

On the opportunity missed by I. Aliyev at COP29

ARVAK Center comment, 29.11.2024¹

Despite the skeptical assessments of international experts regarding the results of COP29, Baku is trying to show that the conference was absolutely fruitful, both in terms of the global climate agenda and the regional environmental issues of interest to Azerbaijan. Regarding the latter, Baku shows particular interest, as it is important for I. Aliyev's regime to convince its society that the significant financial resources spent on the organization of the climate summit and the large-scale inconvenience caused to Baku residents due to the influx of tens of thousands of guests into the Azerbaijani capital were fully justified.

Hoping for a significant resonance from COP29, Baku tried to turn the conference into a tool for the personal promotion of Ilham Aliyev and a platform for increasing Azerbaijan's weight in the world. However, the expected composition of participants disappointed the Azerbaijani authorities. Only two significant leaders attended the conference – UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. However, their presence did not add sensationalism to the event, due to the special ties between Ankara and London with Baku.

Already at the opening of the summit on November 12, 2024, it became clear that COP29 would not become a milestone in the international climate agenda, as the level of delegations from key countries excluded the prospect of reaching an agreement on the creation of a global “*Environmental Fund*”. The establishment of this fund, with an initial resource of \$1 trillion and the prospect of increasing to \$2.5 trillion, was initially considered the main goal of COP29, which some world media characterized as a “*financial summit*”. The lack of consensus among the fund's main potential donors became apparent long before the event in Baku, and the lack of prospects for reaching an agreement forced the most influential world leaders to refuse to travel to Azerbaijan.

Baku, as already noted, preferred to veil the failure of the conference's global agenda and highlight Azerbaijan's ‘*successes*’ at COP29. In particular, the Azerbaijani media emphasizes the signing of two agreements on the margins of the conference, which should radically change the role and place of the republic on the world ‘*environmental map*’, as well as contribute to its economic growth. These are the so-called ‘*green transition*’ projects, one of which involves Azerbaijan's participation in the transit of ‘*green energy*’, and the other in its production. Thus, on the sidelines of the summit, an agreement was signed between Baku, Tashkent, Astana, and the Saudi company *ACWA Power* on laying a ‘*green cable*’ from Central Asia along the bottom of the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, where it should be connected to the ‘*Black Sea cable*’ leading from Georgia to Europe.

Another event highlighted by Baku as a success was the multilateral agreement between the Azerbaijani state oil company *SOCAR Green*, the UAE company *Masdar*, the *European Bank for Reconstruction and Development*, the *Asian Development Bank*, and the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank*. This document regulates the financing of two solar power

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 29.11.2024.

plants (SPPs) in Bilasuvar and Neftchala with a total capacity of 758 megawatts and a cost of \$670 million.

Although these two projects are indeed important for Azerbaijan, the agreements on them were reached long before COP29, and the signing of the agreements could have taken place much earlier. Obviously, I. Aliyev persuaded the partners to postpone the signing ceremonies for the climate conference, thereby trying to add significance to it in the eyes of both the external world and the Azerbaijani society.

Meanwhile, Baku's efforts to engage the international community in solving Azerbaijan's environmental problems have been unsuccessful. The issue of saving the Caspian Sea raised at COP29 not only failed to attract significant attention from global centers but also revealed the catastrophic scale of the disrupted ecological balance of the water body. Discussions on this problem at the conference made it clear that the Caspian countries are still far from a mutual understanding of the anthropogenic causes of the Caspian's shallowing and pollution and, accordingly, from the development of a common strategy to save the water body. Before the conference, particularly in Azerbaijan, it was not customary to talk about the fact that the shallowing of the sea threatens not only the country's ecology but also its economic and political security. COP29 contributed to the widespread dissemination of forecasts and expert assessments that the Caspian Sea, which had until recently contributed to Azerbaijan's development, could very quickly turn into its “graveyard.”

The sea level decreases by an average of 70 cm per year and is already close to the lowest mark (1977) in all the time of expert observations of its balance. If this trend continues, the coastal soils of the republic face erosion, the climatic balance in the eastern regions of the country will be disrupted, the offshore oil and gas wells will lose favorable operating conditions and profitability, port infrastructure will be in shallow water, and navigation will stop, nullifying efforts to create trans-Caspian logistics within the framework of *One Belt, One Road* and *North–South* global projects. Thus, the shallowing of the Caspian Sea is essentially a ‘the sword of Damocles’ for Azerbaijan. This threat has become much more tangible for Azerbaijani society after COP29, which cannot but affect social sentiments in the republic.

