

## I. ALIYEV REGIME DAMAGES THE ECOLOGY OF HIS COUNTRY<sup>2</sup>

In December 2023, the United Nations decided that the next World Climate Conference will take place in Azerbaijan. According to the UN tradition, the right to hold this major event should be given primarily to countries that strive for a natural balance in developing green industry and have the most tangible experience in the field. As reality shows, however, the tacit tradition was ignored for the third year, prompting the British edition of *Bloomberg* to take umbrage at the decision and point out that the conference will be held in an “authoritarian fossil fuel-producing country” for the third year in a row (*the previous two conferences were organized by Egypt and the UAE*)<sup>3</sup>.

*Bloomberg’s* comment is absolutely spot on, as Azerbaijan is the country with the lowest environmental ratings not only in the region, but in the world as a whole. The world’s largest crowdsourcing online database *Numbeo*, which published a 2019 rating of 109 polluting countries, placed Azerbaijan on the 18<sup>th</sup> with 79.36 points for pollution and 139.93 points for harming the world. In comparison, Mongolia ranked 1<sup>st</sup>, while Finland ranked 109<sup>th</sup> (with the best profile), while the AzR’s neighbors Georgia and Armenia ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> and 58<sup>th</sup> respectively<sup>4</sup>. It is traditionally believed that the main source of environmental pollution in Azerbaijan is the oil and gas industry, which is associated with the exploitation of numerous wells in the Caspian Sea and the chemical processing of this raw material, causing high emissions of toxic residual products into the environment – water, soil and air.

It is actually quite common, however, local and international environmental organizations, ecological and health associations, human rights structures and the media have been neglecting some other sector of the Azerbaijani industry for decades. It may be inferior to the oil and gas industry, but it is no less dangerous for the environment and the population. This concerns the exploitation of gold-bearing mines in Azerbaijan, which causes considerable damage to the environment and human health due to the disregard of international production standards and the associated safety criteria.

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<sup>2</sup> The original article (in Russian) was submitted to the Editorial office on 17.02.2024.

<sup>3</sup> Zagdvostkina K. The next UN climate conference will be held in Azerbaijan (in Rus.), 10.12.2023, Forbes, <https://www.forbes.ru/society/502199-sleduusaa-konferencia-oon-po-klimatu-projdet-v-azerbajdzane> (download date: 14.02.2024).

<sup>4</sup> NoNews: “Rating of countries by level of pollution” (in Rus.), <https://nonews.co/directory/lists/countries/pollution-rating> (download date: 11.02.2024).

This issue was banned by the Azerbaijani authorities, which is not only due to the desire to escape pressure from the relevant international instances and not to “slip” into the lowest ecological ratings, but above all, according to the Azerbaijani opposition sources, to the fact that I. Aliyev’s family is involved in Azerbaijan’s “gold-bearing” business. «Chovdar»– one of the largest Azerbaijani mines operated by I. Aliyev’s daughters’ offshore companies registered in Panama, has been mentioned in the local media since 2012<sup>5</sup>. Today there is every reason to claim that the “Chovdar” mine is only one of the fragments of the Aliyev family’s “gold-bearing” business and that the well-kept secrets on gold industry of Azerbaijan as a whole is directly linked to the business interests of this family.

The media secrecy of the sphere is explained by the disinterest of the “first family” in the access of the Azerbaijani public and the international community to the true information about the consortium’s shares in this industry, about the schemes of its financial cycle, the reliable volumes of its raw material production and, finally, the objective data on the environmental damage, which could not only put the need for costly ecologization of the industry on the state’s agenda, but also raise the task of the expediency of further exploitation of the “deadly mines” in general.

Attempts by the media to report on and scrutinize the “grey zone” of Azerbaijan’s gold industry have been repeatedly suppressed by the authorities’ brutal attacks on the opposition, the dissident press and human rights defenders of Azerbaijan, and the discontent of the local population with the destruction of the environment and mass impoverishment due to the alienation of people’s pastures and agricultural land has been constantly bought about by persecution and the creation of a climate of fear. The issue has thus acquired a political dimension in the public life of the AzR, as the authorities themselves initially categorized the social nature of the problems in gold mining as a political protest allegedly instigated by certain powers under the guise of social and societal demands.

