

## The crash of the AZAL liner in the context of I. Aliyev's Russian policy ARVAK Center comment, 31.12.2024<sup>1</sup>

The crash of the *Embraer E190* aircraft of the Azerbaijani airline *AZAL* on December 25, 2024, revealed the fact that, contrary to their declared statements, relations between Russia and Azerbaijan are experiencing a difficult period. International practice shows that in similar cases, strategic partners and allies try to smooth over the incident quickly, especially if it is due to a human error or *force majeure* circumstances. Normally, it is not necessary for the parties to have close relations in order to resolve similar problems constructively and without political consequences.

An illustrative example is the shooting down of the *Siberian Airlines Tu-154M* over the Black Sea on October 4, 2001, which was flying the Tel Aviv–Novosibirsk route. The plane was mistakenly attacked by a *5V28* missile from the *S-200V* system of the Ukrainian Air Defense Forces, which was conducting training exercises at a range in Crimea. After an investigation by a joint Russian-Ukrainian-Israeli commission, Kiev admitted its guilt, apologized to the parties, paid financial compensation, and dismissed several high-ranking officials, including the minister of defense. Thus, the incident was resolved.

In the case of the Azerbaijani plane crash, the situation took on a distinctive character, with signs of a major political scandal. Both sides (Russia and Azerbaijan) equally contributed to this course of events. Baku did not consider the fact that the North Caucasus region was under aerial attack by the Ukrainian Armed Forces at the time of the tragic incident, and the Air Defense Forces of the Southern Military District of Russia were operating in an emergency mode. Moreover, without waiting for an official investigation and the final clarification of the circumstances of the crash, pro-government media resources in Baku launched accusations against Moscow, sharply increasing the degree of anti-Russian sentiment in their society. “*Immediate apology from Putin*” became the main demand of the socio-political mood of the republic, which in Azerbaijan is formed in the corridors of power.

For its part, Russia also objectively contributed to the escalation of the political scandal with several actions. These included the award of a medal to Ramzan Kadyrov's nephew, the secretary of the Chechen Security Council Hamzat Kadyrov, for “*successfully repelling the air attack of the Ukrainian Armed Forces on Grozny on December 25*”. Additionally, there was the story of the dismantling of an impromptu memorial to the crash victims near the Azerbaijani consulate in Yekaterinburg.

However, according to Azerbaijanis, the most negative impression was left by reports that the Russian side tried to steer the investigation down a “*deliberately false path*” immediately after the crash. According to several Azerbaijani and Kazakhstani sources, officials from the Third and Fourth Departments of the Russian Foreign Ministry, along with representatives of Russian special services, attempted secret negotiations with Baku and Astana to develop a version of the *AZAL* airliner crash that would exclude the fact of a missile attack. Later, the Russian Foreign Ministry denied this information, but blamed this “*provocation*” not on Baku and Astana, but on the “*Western centers*”.

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<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 30.12.2024.

It appears that after the Azerbaijani side categorically rejected the possibility of "negotiating" during the aforementioned private contacts, Russian president Vladimir Putin called his Azerbaijani counterpart. During the phone conversation with Ilham Aliyev on December 28, 2024, Putin confirmed that the plane had been damaged in Russian airspace and apologized to his Azerbaijani colleague. At that time, the Joint Commission had not yet made any official statements, indicating that the Russian leader was in a hurry to defuse the situation, which had taken on a threatening character for Russian-Azerbaijani allied relations.

However, it should be noted that the call of Russia's top leader did not smooth over the incident and the scandal brewing around it. On December 27, 2024, AZAL, following the decision of the State Civil Aviation Agency of Azerbaijan, indefinitely canceled flights to 10 Russian cities. While this measure could be seen as a technical necessity for further assessing the safety of flights over Russian airspace, another decision made by Baku was purely political.

On December 28, 2024, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry announced a review and tightening of the rules regarding the length of stay of Russian citizens in Azerbaijan. According to Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesperson Ayhan Hajizade, by making this decision, the Azerbaijani authorities are acting "*based on the principles of parity and reciprocity in matters of temporary stay and migration, as in all matters of foreign policy*". Hajizade was apparently referring to the Russian Foreign Ministry's statement two days earlier that, as of January 1, 2025, "*the period of temporary stay in Russia for foreigners arriving without a visa cannot exceed a total of 90 days within one calendar year*". Thus, the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry, tightening the rules specifically for Russians, refers to the principle of "*parity*", although Moscow changed its rules for all visa-free arrivals, regardless of their nationality. As can be seen from this information, there can be no talk of "*parity*". Hajizade's mention of "*parity and reciprocity in political matters*" is also indicative, probably signaling Baku's intention to further toughen its stance on many issues on the Russian-Azerbaijani agenda.

Against the backdrop of the high-profile incident with the AZAL plane, the already visible caution of Russian policy towards Baku has become even more noticeable. It seems that the tragic case with the airliner provided Baku with an opportunity to adjust its relations with Moscow and to act regardless of the consequences. This is also evidenced by the behavior of Ilham Aliyev, who is escalating the situation to the limit, beyond which signs of an open political rift with Russia become visible.

