, our Azerbaijani language, which is an integral part of Georgian culture and of the Georgian state, at the same time. I am glad that you are learning the Georgian language at schools because this is a guarantee for your success in our unified Georgian state” (*Gabakhadze* 2011).

While the changes brought about by Saakashvili's dedication to the development of the country's infrastructure did indeed do much to improve the daily lives of citizens such as the Georgian Azeri-Turks residing in Kvemo Kartli, his reforms targeting the educational system and endemic societal corruption often placed disproportionate pressure upon such minority groups. George (2009) attributes the disconnect between Saakashvili's rhetoric of civic nationhood and the continued alienation of minorities from wider Georgian society to particular aspects of his state-building program which “often worked disproportionately against the interests of ethnic minorities” (141). Although state-led efforts to increase the opportunities for minority groups to learn the Georgian language were intensified during Saakashvili's second term, the regime's stricter enforcement of language requirements for civil servants as well as educational professionals meant that many non-Georgian speakers were removed from their positions due to their poor knowledge of the language (*Berglund* 2017; *George* 2009). These events heightened the perception of discrimination and relative deprivation among some representatives of the Georgian Azeri-Turk community (*Valiyev & Valiyev* 2005).

Since *Ilham Aliyev* ascended to the Azerbaijani presidency in 2003, the steadily increasing growth of the Azerbaijani economy gave *Aliyev Jr.* the opportunity to

strengthen and expand the visibility of the Azerbaijani state in the areas of Georgia having long been populated by Georgian Azeri-Turks. This visibility took the shape of newly constructed or renovated schools, education, sport, and/or cultural centers as well as the materials therein, grants and scholarships for Georgian Azeri-Turk students to study at Georgian universities, and the sponsorship of celebratory and commemorative events as well as the increased opportunities for employment generated by infrastructural developments. The presence of the Azerbaijani state (and its resource wealth) became increasingly visible in the physical and symbolic landscape of Kvemo Kartli as well as certain areas of Tbilisi (i.e. near Abanotubani) and Batumi.

Strolling in the central, historical part of the city, a visitor to Tbilisi can hardly help but to take notice of the bust of the former Azerbaijani President, Heydar Aliyev, located in a carefully and well-kempt park in the Old City. The Heydar Aliyev Embankment runs parallel to a section of Tbilisi's famous Mtkvari River. Nearby Heydar Aliyev Park is the resplendent house museum of Mirza Phatali Akhundzade, which doubles as an Azerbaijani cultural center, as well as the equally impressive, albeit more austere-looking stone building housing the Azerbaijani Embassy. The final resting place of Mr. Akhundzade as well as several other prominent Azerbaijanis sits beneath a canopy of foliage in Tbilisi's Botanical Gardens, a tribute to the early proponents of independent Azerbaijani statehood at the beginning of the 20th century. A grandiose structure resembling Baku's famous Maiden Tower serves as the central headquarters of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic's (SOCAR's) Georgian office and is located nearby in central Tbilisi. Elsewhere throughout Tbilisi and the rest of the country, SOCAR petrol stations and gas lines symbolize cooperation between Georgia and Azerbaijan in the energy sphere and the disproportionate weight carried by Baku in the countries' economic relations. Perhaps not as easily identifiable as symbols of Azerbaijan's presence in Georgian domestic politics and economics, however, are the banks, hotels, and other luxury properties in Tbilisi and Batumi that are allegedly connected to Azerbaijan's first family, prime examples being Tbilisi Palace, located directly next to Heydar Aliyev Park in Old Tbilisi, and Pasha Bank on Tbilisi's central Rustaveli Avenue (see Mukhtarli 2015 & 2015a). Along with the construction of new oil and gas pipelines and railways connecting Georgia to Azerbaijan, all of the aforementioned adornments of the Georgian landscape symbolize the deepening disparities in Georgian-Azerbaijani political-economic relations since independence. From 2003-2012, the desired respective outcomes of Azerbaijani-Georgian partnership were recognized as serving the interests of both leaders—for Saakashvili's Georgia, the resultant strengthening of the Georgian economy would lead to greater possibilities for the provision of public goods, ultimately increasing living standards in the country and cementing the influence of Saakashvili and his party over the country's future development. For Aliyev Jr.'s Azerbaijan, careful investment in the Georgian economy as well as the so-called "Azerbaijani Diaspora" in Georgia would extend Azerbaijan's influence in Georgian geopolitical affairs, thereby better safeguarding and promoting Azerbaijani interests at home and abroad.

Azerbaijani-Georgian Relations Post-Saakashvili

The parliamentary elections of October 2012 heralded dramatic change in the Georgian government. Saakashvili conceded his party's defeat and looked on with trepidation as billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party proceeded to form the new government. By the time that Giorgi Margvelashvili was elected President in 2013 under Georgian Dream's banner, however, the President's powers had been significantly decreased in favor of a parliamentary system and a powerful post of Prime Minister, a post that had been filled by Ivanishvili shortly following the previous year's parliamentary elections.

