

MAINTAINING POWER THROUGH AGGRESSION: THE AZERBAIJANI EXAMPLE

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Abstract

The takeover of power by Ilham Aliyev over 20 years ago contains all the elements of a non-democratic system. The power thus assumed is perpetuated by so-called elections, which were and are neither free nor fair. The regime arbitrarily disregards the law and citizens are exposed to state attacks without protection. Critical voices from civil society, freedom of the press and freedom of opinion are systematically suppressed on an ongoing basis. The system is not afraid to persecute critical citizens abroad, too. Criticism by foreign powers has been and continues to be mitigated/suppressed by offering lucrative business opportunities and corrupting foreign, predominantly Western politicians.

An essential feature of this system without checks and balances is the plundering and distribution of the people's wealth among a few groups close to the rulers, while at the same time disadvantaging the majority of the population. This system of self-enrichment of those in power can also be observed in the so-called „liberated regions“. Here, too, critical discourse is undesirable. Critics are arrested and imprisoned on trivial pretexts, sometimes even kidnapped from abroad. Some become victims of assassination attempts. This system is not interested in democratic reforms, as they would massively curtail the power of those in power and put a stop to their self-enrichment. Instead of implementing reforms, the system is constantly fuelling a very aggressive nationalism, hatred of its neighbor Armenia and thus distracting from the obvious demands of civil society. The constant territorial demands (West Azerbaijan, Zangezur Corridor, etc.) directed at Armenia have proven to be particularly effective in keeping its own population at bay and avoiding a regime change.

It is a widespread phenomenon that autocrats do not renounce their rule and the economic and other advantages associated with it. In the case of Azerbaijan, this forms an important pillar in the continued aggression against Armenia.

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Received 15.03.2025

Revised 02.05.2025

Accepted 10.05.2025

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Keywords: *Aliyev clan; domestic policy in Azerbaijan; self-enrichment of those in power; suppression of critics; holding on to power as the primary goal; foreign policy successes as a means of stabilizing the regime.*

The Aliyev system

Ilham Aliyev inherited the rule of Azerbaijan from his father Heydar Aliyev in 2003. None of the parliamentary and presidential elections held since then have been either free or fair. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights has noted this in its reports.¹

One of the direct consequences is that the legislature, i.e. the parliament, is unable to exercise the control of the executive that is important for a democratic system. In other words, there are no limits to Ilham Aliyev's arbitrary rule.

The business model of the Aliyev clan

A telegram from the US embassy in Baku dated January 27, 2010, and published by Wikileaks states, among other things:

"In this opening issue, we profile the family of First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva (born Mehriban Pashayeva), and her uncle, former Azerbaijani Ambassador to the United States and current Deputy Foreign Minister Hafiz Pashayev. Mehriban Aliyeva, besides being the wife of the President, is a Member of Parliament and head of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, a non-transparent organization that bills itself as a vehicle for charitable works. Other members of the Pashayev family hold powerful positions in government and academia, and are associated with powerful business groups outside the energy sector. The Pashayevs are known to operate extensively in Baku's rapidly expanding construction/real estate market, and are well invested in the financial and telecommunications sectors."

"2. (C) Observers in Baku often note that today's Azerbaijan is run in a manner similar to the feudalism found in Europe during the Middle Ages: a handful of well-connected families control certain geographic areas, as well as certain sectors of the economy. By and large, this seems to be the case, with general agreement among leading families to divide the spoils and not disturb one another's areas of business or geographic control. The families also collude, using government mechanisms, to keep out foreign competitors, and entities such as the State Border Services, State Customs and tax authorities create barriers that only the best connected can clear. As a result, an economy already burgeoning with oil and gas revenues produces enormous opportunity and wealth for a small handful of players that form Azerbaijan's elite."

This system continued after 2010. However, the Aliyev family's grip on the state was significantly strengthened. President Ilham Aliyev's wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, was appointed Vice President of Azerbaijan by her husband by decree in

¹ Elections in Azerbaijan, OSCE, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/>

February 2017. The office did not exist until then and was introduced in a constitutional referendum in 2016.² There is speculation that Heydar Aliyev Jr, son of Ilham Aliyev, will be installed as the new President of Azerbaijan in the future. He took part in a cabinet meeting at the end of September 2024 at which economic issues were discussed.³

Investigative journalists, such as The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, play an important role in documenting the economic machinations of the Aliyev clan. Some of their comprehensive investigations include: “Offshore companies provide link between corporate mogul and Azerbaijan’s president” in 2013⁴, and “How the Family that Runs Azerbaijan Built an Empire of Hidden Wealth” in 2016.⁵ The articles in <https://www.occrp.org/en/azerbaijanilaundromat/> of OCCRP are also revealing, showing how political influence was and is bought in Western parliaments.