The events can only reinforce the protest movement’s observation that a regime that prefers to reorganize industry with a heavy hand, suppresses grievances driven by personal interests and the cover-up of corruption. A striking example of this was the events of June 2023 in the village of Soyudlu near the town of Gedabek, when civilians, outraged by the disastrous ecological state of the district due to the work of the gold mine, rose in protest against its exploitation. The authorities responded violently to the vigil by beating women, elderly people, and children with batons, using tear gas and stun grenades and making arrests. In Soyudlu, not only police forces from Ganja and the surrounding districts were deployed, but also the rapid deployment regiment of the Azerbaijani Ministry of Internal Affairs from Baku. The

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<sup>5</sup> Vais A., Ilham Aliyev’s family’s share was also found in gold mines (in Rus.), 14.05.2012, Radio Azattyq, [https://rus.azattyq.org/a/aliev\\_family\\_rudnik\\_property/24577466.html](https://rus.azattyq.org/a/aliev_family_rudnik_property/24577466.html) (download date: 14.02.2024).

roads leading to the village were blocked for outsiders, the arriving journalists were arrested, and the equipment and video footage documenting the destruction of the vigil were confiscated. There were also several arrests in Baku, villagers, bloggers, human rights activists, opposition politicians and independent environmentalists were severely detained at police stations and in prisons, ruthlessly released, tortured, and charged with treason<sup>6</sup>.

These harsh measures were a response to the peaceful vigil of the villagers who called on the authorities to stop the operation of the Soyudlu mine, as the incidence of cancer and other diseases in the village and surrounding settlements had risen dramatically, not only among the adults but also among the children. The resulting residues with high concentrations of cyanide and other chemical toxins poisoned the entire district and led to the extinction of orchards, bees, and livestock. Toxic waste flows through mountain streams into the Kura River, which threatens to spread the deadly compounds for hundreds of kilometers along the country's largest freshwater artery.

The protest of the inhabitants of Soyudlu was triggered by the construction of a second tailings pond under the Soyudlu mine, as the first one has no longer room for processing waste. However, despite the attempts of the Azerbaijani authorities to keep the above events secret and prevent information from leaking in the country and abroad, some information have leaked to the media and social networks. Images of violence against elderly women, arrests of the villagers, and testimonies of beatings of eco-activists and human rights activists began to spread on the net and caused a strong response from both the Azerbaijani and international public and human rights organizations. From the summer of 2023, Western independent media launched journalistic investigations into the events in Soyudlu and began to unravel the complex web of corruption in the Azerbaijani gold industry, which leads through Baku to the American and British "gold-leading" cartels whose influence and connections in the world allow I. Aliyev to terrorize his own citizens without fear of being condemned for the suppression of their rights and freedoms in his country, for the neglected environmental situation in the republic, which has led to numerous illnesses and deaths because of the authorities' reluctance to bring the mining industry up to international safety standards<sup>7</sup>.

In the context of this investigation, the persons of greatest interest are those who, according to open sources, are the owners of the operator of the Soyudlu gold mine and beyond. In 1997, Heydar Aliyev started negotiations on the transfer of this

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<sup>6</sup> Kavkaz Uzel: "Protest in Soyudlu: people against the mine (in Rus.)", 20.07.2023, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/390548> (download date: 14.02.2024).

<sup>7</sup> Forbidden stories: From Azerbaijan to smartphones: How tainted gold ends up in high-tech products, <https://forbiddenstories.org/from-azerbaijan-to-smartphones-how-tainted-gold-ends-up-in-high-tech-products/> (download date: 12.02.2024), also Forbidden stories: Torture in Azerbaijan: How European funds flow to Baku's prisons, <https://forbiddenstories.org/torture-in-azerbaijan-how-european-funds-flow-to-bakus-prisons/> (download date: 12.02.2024).

