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MANUFACTURING THE ENEMY: ARMENOPHOBIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POST-SOVIET AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract

This article examines the role of Armenophobia in the construction of national identity in Azerbaijan. It argues that the Azerbaijani national identity has been shaped not through affirmative civic or ethnic principles, but rather through a sustained campaign of "negative nationalism" — a nation-building project defined predominantly by hostility toward the Armenians. Drawing on political discourse analysis, state policy review, and examples from elite rhetoric, the study illustrates how Armenophobia functions as a tool of authoritarian consolidation, ideological substitution, and historical revisionism. The Azerbaijani regime has cultivated an image of Armenians as existential enemies to justify both domestic repression and external aggression, presenting itself as the sole protector of the Azerbaijani nation. The article situates this phenomenon within broader theoretical discussions of ontological insecurity, post-imperial identity crises, and authoritarian statecraft in the post-Soviet space. By framing Armenophobia as a strategic instrument for regime legitimacy and societal mobilization, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the politics of memory, nationalism by negation, and conflict-driven identity formation in transitional political systems.

Keywords: *Turkism, Azerbaijanism, Azerbaijani Citizenship, Armenophobia, national identity.*

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Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 placed Azerbaijan at a critical juncture of state- and nation-building. Independence demanded the forging of new political institutions, but equally urgent was the creation of a coherent national identity capable of uniting a diverse society under a single political framework. From the outset, the search for identity in Azerbaijan was shaped not only by internal debates between civic Azerbaijanism and ethnically oriented Turkism, but also by the existential confrontation with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. The combination of territorial conflict, fragile institutions, and competing ideological legacies created fertile ground for the emergence of a particular form of nationalism that was less defined by positive values than by hostility toward an external enemy.

This article argues that Armenophobia has been central to the consolidation of Azerbaijani national identity in the post-Soviet era. Rather than developing around inclusive civic principles or a clear ethnic project, Azerbaijani nationalism has relied on what may be termed negative nationalism: a framework of belonging constructed through systematic opposition to the Armenians. By portraying Armenians as existential enemies, Azerbaijani elites have mobilized society, suppressed dissent, and legitimized authoritarian governance. This strategy, far from being a temporary wartime expedient, has become institutionalized across education, media, and cultural production, embedding enmity at the level of everyday consciousness.

The trajectory of Azerbaijani nationalism cannot be understood without examining the interplay between Turkism, Azerbaijanism, and Azerbaijani citizenship identities. Ayaz Mutallibov's vision was less centered on cultivating a distinct Azerbaijani identity and more aligned with the Soviet framework, which emphasized the label "Turk" for Azerbaijanis while simultaneously suppressing broader Turkish cultural affiliations. Abulfaz Elchibey's short-lived reliance on Turkism in the early 1990s highlighted the appeal of pan-Turkic solidarity but failed to address the country's internal diversity. Heydar Aliyev's subsequent promotion of Azerbaijanism as state ideology introduced a civic vocabulary of tolerance and multiculturalism, yet in practice, it was interwoven with an exclusionary logic directed at Armenians. Under Ilham Aliyev, this synthesis hardened into a durable state project: a nationalism that speaks the language of Azerbaijani citizenship while cultivating Armenophobia domestically as a unifying and mobilizing force.

By situating Azerbaijan's trajectory within theoretical debates on nationalism by negation, ontological insecurity, and authoritarian statecraft, the article contributes to the comparative study of identity formation in transitional systems. It suggests that Armenophobia in Azerbaijan is not merely a cultural byproduct of con-

flict but a deliberate political instrument, one that sustains authoritarian rule, legitimizes external aggression, and forecloses opportunities for reconciliation.

Pre-Soviet and Soviet Background of Azerbaijani Identity Formation

Until the proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918, the population now known as Azerbaijanis was commonly referred to in Russian imperial sources as Tatars or Caucasian Tatars.[1] A distinct conception of an "Azerbaijani nation" in the modern sense was absent. Azerbaijan first emerged as a political entity in 1918 with the proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918–1920). However, this short-lived state failed to secure formal recognition from the League of Nations[2] The duality between Turkic nationalism and Islamic universalism was reflected in the famous dictum of Muhammad Amin Rasulzade, founder of the First Republic of Azerbaijan: "Turkify, Islamize, Europeanize."[3] This slogan epitomized the dialectical character of early Azerbaijani national consciousness: a modernist enterprise seeking reform and progress, yet ideologically moored in the transnational imaginaries of Turkism and Islam. Hence, the nationalism that developed in the pre-Soviet context was not an autonomous state-centered phenomenon, but a composite formation situated at the intersection of Pan-Turkist and Pan-Islamist discourses.[4]

With the Soviet takeover, these early nationalist currents were abruptly curtailed. In the early decades of Soviet rule, Azerbaijani identity virtually disappeared as an official category. Most people continued to identify themselves primarily as Muslims, while family, clan, and tribal ties remained crucial.[5] The absence of a clearly defined Azerbaijani identity was evident even at the institutional level. Between 1922 and 1956, the official language of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was still designated as Turkish.[6]

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[1] Harun Yilmaz, *National Identities in Soviet Historiography: The Rise of Nations Under Stalin* (Routledge, 2015), 17.
[2] Anzhela Mnatsakanyan, "The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan has nothing in common with Nagorno-Karabakh," *Greek city times*, November 20, 2020, https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/11/26/azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-common.
[3] Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, (MIT Press, 2002), 38.
[4] Hrair Dekmejian and Hovann Simonian, *Troubled Waters: The Geopolitics of the Caspian Region* (I.B.Tauris, 2001) 63.
[5] Emil Souleimanov, *Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict: Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia Wars Reconsidered* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 140.
[6] Altay Goyushov, "The Language of Azerbaijan: Turkish or Azerbaijani?" Baku Research Institute, September 26, 2018, https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/azerbaijani-turk-dili-yoxsa-az%C9%99rbaycan-dili/.