The early years of Georgian Dream leadership saw increased tensions in Azerbaijan-Georgian relations. One of the chief aims touted by Ivanishvili prior to the 2012 parliamentary elections was the restoration of the railroad road linking Russia-Georgia-Armenia (i.e. the Trans-Caucasian railroad) through the contested territory of Abkhazia. Ivanishvili's apparent readiness to discuss the reopening of rail traffic between Russia, Georgia, and Armenia was looked upon with alarm in Baku as well as within Georgian opposition circles, as were Ivanishvili's comments concerning the long-anticipated Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. In a 2012 interview with the Georgian newspaper, *Resonance*, Ivanishvili reportedly stated that:

"The construction of the Kars-Akhalkalaki [Baku-Tbilisi-Kars] rail line raises questions. Perhaps, I will have to ask them on my visit to Azerbaijan, and very softly explain to our friendly country that at some stage this project would not be suitable for us..." (quoted in Idayatova 2012).

Baku's fears that the new Georgian government would choose to align itself more closely with Russia — and, by default, Armenia — were further heightened by the new Georgian government's willingness to negotiate with Russia's Gazprom regarding potential increases in Georgian imports of Russian gas. Following public outcry over talks held between Gazprom and Georgian officials in autumn 2015, in March 2016 the Georgian government announced that it would increase imports of Azerbaijani natural gas, thereby eliminating the need to import gas from Russia. Azerbaijan was set to meet 99.5 percent of Georgia's demand for natural gas in 2018 (Ajeganov 2016; *Azernews* 2018).

Despite these hiccups in Azerbaijani-Georgian relations from 2012-2016, tensions between the two countries' leaderships have gradually decreased. The relationship between Ilham Aliyev and Bidzina Ivanishvili never came close to rivaling that of Aliyev Sr.-Shevardnadze or Aliyev Jr.-Saakashvili in terms of inter-personal warmth and friendship. For example, despite the arrest order issued by the Georgian government for Saakashvili in 2014 or the revocation of his Georgian citizenship in 2015, the ex-Georgian President nevertheless traveled to Baku and met with President Aliyev in April 2015, taunting Georgian Dream officials from across the border. The Azerbaijani government never officially commented on Georgia's extradition request, but Azerbaijani news media reported that Baku rejected Tbilisi's request to hand Saakashvili over to the Georgian authorities (*DFWATCH* 2015a). The relationship between Aliyev Jr. and Margvelashvili was cordial since the latter assumed the Presidency in 2013.

Despite occasional setbacks, the relationship between Baku and Tbilisi has continued in its strategic importance, and Baku's political leadership has continued to beckon Georgian Azeri-Turks into its paternal embrace. Baku's endeavors at framing the Azerbaijani territorial state as the *homeland* of Georgian Azeri-Turks have not been concentrated solely in Tbilisi, despite the city's prominent socio-cultural, political, and economic status as the Georgian capital. The Azerbaijani nation-state positions itself as real presence Kvemo Kartli residents' lives through its leadership's efforts combining projects of infrastructural development, charity, and event sponsorship in ways that propagate Baku-based official narratives of national identity and loyalty to the "historical homeland".

Aliyev Jr. and the Growth of the "Azerbaijani Diaspora" in Georgia from 2003–2017

An examination of speeches made by Aliyev Jr. at the previous three gatherings of the Congress of World Azerbaijanis (2006, 2011, and 2016) and annual statements in commemoration of Azerbaijani national holidays — National Salvation Day, Day of Solidarity of World Azerbaijanis, Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis, Khojaly Genocide, and National Mourning Day, for example — demonstrate the current administration's continued dedication to narratives of Azerbaijani victimhood in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well as those sanctifying Heydar Aliyev as the savior of the Azerbaijani nation-state. For example, speaking at the Third Congress of World Azerbaijanis in Baku in 2011, President Aliyev stated:

"We have a large family living abroad, they are Azerbaijanis. These are the people attached to their native homeland. Our distinctive feature is that no matter where we live, we are attached to our home country. This is our homeland, our common homeland. Independent Azerbaijan is the motherland for all Azerbaijanis. We have one motherland – Azerbaijan! We have one language – the Azerbaijani language! We have a nationwide ideology – the ideology of Azerbaijanism! I want all Azerbaijanis of the world always to be together, to know that a strong state of Azerbaijan is behind them and they can always rely on Azerbaijan. I want to conclude my remarks with the unforgettable words of great leader Heydar Aliyev: 'We are all proud to be Azerbaijanis.'" (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2011).

Furthermore, a 2013 presidential decree concerning the celebration of the late Heydar Aliyev's birthday reads:

"Thanks to the consistent and goal-oriented policy pursued by Heydar Aliyev during his leadership of the independent Republic of Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani Diaspora has formed, developed and demonstrated a close attachment to the historical homeland. The fact that the Azerbaijanis living in different countries of the world consider the Republic of Azerbaijan their homeland, see it as a temple of the national spirit, national and spiritual values, national culture, and are rallied around the idea of Azerbaijanism is precisely the result of Heydar Aliyev's activities" (President of Republic of Azerbaijan 2013).

As the Azerbaijani economy has grown, so too have the state's efforts with regard to creating and disseminating a diasporic consciousness among the peoples perceived to

be “co-ethnics.” In Georgia, such efforts have been concentrated in the region of Kvemo Kartli, within the districts of Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, and Gardabani in particular. Marneuli serves as the sort of “epi-center” of socio-cultural life for Georgian Azeri-Turks, due in large part to the municipality and district’s population size as well as the extent to which Georgian Azeri-Turks are concentrated there.

