

## **On the reasons of I. Aliyev's reluctance to sign a peace treaty with the RA** **ARVAK Center comment, 23.10.2024<sup>1</sup>**

Judging by the Azerbaijani leadership's behavior, this country is trying to prolong the negotiation process and postpone the signing of a peace treaty with Armenia for an indefinite period. Some Armenian analysts believe that it is caused by the weakness of the military-political positions of Yerevan, which has not yet recovered from its defeat in 2020 and the loss of Artsakh in 2023.

In conditions when the current RA authorities are still trying to find new support in the West but have already managed to significantly reduce the resources of trust and partnership relations with Moscow, Baku does not want to miss the opportunity to put forward new demands as a “price for peace”. I. Aliev's temptation is “great, and his plans are easy to read: either Yerevan gets a peace treaty at the price of fulfilling Baku's (maximalist) demands, or the approval and signing of a peace treaty will be postponed indefinitely, giving Azerbaijan the opportunity, under favorable circumstances, to obtain by force more than it demanded in the negotiations.

Baku's maximalist demands are increasing each time, already covering the issues not directly related to the problems of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. If during the 2020 war Baku assured the international audience that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict would be resolved after Azerbaijan “restores its territorial integrity”, then after the Prague Agreements of January 2023 and, in particular, the September aggression against Nagorno-Karabakh that followed their results, Baku started to consistently increase the list of ultimatum demands put forward to Yerevan as a condition to conclude a “lasting peace”: the “extraterritorial status” of the so-called “Zangezur corridor”, the amendment of the RA Constitution, the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group, the withdrawal of claims against Azerbaijan at international courts and demilitarization of the RA. This is not a complete list, but there are all reasons to believe that Baku is not ready to be satisfied even with already voiced demands, the fulfillment of which seems inherently impossible for Yerevan.

Judging by the recent information campaign unfolded in the Azerbaijani media, this country's authorities intend to make claims against Armenia in the near future regarding the “environmental damage”, allegedly inflicted on the region by the Armenian mining industry, as well as the “water issue” that poses importance for the Caspian republic. In all likelihood, Baku would not be unwilling to create problems for the RA's raw materials economy, which provides its foreign exchange earnings, and also, with reference to UN Resolution 64/292 of 2010 “On the Right to Clean Water”, demanding from Armenia an access to its “unpolluted” water sources, including the Sevan basin. According to some observers, I. Aliyev is planning

---

<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 21.10.2024.

to use the rostrum of international climate conference COP29 in Baku to “legitimize” these claims, which may also appear on the table of Armenian negotiators in the future.

Azerbaijan's efforts to prolong the negotiations or lead them to a deadlock are even more obvious against the backdrop of the latest statements by RA senior officials about agreement of almost all the negotiating points and Yerevan's readiness to sign a peace treaty “even today”,. Despite the attempts of the Azerbaijani propaganda to accuse Yerevan in destructiveness, the reality shows the opposite, and there is every reason to suppose that it is the pressure of geopolitical centers, insisting on the rapid signing of the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty, that prevents Baku from withdrawing from the negotiation process with reference to “Yerevan's non-constructive approaches”.

Objectively, there is a strong pressure on I. Aliyev, from behind-the-scenes primarily from the West, which is evidenced by the Azerbaijani leader's increasing irritability and his more frequent reproaches, especially, against the USA and France. The apogee of such stingers was the speech of the AzR leader in Jabrayil on October 04, 2024, during which he directly accused Washington of the policy of “double standards” related to the AzR and even warned from interfering in the “sovereign affairs” of Baku. I. Aliyev means the sanctions that the US is threatening to impose on the Aliyev regime.

Azerbaijani official media immediately picked up the mood of their president and the theses of his speech and used them as a basis for a broad media campaign to discredit the role of the USA and its allies in the geopolitical processes in the South Caucasus. Aliyev's media explain “destructiveness” of the USA by its intentions to support Yerevan's “revanchist aspirations” and to “pump up” the RA with weapons. And the prepared anti-Azerbaijani sanctions are allegedly part of a broad program to pacify Baku, which opposes such tendencies. Mentioned arguments do not withstand any criticism, given that Washington, accused of supporting “Armenian revanchism”, and the international circles, supporting its policy, have not made any effort to prevent the Second Karabakh War in 2020, ethnic cleansing in Artsakh in 2023, and the Azerbaijani occupation of the internationally recognized territories of the RA itself proper in that period. The illogicality of Azerbaijan's statements is obvious, and, therefore, Washington's pressure on Baku is based on other reasons and motives with which the RA has no direct relation. And, nevertheless, not only Baku, but also Washington is silent regarding the real reasons of tension in the US-Azerbaijan relations. According to the US media, about 60 congressmen, who wrote a letter to the Secretary of State A. Blinken, demand to impose sanctions against the Aliyev regime, citing its corruption, despotic methods of governance and violations of international law both in relation to the Armenian minority of Nagorno-Karabakh and, in fact, Azerbaijanis themselves. In general, it is a standard set of accusations, and the House of Representatives