During the 1930s, however, Moscow sought to delimit Azerbaijani identity in more precise terms. Stalinist nationality policy aimed to foster a specifically Azerbaijani national identity, in part to reduce the cultural and political influence of Türkiye.[7] This process, often described by scholars as a fusion of European romantic-nationalist tropes with Soviet nation-building from above was far from straightforward.[8] Language reform, including successive changes in script, from Arabic to Latin, then to Cyrillic, and eventually back to Latin, produced a recurring "identity crisis" among speakers and fractured the continuity of cultural transmission.

During the final decades of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani identity was officially codified within the ideological apparatus of the state, though its foundations remained tenuous. The sense of national continuity often depended on carefully curated cultural symbols such as music, poetry, and folklore, which Soviet authorities elevated to lend the republic historical depth. The city of Shushi in Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, was promoted in Soviet narratives as the "birthplace of Azerbaijani musicians and poets."[9] This symbolic framing was later to acquire explosive significance during the independence movement of the late 1980s.

The first large-scale demonstrations in Soviet Azerbaijan broke out in November 1988, triggered by rumors that authorities planned to cut down the Topkhana forest near Shushi to build an aluminum plant.[10] Although presented as an environmental concern, the dispute was inseparable from the ethnic tensions already mounting in Nagorno-Karabakh. In nationalist discourse, then as now, natural objects such as forests, rivers, and mountains are framed as integral to the wealth and dignity of the nation. Any harm inflicted upon them, especially when attributed to an "other" community, tends to be reinterpreted as a symbolic act of humiliation. In this sense, the alleged destruction of the Topkhana forest functioned as a catalyst for mass mobilization in Baku.[11]

From a theoretical perspective, these early protests can be situated within Ernesto Laclau's framework of populism. According to Laclau, unfulfilled social demands, when aggregated, create the possibility of a broader collective identity.[12] The Topkhana protests began as "democratic demands," expressed through specific and limited claims within the existing political framework, but soon evolved into

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[7] Goyushov, "The Language of Azerbaijan."
[8] Maxim Tabachnik, *Citizenship, Territoriality, and Post-Soviet Nationhood: The Politics of Birthright Citizenship in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 142–64.
[9] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2018) 99–133.
[10] de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 83.
[11] George Meneshian, "Exploring the Azerbaijani National Identity: a historical analysis," *Institute of Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies*, 4 February 2021, https://mecacs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2021/exploring-the-azerbaijani-national-identity-a-historical-analysis/.
[12] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005), 86.

"popular demands" that crystallized broader social and national grievances. This transformation gave rise to a discourse marked by antagonism and the affirmation of national identity. As in Armenia, where environmental and cultural issues initially animated the Karabakh movement, ecological concerns in Azerbaijan soon transformed into nationalist populism.

These conditions laid the ground for the first explicitly anti-Armenian violence: the Sumgait pogrom of February 1988. For three days, dozens of ethnic Armenians were killed, with hundreds injured or displaced. Soviet officials later linked the events directly to the escalating situation in Nagorno-Karabakh.[13] As Thomas de Waal has argued, Sumgait represented "the first violent fission of a 'Soviet' identity."[14] It marked both a shocking rupture in the late Soviet political order and a precedent for ethnically charged violence within the Union at a time when Gorbachev's perestroika reforms had encouraged greater openness. In Azerbaijan, the events fueled an anti-Armenian narrative that increasingly served as a unifying discourse. The mobilization that followed soon coalesced into the Meydan ("Square") Movement, named after Baku's Lenin (later Freedom) Square, where massive demonstrations took place. Initially, the Meydan Movement echoed socialist and internationalist rhetoric. Slogans such as "Long live Lenin's national policy" or "The USSR is one country; we will not allow its division" highlighted the movement's ambiguous position within the Soviet framework. Yet, as nationalist sentiments intensified, these slogans were gradually replaced by explicitly separatist and irredentist calls: "Long live independent Azerbaijan," "We have two eyes—one is Baku, the other is Tabriz," and, most enduringly, "We will die but never give up Karabakh." The shift illustrates the discursive rearticulation of Azerbaijani identity from Soviet internationalism toward an antagonistic nationalism defined largely in opposition to Armenians.[15] The trajectory of the late Soviet Azerbaijani identity was thus deeply shaped by this antagonistic discourse. Through slogans, poetry, and populist speeches, the national "Self," articulated as Azerbaijani Turkic identity, was constructed in direct relation to the notion of "lost lands" and the contested symbol of Karabakh. This antagonistic framework, later institutionalized through the Meydan Movement, created fertile ground for the consolidation of Armenophobia as a defining component of Azerbaijani nationalism.

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[13] Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 298.

[14] Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York University Press, 2003) 37.