A. “Welcome to Marneuli”: Symbolic Duality in the Material Environment

Georgian language signage — complete with religious symbolism — welcomes you to Marneuli, much the same as it would in other Georgian cities. A monument featuring a mother and her two infant sons, each holding one end of a large sword, evokes the patriotic imagery of a motherland and her children, who are ready to defend their country at any cost. As your journey progresses further toward the heart of the city, however, you begin to notice subtle changes to the built landscape. Bi- or even tri-lingual signage begins to appear in shop windows, with Turkish or Azerbaijani appearing alongside the Georgian and/or Russian languages and beckoning to potential customers. Some of the most impressive structures are encountered almost immediately upon breaching the city’s low walls, including a glass-walled police station, public service hall, fountain encircled by the Georgian and European Union flags, a modern supermarket, a small Orthodox church, and a remarkable, two-story structure sitting within a beautiful, carefully landscaped park. Beside this latter structure and park sits a SOCAR filling station and building adorned with the trademark “M” of a McDonald’s restaurant. It is in this manner that the visitor to Marneuli is greeted — subconsciously, metaphorically, and simultaneously — by the states of Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The glass and steel structures of the police station and public service hall serve as particular reminders of Saakashvili’s endeavors to improve the quantity and quality of public services to locals in a modern and transparent manner. The structures standing between the police station and public service hall — the “Tea House” and its immaculately kempt park, the SOCAR filling station and its incomplete McDonald’s restaurant — signify the presence of the Azerbaijani state in this city of approximately 20,000 people (*Municipality of Marneuli* n.d.). The “Tea House” is home to the Marneuli Youth Center, the Mugham Restaurant, and lovely little park, all of which symbolize the manner in which Ilham Aliyev’s regime has expanded official involvement with Georgia’s Azeri-Turk community since 2003. Through the confluence of resource wealth, infrastructural development, humanitarian aid, and socio-cultural symbolism, Aliyev Jr. has carried on in his father’s footsteps, taking even further steps to develop and maintain Georgian Azeri-Turks’ ties to and perceptions of Azerbaijan as their “historical homeland” across the border.

In what Ilham Aliyev has termed efforts of his administration to “turn oil capital into human capital” (cf. *AZERTAC* 2014), the Azerbaijani state has been looking beyond the mere construction of oil and gas pipelines, railways, and/or electricity lines in Georgia to develop a diasporic consciousness among Georgian Azeri-Turks. Through the organizational and financial support of the State Committee for Work on the Diaspora, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR), and the

Azerbaijani Embassy in Georgia, the Azerbaijani state has invested in the development of a Georgia-based “Azerbaijani Diaspora” that is loyal to the interests of the Azerbaijani state. These investments have taken the shape of changes to the built environment that simultaneously propagate the Heydar Aliyev cult of personality and connect it to narratives of Azerbaijani victimization in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Scholarships are given, schools are renovated, festivals are held, additional charitable deeds are done, but all come with strings attached. The expectation is that, by taking advantage of the opportunities presented to them by the beneficent Azerbaijani state, Georgian Azeri-Turks will gradually better their own collective socio-economic and political condition, become better integrated into Georgian state structures, and come to be the voice of (Azerbaijani) reason in Georgia. In his annual address to “world Azerbaijanis” in December 2017, President Aliyev stated:

“We persistently strive to achieve the set goals for the comprehensive development of our Motherland. Diaspora organizations also face important tasks of expanding the international relations of our country, promoting our ancient and rich culture and suppressing provocative actions against Azerbaijan. Therefore, our compatriots living abroad should closely rally around the idea of Azerbaijanism in the name of protecting our national interests. I believe that your focused and joint activity will multiply our strength and make a weighty contribution to the speedy settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that worries us all, and restore the territorial integrity of our country” (Aliyev 2017).

Taking a tally of Azerbaijani diaspora organizations currently operating in Georgia is a difficult task, as a large number of these organizations founded shortly after independence appear to no longer be functioning. In some cases, these organizations’ founders have passed away and the organizations themselves, perhaps due to lack of funding or effective leadership, have ceased operations. It is for this reason that claims pertaining to such diaspora organizations in Georgia as numbering 50 or greater should be viewed with skepticism. Fieldwork visits to Georgia and to the municipalities of Tbilisi, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, and Gardabani have allowed me to identify the organizations and actors most actively involved with Georgia’s Azeri-Turk population and to determine which of these organizations and actors can be labeled as “diaspora organizations” due to their affiliation with the Azerbaijani state. These organizations include the Mirza Phatali Akhundzade House Museum and Azerbaijani Cultural Center in Tbilisi, Borchali Ireli Public Union (Marneuli), the Congress of Georgian Azerbaijanis and its associated Union of Georgian Azerbaijani Youth (offices in Tbilisi and Marneuli), Azerbaijani Student Union of Georgia (Tbilisi), the Azerbaijani Cultural Center of Marneuli and its Youth Department, the Marneuli Youth Center, the Integration Center for Azerbaijanis of Georgia, and the Heydar Aliyev Computer Learning Center of Dmanisi. These organizations are comprised of educational and cultural centers as well as collectives of intellectuals and community representatives. It is through the support of the Azerbaijani State Committee for Work on the Diaspora, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tbilisi, and SOCAR that the aforementioned organizations are able to provide locals with educational and socio-cultural resources in addition to knowledge about historical and contemporary Azerbaijani “realities” in service of the “historical homeland”.

