

## About some theses from I. Aliyev's interview

ARVAK Center comment, 19.01.2025<sup>1</sup>

The aggressive statements made by the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, during an interview with the local media on January 7, 2025, were quite unexpected. The thoughts of the Azerbaijani leader do not fit into the logic of the negotiation process, which, despite its low dynamics, by its very existence implies the maintenance of a constructive atmosphere of and the demonstration of diplomatic restraint by the parties. Meanwhile, Aliyev called Armenia a “*fascist country*” that must be “*finally defeated*” and openly threatened to seize the so-called “*Zangezur Corridor*” by force.

During the interview, he criticized France for its allegedly “*emphasized anti-Azerbaijani policy*” and destructive initiatives in the international arena. At the same time, Aliyev signaled to Iran his dissatisfaction with the rhetoric of some spiritual leaders of the Islamic Republic, who criticize Baku “*everywhere*”. Finally, he voiced anti-Israeli messages. Although Aliyev did not mention the word “*Israel*” even once, he declared his unconditional support for Palestine, the principle of “*two states*”, and Azerbaijan's solidarity with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the League of Arab States (LAS), thereby making it clear that he does not accept the position of the Jewish state. Ilham Aliyev also criticized the outgoing US president Joe Biden's administration for its allegedly “*non-constructive actions*” towards Baku, emphasizing that he expects positive signals from Donald Trump, which could serve as the basis for future “*US–Azerbaijan strategic partnership*”.

Aliyev did not say a single negative word about Russia, which is probably due to the fact that the head of Azerbaijan had already subjected it to harsh criticism in his previous statements related to the crash of the *AZAL* airliner on December 25, 2024.

It seems that the Azerbaijani leader convened the press conference with the intention to convey several important ideas to the external and internal audience. Despite the “*epochal successes*” recorded in recent years in restoration of sovereignty, state-building, and the economy, Baku apparently has many problems, mainly related to “*Armenian revanchism*” and the unfriendly behavior of some neighbors and international partners. According to Aliyev, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is still far from its peaceful resolution, a number of Western countries continue their “*policy of escalation in the South Caucasus*”, and neighboring Russia and Iran pose a threat to Baku's security by disregarding its interests and authority. Throughout all of Aliyev's responses, the idea that Azerbaijan is guided solely by its own agenda and has no intention of yielding to the pressure of external actors seeking to use Baku against its national interests runs like a red thread.

The only power with which Aliyev expressed unconditional mutual understanding during the interview was Turkey. According to him, only Turkey enjoys Azerbaijan's full trust and shares all its views on the international agenda. This means that only Ankara is allowed to participate in shaping Baku's future behavior in the context of regional and global geopolitical processes.

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<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 17.01.2025.

The Azerbaijani leader's revelations suggest that Baku is trying to shed some of the commitments it once made to international “partners” and “allies”. This is of particular concern to Russia and Israel, whose relations with Azerbaijan have deepened over the years to the point where they pose significant challenges for Baku amid the changing geopolitical landscape. The timing of Aliyev's interview supports this version, as it was scheduled ahead of three significant events that could drastically alter the current balance of power on the international stage, thereby reducing Baku's room for maneuver between the main actors in the region.

1. A few days after Aliyev's interview, on January 17, 2025, a treaty between Russia and Iran on “strategic partnership” was to be signed in Moscow, which was essentially aimed at a close military-political alliance with all its ensuing consequences. Due to the signed, essentially allied treaty with Russia from February 22, 2022, as well as participation in the global trade and “North–South” energy project secured by a number of legal agreements, Azerbaijan faces the threat of being finally drawn into the orbit of the Russian-Iranian project for global resistance to the West, which may escalate into military confrontation in the near future. In this context, Azerbaijan's geographical location, which until recently was considered one of its key advantages, makes it extremely vulnerable if the new Russian-Iranian tandem decides for strategic reasons to establish more reliable land, sea, and air connections between Russia and Iran.

2. Donald Trump, who will begin his second term on January 20, 2025, may, contrary to popular belief, may adopt the Biden administration's developments in the South Caucasus and resort to even harsher pressure on Baku to dismantle the Russian-Iranian strategy. There is also a high probability of attempts by Washington and Tel Aviv to coerce Baku into a confrontational policy against Iran, which could have severe consequences for Azerbaijan.

3. In the Middle East, tensions are growing between Baku's traditional allies – Turkey and Israel – which could escalate in the near future into a confrontation on Syrian territory involving proxy forces. The consequences of such scenarios could be dangerous for Baku, which has built its combat potential based on interaction with these two countries and continues to maintain a complex balance of relations with Russia and Iran, relying on both Ankara and Tel Aviv. As Turkish-Israeli relations enter a “hot” phase, Azerbaijan will have to make its strategic choice in favor of the side closest to it. Withdrawal from the conflict of allies is almost impossible unless it involves a situation for Azerbaijan that *a priori* excludes support for either side. Apparently, Azerbaijan wants to create just such a situation as a prerequisite for distancing itself from the Turkish-Israeli conflict and from involvement in the conflict of interests between Tel Aviv and Turkey. As shown by the discussed interview, Baku first of all wants to demonstrate that it does not have “unconditional” allies to whom it can turn when Azerbaijan itself “*faces existential threats*” in the region and the world. It shows all sides that it has a backlog of accumulated contradictions and unresolved issues with Russia, Iran, Israel, the EU, and the US, preventing it from making any radical choice. This is essentially true even for Turkey, which, despite Aliyev's rhetoric about unconditional coincidence of interests, has not yet been able to achieve the highly needed resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani “peace process” from Azerbaijan.

**Secondly**, Aliyev is once again reviving the issue of the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation, presumably to show that Azerbaijan's security problems are not yet exhausted. His radical rhetoric about “*Armenian fascism*” and the allegedly gaining momentum “*Armenian revanchism*” is intended to show that Azerbaijan is “*on the brink of a new war*” and therefore cannot afford to be drawn into large-scale games by regional and global actors. This logic also includes the delay of the negotiation agenda, which allows Baku to maneuver between global centers, and periodically refers to the prematurity of the final choice of geopolitical vector given Azerbaijan's *de facto* state of war.

An analysis of the international situation suggests that, at least for the time being, Baku does not have the necessary international consensus for aggression against the territory of Syunik, as it did in 2020 and 2023 in the case of the Artsakh Republic. However, it can be expected that in the logic of maneuvering by using the Armenian-Azerbaijani problem to distance itself from the demands of allies and partners, Baku may well initiate local clashes on the Armenian border. This is quite expected development, which, from Baku's point of view, will allow it to mix up the plans of the West, Russia, Turkey, Israel, and Iran and distance itself from their increasing multidirectional pressure on Azerbaijan.

Overall, the review of Ilham Aliyev's messages and signals of in the interview of January 7, 2025, gives the impression that the Azerbaijani president is rather in a state of anxiety rather than feeling the confidence that he tried to convey to his audience. This is quite understandable, given the extreme complexity of the geopolitical situation in which Azerbaijan, along with other neighboring countries, finds itself. Just like Armenia, with its own no less complicated problems.