Thus, Ilham Aliyev has virtually nothing to boast about to domestic and international audiences following the conference. COP29 not only did not become the apotheosis of his political career but instead revealed numerous problems facing the republic, undermining both its ecological and economic image as well as the positions of the ruling regime.

Meanwhile, according to experts, Azerbaijan had a real chance to achieve more acceptable political and image results at COP29 if it had used this platform for the real normalization of relations with Armenia. There is an opinion that it was I. Aliyev's reluctance to sign a framework peace document with Yerevan on the margins of the conference that largely caused the lack of attention from world's major capitals to the climate summit in Baku. These leaders would have been more favorable to the conference, and it would have become significant even in the climate agenda if Baku had shown the will to overcome enmity and abandon its obviously unacceptable demands on Yerevan. In this regard, the overall skepticism towards the conference may also be interpreted as a manifestation of

solidarity with Armenia, which was recommended by West to finally abandon its 'claims' for Nagorno-Karabakh in exchange for reciprocal steps towards reconciliation from Baku.

It is unlikely that Aliyev does not understand this, but he apparently has several reasons to refuse or postpone this step for a certain time. The reasons may be both personal and geopolitical in nature.

It has long been noted that I. Aliyev is intoxicated by his victories in Nagorno-Karabakh and, as a result, is losing touch with reality and the objective limits of Azerbaijan's capabilities. Feeling military-political superiority over Yerevan at this particular time, he does not accept the current *status quo* as a "starting point" for new relations with Armenia. In his opinion, Azerbaijan still has resources to shift the situation towards even greater concessions from Yerevan, and, accordingly, there is not yet sufficient international resistance to this policy.

On the other hand, some argue that foreign political partners contributed to his refusal to formalize peace at the conference. Specifically, this may refer to Russia, which, according to the logic of current geopolitical processes in the region, is the least interested in reconciliation and constructive relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. As long as a mutually acceptable 'zero point' has not been established in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, Moscow can be confident in maintaining some influence in the region and, accordingly, in the inability of the Western coalition to firmly establish itself in the South Caucasus. Given the complications in Ukraine, Russia would indeed benefit from 'freezing' the situation of '*neither war nor peace*' in the Armenian-Azerbaijani track and waiting for better times and conditions to reclaim the role of the main arbiter in the long-standing Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute. Judging by all appearances, such a position of Moscow suits I. Aliyev, who, apart from his personal ambitions, has additional arguments to present to the West regarding his unwillingness to reconcile with Armenia. This allows him to shift the 'blame' for his intransigence onto Moscow, his actual dependence on it, and thereby gain additional time to put pressure on Yerevan. According to I. Aliyev, the geopolitical realities in the region and the world are such that at any moment, a real opportunity could open up for Baku to 'obtain' all of Armenia, not just the most maximalist concessions from it.

Ultimately, these expectations outweighed the chance to achieve a 'triumph' and 'peacekeeper laurels' from the West at the COP29 conference, something Washington and Brussels have long been urging him to pursue. Now, Baku is taking a significant risk, as the paradigm of processes in the South Caucasus and the broader Western Asia region could just as easily lead to entirely opposite scenarios than those anticipated by I. Aliyev. In that case, the 'fruitless' COP29 conference or any other platform offered to him as an opportunity to end the conflict with Armenia could become a fatal omission for Azerbaijani politics.

According to experts familiar with the origins of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, unlike his predecessor, Aliyev Sr. would hardly have missed such an opportunity. He would have found diplomatic methods to influence Russia to convince it of the lack of alternatives for Azerbaijan. However, in contrast to his calculating bureaucrat father, Ilham Aliyev is a passionate player by nature and from his rich experience in his youth, as can be gleaned from Azerbaijani opposition sources. Evidently, the refusal to take what has already been 'won' and the risky pursuit of the whole bank – indeed, this is his element and credo. His large

gambling debts were once paid off by his father. Perhaps, as a result of Aliyev Jr's current political game, his losses will have to be covered by Azerbaijani society.