[15] Bahruz Samadov and Mane Grigoryan, "Formation of Discourses of National Identity in Armenia and Azerbaijan: from the Path to Independence to Nationalist Hegemony," *Journal of Conflict Transformation*, September 23, 2022, https://caucasusedition.net/formation-of-discourses-of-national-identity-in-armenia-and-azerbaijan-from-the-path-to-independence-to-nationalist-hegemony/

The subsequent escalation only deepened this antagonism. Between January 13–15, 1990, radical nationalists in Baku carried out another pogrom, killing approximately 90 Armenians. Within Azerbaijani memory, however, these events were quickly overshadowed by "Black January." For many Azerbaijanis, Black January became the founding moment of independence—at once a day of grief and a source of national pride.[16] Yet, significantly, the ethnic pogroms of the same period were downplayed or reframed, while the nationalist narrative focused on the violence of the Soviet state.

In this sense, the late Soviet period was not merely a moment of national awakening but also one of selective memory. The construction of Azerbaijani identity relied on a dual process: the glorification of victimhood at the hands of imperial powers and the demonization of Armenians as existential adversaries. This discursive foundation would later be amplified and institutionalized under the leadership of Heydar Aliyev and, subsequently, his son Ilham Aliyev, where Armenophobia became not just a byproduct of conflict but a central pillar of national identity and regime legitimacy.

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Armenophobia Between Turkism, Azerbaijanism, and Azerbaijani Citizenship Identities

The years following Azerbaijan's independence in 1991 were marked by competition between two ideological currents: Azerbaijanism and Turkism. This tension reflected deeper struggles over how to define the nation in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse.

Initially, Ayaz Mutallibov's conceptualization of Azerbaijani identity was deeply embedded within the Soviet ideological framework, emphasizing the primacy of a unified state over the articulation of a distinct national identity. His approach did not seek to construct an independent notion of "Azerbaijani" identity but rather sustained the Soviet paradigm, which classified Azerbaijanis under the generalized label of "Turks" while simultaneously restricting overt cultural and historical connections to Türkiye. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, this framework rapidly lost relevance. In its place emerged a more autonomous and distinctly formulated Azerbaijani identity, one that moved beyond both Soviet-era homogenization and a purely Turkic definition, thereby reflecting the broader political and cultural transformations of the post-Soviet period.[17]

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[16] Elisabeth Militz and Carolin Schurr, "Affective Nationalism: Banalities of Belonging in Azerbaijan," *Political Geography* 54 (2016): 58, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.11.002.

[17] Narmin Guliyeva, "The Evolution of National Identity and Nationalism in Azerbaijan (1900–2018)" (MA thesis, Middle East Technical University, September 9, 2022), https://open.metu.edu.tr/handle/11511/99415.

The short-lived presidency of Abulfaz Elchibey (1992–1993) sought to anchor Azerbaijani identity within the framework of Turkism.[18] His government emphasized ethnic kinship with Anatolian Turks and even renamed the official state language as "Turkish." Such steps highlighted a vision of nationhood rooted in pan-Turkic solidarity rather than civic inclusivity. However, Elchibey's defeat in the First Karabakh War, combined with the fragility of state institutions, diminished the appeal of this ethnic nationalism.

Upon assuming power in 1993, Heydar Aliyev initiated a deliberate reorientation of national discourse. Seeking stability and national cohesion, Aliyev reinstated the term "Azerbaijani language" and elevated Azerbaijanism to the level of official state ideology.[19] Unlike Turkism, Azerbaijanism was a civic and territorial doctrine, emphasizing unity across ethnic and religious lines within the boundaries of the republic.[20] The choice was strategic. Azerbaijan in the early 1990s faced immense pressures of state-building, regional insecurity, and social fragmentation.[21] A narrowly ethnic definition of the nation risked deepening internal divisions, especially given Azerbaijan's multi-ethnic composition. Azerbaijanism, by contrast, provided a more inclusive framework that could be institutionalized through state policy and official discourse.[22] Still, Turkism did not disappear. Türkiye had been the first state to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, and cultural-linguistic ties between the two nations remained strong. The slogan "One Nation, Two States," coined by Heydar Aliyev, epitomized this dual structure. Azerbaijanism operated as the formal state doctrine, whereas Turkism persisted as a powerful undercurrent shaping public sentiment and guiding foreign policy.[23] In this sense, Azerbaijan's national identity since independence has remained hybrid.

Civic Azerbaijanism became the official doctrine, but Turkist references persisted in public rhetoric, cultural life, and regional diplomacy.[24] The interplay be-

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[18] Tabachnik, *Citizenship, Territoriality, and Post-Soviet Nationhood*, 142–64.

[19] Levon Hovsepyan and Artyom Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict: Identity, Ontological (In)Security, and Azerbaijan's Policy Toward Armenia after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, March 25, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2480690.

[20] Nina Krickel-Choi, "State Personhood and Ontological Security as a Framework of Existence: Moving beyond Identity, Discovering Sovereignty," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, August 9, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2108761.

[21] Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological security in world politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, September 1, 2006, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346.

[22] Lamiya Panahova, "One Nation – Two States Indeed? Turkish Soft Power and the National Identity Dynamics in Azerbaijan after the Karabakh War," The Hague Research Institute, April 2025, https://hagueresearch.org/one-nation-two-states-indeed-turkish-soft-power-and-the-national-identity-dynamics-in-azerbaijan-after-the-karabakh-war/.

[23] Panahova, "One Nation – Two States Indeed?"