In some cases, these diaspora organizations are housed within newly constructed or renovated buildings that both enrich the local landscape and imprint it with the echo of Azerbaijani influence and resource wealth. Key examples of this include:

- 1.) Marneuli's "Tea House", its Mugham Restaurant, and park (containing a statue of Nizami Ganjavi and Shota Rustaveli, benches, a decorative fountain featuring Azerbaijani carpets, and bushery trimmed into the shape of Azerbaijani fire symbols),
- 2.) the Heydar Aliyev Computer Learning Center in Dmanisi (and the improved roads and landscaping leading to it), and
- 3.) the recently-renovated house museum and cultural center dedicated to the poet and playwright, Mirza Phatali Akhundzade, located in Old Tbilisi.

These and other centers typically serve as sites of official events celebrating Azerbaijani state and national holidays and commemorative dates in addition to sites wherein usual functions (like educational and extra-curricular courses, trainings, seminars, etc.) are carried out. Such celebratory and commemorative events are also held in other buildings and outdoor areas marked with the presence of the Azerbaijani state, such as in the Azerbaijani Embassy building itself, Tbilisi's Heydar Aliyev Park, Marneuli's Neriman Nerimanov Park (currently in the midst of a contentious name change)¹, Marneuli's Ata Holding Center, or the Heydar Aliyev Park in Rustavi. Visits by members of the Azerbaijani and Georgian Parliaments, the Georgia-Azerbaijani Inter-parliamentary Friendship Committee, Georgian and Azerbaijani state ministries, SOCAR leadership, Embassy personnel, prime ministers and even the heads of the Georgian and Azerbaijani states themselves to these locations for special occasions and brief local consultations adds an air of authority and solicitousness to Azerbaijani actions vis-à-vis Georgia's Azeri-Turk population.

Officially propagated symbols of Azerbaijani nationhood are demonstrated, displayed, and reproduced at state-sponsored events and physical sites both within and outside the borders of Azerbaijan. These symbols include socio-cultural norms and values pertaining to the Azerbaijani language as the mother tongue of all Azerbaijanis and Islam as the spiritual anchor of the Azerbaijani people, feature traditional art forms such as *muğam* and *aşıq/bard* folk music, dance, poetry and literature, and carpet weaving. National costumes are regularly donned by youth and tables are laden with the delicacies of Azerbaijani national cuisine, all adding to the sensory experience surrounding the "narration" of the Azerbaijani nation.² In Georgia's Kvemo Kartli, these symbols of Azerbaijani nationhood are evident in official speeches, the *types* of state-sponsored activities available to locals at Azerbaijani cultural and youth centers, and even in the décor chosen to represent Azerbaijani national identity at official events. At the Azerbaijani Cultural Center in Tbilisi and the Youth Center in Marneuli, for example, carpeting classes are offered to Georgian Azeri-Turks and others interested in learning the 'ancient Azerbaijani art' of carpet weaving. Additionally, the Azerbaijani Cultural

¹ For more on the questionable circumstances surrounding this name change, see Storm, 2019c.

² Reference to the "narration" of the nation harkens back to Bhabha's (1990) work, *Nation and Narration*.

Centers in Tbilisi and Marneuli host events in support of Borchali's *aşıqlar* (bards) as well as traditional Azerbaijani music and dance ensembles. Performances by these ensembles typically accompany celebrations of Azerbaijani national holidays and commemorative dates, during which time the Azerbaijani flag typically flies alongside that of Georgia and the sounds of both countries' national anthems float through the air. At the *Novruz* festival held annually in Marneuli, young girls and boys don traditional Azerbaijani national costumes and pose for pictures with officials and laypeople alike among carpets, tea sets, traditional sweets, and national musical instruments. A model of Baku's ancient Maiden Tower graced Marneuli's 2016 *Novruz* celebration and provided a lovely backdrop for the aforementioned photos.

The Azerbaijani state has rather successfully been framing itself as the protector of Georgia's Azeri-Turk community and champion of this community's interests by doing what the Georgian has heretofore been unable to do on a sufficient scale — renovate or completely reconstruct dilapidated Azerbaijani language schools (and provide them with textbooks), open cultural, educational, and sports centers (and provide them with modern equipment), improve locals' access to clean drinking water, heat and electricity, and facilitate events in celebration of civic, national, and cultural happenings that allow locals to feel as though they were part of a wider "imagined community" (cf. Anderson 1983). Furthermore, especially through the doings of SOCAR's Georgia office, locals are offered employment without the necessity of knowing Georgian. Despite all of these charitable activities, however, the Azerbaijani state does not encourage the permanent migration of Georgian Azeri-Turks to Azerbaijan. Visiting the "historical homeland" is indeed encouraged but remaining there is quite another matter. The Azerbaijani state has not made it easy for Georgian Azeri-Turks to live and work in Azerbaijan; rather, since 2007, tougher enforcement of immigration laws, stricter material requirements, and increases in bureaucratic "red tape" have created considerable difficulties for Georgian Azeri-Turks wishing to remain in Azerbaijan indefinitely (Ahmedbeyli 2009; Sultanova 2012; Tabachnik 2019: 5–6).