periodically sends almost identical letters to the White House and the State Department in connection with the situation in Venezuela, Bolivia or Syria.

It is unlikely that the US Congress and the State Department, where, according to I. Aliyev, “this slanderous document was concocted”, will spoil relations with Azerbaijan only because of their rejection of Aliyev's authoritarianism. It is known that one of the postulates of American foreign policy since the time of Roosevelt is that the fact of a foreign leader loyalty to the USA is much more important than his moral and political qualities. As it can be concluded from the above, both the threat of sanctions and other behind-the-scenes methods of pressure of the US on I. Aliyev are conditioned by the circumstances, giving Washington the reason to doubt the loyalty of the Azerbaijani president, who is allegedly trying to escape from the Western tutelage.

It seems there might be some previously taken Azerbaijani obligations to the collective West in exchange for the “restoration of territorial integrity” and the unwillingness to fulfill them in time or in full. It is no coincidence that in his aforementioned “Jabrayil speech” the Azerbaijani leader emphasized several times that Azerbaijan won the war and restored its sovereignty “all by itself” and “at the cost of the lives of its sons.” It seems that Aliyev constantly voiced the idea that he had no deal with the West, and that Azerbaijan did not owe the results of the Karabakh war to anyone.

For a quarter of a century, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was, paradoxically, was a reliable balancer for the Aliyev clan, helping to retain power in the republic on the one hand, and to maintain the geopolitical balance in Azerbaijan's relations with regional powers and global centers on the other,. It was exactly then Armenian Karabakh that allowed Baku to avoid forced entry into any military-political blocs or demonstrations of sympathy for them in the world that was once again polarizing after the collapse of the USSR. The unresolved Karabakh problem allowed Baku to maintain an advantageous distance and not allow excessive interference in its internal and external affairs both by the RF and the IRI, as well as by the collective West. The Aliyevs quite successfully maneuvered between the geopolitical centers, putting forward to each of them the imperative of restoring territorial integrity and sovereignty over Stepanakert as a condition of their loyalty. In the meantime, joining the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011 was aimed at consolidating the country's non-aligned foreign policy, thereby significantly reducing external pressure.

In other words, the destruction of the NKR was the price that Baku set for its loyalty. Of course, it was not a question of any geopolitical power center to be able to solve such an issue on its own. The solution of the Karabakh problem in the interests of Azerbaijan could only become a reality with the consensus between major regional and global actors. The only question was which of them would initiate the process on the basis of a more determined

position, and which would be forced to seek consensus, simply based on its difficult foreign policy situation.

J. Bolton's visit and his messages to Yerevan in October 2018 clearly showed that the initiative to dismantle the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic belonged only to the collective West, meanwhile Armenia's strategic ally RF, in turn, agreed to this process, which is already being constrained by sanctions and preparations for the upcoming Ukrainian war. Tehran, for its part, did not interfere in the consensus Karabakh agreement, not wanting to finally spoil its already less than ideal relations with Baku. There is no need to talk about Turkey's position: it was Ankara that largely contributed to implementation of the Western initiative and also indirectly provided a military component of the Western aid to Baku in the Karabakh campaign of 2020.

Thus, a consensus was reached, which was facilitated by a complex geopolitical situation around the Russian borders. An opinion exists that in the current situation Moscow is trying to “play out” the situation in such a way that the “final dismemberment of the NKR” would occur with its favor and with its direct participation. In this regard, the cessation of hostilities in November 2020, the signing of the Trilateral Document and the introduction of the RPC into the NKR were not intended to freeze the conflict until a political solution is found with consideration of the results of the 44-day war, as Moscow itself assured, but to construct a certain intermediate phase of the dismemberment of the Armenian Republic and provide the RF with the opportunity to hand over the “keys to Karabakh” to I. Aliyev himself. According to this version, the RF was trying to intercept the “initiative for the handover of Karabakh” from the West, in order to receive from Baku the first place in the list of centers, which supported the Azerbaijani aggression, with all the privileges resulting from it. In light of the indifferent attitude of the RPC towards numerous Azerbaijani encroachments in Nagorno-Karabakh, toleration of a total blockade of the republic and reduction of the peacekeeping mission in June 2024, this version seems quite trustworthy.