Even after the Russian leader's apology, the Azerbaijani president not only did not try to reduce the tension but also toughened his rhetoric: "*Admitting guilt and timely apologizing to Azerbaijan were measures and steps that had to be taken. Unfortunately, for the first three days, we heard nothing from Russia but absurd versions*". This statement can hardly be seen as anything other than a personal attack on Vladimir Putin, although given the "*high degree of mutual understanding developed through years of joint work and friendship between the two leaders*", it would have been expected that the incident with the crash would be resolved privately and, moreover, without public accusations.

However, Ilham Aliyev is at least trying not to let the issue “*cool down*”, and in this initiative, judging by Azerbaijani media publications, he is actively using recommendations from Ankara. In the days following the plane crash, the Azerbaijani leader discussed the incident with his Turkish counterpart, while Azerbaijani foreign minister Jeyhun Bayramov was constantly in touch with Hakan Fidan.

It is also noteworthy that after Aliyev made the above-mentioned statement, Putin called Aliyev for the second time on December 29, 2024, and this time the phone conversation likely took on a different tone.

There could be several reasons why Aliyev emphasizes the tragic incident with the *AZAL* plane. Firstly, it can be assumed that by escalating the scandal, Aliyev is expanding the scope of “*bargaining*” with Moscow, seeking to gain additional benefits in the overall context of Russian-Azerbaijani political and economic relations. It is also possible that Aliyev is increasingly dissatisfied with the reputation of being a satellite of “*Putin's authoritarianism*”. In this regard, according to Aliyev, the Russian-Azerbaijani scandal could weaken Western criticism of Azerbaijan, which focuses on the deteriorating situation with democracy in the republic and Baku's actions to legalize Russian income bypassing Western sanctions.

Aliyev apparently has reasons to be concerned about this. Baku's image has indeed suffered significantly following the news that Russia and Azerbaijan were trying to “*impose*” a new gas transit contract on Ukraine, under which the Russian gas would be pumped to Europe under the Azerbaijani “*labeling*”. This scheme was discussed by Putin and Aliyev at their meetings in Moscow in April and Baku in August 2024. The developed plan would have allowed Russia, despite the hostilities, to continue exporting its gas to the West through Ukraine, and Azerbaijan would have had the opportunity to earn money “*out of nothing*”. However, as is known, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on December 20, 2024, that he excludes such a possibility, thereby jeopardizing a vital component of Russian-Azerbaijani cooperation. Zelensky's arguments portrayed Azerbaijan in a very unfavorable light, as a participant in the Russian gas venture, which also wanted to profit from the “*Ukrainian blood and dignity*”.

The plans for relabeling the gas fell through, thereby reducing Baku's interests in the partnership track with Russia. It is not yet clear what else, besides the already lost “*gas money*”, Russia can offer Azerbaijan to compensate for the reputational and political damage of the “*friendship*” with Moscow. In this context, it is worth recalling the once-promised profitable participation of Azerbaijan in the transcontinental “*North–South*” logistics project initiated by Russia and Iran. However, this program is still in a draft stage due to unresolved technical, financial, and political problems. Moreover, the Russian-Iranian logistics project is under threatened by recent events in the Middle East. The Syrian factor has changed the geopolitical realities in the region from Europe to Africa and Central Asia. The actual destruction of the “*Resistance Axis*” (or the “*Shia Crescent*”), and the role of Turkey and Israel in the reformatting processes of this region complicate the tasks of Tehran and Moscow. Israel and the United States have more frequently voiced threats of an attack on Iran, and after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the imminent inauguration of Donald Trump, the likelihood of such a plan being implemented has significantly increased. With

such developments, not only the prospects of Azerbaijan's profitable integration into the Russian-Iranian project will be in question, but the republic itself may find itself between the “hammer” and the “anvil” of a large-scale anti-Iranian campaign.

Perhaps this is why Ilham Aliyev's behavior shows signs of moving away from close cooperation with Russia, which is allied with Iran. One such sign is the scandal over the downed airliner, which Baku is inflating. It should be emphasized that Aliyev's signals to the West are occurring on the eve of the signing of the Russian-Iranian “*strategic alliance*” treaty. Ilham Aliyev cannot ignore the fact that in the context of the expected geopolitical deal, the importance of his country for Moscow and Tehran will increase significantly, and consequently, the pressure from Russia and Iran on Azerbaijan will also increase, aiming to limit Baku's ability to maneuver between geopolitical poles. Aliyev wants to convey this message to the West, especially to Donald Trump, who has so far been unwilling to engage with him, and to obtain his security guarantees for Azerbaijan in case Baku decides to break relations with Moscow and Tehran.

Thus, on the eve of the anticipated large-scale transformations in the region and the world, related to the events in Syria and the inauguration of the new US president, Azerbaijan is essentially sending messages about the ambiguity of its position and role in the context of the Russian-Iranian strategic rapprochement. It indicates that it is capable, of escalating politically with Russia if deemed necessary, despite the long-standing “*personal friendship and mutual understanding*” with Vladimir Putin, as well as the “*strategic alliance*” agreement with Russia signed on February 22, 2022.