[24] Ceylan Tokluoğlu, "Definitions of National Identity, Nationalism and Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, August 15, 2006,

tween these two ideologies reveals both the fluidity and the contested nature of nation-building in post-Soviet Azerbaijan.[25] Since the 1990s, Pan-Turkism has made a return to Azerbaijan, once again challenging the framework of territorial nationalism. The high point of this revival was the rise to power of Abulfaz Elchibey in 1992, a nationalist and pan-Turkist leader who had long argued that Azerbaijanis were part of the broader Turkic nation.[26] Yet his government proved short-lived. Following Azerbaijan's defeat in the First Karabakh War and the deepening of internal instability, Elchibey was overthrown in 1993 and replaced by Heydar Aliyev, who redefined the ideological orientation of the state. The Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA), led by Elchibey, had been central to propagating Turkism in the late Soviet and early independence years. Formed in 1988, just before the dissolution of the USSR, the movement evolved from a discussion circle of nationalist intellectuals into a mass political force demanding independence.[27] Importantly, it was not a top-down nationalist ideology that brought the people into the streets. Rather, collective action itself created a new sense of belonging. Through protests, rallies, and demonstrations, ordinary citizens redefined their identity, transcending the traditional boundaries of clan, family, and region.[28]

The consolidation of Azerbaijanism during Aliyev's rule made it possible to stabilize the fragile state and gave the regime a unifying ideological framework.[29] At the same time, Turkism remained present in everyday life and popular imagination. By the late 1990s, Turkish television channels had become widely accessible across Azerbaijan. With few domestic alternatives, particularly in rural areas, Turkish programming quickly dominated. Compared to the heavily censored state media, Turkish channels offered colorful series, films, music videos, and news programs that were far more appealing to viewers. Many adults came to understand Turkish fluently, while younger generations acquired near-native speaking skills. This exposure reshaped cultural horizons and produced a stronger sense of close-

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https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870500092951; Elyse Semerdjian, "Gazafication and Genocide by Attrition in Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh," *Journal of Genocide Research*, July 17, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2377871.

[25] Ilgam Abbasov et al., "Ethnic Groups and Conflicts in the South Caucasus and Turkey," *Caucasus Edition – Journal of Conflict Transformation*, February 1, 2016, https://caucasusedition.net/ethnic-groups-and-conflicts-in-the-south-caucasus-and-turkey/.

[26] Tabachnik, *Citizenship, Territoriality, and Post-Soviet Nationhood*, 142–64.

[27] Tokluoğlu, "Definitions of National Identity…," 2006.

[28] Umut Uzer, "Nagorno-Karabakh in Regional and World Politics: A Case Study for Nationalism, Realism and Ethnic Conflict," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, June 2012, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2012.694668.

[29] Ayça Ergun, "Citizenship, National Identity, and Nation-Building in Azerbaijan: Between the Legacy of the Past and the Spirit of Independence," *Nationalities Papers*, July 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.81.

ness with Türkiye.[30] Here, Michael Billig's concept of banal nationalism is particularly relevant. Everyday references to "we," "our," and "motherland" in Turkish broadcasts, the omnipresence of Turkish flags, and the circulation of patriotic songs and imagery acted as constant reminders of a wider Turkish belonging.[31] This was reinforced in popular culture: nearly every football fan in Azerbaijan supported one of Istanbul's major teams, and during international tournaments, Turkish flags were waved in the streets as though representing a second home. Turkish media discussions about the shared origins of Azerbaijanis and Anatolian Turks further encouraged this identification. Bookstores also began filling their shelves with Turkish-language publications, deepening the cultural overlap. In this way, Turkism, even when not an official state ideology, permeated everyday practices and identities.

Religion provided another layer of complexity. Despite the secularism inherited from the Soviet system, Azerbaijan remained a predominantly Muslim country with a Shia majority and an expanding Sunni minority.[32] However, that sectarian divisions are often overstated; for most Azerbaijanis, religious identity is expressed simply as "Muslim," without reference to denominational differences.[33] While the process of Islamization has been gradual, it nonetheless represents an undercurrent that may increasingly influence Azerbaijani identity in the long term.[34] For now, secularism and Islam continue to coexist in a pragmatic balance, shaping identity in subtle ways.[35]

Popular discourse of the 1990s also revealed how Turkism and nationalism were woven into cultural production. A striking example is the rap song "Either Karabakh or Death" (1999) by the group Dayirman, which invoked jihad and portrayed Karabakh as a sacred cause.[36] Similarly, the 2001 poem by conservative Shia poet Baba Punhan sacralized the loss of Karabakh and infused it with a sense of religious duty. These cultural texts reinforced the representation of Karabakh as a sacred land and depicted Armenians as a cruel and unrelenting enemy. During

[30] Meneshian, "Exploring the Azerbaijani National Identity."
[31] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Sage, 1995), 175.
[32] Svante E. Cornell, Halil Karaveli, and Boris Ajeganov, *Azerbaijan's Formula: Secular Governance and Civic Nationhood* (Silk Road Paper, 2016), 74.
[33] Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach, *Religious Revival and Secularism in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* (De Gruyter, 2017), 71.
[34] Irina Ghaplanyan, "Empowering and Engaging Civil Society in Conflict Resolution: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh," *International Negotiation*, January 1, 2010, https://doi.org/10.1163/157180610X488191.
[35] Cornell, Karaveli, and Ajeganov, *Azerbaijan's Formula*, 76.
[36] Cameron S. Brown, "Wanting to Have Their Cake and Their Neighbor's Too: Azerbaijani Attitudes toward Karabakh and Iranian Azerbaijan," *The Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 576–96, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4330064.