mine to *R.V. Investment Group Services*, and in 2007 the operator began exploration there. The main shareholder of the company, which is registered in the United States (State of Delaware), is a native Iranian, Azari by origin Mohammad Rza Vezari, a former advisor to the Iranian Shah and, later, after moving to the United State, the head of the American-Azerbaijani Chamber of Commerce, whose honorary members were once such odious figures of American politics as James Baker, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger. Subsequently, Rza Vezari handed over the management of *R.V. Investment* to another company – the London-based *Anglo Asian Mining*, whose main shareholder is now Michael Sununu. His father, John Sununu, was President Bush’s Chief of Staff and later the head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. According to sources, it is these despicable individuals – Vezari and Sununu – who now run not only the Soyudlu mine, but the entire gold industry of Azerbaijan, which belonged to *Anglo Asian Mining*. It is known that during the time of the 44-day war in Artsakh, the company held talks with the Azerbaijani authorities about the start of the exploration work and the rapid development of the “liberated” gold mines in Zangelan and Kelbajar districts. It also became known that in October 2020, Rza Vezari was in an intensive electronic correspondence with the British Ambassador to Baku about the results of the agreements with the Azerbaijanis regarding their consent to the development of the “liberated” mines. The British Foreign Office was probably interested in whether Baku was prepared to fulfill its obligations under the 25-year-old agreement that had given the British a monopoly on gold mining in the NKR immediately after its capture. As a result, the British Foreign Office kept all information about the exchange of letters under wraps, claiming that it did not want to harm the working agenda of the Minsk Group and the reconciliation process between Armenia and Azerbaijan<sup>8</sup>. According to many sources, I. Aliyev has thus handed over the management of the entire gold industry of Azerbaijan to despicable individuals representing the interests of powerful political and financial groups in the US and the UK (*including the British royal family*). Countries that have problems with the legitimacy of their authoritarian regimes (*in this case - Azerbaijan*) in return receive lobbying for the interests of these regimes at the highest levels of world politics and cover for their unscrupulous domestic policies.

The scheme of the corrupt interaction is quite simple: the beneficiaries of the Azerbaijani gold mines ensure the stability of Aliyev's regime, which in return undertakes to guarantee the beneficiaries the receipt of easy “gold”. The aim is to avoid state taxation and the costs of greening the mining industry. Under this system of corruption, the state suffers, its national wealth is plundered, nature is destroyed, and the population is exposed to health and life risks. In light of these

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<sup>8</sup> Buniatyan H., Azerbaijan sold the right to exploit the Drbon gold mine registered in the USA 25 years ago. 16.12.2022, Radio Azatutyun, <https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/32179980.html> (download date: 14.02.2024).

facts, the Azerbaijani government's statement that it wants to map the mines of neighboring Armenia and launch an investigation into the extent of the environmental damage allegedly caused to Azerbaijan and the entire region by the pollution of rivers and air looks especially cynical.

In this connection, it is necessary to remember the blockade of Artsakh initiated in the winter of 2022 by Azerbaijani “eco-activists”. At that time, they claimed that the Kashen mine in Nagorno Karabakh was causing irreparable damage to the ecology of Azerbaijan and demanded a complete suspension of its exploitation. Production at the Kashen field was forced to stop, however, after Azerbaijan’s aggression in September 2023 brought the territory of Nagorno Karabakh under full control of Baku, the Kashen mine, like the entire complex of the gold-bearing geological conglomerate Drmbon, was put back into operation. This process is supervised by Rza Vezari, who admitted that the Drmbon mines were promised to his company *R.V. Investment Group Servis* personally by Heydar Aliyev 25 years ago, which was appropriately documented in the form of a business deal<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, the events of 2023 summer near Soyudlu demonstrated the real situation in the sphere of Azerbaijani gold mining, which became a consequence of theft, corruption, and blatant disregard of state interests and safety of local residents. At the same time, the system of plundering of the country’s national wealth would not have been able to function without the cooperation of the authoritarian Aliyev regime with political-financial groups and individuals with extensive ties in the West, but not an impeccable reputation in public-relations the political circles that really advocate environmental progress in the world and the «sterility» of political systems in such raw-resources-countries as Azerbaijan.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.