In this context, it is impossible not to connect obvious signs of the new rapprochement between Moscow and Baku with the above-mentioned arguments. It seems that the parties have established not only mutually interesting trade, energy and logistics projects, but also “geopolitical solidarity”, based on some kind of agreement as the basis of their relations. In any case, in addition to the narrative about the “friendship of dictators”, actively promoted by some media outlets, there are similar opinions in the West as well.

Thus, based on the new processes observed around and within Azerbaijan, it can be concluded that a rivalry has unfolded between the West and the RF for the right to be considered as an “exceptional actor” in the military resolution of the Karabakh problem in favor of Baku. And, consequently, the right to make demands on Baku in accordance with such a status. In this context, R. Erdogan's July statement about Turkey's merits in the

occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh acquires a different meaning than many experts have stated so far. It seems credible to assume that the Turkish leader's statement was not intended to “put in place” the “presumptuous” I. Aliyev, but to help him neutralize the Russian-Western rivalry for the role of Baku's “main benefactor” in the Karabakh problem. R. Erdogan made it clear to both the West and Moscow that if Azerbaijan owes anything to anyone for the “liberation of Karabakh”, it can only be Turkey, whose direct participation in the war put an end to the problem. Ankara has every reason to be categorical in its tone, as its ally Baku has found itself in a situation where various centers are demanding payments for the “Karabakh debt”, and in a completely opposite logic to Azerbaijan's further behavior.

Moscow expects Baku to at least maintain neutrality in the global confrontation between the West and Russia, closely cooperate in the sale of energy resources and ensure unimpeded trade and logistical communications with Iran. The US and the alliance led by it demand the opposite from Baku: integration into the Western bloc, a thorough revision of relations with the RF and the IRI, providing the NATO camp with conditions for creating a bridgehead on Azerbaijani territory to prevent the establishment of geopolitical ties and alliances in Asia that could contradict the interests of the global West.

Undoubtedly, Baku understands where such obligations can lead and what consequences they can have for Azerbaijan in case of deepening confrontation between Western countries and the Russian-Iranian duo. And, obviously, it was I. Aliyev's attempts to avoid fulfilling hidden agreements on Nagorno-Karabakh that caused tension in his relations with the West. As a result, on the one hand, the Azerbaijani leader is trying to prove with the harsh rhetoric that there were no agreements regarding the exchange of Nagorno-Karabakh for unconditional loyalty to the West, and that the military victory over the Armenians is Baku's exclusive merit. On the other hand, he is trying in every way to show that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is not exhausted, and that the parties have a long way to go on the path to peace. Meanwhile, according to open sources, the US and its allies are pushing Baku to sign the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty. From this it can be concluded that the deal between Baku and the West was really made, and, according to it, I. Aliyev should kick off fulfilling his part of the obligations after establishing control over the NKR, which, according to his assurances, would end the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and make it possible to sign a peace treaty. However, Baku is now making it clear in every possible way that the conflict has the potential for a new escalation, and, therefore, there is no point in consolidating the current *status quo*.

It should be understood that constant making of new, often absurd and unfulfillable demands on Armenia, at this stage can only be aimed at stalling the negotiation process and nothing more. The same applies to Baku's constant false reports about violations of the ceasefire on the line of contact by the Armenian side. In a word, Aliyev makes it clear in

every possible way that the conflict is not over, and as long as he does not achieve the conclusion of a peace treaty on his own terms, allegedly neutralizing the “Armenian revanchism”, Baku will not be ready to begin an open confrontation with the RF and the IRI.

Obviously, I. Aliyev acting with the confidence that the termination of the Karabakh agreement is impossible as long as the most significant factor plays into his hands. If the dissolution of the Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was possible only under the conditions of reaching a consensus between all regional players and global centers, then there is no such consensus to hold Baku accountable for its unfulfilled obligations. I. Aliyev believes that with R. Erdogan's support and guardianship, he has secured the opportunity to pay off his “creditors” as he deems necessary, or to refuse his “debts” altogether.

Now it is up to the “creditors”, who, in accordance with the rich traditions of the classical Eastern diplomacy, consider themselves deprived and deceived in this game.