Aliyev's presidency, official discourse reproduced these motifs: Karabakh was presented as holy, atrocities attributed to Armenians were emphasized, while Azerbaijani pogroms were either denied or rationalized through conspiracy narratives. Within this framework, diplomacy was increasingly portrayed as futile, given the enemy's allegedly deceitful and inhuman character.[37]

Foreign policy developments reinforced these ideological dynamics. While Bülent Ecevit's government in Türkiye during the 1990s had sought close relations with the Turkic world and Azerbaijan in particular, the rise of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in 2002 brought initial distance.[38] The JDP prioritized former Ottoman lands and Islamic solidarity, and while cooperation with Azerbaijan continued in energy and neighborhood policy, the emphasis was less on pan-Turkism than under Elchibey. Still, the foundations of "One Nation – Two States" were never abandoned, and cultural identification with Türkiye remained strong.[39]

Finally, the redefinition of the "Other" also evolved in this period. In Soviet times, Azerbaijani expansionist narratives focused largely on Iran, framed through the fabricated idea of "Southern Azerbaijan" as a divided homeland. In the post-Soviet years, however, Armenia came to occupy this role as so-called "Western Azerbaijan."[40] Heydar Aliyev's doctrine muted overt irredentism toward Iran, understanding its destabilizing potential, but his government nevertheless cultivated pseudo-historical narratives delegitimizing Armenia's existence. A revealing episode occurred in 1999, when state institutions encouraged the production of historical works aimed at the falsification of history and 'proving' that Armenian lands had historically belonged to Azerbaijan, thereby providing ideological resources for future generations. This directive embedded irredentist thinking into academic and cultural production, ensuring its reproduction beyond immediate politics.[41] A major milestone was reached in 2001, when Azerbaijanism was officially declared the state ideology at the first Congress of World Azerbaijanis.[42]

Aliyev's model of Azerbaijani citizenship strengthened internal unity and extended its reach beyond the republic, focusing particularly on Azerbaijani communities in Iran. At the same time, Armenians continued to be defined as the nation's

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[37] Samadov and Grigoryan, "Formation of Discourses of National Identity…," 2022.
[38] Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic* (1998), 34.
[39] Panahova, "One Nation – Two States Indeed?"
[40] Hovsepyan and Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict…," 2025.
[41] Laurence Broers, "Perspectives | Augmented Azerbaijan? The Return of Azerbaijani Irredentism," *Eurasianet*, August 5, 2021, https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-augmented-azerbaijan-the-return-of-azerbaijani-irredentism.
[42] Hamid Ahmadi, *The Clash of Nationalisms: Iranian Response to Baku's Irredentism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 112.

primary 'Other'. This image of a common adversary allowed the regime to integrate Azerbaijan's diverse ethnic and regional groups under a single narrative. From an identity-theoretical perspective, this oppositional framing provided the cohesion, legitimacy, and mobilizing energy that sustained the national project. The interplay between civic Azerbaijanism, cultural Turkism, and anti-Armenian sentiment ultimately shaped the consolidated form of Azerbaijani identity in the early 2000s.

Since 2003, the consolidated notion of Azerbaijanism has served as the basis for a civic understanding of national identity and an inclusive model of citizenship. This framework has been officially promoted as multicultural, tolerant, and secular, drawing upon elements that have been historically present in both pre-Soviet and Soviet Azerbaijani society. Within this state-sponsored interpretation, independence itself is framed as a supreme value: building a new state became a source of collective pride, while territorial belonging rather than ethnicity was emphasized as the foundation of identity. Although the ethnic roots of Azerbaijanis were not openly promoted, they remained embedded at the core of the citizenship concept. Turkish origins were acknowledged as complementary to Azerbaijani Citizenship rather than contradictory, and references to Turkic kinship were presented as peacefully coexisting with the civic-territorial model. Nevertheless, this balance remained fragile. As one Azerbaijani filmmaker, Teymur Hajiyev, remarked: "We speak Russian, our names are Islamic or Persian, we try to be Turkish. We have a Frankenstein culture. We haven't figured out what it means to be Azerbaijani."[43] His comment captures the hybridity and contradictions at the heart of Azerbaijan's post-Soviet identity discourse.

Ilham Aliyev, who succeeded his father Heydar in 2003, inherited this ideological framework but adapted it to the realities of his own rule. Like his father, he relied heavily on state-directed nation-building, but under his leadership, Azerbaijan combined Azerbaijanism with increasing elements of cultural spectacle, prestige politics, and authoritarian consolidation. Flush with oil revenues, Aliyev sought to project Azerbaijan onto the global stage. Baku became the host of major international events such as the World Chess Olympiad, the European Games, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, and the Eurovision Song Contest; Formula 1 races were staged annually; and bids were made, though unsuccessful, for the Olympic Games. Global luxury hotel chains established branches in the capital, and lavish architectural projects, from an ultramodern airport to war memorials and futuristic shopping centers, were presented as symbols of national moder-

[43] Bruce Schoenfeld, "This Ancient Silk Road City Is Now a Modern Marvel," *National Geographic*, April 10, 2018, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/photos-pictures-baku.

nity.[44] These efforts were part of a deliberate strategy to craft an image of Azerbaijan as both historically rooted and globally relevant.