SOCAR and other Azerbaijani firms offer scholarships to Georgian Azeri-Turk students seeking to attend Georgian institutions of higher education, and Georgian language courses are offered at Azerbaijani-funded educational and cultural centers in hopes of improving young peoples' chances of obtaining gainful employment or spots in Georgian universities. Azerbaijani officials encourage Georgian Azeri-Turks to improve their knowledge of the Georgian language in order to become better integrated into Georgian society whilst reminding young people not to forget their historical and national roots. At his last visit to Marneuli (2015), President Aliyev thusly addressed local Georgian Azeri-Turks:

"We want the Georgians living in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia, as citizens, to play a role in and make valuable contributions to the social, political, and economic lives of their countries in the future as well as, of course, not forgetting their own historical roots... Azerbaijanis in Georgia have always supported Georgian statehood and have become good citizens of Georgia. This is as it should be, as you have lived on these lands for centuries. ... We want the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia to know the Georgian language perfectly—as well as

they know their own mother tongue—so that, by doing this, they can take their rightful place in Georgia. ... You are valuable citizens of this state, and through your hard work you contribute to the development of Georgia. These courses [at the “Tea House”] have been organized to help you learn the Georgian language... This is very important, but, of course, you should never forget your historical roots. Each nation is developed on the basis of its historical and cultural roots. Of course, the [Georgian] government will do its utmost to further this and to give you a comfortable experience so that you may continue to praise Allah and your historical roots at all times” (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2015).

By remaining in Georgia and benefiting from the socio-cultural, educational, and economic opportunities afforded them by Azerbaijan, the intention is for Georgian Azeri-Turks to internalize and further disseminate Azerbaijani narratives of Georgian-Azerbaijani fraternity, Armenian hostility, glorification of the Aliyev dynasty, and pride in the characteristics underlying Azerbaijani national identity.

Of the Azerbaijani state holidays and commemorative dates observed by Azerbaijani-affiliated organizations in Georgia, the most widely observed dates include the following: Heydar Aliyev’s days of birth and death (May 10th and Dec. 12th, respectively), Solidarity Day of World Azerbaijanis (Dec. 31st), New Year, “Bloody January” (Jan. 20th), the dates associated with the Khojaly tragedy (Feb. 25-26th), International Women’s Day (March 8th), *Novruz* (March 20-24th), Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis (March 31st), Republic and Independence Days (May 25th and October 18th, respectively), and National Salvation Day (June 15th) in addition to the Islamic holy days of *Qurban Bayramı* and *Ramazan*. On each of these days, representatives of Azerbaijani bodies, organizations, and cultural centers make public statements and take part in officially sanctioned events. These events are covered by local and national news agencies, and audiences in Azerbaijan and Georgia consume the resultant news pieces. Georgian state officials and representatives of regional and local governments attend these events as well, offering either their condolences or congratulations as appropriate. More than half of these events serve to propagate Azerbaijani official narratives pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Bloody January, Khojaly, and the Day of Genocide of Azerbaijanis) and the Heydar Aliyev cult of personality (anniversaries of the former leader’s birth and death as well as National Salvation Day). Solidarity Day of World Azerbaijanis, Independence Day, and Republic Day, too, remain deeply connected with what is framed as Azerbaijan’s historical struggle for political and territorial autonomy. Emphasis is placed upon the stabilizing and restorative role played by Heydar Aliyev in the face of these struggles both during and following the Soviet period. While official celebrations of New Year and International Women’s Day represent the spread of Soviet and Western traditions in Georgia as well neighboring Azerbaijan, *Novruz Bayramı*, *Qurban Bayramı*, and *Ramazan* are officially recognized by Georgia and Azerbaijan as being of cultural and religious significance to the two countries’ Turkic and/or Muslim peoples.

Events commemorating the life of Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijani victimhood in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, *Novruz*, *Qurban Bayramı* and *Ramazan* are held in Tbilisi as well as in the districts of Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, and Gardabani in order to encourage the attendance of Georgian Azeri-Turks. These events are held in cooperation between

the Azerbaijani Embassy and Azerbaijani state-affiliated organizations and cultural centers such as Georgia's SOCAR branch, Marneuli's Azerbaijani Cultural Center as well as the Integration Center for Azerbaijanis of Georgia, the Marneuli Youth Center, and a handful of select NGOs operating in the region. These events often serve dual purposes, oftentimes introducing locals to new state-sponsored projects in the region, presenting locals with charitable and other gifts (such as SOCAR-sponsored scholarships and grants, and/or textbooks and other literature pertaining to Nagorno-Karabakh), *and* propagating official narratives of Azerbaijani national identity. By officially sponsoring these and other events, the Azerbaijani state presents itself as the provider and guarantor of local Georgian Azeri-Turks' cultural and material wellbeing.

When asked if he had ever perceived any sort of suspicion or negativity on the part of Georgian officials with regard to Azerbaijani interaction with Georgian Azeri-Turks, Azer Suleymanov, one of the then-three Georgian Azeri-Turk representatives in the Georgian Parliament, stated:

"I think about it like this: How would you feel, if, for example, Canada [as a neighboring country] were to come to your country and start to build roads, factories, plants, and help your students? ... A person must be an idiot or a fool to be dissatisfied when a neighbor comes to him/her and builds something for free—gives homes, roads, factories, and plants. I have a very good relationship with Azerbaijani ministers and deputies... Azerbaijan is not interested in destabilizing Georgia. Azerbaijan needs a strong neighbor... Of course, Azerbaijan has many problems of its own... Like as is the case with Georgia, 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territories are occupied by the Armenian side... And still Azerbaijan is trying to improve our lives in some way. Not only for us, but for all of Georgia".¹

