

Internal Political Aspects of I. Aliyev's Initiative toward Russia

ARVAK Center comment, 21.02.2025¹

Tensions between Baku and Moscow continue to escalate, primarily driven by Azerbaijan deepening the crisis.

The formal reason for the political-diplomatic conflict was an incident involving the crash of an Azerbaijan Airlines (AZAL) passenger aircraft on December 25, 2024, in Aktau, Kazakhstan². Immediately after the crash, media outlets close to the Azerbaijan's government placed all responsibility on the Russian side, accusing its air defense and civil aviation services of negligence and unprofessionalism. President Ilham Aliyev's speech on December 29, 2024, brought Azerbaijan's claims against Russia to an official level, thus politicizing the incident³. In his speech, the head of Azerbaijan expressed outrage not so much at the mistaken attack on the aircraft by an air defense missile system but at what he described as official Moscow's attempts to evade responsibility and its unwillingness to admit guilt. The main challenge from I. Aliyev to Russia was the fact that his accusations were voiced before the start of the international investigation and the announcement of its preliminary results.

Despite this, Russian president Vladimir Putin called I. Aliyev twice and, according to Azerbaijani media, apologized for the incident. Additionally, according to Russian media, he urged his Azerbaijani counterpart to wait for the official investigation results. Nevertheless, I. Aliyev insisted on deepening the crisis. On 06.01.2025, he once again addressed the public, reiterating his previously stated points and demanding “*justice*”⁴. Subsequent events only contributed to the rising tension in Azerbaijani-Russian relations. On 22.01.2025, I. Aliyev met with the Ukrainian president V. Zelensky at the Davos Economic Forum and behaved with him in a particularly warm manner, demonstrating no grievances towards Kyiv regarding its involvement in the AZAL airliner incident.

Then, on 05.02.2025, the Azerbaijani leader issued a special order to allocate \$1 million to Ukraine for the restoration of energy infrastructure destroyed by the Russian armed forces, which was perceived by the Russian political circles as a deliberate move against Moscow. After this, with a week's notice, Baku completely suspended the activities of the Russian agency “Rossotrudnichestvo”⁵ and closed its overseas representative office in Baku, the “Russian house”, officially justifying this step with the alleged “*lack of proper registration*”⁶.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 18.02.2025.

² “A plane crash in Aktau”. Interfax, 29.12.2024–04.02.2025 (in Rus.), <https://www.interfax.ru/chronicle/aviakatastrofa-v-aktau.html/> (download date: 13.02.2025).

³ “Aliyev: Russia must admit guilt and fulfill compensation in connection with the plane crash”. Голос Америки, (in Rus.), 29.12.2024, <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/azerbaijan-s-president-says-crashed-jetliner-was-shot-down-by-russia-unintentionally-/7917549.html/> (download date: 13.02.2025).

⁴ “We demand justice. Aliyev blamed Russia for AZAL plane crash and called for punishment of those responsible”. BBC NEWS, 06.01.2025, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c047w9xd1gdo> (download date: 14.02.2025).

⁵ The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) was established in 2008 by presidential decree. Since 2021, the agency's foreign missions abroad have been informally named “Russian House”.

⁶ “The Russian house in Baku announced the suspension of activities”. RIA Novosti (in Rus.), 11.02.2025, <https://ria.ru/20250211/baku-1098623849.html/> (download date: 14.02.2025).

Subsequently, it had been announced that the activities of the Russian news agency *Sputnik*'s branch in Baku would be limited. Finally, amid these developments, Azerbaijani sources reported that group acting in the interests of Russia, consisting of former high-ranking Azerbaijani officials had allegedly been exposed in Baku⁷. Azerbaijani media speculated that the “*exposed agents*” were cooperating closely with the “Russian House” in Baku, which allegedly carried out subversive activities in Azerbaijan under the aegis of the Russian special services.

The situation with “Rossotrudnichestvo” and the “Russian House” showed Baku’s unequivocal intention to expand the front of political and diplomatic confrontation with Moscow. As a result, Russian political circles came to understand that the incident with the *AZAL* plane crash incident was not the cause, but rather the pretext for the surge of anti-Russian sentiments in Azerbaijan, a political maneuver by I. Aliyev to create a crisis in AzR–RF relations.

The ARVAK Center has already referred to examples of international practice where the unintentional downing of a civilian aircraft did not become a reason for complicating relations between friendly states⁸. International practice suggests that the elimination of political consequences of such tragic incidents is conducted without excessive publicity, based on mutual respect and consideration of the interests of the parties involved. Essentially, V. Putin proposed to I. Aliyev to follow this practice and resolve all issues in the spirit of “*friendship and partnership*” without politicizing the problem. The Azerbaijani leader, however, apparently decided not to meet his Russian colleague halfway, as evidenced by the progressive nature of the interstate crisis even after two phone calls prove.