Yet beneath this civic facade, Armenophobia remained a defining element of identity. Far from diminishing, it was further reinforced under Ilham Aliyev's rule. For over thirty years, Azerbaijani policy toward Armenia has been characterized by coercion, aggression, and hostility. Persistent hate speech, state propaganda, and the glorification of violence against Armenians eroded the social foundations necessary for reconciliation. The 2020 war further entrenched this trajectory: although framed as a "victory," it was accompanied by intensified propaganda portraying Armenians as existential enemies, thus undermining the possibility of trust and dialogue.[45]

Scholars often describe Heydar Aliyev's conceptualization of Azerbaijanism as a revival of Soviet-era Azerbaijanism, yet with notable adaptations. His project distanced Azerbaijan from both Türkiye and Iran, seeking instead to consolidate a distinct state-centric ideology. Aliyev redefined Azerbaijanism as a unifying formula suited to the geopolitical realities of independence. Retaining its emphasis on fabricated "territorial unity", Azerbaijanism positioned the term "Azerbaijani" as a marker of shared belonging for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity. At the same time, this inclusivity was secured by redefining the Armenian 'Other' as the central adversary, around which solidarity could be mobilized. The regime disseminated postulates such as "we are all martyrs in Karabakh" and "we gave, we shed blood", embedding a collective memory of sacrifice into public discourse and ensuring that Armenophobia served as a glue binding Azerbaijan's heterogeneous population.[46]

Ilham Aliyev further developed this framework. In his inauguration speech, he underscored the role of Azerbaijanism as the guiding ideology of the state, while simultaneously highlighting external threats as existential challenges.[47] Such framing not only legitimized the regime's policies but also perpetuated ontological insecurity within Azerbaijani society.[48] The enemy image of Armenians provided a convenient mechanism for containing internal diversity, especially the potential separatism of non-Turkic Muslim groups such as Talysh, Tats, Kurds, and Lezgins. By positioning Armenians as the universal adversary, the regime reinforced unity

[44] Schoenfeld, "This Ancient Silk Road City Is Now a Modern Marvel."
[45] Roza Melkumyan, "Baku's Hostility Has Not Abated since the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh," *Freedom House*, November 30, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/article/bakus-hostility-has-not-abated-fall-nagorno-karabakh.
[46] Hovsepyan and Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict…," 2025.
[47] "Inauguration Ceremony of Ilham Aliyev Was Held," Office of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, February 14, 2024, https://president.az/en/articles/view/63979.
[48] Broers, "Augmented Azerbaijan?"

among these groups and simultaneously advanced discriminatory policies of assimilation.[49]

In this period, Armenophobia transcended the domain of propaganda and assumed an institutionalized form within state policy. Across educational, media, and cultural spheres, Armenians were consistently represented as deceitful, violent, and fundamentally incompatible with peaceful coexistence. From textbooks and children's stories to official speeches and televised news, these depictions sustained a pervasive culture of enmity.[50] The political elite used this constructed threat to mobilize society and suppress dissent, casting Ilham Aliyev as the "protector" and "father" of the nation.[51] Documentation by the Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Ombudsman since 2016 has highlighted the unprecedented normalization of such extremist rhetoric, noting its pervasiveness across all segments of Azerbaijani society.[52]

The escalation of Armenophobia was starkly evident during and after the 2020 war. A joint report by the Ombudsmen of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia documented organized hate speech by Azerbaijani officials and public figures, including targeting Armenian children. The public record contains numerous instances of explicit dehumanization and calls for violence against Armenians emanating from Azerbaijani state officials, political actors, and prominent cultural and sporting figures, phenomena that this study situates within a broader, state-aligned discourse of Armenophobia. These statements and actions fall into several interrelated categories: (1) delegitimization of Armenia as a political and territorial entity; (2) exhortations to, and public praise of, violence against Armenians; (3) vilification of Armenian civilians, including children and women on social media and other public fora; and (4) official impunity and state-level endorsement of perpetrators of extreme violence.

First, explicit delegitimization of the Armenian state and people has been voiced at the highest levels of power. For example, the President of Azerbaijan declared that "Armenia as a country is of no value. It is actually a colony, an outpost

[49] Hovsepyan and Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict…," 2025.
[50] Anzhela Mnatsakanyan, "Armenophobia in Azerbaijani schools" (@Anzhela_Yan, Mar 26), https://x.com/ANZHELA_YAN/status/1640037860647616512.
[51] Anzhela Elibegova, "Armenophobia in Azerbaijan: Causes and Effects," *EVN Report*, May 9, 2017, https://evnreport.com/politics/armenophobia-in-azerbaijan-causes-and-effects/.
[52] Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman), *Interim Public Report: Atrocities Committed by Azerbaijani Military Forces against the Civilian Population of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Servicemen of the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army on 2–5 April 2016* (April 2016), https://anca.org/assets/graphics/2016/Public-Report-Ombudsman-of-NKR.pdf.

run from abroad, a territory artificially created on ancient Azerbaijani lands."[53] This rhetorical frame serves to negate Armenian sovereignty and to justify political and territorial claims in quasi-existential terms.

Second, violent exhortations and direct calls to kill Armenians have appeared in public statements by political actors and influential public personalities. A member of the Azerbaijani parliament affiliated with the ruling party has been quoted as rejecting negotiation and calling instead for continued operations "to destroy them,"[54] language that frames armed extermination as a legitimate policy objective. Similarly, a media-linked representative of Qarabag football club asserted, "We must kill Armenians. No matter whether a woman, a child, an old man. We must kill everyone we can…"[55]—a statement that normalizes mass violence and was widely circulated and condemned.

Third, the vilification of civilian populations extends to targeted threats against Armenian children and women on social media platforms, where users have openly advocated killing mothers and children and promoted other forms of cruelty. Across social media, posts, polls, and other interactive formats form not isolated acts of hostility but a broader ecosystem that fuels and legitimizes calls for violence against a different group.[56]

Fourth, the state's response to atrocity has at times signaled implicit or explicit approval of perpetrators, thereby entrenching a culture of impunity. Ramil Safarov's 2004 murder of Lieutenant Gurgen Margaryan in Budapest, followed by his extradition to Azerbaijan and subsequent pardon and promotion, serves as a striking example of how violence was publicly reframed and rewarded.[57] Azerbaijani officials and other public figures publicly praised Safarov following his return, and the subsequent European Court of Human Rights judgment in Makuchyan and Mi-

[53] Ilham Aliyev (@presidentaz), X (formerly Twitter), November 19, 2012, https://x.com/presidentaz/status/270827003521929216.