This model also continues seamlessly in the so-called “liberated territories”. The master plan for the reconstruction of Shushi was drawn up by the British company Chapman Taylor. No tender has been published anywhere. Among the major Azerbaijani players willing to work with British companies is Pasha Construction, which is part of a holding company linked to Azerbaijan’s ruling family (Ilham Aliyev’s wife is a descendant of the Pashayevs).

Nine of the so-called agroparks in the “liberated areas” are owned by the Aliyev family. The owners of a further 38 agroparks are in direct contact with the ruling family.⁶ Azerbaijani economist Gubad Ibadoglu commented on the so-called “smart villages” in which the returnees in Karabakh are to live: “Corrupt officials and businessmen will take control of the money allocated to them.”⁷ The fact that Aliyev considers the land to be his “private property” can be seen in the following

² Aserbajdschan: “Aliyev ernennt seine Ehefrau zur Vizepräsidentin,” *Der Standard*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.derstandard.at/content/tcf/story/2000052943445/aliyev-ernennt-seine-ehefrau-zur-vizepraesidentin>

³ Farhadova, Aytan. “Ilham Aliyev’s Son Attends Cabinet Meeting, Sparking Succession Rumours,” *OC Media*, September 26, 2024, <https://oc-media.org/ilham-aliyevs-son-attends-cabinet-meeting-sparking-succession-rumours/>

⁴ Candea, Stefan and Khadija Ismayilova. “Offshore Companies Provide Link Between Corporate Mogul and Azerbaijan’s President,” *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, April 3, 2013, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/offshore/offshore-companies-provide-link-between-corporate-mogul-and-azerbaijans-president/>

⁵ Fitzgibbon, Will, Miranda Patrucic, and Marcos García Rey. “How the Family That Runs Azerbaijan Built an Empire of Hidden Wealth,” *OCCRP*, April 4, 2016, <https://www.occrp.org/en/panamapapers/azerbaijani-first-family-s-hidden-wealth/>

⁶ Isayev, Heydar. “Farmland in Karabakh Being Given to Powerful Azerbaijanis – Report,” *Eurasianet*, June 28, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/farmland-in-karabakh-being-given-to-powerful-azerbaijanis-report>

⁷ Isayev, Heydar. “Azerbaijan Prepares for Karabakh Resettlement in ‘Smart Villages,’” *Eurasianet*, October 20, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-prepares-for-karabakh-resettlement-in-smart-villages>

example: He instructed deminers to clear only THOSE parts of the country of mines that were in his interests.⁸

Another example is the private company that Ilham Aliyev founded with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.⁹

Criticism from the opposition

People and institutions that deal with the machinations of Ilham Aliyev and the clans and the corruption of the system are particularly dangerous for the regime.

For example, investigative journalist Afgan Mukhtarli was abducted from Tbilisi on May 29, 2017, under unexplained circumstances and sentenced to six years in prison in Baku. He had been researching Ilham Aliyev's financial machinations in Georgia in Tbilisi.¹⁰

This also includes Gubad Ibadoglu, a political activist, academic, critic of the oil and gas industry and prominent human rights and environmental activist, who has been a research fellow at the London School of Economics since 2021.

Two of his scientific articles should be mentioned: Ibadoghlu, Gubad (June 21, 2021). "Corruption Risks in the State Budget of Azerbaijan and Their Management"¹¹, "The economics of petro-authoritarianism: Post-soviet transitions and democratization".¹²

Gubad Ibadoglu was arrested on 23 July 2023 and charged under Article 204.3.1 of the Criminal Code (if an organized group has committed the manufacture, acquisition or sale of counterfeit currency or securities).