An overview of expert opinions regarding I. Aliyev’s motives, which led to the sharp change in the tone of relations with Russia, can be generally summarized by the thesis that Baku began to grow weary of “*alliance*” with Moscow. Russia effectively contributed to the neutralization of the Armenian resistance in Nagorno-Karabakh and the liquidation of the NKR, after which its armed contingent finally left the territory of Azerbaijan. The option of “capturing” the so-called “Zangezur Corridor” and transferring it under the control of the Russian FSB is obviously no longer relevant. Therefore, Baku has no further interest in relying on Moscow, which has lost its former influence on the political situation in Yerevan. Moreover, close partnership or alliance with Moscow could become a “toxic asset” in a broader geopolitical context. This concern in Baku may have intensified after the re-election of D. Trump, whose foreign policy course and strategy were difficult to predict at that time. In this situation, I. Aliyev may have resorted to demonstrating to the new American administration his readiness to move towards a strategic rapprochement with the US, with the prospect of becoming Washington’s key partner in the region. It is possible that for this very purpose, another diplomatic scandal between Azerbaijan and Iran was initiated at the end of December and the beginning of January 2025, during which the sides exchanged accusations of disrespecting sovereignty and escalating the crisis in relations⁹. However, this

⁷ “In Azerbaijan, ex-Foreign Minister and other former officials accused of spying in favor of Russia”. Armenia News, 10.02.2025, <https://news.am/eng/news/865990.html> (download date: 13.02.2025).

⁸ “The crash of the *AZAL* liner in the context of I. Aliyev’s Russian policy. Armenian Analytical Center ARVAK, 31.12.2024, <https://arvak.am/en/the-crash-of-the-azal-liner/> (download date: 14.02.2025).

⁹ “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan expressed protest to official Tehran”. Kavkazskiy uzel (in

incident remained overshadowed by the parallel unfolding of the Azerbaijani-Russian conflict, which allowed I. Aliyev to demonstrate his readiness to sharply distance himself from the main US competitor in Western Asia—Russia.

For Baku, sending such signals to Washington was especially important against the backdrop of the preparation and signing of the “*Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and Iran*” on January 17, 2025¹⁰. Given that Moscow and Tehran attach special significance to Azerbaijan in the context of their geostrategic rapprochement and the creation of the global “North–South” transport and communication route, Baku needed to demonstrate its independence. Specifically, Azerbaijan had to show that it is not an interested participant in the emerging new, essentially anti-Western, geopolitical alliance, and that with certain support, it is ready to minimize its role as a bridge between Russia and Iran.

In this regard, it is particularly interesting that on the eve of the signing of the Russian-Iranian treaty, a meeting between V. Putin and I. Aliyev was planned in Moscow. It was expected that at this meeting, it was assumed that, among other things, agreements would be reached on deepening Azerbaijan’s integration into the “North–South” project and on the urgent solution problems creating legal, political, and technical obstacles to the implementation of the Russian-Iranian global project. The meeting was scheduled for December 25, 2024, and when the *AZAL* plane crashed, the Azerbaijani leader’s plane was already flying over Moscow. While this may be a simple coincidence, the fact remains that the crash of the Azerbaijani civilian airliner became the reason (or pretext) for I. Aliyev to refuse an important meeting for V. Putin. The Azerbaijani leader ordered the plane to make a U-turn and head back to Baku¹¹, thus leaving the Moscow meeting agenda unknown.

These circumstances are generally explained by experts as the reasons for I. Aliyev’s behavior and his adopted rhetoric against Moscow. However, when considering the foreign policy aspects of the Azerbaijani-Russian crisis, they mostly overlook a number of factors in Azerbaijan’s domestic agenda, which may also be indirectly related to the deterioration of Baku–Moscow relations. This primarily concerns the alleged exposure of a spy network composed of former high-ranking officials and their “*secret connection*” with the staff of “*Rossotrudnichestvo*” in Baku. This involves the former head of the presidential administration, a close associate of H. Aliyev, Ramiz Mehdiyev; the former foreign minister Elmar Mammadyarov; the former minister of culture Abulfaz Garayev; the former minister of youth and sports Azad Rahimov; and the former head of the ministry of national security (MNS) Eldar Mahmudov. Except for E. Mammadyarov and E. Mahmudov, the rest belonged to the team of veterans of the “*New Azerbaijan*” party founded by H. Aliyev and were dismissed from their positions on various pretexts from 2019 to 2021. According to opposition circles in Azerbaijan, they were part of the pro-Russian forces in the Azerbaijani

Rus.), 01.01.2025, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/407187> (download date: 14.02.2025).