[54] Suren Tadevosyan, "Balancing Powers: Azerbaijan's National Role Conceptions Amidst Regional and Global Challenges," *Contemporary Eurasia*, November 5, 2024, 6–21, https://doi.org/10.52837/2579-2970-2024.13.1-6.

[55] "FFA Demands to Exclude FK Qarabag from European Club Competitions," Football Federation of Armenia (FFA), October 31, 2020, https://www.ffa.am/en/1604159474/page/3.

[56] The Human Rights Defender of Armenia and the Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh, *Ad Hoc Public Report: Organized Hate Speech and Animosity towards Ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan as Root Causes of Ethnically-Based Torture and Inhuman Treatment by Azerbaijani Armed Forces* (September–November 2020) (Yerevan: Office of the Human Rights Defender of Armenia, 2020), 11, https://www.ombuds.am/images/files/2032f021fe81176414a649d588ad0e86.pdf.

[57] Artsakh Human Rights Ombudsman, *Interim Public Report on Atrocities Committed by Azerbaijani Military Forces against the Civilian Population of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)* (Stepanakert: Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh, 2020).

nasyan v. Azerbaijan and Hungary recorded that the pardoning and glorification contributed to an ethically motivated endorsement of the act at the state level.[58]

Taken together, these elements demonstrate how hate speech, calls for violence, and official measures of reward or impunity can operate synergistically to produce a socio-political environment in which Armenophobia is not merely a set of private attitudes but a public, routinized, and politically consequential phenomenon. The prominence of such rhetoric among political elites, public personalities, and state institutions indicates that violent dehumanization is embedded in both discourse and policy practices.

This institutionalized animosity was not incidental but part of a closed cycle generated by state policy, reinforced by cultural production, and embraced by society. Evidence from this period points to systematic hate speech, incitement, and propaganda as root causes of ethnically motivated violence, torture, and killings during the September–November 2020 war. Analysts argue that these practices reflect not only hostility but also elements of ethnic cleansing and genocidal intent.[59] Evidence collected through the monitoring and fact-finding missions of Armenia's Human Rights Defender, along with reports from international bodies such as the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and rulings of the International Court of Justice, demonstrates that Armenophobia in Azerbaijan is not an incidental social phenomenon but a systemic, state-supported policy. This policy has translated directly into gross human rights violations, ethnically motivated crimes, and atrocities committed by Azerbaijani servicemen during episodes of armed conflict, most notably the April 2016 clashes and the September–November 2020 war. Documentation shows patterns of torture, mutilation, and indiscriminate targeting of civilians, often carried out in the same rhetoric used by the Azerbaijani political leadership.[60]

The consolidation of Azerbaijani citizenship identity under Ilham Aliyev thus rests on a paradox. On the one hand, Azerbaijanism is presented as civic, inclusive, and secular; on the other, its unity is maintained through the exclusion and demonization of Armenians. Turkish cultural ties, encapsulated in the enduring slogan "One Nation – Two States", remain a powerful complementary narrative, further strengthened during the 44-day war with Türkiye's unequivocal support. Symboli-

[58] Artsakh Human Rights Ombudsman, *Interim Public Report on Atrocities…* (2020).
[59] Human Rights Defender of Armenia; Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh, *Organized Hate Speech* (2020).
[60] The Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, *Ad Hoc Public Report, the Azerbaijani Policy Ofhatred and Animosity Towards Armenians as Root Causes of Ethnically Motivated Violations of Human Rights: Evidence-Based Analysis of the Post-War Developments*, February 2022, https://www.ombuds.am/images/files/ea202a21c5fa032687be862bc5ba7689.pdf.

cally, Victory Day was moved from November 10 to November 8, to avoid coinciding with Atatürk Remembrance Day, signaling the centrality of the Turkish connection in Azerbaijan's post-war identity discourse.

In this framework, the notion of expansionism also shifted. During the Soviet era, the so-called 'Southern Azerbaijan' (northwest Iran) was invoked as a divided homeland; in the post-Soviet period, the so-called 'Western Azerbaijan' (the Republic of Armenia) was added as an imaginary historical territory to create a myth of a new 'lost cause.' While Heydar Aliyev had attempted to mask irredentist claims for pragmatic reasons, his instructions to historians in 1999 to consistently 'prove' that Armenia belonged to Azerbaijan laid the foundation for the institutionalization of the falsification of history. Ilham Aliyev has since carried this irredentist discourse into the diplomatic and military arenas, using it as a strategic tool of coercion against Armenia.

The evidence demonstrates that Armenophobia in Azerbaijan is not merely a spontaneous social sentiment or the byproduct of unresolved conflict but rather a deliberate, state-sponsored policy that has become a core element of Azerbaijani national identity. Over the past three decades, the Aliyev regimes have institutionalized hostility toward Armenians as a unifying framework for society. This has transformed education, culture, and daily life into a system organized around enmity: from academic publications and "historical" narratives to media propaganda, to children's fairy tales portraying Armenians as villains. By saturating both elite discourse and everyday practices, the state has ensured that Armenophobia functions as an intergenerational ideology rather than a transient political tool.