Mr. Suleymanov, a long-time member of the Georgian Parliament and staunch supporter of Mikheil Saakashvili, was publicly recognized by the Azerbaijani government at the IV Congress of World Azerbaijanis in 2016 for his efforts in support of Georgia's Azerbaijani "Diaspora" (*Zim.az* 2016). Suleymanov has also been very vocal in his desire to spread awareness and recognition of the Karabakh conflict within Georgia, at times even narrowly avoiding physical conflict with his Armenian colleagues in the Georgian Parliament (cf. Machaidze 2012; *DFWatch* 2015, 2016, 2016a). Suleymanov, along with other Georgian Azeri-Turk representatives in the Georgian Parliament and Tbilisi- and Kvemo Kartli-based, Azerbaijan-affiliated organizations, is a regular presence at events commemorating narratives of Azerbaijani history and culture in Georgia. Representatives of the Marneuli-based Azerbaijani Cultural Center, Integration Center for Azerbaijanis of Georgia, and the Congress of Azerbaijanis of Georgia regularly help host such events in Kvemo Kartli. According to Nargiz Aliyeva, head of the Youth Department at the Azerbaijani Cultural Center in Marneuli,

"... our youth should know the history of their motherland [i.e. Azerbaijan]. They should know it perfectly in order to inform the whole world about it. When we distributed brochures with the history of Khojaly, with pictures of martyrs, Georgians were so surprised. They were horrified with such kind of inhuman action towards civil population which was killed in Khojaly. And we saw that Georgians

¹ Author's unpublished interview with Azer Suleymanov, Marneuli, March 2016.

don't hear about this genocide at all. That is why Azerbaijani students should know the Georgian language; they should know the history, and talk, spread information about this genocide to more people" (*DFWatch* 2016b).

When asked about the aims and functions of the Congress of Azerbaijanis of Georgia (GAK), Huseyn Yusubov, Chairman of the Congress, stated that:

"We, the Azerbaijanis living here, are not a diaspora... We aren't a diaspora, yet we operate as one. For us, Georgia is our homeland. Azerbaijan and Turkey are like our national, vernacular states... We try to inform Georgian society and Georgian intellectuals about Azerbaijani realities. Around one million Azerbaijanis were living in Armenia, and all of them were banished. Also, in Karabakh, hundreds of thousands of people were banished from their homes. Many children, women, and elderly people were killed in that war. We try to inform Georgian society about all of these realities."¹

A key element of the above organizations' functions, however, is also to protect the rights and cultural autonomy of Georgian Azeri-Turks as well as to take note of their problems and concerns, later giving voice to these concerns to Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities.² This is not to say, however, that Azerbaijani-sponsored organizations such as the Azerbaijani Cultural Center, the Integration Center for Azerbaijanis of Georgia, and GAK are the only organizations seeking to represent the Georgian Azeri-Turk community, but they *are* some of the best funded and most visible thanks to their connection with neighboring Azerbaijan. Representatives of other organizations serving Georgia's minority communities, including, for example, Civic Integration Foundation (CIF), Civil Development Agency (CiDA), the United Nations Association of Georgia (UNAG), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Union of Azerbaijani Women of Georgia, and Public Movement Multinational Georgia (PMMG) — all primarily funded by North American and European bodies — seek to facilitate the integration of minority groups into Georgian society. For Zaur Khalilov of CIF, for example, the aim is to turn the gaze of minority groups like Georgian Azeri-Turks inward to the *Georgian* state rather than outward to neighboring states like Armenia, Azerbaijan, or Russia for the resolution of their problems as well as to increase the state's capacity to resolve these problems.³ Other organizations, like Marneuli-based "Qeyrat" National Movement or Baku-based Borchali Society, remain much more controversial in both Tbilisi and Baku for their critical stances toward their respective governments.

Representatives of "Qeyrat" allege that their presence is often not allowed at meetings of Georgian and Azerbaijani officials due to their outspoken criticism of the Georgian government,⁴ whereas some representatives of Borchali Society, including Mr. Zelimkhan Memmedli, are banned from entering Georgia due to their allegedly separatist ideologies (cf. *Musavat* 2015; Ismailov 2015). These organizations and their representatives tend to operate in separate circles — the Western-funded organizations

¹ Author's unpublished interview with Huseyn Yusubov of GAK office, Marneuli, Sept. 2016.

² Author's unpublished interviews with Yusubov of GAK office (Marneuli, Sept. 2016) and Nargiz Aliyeva of the Marneuli Azerbaijani Cultural Center (Marneuli, Jan. 2016).

³ Author's unpublished interview with Zaur Khalilov of CIF, Tbilisi, 2016.

⁴ Author's unpublished interview with leader of "Geyrat", Alibala Askerov, Marneuli, March 2016.

in one, and the Baku-funded organizations in another. Still another circle exists for organizations like “Qeyrat” and Borchali Society, with their controversial and outspoken manners of operation. Whereas the Georgian government participates in events hosted by organizations in each of the aforementioned circles, its dealings with members of the so-called “third circle” are much more limited. In recent years, the Georgian government has shown that, not only will it deny entry to individuals such as the aforementioned Zelimkhan Memmedli for allegedly threatening the security of the Georgian state, but it will also deny entry, residency, or citizenship to critics of the Aliyev regime.