¹⁰ “Russia and Iran signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement”. *Vedomosti* (in Rus.), 17.01.2025, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2025/01/18/1086965-rossiya-i-iran-podpisali-dogovor-o-vseobemlyuschem-strategicheskome-partnerstve/> (download date: 14.02.2025).

¹¹ “Aliyev interrupted his visit to Russia due to the crash of an AZAL plane in Aktau”. *Interfax* (in Rus.), 25.12.2024, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/1000549> (download date: 14.02.2025).

political establishment, and their dismissals generally coincided with the run-up to the 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh and were related to the increased role of Turkey in Azerbaijan's political life.

E. Mahmudov rose to prominence precisely under I. Aliyev but was dismissed and fell out of favor already in 2015. The formal reason for his removal was the so-called “*Case of the MNS generals*”, associated with corruption in the state security system and the total extortion of the country's large and medium-sized businesses by the Azerbaijani intelligence officers¹².

Subsequently, several Azerbaijani experts linked E. Mahmudov's disgrace to suspicions of illegal ties between his department and the intelligence services of RF and IRI¹³. Nevertheless, unlike other high-ranking MNS officials, E. Mahmudov was not arrested¹⁴, presumably because he had extensive compromising materials on the Aliyev family. Along with a special order from I. Aliyev, the former head of the intelligence service, was ordered to stay under house arrest. Special surveillance was established over him, his phones were tapped, and all communication with the outside world was strictly regulated by the relevant services.

E. Mammadyarov was also not considered a cadre of H. Aliyev but later found himself among those suspected of close cooperation with Russia, possibly not without Ankara's recommendation. R. Mehdiyev, E. Mammadyarov, A. Garayev, and A. Rahimov were not placed under “house arrest”, but there is no doubt that every step they took was closely monitored for many years after their high-profile dismissals.

In the context of the crisis in Azerbaijani-Russian relations, the persecution of politicians who have long fallen into disfavor cannot have any practical benefit for I. Aliyev. Especially considering the lack of evidence for the crimes they are now being accused of, and the fact that the individuals mentioned in the Azerbaijani media cannot leave the country and are under close surveillance by the Azerbaijani special services. Given all this, the very physical possibility of their cooperation with Russian intelligence services, as discussed in Azerbaijan, is questionable. Therefore, the initiative to renew the persecution of these individuals aims not so much to add new elements to the overall context of the Azerbaijani-Russian conflict, but rather to resolve certain domestic political issues through this conflict. The crisis in relations with Russia, among other things, could become a convenient pretext for finally settling scores with representatives of the “*pro-Russian*” Azerbaijani elite of the old formation, formed during the time of Heydar Aliyev.

In Azerbaijan, these groups are simplistically referred to as the “*the Yeraz clan*”¹⁵. This

¹² “Experts cited gaps in Azerbaijan's economic security as the reason for Makhmudov's resignation”. Kavkazskij uzal (in Rus.), 19.10.2015, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/270878/> (download date: 15.02.2025).

¹³ “Experts linked the espionage scandal in Azerbaijan's intelligence services to Iran's activities”. Kavkazskij uzal (in Rus.), 30.12.2018, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/329810/> (download date: 15.02.2025).

¹⁴ After the “Generals' case”, the ministry of national security was disbanded, and the national security service and the foreign intelligence service of Azerbaijan were established in its place.

¹⁵ I. e. Yerevanian Azerbaijanis – *Yerevanli Azerbaijanlilar* – *YerAz* – *Yeraz* – a designation applied to individuals from Armenia whom Aliyev Senior surrounded himself with.

clan essentially ruled the republic for many years and managed to establish control over a sizable portion of its financial and economic assets. After the death of Heydar Aliyev, the “Yeraz” clan was “inherited” to I. Aliyev and organized a power transition in Azerbaijan with the expectation of maintaining their positions under the “weak and inexperienced” new president.

However, I. Aliyev, having established himself in his new position, initiated attempts to free himself from the excessive tutelage of the “old guard”¹⁶. The internal political struggle between the president and his predecessor’s entourage lasted about 15 years, during which I. Aliyev, with the support of his ambitious wife, formed the so-called “*Absheron clan*” or “*Pashayev clan*”, led by Mehriban Aliyeva’s (née Pashayeva) father, brothers, and cousins, as a counterbalance to the “Yeraz” clan. This group gradually introduced loyal figures into the state administration system and established control over a significant portion of the country’s financial and economic resources, which were previously under the “old guard” of Heydar Aliyev.