The media portals Kanal 13 and AbzasMedia, which report critically on the systemic corruption in Azerbaijan, are also dangerous for the system and their employees were successively arrested from fall 2023 and confronted with absurd accusations. Among other things, AbzasMedia is said to be part of a US spy ring.¹³

Former Azerbaijani diplomat Emin Şaiq İbrahimov makes a connection between the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and the Aliyev clan's hold on power. In a Twitter post, he writes: "These stories must not end in order to preserve the land as

⁸ Rubin, Michael. Did Azerbaijan target Christians for its dictator's personal profit? *Washington Examiner*, November 29, 2023, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/2433934/did-azerbaijan-target-christians-for-its-dictators-personal-profit/>

⁹ Natiqzizi, Ulkar. "'Brotherly' Azerbaijan and Turkey Build Lucrative Karabakh Business Ties," *Eurasianet*, October 24, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/brotherly-azerbaijan-and-turkey-build-lucrative-karabakh-business-ties>

¹⁰ European Court of Human Rights, *Mukhtarli v. Azerbaijan and Georgia*, [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-184176%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-184176%22]})

¹¹ Ibadoghlu, Gubad. *Corruption Risks in the State Budget of Azerbaijan and Their Management*, June 21, 2021, SSRN, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3871136

¹² Ibadoghlu, Gubad and Rashad Sadigov. "The Economics of Petro-Authoritarianism: Post-Soviet Transitions and Democratization," *Resources Policy* 85 (August 2023), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0301420723004634>

¹³ Abzas Media, <https://oc-media.org/tag/abzasmedia/>; Arrests at AbzasMedia: Allegations and Responses, *Meydan TV*, November 22, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgVMfR1J_pA.

a family object and to plunge the people into misery as eternally disenfranchised subjects. They are busy robbing the people. Only the parasites, the servants of the dictatorship who fill their bellies, can support this senseless policy. But it is in vain.”¹⁴

Other members of Azerbaijani civil society are campaigning for peace with Armenia. For example, Feminist Peace Collective has raised its voice in “Solidarity with Karabakh/Artsakh against total war, blockade and hegemony”.¹⁵

On August 21, 2024, Bahruz Samadov was arrested in Baku. He is a PhD student at Charles University in Prague, where he researches political debates in Azerbaijan and authoritarianism, has written frequently for OC Media and other publications and is a regular guest on the Caucasus Digest podcast. Samadov is also an outspoken supporter of peace with Armenia. He is accused of “high treason”.

Opponents of the war are generally referred to as “NoWar”çılar. They are regularly shown on the popular, state-controlled YouTube channel with the hashtag #xainleritani (know the traitors).¹⁶ The creators are certain: they are working for the enemy Armenia and are controlled from a central office, hence the Armenian tricolor in the collage for the imaginary “network of traitors”.

A platform called the Expert Center for Journalists has published an „educational article“ titled “The ‘Liberalism’ of ‘Azerbaijani’ ‘NoWar’ Supporters to Support Terrorists - the Video of Treason”.¹⁷

Azerbaijani human rights and democracy activist Mahammad Mirzali was attacked and stabbed 16 times with a knife in Nantes, France, on March 16, 2021. According to Mirzali, many other Azerbaijani activists have been attacked in this way by the Aliyev regime. He said this in an interview with civilnet.am.¹⁸ He was then the subject of threats. He spoke about this in another interview with civilnet.am.¹⁹

¹⁴ Emin Ibrahimov X post, December 24, 2022,

<https://x.com/eminibrahimov81/status/1606723909667196928>.

¹⁵ “In Solidarity with Karabakh/Artsakh against Total War, Blockade and Hegemony,” *Feminist Peace Collective*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.feministpeacecollective.com/en/post/in-solidarity-with-karabakh-artsakh-against-total-war-blockade-and-hegemony>

¹⁶ “Müharibəyə yox” şüarı altında fəaliyyət göstərən xəyanətkar şəbəkə [Traitorous Network Operating Under the Slogan “No to War”], YouTube video, August 15, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oh-Ogn8VtY>

¹⁷ “Azərbaycanlı ‘NoWar’çıların terrorçuları dəstəkləmək ‘liberalizmi’,” *MediaEkspert.az*, August 25, 2023, <https://mediaekspert.az/az/yazilar/azerbaycanli-nowarcilarin-terrorculari-desteklemek-liberalizmi>

¹⁸ “Is Aliyev’s Popularity Surging in Azerbaijan? A Talk with Activist Mahammad Mirzali,” *CivilNet*, May 31, 2021, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/609891/is-aliyevs-popularity-surging-in-azerbaijan-a-talk-with-activist-mahammad-mirzali/>

¹⁹ “Azerbaijani Activist Recounts Story of Attacks after CivilNet Interview,” *CivilNet*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/626224/azerbaijani-activist-recounts-story-of-attacks-after-civilnet-interview/>, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/626224/azerbaijani-activist-recounts-story-of-attacks-after-civilnet-interview/>

In the comprehensive report “We Try to Stay Invisible” Human Rights Watch documents Azerbaijan's increasingly harsh repression of critics and civil society.²⁰

The inertia of the system or foreign policy successes as a distraction from the demands of civil society

The Aliyev system is not interested in democratizing the country for two main reasons.