This policy has served clear political purposes. By manufacturing the Armenian "enemy," Azerbaijani authorities have diverted public attention away from pressing domestic grievances: the monopolization of power by the Aliyev family, the entrenchment of authoritarian rule, systemic human rights violations, pervasive corruption, and the deterioration of social and economic standards. In this way, Armenophobia operates as a substitute ideology, filling the vacuum left by the absence of democratic legitimacy or an affirmative vision of nationhood. The regime sustains itself not through civic participation or economic justice, but through the constant reproduction of an external threat that demands unity, loyalty, and obedience. After thirty-three years of independence, the results of this policy are visible: a society deeply conditioned to view Armenians as existential adversaries, and a political system that draws strength and legitimacy from perpetuating this hostility. Moreover, this externalized hostility conveniently deflects public attention from domestic challenges. Issues such as the snap presidential and parliamentary elections held in February and September 2024, which failed to meet international

standards for free and fair voting,[61] Azerbaijan's persistent human rights violations,[62] widespread poverty,[63] and the European Parliament's Members' 2025 condemnation of the imprisonment of Azerbaijani journalists,[64] are all overshadowed by the regime's manufactured sense of external threat. Through this diversionary strategy, Armenophobia becomes not only a tool of ideological cohesion but also a means of political distraction.

Conclusion

The Soviet collapse thrust Azerbaijan into the twin tasks of state- and nation-building amid insecurity, porous borders, and brittle institutions. In that unsettled space, identity coalesced not along a clean civic or ethnic line but as a hybrid project: outwardly speaking the language of tolerance and multiculturalism, while inwardly binding itself through an exclusionary 'Other'. As this study shows, Armenophobia has not only been a residue of conflict; it has been a shaped instrument of statecraft, a deliberate political instrument embedded in statecraft.

After the First Karabakh War, Heydar Aliyev promoted Azerbaijanism as a unifying civic frame. Its promise of inclusion, however, rested on an exclusion that cast Armenians as a standing danger to sovereignty and territory. Under Ilham Aliyev, this logic deepened. Where a positive national idea remained thin, a manufactured nationalism grew in its place, organized from above, spread through schools, media, and culture, and sustained by an everyday sense of siege.

This instrument serves immediate political ends. By fixing Armenians as a permanent adversary, the regime gathers varied groups into a single audience and converts disagreement into a test of loyalty. The slogan "We are all martyrs in Karabakh" illustrates this mobilizing strategy, transforming diversity into an illusion of unity through appeals to collective sacrifice and historical grievance. In this sense, Armenophobia functions not only as a unifying ideology but also as a mech-

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[61] Amnesty International. 2025. *Azerbaijan: No Sign of Hope for the Human Rights Situation in Azerbaijan: Systemic and Serious Breaches of Human Rights Must Be Strongly Condemned.* January 23, 2025. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8963/2025/en/. Accessed October 13, 2025.

[62] European External Action Service (EEAS). 2025. *Azerbaijan: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Sentencing of Journalists and Political Activists.* June 23, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/azerbaijan-statement-spokesperson-sentencing-journalists-and-political-activists_en?s=09&%3Bref=oc-media.org&ref=oc-media.org. Accessed October 13, 2025.

[63] European Parliament. 2024. *MEPs Denounce Violations of Human Rights and International Law by Azerbaijan.* October 24, 2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241017IPR24740/meps-denounce-violations-of-human-rights-and-international-law-by-azerbaijan.

[64] World Bank Group. n.d. *Poverty Headcount Ratio at National Poverty Lines (% of Population) – Azerbaijan.* https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=AZ. Accessed October 13, 2025.

anism of political control—securing loyalty to the ruling elite while discouraging the emergence of alternative conceptions of national identity.

Institutionalization completes the loop. When hostility is taught, aestheticized, normalized, and then fed back into policy, it creates a closed cycle of enmity. What begins as strategy becomes common sense. Such routinization corrodes the social foundations of reconciliation: peace initiatives falter not only on terms but on the habits of mind and feeling that make trust imaginable.

The deeper engine is ontological insecurity. Like many post-imperial states, Azerbaijan faced the question of who it is without the Soviet frame. Rather than build an identity on democratic institutions or shared civic purpose, power brokers resolved anxiety by fixing the nation against an enemy. The 2020 victory did not end this insecurity; it intensified the need to reproduce enmity as a stabilizer. The interplay of Turkism and Azerbaijanism sharpens the paradox. Abroad, pan-Turkic affinity and a polished cosmopolitan brand promise openness through concerts, races, and global sport. At home, the pedagogy of siege teaches children who to fear.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Armenophobia is not an incidental byproduct of conflict but a central pillar of Azerbaijani nation-building in the post-Soviet period. By manufacturing an enemy, the Azerbaijani state has sought to resolve its ontological insecurities, consolidate authoritarian power, and unify a diverse population under a shared sense of threat. Yet this strategy has come at a profound cost: the erosion of possibilities for peace, the entrenchment of hostility, and the impoverishment of national identity. Understanding this dynamic is essential not only for interpreting Azerbaijan's trajectory but also for grasping the broader patterns of negative nationalism and authoritarian statecraft in transitional societies. The case of Azerbaijan illustrates how nations can be constructed as much by enmity as by affirmation, and how the politics of memory, fear, and hostility can become the foundation of an entire state project. In the end, manufacturing the enemy may offer short-term cohesion. Still, it leaves behind a legacy of division, insecurity, and unresolved conflict that threatens to shape the South Caucasus for decades to come.

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.

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