B. Extending Azerbaijan's Influence into Georgian Political Affairs

While Azerbaijani leadership frames the territorial state of Azerbaijan as the autochthonous homeland of Azerbaijanis all over the world, it does not hold all Azerbaijanis in equally high regard. In recent years, Tbilisi has become somewhat of a safe haven for dissidents and critics of the Aliyev administration. The 2017 kidnapping of Azerbaijani dissident and investigative journalist, Efghan Mukhtarli, from the Georgian capital and his subsequent reappearance in Baku has given some pause, including representatives of human rights organizations and, allegedly, some Georgian Azeri-Turks. Not only has the Azerbaijani government increasingly pressured its Georgia-based dissidents in recent years, but it has also urged its Georgian counterpart to do the same. According to the Brussels-based International Partnership for Human Rights, Azerbaijan has been increasingly applying pressure to its critics traveling to, residing in, or *seeking* to travel to/reside in Georgia since 2014 and in particular since 2016 (IPHR 2017).

There are several cases wherein the Georgian government has denied entry to Azerbaijani dissidents residing abroad and denied residence permits or citizenship to Azerbaijanis residing in Tbilisi. Furthermore, it is alleged that the Georgian secret service has been involved in surveillance of Azerbaijani dissidents in Georgia (cf. Adilgizi 2017; Aliyev 2017; IPHR 2017; Sajaia 2017). Mukhtarli and his supporters allege Georgian and Azerbaijani cooperation in the former's abduction from Tbilisi and arrest in Azerbaijan. In a 2017 interview with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), leading Georgian political analyst, Gia Nodia, stated:

“I think it's obvious there is some kind of pressure by [Azerbaijan] on the Georgian government, which says, ‘You know we give you oil and gas and you depend on us energy-wise so you should do something about [the dissidents], it is unacceptable that all of our enemies are there and conspire against Azerbaijan... And the Georgian government doesn't want to alienate the Azerbaijani government. They don't want to openly harass these people or hand them back to Azerbaijan but they don't want to make the Azerbaijani government unhappy, either” (Nodia in Baumgartner 2017).

When journalist Khayal Azizov attempted to discuss Mukhtarli's abduction with Georgian Azeri-Turks shortly following the May 2017 incident, Azizov found people too afraid to speak with him about this or any other issue. According to Azizov (2017), “When I try to find out the causes of this fear, I am often told that one ‘fine day’ they might also be covered by a sack and taken to a cell.”

In addition to the pressure that the Azerbaijani government places upon Azerbaijani dissidents in Georgia, there are grounds to suggest that the Azerbaijani government pressures Georgian Azeri-Turks to show support for Georgia's ruling party. For example, Georgian Dream (GD), and SOCAR Georgia officials allegedly held meetings with recipients of SOCAR grants prior to the Parliamentary elections of 2016. These gatherings were allegedly held to encourage participants to vote for the ruling party's candidates in the approaching elections. Furthermore, an implicit understanding exists between the grantors and grantees that the latter will be available when called upon to attend protests and commemorative dates hosted by Azerbaijani organizations in Georgia.¹ This is purportedly a way that one can demonstrate one's loyalty to both the Azerbaijani and Georgian states. Representatives of a number of other non-governmental, non-Azerbaijan-affiliated organizations specializing in the protection of minority rights in Georgia have lent credence to allegations of Azerbaijani involvement (i.e. lobbying) in Georgian elections, stating in one-on-one interviews that such involvement has been a regular occurrence in Kvemo Kartli since 1993. Until the Georgian government substantially demonstrates its commitment to and belief in the integration of Georgian Azeri-Turks into wider Georgian society, these representatives urge, Azerbaijan's influence over locals' voting patterns is unlikely to abate in the near future.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined ways that the key leaders of post-Soviet Azerbaijan and Georgia have tried to position their own territorial states as the *vətən* (i.e. "homeland") of Georgian Azeri-Turks and to what ends, focusing particularly upon the Aliyev administrations' doings in this regard. Inter-personal relationships of Azerbaijani-Georgian leaders, coupled with the economic imbalance between both countries, have been key elements setting the scene of bilateral relations since independence. Of equal importance, however, is the construction of the Azerbaijani "Diaspora" in official Azerbaijani discourse since the mid-1990s and the bearing this discourse has upon Baku's official relationship with Georgia's Azeri-Turk community. Azerbaijani projects in the spheres of infrastructure, education, and culture in Tbilisi as well as Kvemo Kartli in particular help to remind local Georgian Azeri-Turks of their ethno-national ties to the Azerbaijani nation-state and provide further incentives to uphold these ties.

Georgian initiatives aiming to integrate Georgian Azeri-Turks into wider Georgian society have largely been diffident and limited in success in comparison with the endeavors of Heydar and İlham Aliyev to promote ties between Georgian Azeri-Turks and the Azerbaijani territorial state. The efforts on the part of the latter have mostly taken the shape of state-funded infrastructural development projects and official Azerbaijani sponsorship of socio-cultural and educational courses and events, political happenings, and charitable works. These infrastructural development projects include the (re)construction of schools and educational centers, cultural centers, sports facilities, gas and water lines, electricity grids and large-scale oil and gas pipelines, as well as the

¹ Author's personal correspondence, 2016.