- a) In the event of democratization, it would lose all or part of its power.
- b) As a direct consequence, it would have to give up its economic monopoly.

The system seems to have chosen the aggression against Armenia and the “successes” achieved as a means of distracting itself from the demands of civil society. Moreover, the system hopes to consolidate its position in this way.

Building blocks of this policy

1. Systematic Armenophobia

Azerbaijan's humiliating defeat in the first war over Nagorno-Karabakh in the 1990s fuelled the hatred of Armenians that had existed before, without which the pogroms in Sumgait and Baku would have been inconceivable. The Khojaly massacre, which was essentially blamed on the Armenians and has not been fully investigated, has led to a potentiation of state-directed and promoted Armenophobia.

There are many channels through which Armenophobia has been and continues to be practiced. The dossier „Armenophobia in Azerbaijan“ summarizes its main manifestations.²¹

A key component is the integration of Armenophobia into the education system, including school textbooks.²²

The incitement of small children to burn the Armenian flag is a particularly vivid example of the “successes” of Armenophobia.²³

The beheading of Lieutenant Gurgen Margarian by the Azerbaijani officer Ramil Safarov during a NATO training course in Budapest in 2004 is another vivid example of what systematic Armenophobia can lead to.²⁴

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, “*We Try to Stay Invisible*”: Azerbaijan's Escalating Crackdown on Critics and Civil Society (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 2024),

²¹ <https://stophatespeech.net/en/content.html>.

²² Armenophobia in the Textbooks Used in Azerbaijan, <https://azerichild.education/en/>.

²³ https://www.reddit.com/r/armenia/comments/n15a9r/how_are_a_group_of_azeris_are_throwing_a_party/?rdt=52467

²⁴ European Court of Human Rights, Makuchyan and Minasyan v. Azerbaijan and Hungary, [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:\[%22001-202524%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-202524%22]}), Deutsch-Armenische Gesellschaft, „Überstellung und Begnadigung des verurteilten Mörders Safarov durch Alijew: Internationale Reaktionen“, 5. September 2012, <https://www.deutscharmenischegesellschaft.de/2012/09/05/uberstellung-und-begnadigung-der-verurteilten-morders-safarov-durch-alijew-internationale-reaktionen/>

In the “Park of Trophies” - erected in Baku after the 44-day war in 2020 - hatred of Armenia and Armenians was also fostered for quite some time through the racist depiction of Armenian soldiers. It was only after strong protests from the West that these elements were removed from the “Park of Trophies”.

2. Stages of the extended demands on Armenia

As long as the settlement of the Karabakh conflict was being sought under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group, it could be assumed that the Baku regime was ultimately concerned with controlling the seven regions under Armenian control. The status of Nagorno-Karabakh was still open at the time. However, it was already clear at the time that Baku did not agree with the Minsk format.

In the fall of 2019, an exhibition in Baku drew attention to the Yerevan Khanate. This khanate has become one of Azerbaijan’s main weapons in the historic wars with Armenia, in which the two countries lay claim to the ‘true’ ownership of territories in the Caucasus. Azerbaijani government rhetoric uses the history of the khanate - which was ruled by Turkic-speaking khans under Persian suzerainty - to delegitimize Armenia’s claim to its own territory and defend against analogous Armenian claims to its territory.

The Yerevan Khanate has received and continues to receive a disproportionate amount of attention in Azerbaijan, according to Cavid Aga, an Azerbaijani social media activist and history enthusiast. “You see conferences and symposiums about this [Yerevan Khanate], but you don’t see much about other medieval small states that played a more important role at the time. I don’t find much about other khanates, other medieval small states, not even the Khanate of Baku,” Aga told Eurasianet. “They are really pushing this.”

President Aliyev caused a stir back in 2018 when he referred to Yerevan and other territories in what is now Armenia as “historical Azerbaijani lands” and said Azerbaijanis should “return” there. Following this call, Azerbaijani government officials began promoting on their Twitter accounts a high-production quality video produced by the Ministry of Youth and Sports defending Yerevan’s Azerbaijani origins. “The city ... is clearly one of the cultural centers of Azerbaijan,” says the spokesperson.²⁵

After Azerbaijan’s victory in the 44-day war in the fall of 2020, other demands were ventilated.

