

Azerbaijani Intellectuals Express Concern over Native Language

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In recent months, intellectuals from the Baltic republics to Uzbekistan have been lobbying to win official recognition of their native language as the state language of their republic. The experience of Azerbaijan, however, where the native language has been designated as the state language by the republican constitution for decades, suggests that merely upgrading the official status of the language of any given republic is unlikely in itself to result in any substantial improvement. The situation is complicated, as the director of the Azerbaijan SSR Academy of Sciences Nizami Institute of Literature, Ya. V. Karaev, pointed out in a recent interview, by the fact that there exists no precise legal definition of the status, functions, or sphere of use of either the national languages or Russian. ¹

The question of neglect of the Azerbaijani language was one of the issues raised by participants in the mass demonstrations that took place in Baku in November and December of last year in a televised appeal for calm and restraint broadcast at the time, Bakhtiyar Vahabzade, one of Azerbaijan's most prominent poets, who has spoken and written extensively on the issue of the native language, conceded that, although Azerbaijani theoretically enjoys the status of the republic's state language, in practice it has not been used for conducting official business for fifty years. He disclosed that a commission had been set up, of which he is the head, to upgrade the status of the Azerbaijani language, and that a draft law is being prepared to this effect. Vahabzade further intimated that measures would be taken against ministers and heads of organizations "who cannot speak their native language."²

A more detailed evaluation of the impact of the use of Russian was given in an earlier article by the critic Aydyn Mamedov, who cited restrictions on the use of the Azerbaijani language in government offices and the fact that all scientific and technological literature and university dissertations are written in Russian. (At a conference last year on scientific terminology in Azerbaijan, for example, it was acknowledged that, despite the existence of more than 200 terminological dictionaries, native Azerbaijani terms are generally ignored, and Russian loan words are systematically introduced to designate scientific and technical terms) ³. All these factors, Mamedov argued predispose parents to send their children to Russian rather than Azerbaijani schools. Russian schools, Mamedov added, are better equipped with technology and laboratories. Mamedov also disclosed a further trend-viz., that in raions where Party secretaries choose to send their children to Russian schools, pressure is exerted on other parents to follow suit. Making clear his disapproval of such practices, Mamedov quoted an earlier statement by Vahabzade to the effect that "a man who does not know his native language should not be provided with a job." ⁴

Another aspect of the inequality that exists between Russian and Azerbaijani schools is the discrepancy between salaries paid to teachers of Russian, which were raised by 15 percent in 1984. ⁵ and those paid to teachers of the Azerbaijani language, which in some cases are as low as 30 rubles a month ⁶-less than half the officially designated minimum wage of 70 rubles a month.⁷ The abysmal salaries paid to teachers of Azerbaijani is presumably one reason why there could be as many as 14,000 unemployed teachers in Azerbaijan. ⁸ It would help to explain why the standard of teaching of the Azerbaijani language leaves much to be desired.

Vahabzade has also suggested some of the reasons why Azerbaijani school graduates have an inadequate knowledge of both Russian and their native language. In an article solidly endorsing the policy of bilingualism, Vahabzade takes issue with the methodology of teaching both languages. He proposes, first, that language teaching should in the initial stages be based on conversation rather than grammar. In addition, he argues that the teaching of Russian should be introduced only from the third grade (as is the case in Lithuanian schools)-by which time children should have an adequate basic knowledge of their native language-rather than from the first grade, as is present practice in Azerbaijan. The dry style of the language textbooks currently in use only serves further to alienate pupils. Vahabzade goes on to make the point that the number of hours devoted to Russian-Language instruction in Azerbaijani schools is far higher than that allocated to Azerbaijani in Russian language schools. ⁹ To just what extent such changes in teaching methods would help to counter what is clearly a widespread problem remains, however, an open question.

There are isolated indications that public disapproval of permanent residents of Azerbaijan unable to speak Azerbaijani is beginning to have some effect. One school director revealed that non-Azerbaijanis are beginning to attend private courses in Azerbaijani, ¹⁰ and the Azerbaijan SSR Russian-Language party and government newspaper *Bakirsky Rabochii* has launched a series of basic lessons in conversational Azerbaijani. ¹¹ In the long term, however, preserving and enhancing the status of the Azerbaijani language within Azerbaijan will require a carefully thought-out policy, something that at present is apparently lacking. At a general meeting of the Azerbaijan SSR Academy of Sciences in December, 1988, Azerbaijan Party First Secretary Abdul-Rakhman Vezirov reproached heads of scientific institutions “who on the pages of the press and on radio and television can for the development and perfection of the Azerbaijani language but fall to make the slightest effort in this direction. ¹²

Footnotes:

1 *Bakinsky Rabochii*. January 21, 1989.

2 *Kommunist* (Baku), November 25, 1988.

3 *Bakitnsky Rabochii*. December 9, 1988. .

4 *Azerbayan Genclerit*. October 18, 1988.

5 *Azerbayan Mektebi*. No. 11, 1984.

6 *Azerbagan Gencleri*. December 24, 1988.

7 see Aaron Trehub, RI. 256/88. .Poverty in the Soviet Union,. June 20, 1988, and *The New York Times*. January 29, 1989.

8 *Azerbayan Mektebi*. No. 11, 1984.

9 *Kommunist* (Baku). November 5, 1988: *Bakitnsky Rabochii* / November 10.

10 *Kommunist* (Baku), January 24, 1989.

11 *Bakitnsky Rabochii*. February 4, 1989.

12 *Bakitnsky Rabochii*. December 20, 1988.