resultant employment opportunities for locals. Charitable works include the provision of textbooks, technological and other materials to the aforementioned schools and centers, financial support of Georgian Azeri-Turk students attending Georgian institutions of higher education, and even the occasional payment of locals' medical treatment costs. Events promoting Azerbaijani historical figures, literature, and art forms are held alongside days celebrating the life of Heydar Aliyev and/or commemorations of tragedies having befallen the Azerbaijani people at the hands of Soviet or Armenian forces. These events support official conceptions of Azerbaijani (nation-) statehood and their dissemination among Georgian Azeri-Turks, in Tbilisi and the region of Kvemo Kartli in particular. By examining statements and speeches by both Aliyev Sr. and Jr., joint Azerbaijani-Georgian political-economic activities, interviews with state- and non-state actors, and the content of Azerbaijan-sponsored opportunities and events, I have identified the following narratives as being regularly promoted by Azerbaijan in Georgian Azeri-Turk locales since 1993: 1.) the preservation of the socio-cultural attributes considered to be unique to members of the Azerbaijani nation (i.e. language and spirituality as well as traditional mores, values, and customs), 2.) the acknowledgement and/or acceptance of Azerbaijani victimhood (particularly with regard to Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict), and 3.) the dissemination of the Heydar Aliyev cult of personality. Azerbaijan's official emphasis upon growing the Azerbaijani "Diaspora" carries with it the implication that Georgian Azeri-Turks can best serve the historical Azerbaijani *vətən* by remaining in Georgia and improving their positions there (rather than by migrating permanently to Azerbaijan).

Official Azerbaijani interaction with Georgian Azeri-Turks has further problematized the issue of minority integration into Georgian society, as Azerbaijani organizations operating in Georgia have tended to focus upon the preservation of official narratives of *Azerbaijani* culture, identity, and (nation-)state building among Georgian Azeri-Turks. This results in a situation wherein Georgia's Azeri-Turks are effectively caught between the nation-building endeavors and narratives of two states — Georgia and Azerbaijan. Furthermore, according to CIF's Khalilov,

“Georgian society must take steps with regard to ethnic minorities, meaning that they must not push them away. And these minorities must also be ready to strive to be full-fledged citizens. So, it is necessary to change these peoples' thinking...that ‘You are a citizen.’ Georgian citizenship isn't just about having a Georgian passport or serving in the Army. Your political and civic self-awareness must be oriented toward the well-being of your state. And, in terms of Azerbaijan, it is a neighboring state. We need to come to terms with this”.¹

The durability of ethno-cultural conceptions of national identity in Georgia, coupled with continuing insecurities over further potential losses of Georgian territories, have created a situation wherein the Georgian state has allowed its Azerbaijani counterpart to take responsibility for its own citizens, “Georgian” by virtue of citizenship, but “Azerbaijani” by virtue of widely accepted narratives of ethno-nationality. The economic situation has indeed affected this situation, but the continued isolation of

¹ Author's unpublished interview with Zaur Khalilov of Civic Integration Foundation, Tbilisi, Sept. 2016.

Georgian Azeri-Turks from wider Georgian society is not to be blamed solely upon Georgian economic woes.

Saakashvili's domestic policies vis-a-vis minority groups in the realm of education (the "1+4" Program¹ in particular) and infrastructure were important steps toward correcting this imbalance and bringing Georgian Azeri-Turks closer to the Georgian state, but these efforts have not been substantial enough in their breadth and depth to completely dislodge Azerbaijan's influence in Georgian Azeri-Turk communities. The Georgian state, for its part, continues to vacillate between rhetoric of civic, inclusive nationalism and rhetoric that reinforces traditional, exclusivist conceptions of Georgian ethno-nationality with its linguistic and religious underpinnings. Such vacillating rhetoric, common during the Saakashvili period (2003-2013), has continued thus far under Georgian Dream leadership (cf. Bergund 2017; Devdariani 2004; Jones 2013; Storm 2017, 2019, 2019b).² At the official level, Georgia's Azeri-Turk population is effectively caught between the rhetoric of two "*vətən*" (homelands), one autochthonous, or "organic" (i.e. Azerbaijan), the other allochthonous, or "inorganic" (i.e. Georgia). In the words of Zaur Khalilov,

"There are very few integrated individuals [among Georgian Azeris]. There are people who try to strive for balance somehow. They support this balance so as not to act in a way that is offensive to either Azerbaijan or Georgia. But such a thing doesn't work. There are very few people who identify as citizens of Georgia, although the same can be said about Azerbaijan... They are, therefore, in a kind of 'in-between' situation".³

Future research is needed at the grassroots level to ascertain the ways in which local Georgian Azeri-Turks perceive and respond to Azerbaijani and Georgian efforts at homeland-framing. This will help to provide a more complete picture of Georgian Azeri-Turks' state- and national-affiliations as well as shed light upon the possibilities that such affiliations imply.

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¹ This program, which went into effect in 2010, was designed to simplify university entrance exam procedures for members of socio-cultural, linguistic minority groups, such as Georgian Armenians and Azeri-Turks. Students wishing to attend Georgian institutions of higher education take a simplified exam in their native language, and, upon the attainment of sufficient scores, spend one year intensively studying the Georgian language. After passing their language courses, students are then able to go on to the Georgian university and program of their choice (i.e. the remaining four years of the '1+4' formula). It remains unknown whether or not this program will continue beyond the 2019-2020 academic year.

² This claim is also supported by the author's unpublished interviews with representatives of the following NGOs: Khalilov of CIF, Arnold Stepanyan of Public Movement Multinational Georgia (PMMG), and Aptsiauri of UNAG, Tbilisi, Sept. 2016.

³ Author's unpublished interview CIF's Khalilov, Tbilisi, Sept. 2016.

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