On September 19, 2022, just days after Azerbaijan launched an attack on Armenia, reviving fears of a major invasion, a threatening campaign was launched in Azerbaijan’s pro-government media.

Several news websites published an announcement about the establishment of a “Goycha-Zangazur Republic” (GZR) on the territory that is now part of Armenia.

²⁵ Clayton, Austin. “Azerbaijan Mounts Exhibition Showcasing Erivan Khanate,” *Eurasianet*, October 17, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-mounts-exhibition-showcasing-erivan-khanate>

Its borders would correspond to those of today's Armenian provinces of Sevan and Syunik (called Goycha and Zangezur in Azerbaijani, respectively).²⁶

However, GZR soon disappeared from the headlines, but the term "West Azerbaijan" became established in Azerbaijani journalism. President Aliyev pushed this term more and more.²⁷

As early as 2020, an Azerbaijani academic in Turkey, Gafar Khahmagli, founded the so-called Republic of West Azerbaijan (Irevan), which would have had an even greater territorial reach than GZR. This project (which was also called the Turkish Republic of Irevan) was linked to another group with obvious government connections, the West Azerbaijan Community (WAC), but did not receive the (brief) state support that GZR did.

Foreign policy successes as a means of stabilizing the regime

Just how dangerous a lack of success by the Azerbaijani military can be for the Aliyev regime was demonstrated in July 2020. The fighting that broke out on July 12 was the deadliest since the "April War" of 2016. It took place on the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where there had been occasional exchanges of fire in recent years, but not since the 1990s had there been such heavy fighting.²⁸

At least 11 Azerbaijani soldiers, including Major General Polad Hashimov, were killed in three days of fighting on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. Unprecedented protests broke out in Baku. Some of the protesters broke into the parliament and caused damage, and the police used tear gas and batons to disperse the demonstrators, who fought back and overturned police cars. Other protesters tried to convince the police to join them.²⁹

Azerbaijan's victory in the 44-day war in 2020 and the expulsion of the Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 had a stabilizing effect on the regime in Baku. Ilham Aliyev's good performance in the presidential elections on February 7, 2024, was often attributed to his "success" in gaining complete control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Even the handover of the four villages in the Tavush region to Azerbaijan in 2024 boosted Aliyev's rating among the majority of the population. In this heated nationalist mood, the continued enrichment of the

²⁶ "The Rise and Fall of Azerbaijan's 'Goycha-Zangazur Republic,'" *Eurasianet*, September 22, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/the-rise-and-fall-of-azerbaijans-goycha-zangazur-republic>; Die "Republik Göyçe-Zengezur," *Armenisch-Deutsche Korrespondenz* (ADK) 197, Jg. 2022/Heft 4, <https://www.deutscharmenischegesellschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/ADK197-Die-%E2%80%9ERepublik-Göyçe-Zengezur.pdf>

²⁷ "Ilham Aliyev Viewed Conditions Created at Administrative Building of Western Azerbaijan Community," *President of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, December 24, 2022, <https://president.az/en/articles/view/58330>

²⁸ Kucera, Joshua, "Fighting Between Armenia and Azerbaijan Widens," *Eurasianet*, July 14, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/fighting-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan-widens>,

²⁹ "Pro-War Azerbaijani Protesters Break into Parliament," *EurasiaNet*, July 15, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/pro-war-azerbaijani-protesters-break-into-parliament>

Aliyev clan only played a role for a small minority of people in the country. However, this minority was kept in check by radical police-state measures.

Conclusion: A look into the future

From Baku's point of view, there is enough "conflict material" that can be used to maintain power and distract attention from the continued enrichment of those in power. These include the enclaves within the Republic of Armenia, the problems of limitation and demarcation, the territories of the Republic of Armenia occupied by Azerbaijan since May 2021, Syunik transit road (the so-called "Zangezur Corridor"), Azerbaijan's ultimate demand for a new constitution for the Republic of Armenia. Not to forget "Western Azerbaijan" and Yerevan as an "Azerbaijani" city. It is to be feared that the Aliyev system will try to force concessions from Armenia for its continued existence with these and possibly other conflicts. Consequently, it seems unlikely that a peace treaty worthy of the name can be concluded in the foreseeable future.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.