The open bid for leadership in the country’s administration by the “Absheron clan” was marked by the appointment of First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva to the newly created position of Vice President of Azerbaijan in 2017. However, the apogee of the “Pashayev” victory came in 2019 when the head of the “Yeraz” clan and the “gray cardinal” of power, the head of the presidential administration, R. Mehdiyev, was removed from his post. He was considered the most significant opponent of the “Pashayev clan” and the main critic of Mehriban Aliyeva’s political ambitions.

After R. Mehdiyev’s dismissal, and subsequently the removal of his supporters from state bodies, processes began to emerge in Azerbaijan indicating the Aliyevs’ preparation for a new internal transition of power¹⁷. This transition might have already occurred, with Mehriban Aliyeva becoming the next president, if it were not for the convenient geopolitical situation for the start of the so-called “*Second Karabakh War*”. In Baku, possibly with Ankara’s prompting, it was decided to postpone the transition because the results and consequences of the war were unpredictable at that time, and the initiative of such a reshuffle within the ruling family could have been dangerous. However, the war was won and given I. Aliyev’s significantly strengthened personal authority in the Azerbaijani society, the need for a power transition maneuver within the family has significantly diminished.

However, it is highly likely that the plan to transfer supreme power to Mehriban Aliyeva has not been postponed for a long time. The fact is that the euphoria of the “*Karabakh victory*” cannot indefinitely provide I. Aliyev with the trust and legitimacy of society. The socio-economic situation in the country is deteriorating, and the public is questioning why the “*restoration of territorial integrity and sovereignty*” is not having a positive impact on the living standards of ordinary citizens, as promised. On the contrary, the militarization of Azerbaijan requires significant financial resources, oil and gas production volumes are

¹⁶ “Ilhams kingdom”. Kommersant (in Rus.), 31.10.2005, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/622324> (download date: 14.02.2025)

¹⁷ “Arif Yunusov: Sooner or later, there will also be a change of power in Azerbaijan as a result of a social explosion”. CivilNet (in Rus.), 29.11.2019 <https://www.civilnet.am/news/195239/ариф-юнусов-в-азербайджане-рано-или-поздно-будет-также-смена-власти-в-результате-социального-взрыва/> (download date: 15.02.2025).

constantly declining, consumer prices are rising, and the economy is unable to stop the recession. The situation is exacerbated by widespread corruption in the state system. In total, the domestic political realities in the country require radical steps.

In this context, parallels are being drawn with 2019 when Ilham and Mehriban Aliyevs essentially subjected the state apparatus to a massive purge; “*exposed the destructive activities*” of the old cadres, representing the “*Yeraz clan*” and affiliated with Russian interests; dissolved the Milli Majlis, and called for new extraordinary parliamentary elections. However, at that time, the transit initiative was temporarily halted. Now, it can technically be brought to its logical conclusion. This can also be indicated by the symptomatic circumstances observed after the “*victorious war*” in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.

And so, there is a clear process of dismantling the cult of Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan. The new persecutions of the old cadres of the “*national leader*” are evidently intended not only at destroying their remaining influence on socio-political processes in the country but also to eradicate the cult of his veneration, whose “*architect*” is the same Ramiz Mehdiyev. He became the main apologist for the creation of the cult of the “*national leader*”, modeled and implemented the ideological doctrine of venerating H. Aliyev as the founding father of the “*modern Azerbaijani statehood*”, and elevated the study of H. Aliyev’s biography to the rank of a new science, referred to in Azerbaijan as “*Heydarology*”. He also became the most prominent representative of this “*science*”, dedicating numerous books and monographs to the research of the “*phenomenon of H. Aliyev*”¹⁸.

At one time, R. Mehdiyev’s initiative to create the cult not only helped Heydar Aliyev’s associates stay in power and form a powerful clan, but first and foremost, provided a reliable platform for the younger Aliyev’s stay in power, regardless of how paradoxical his struggle against his father’s cadre legacy was. However, over time, the psychological factor began to overshadow political expediency. As an individual, I. Aliyev always felt burdened by his father’s cult, which was the only source or resource of his legitimacy as president and overshadowed his personal “*merits*”. After the “*Karabakh War*”, which brought Aliyev confidence and respect in the eyes of Azerbaijani society, he began to openly depart from the policy of maintaining this cult. An overview of the internal Azerbaijani political-ideological agenda suggests that since the 2020s, Heydar Aliyev’s name has gradually rarely circulated in the media and official reports, and elements of his cult have practically remained outside the special attention of the authorities. I. Aliyev no longer delivers extensive speeches praising his father and predecessor; he has minimized the traditional ceremonies of visiting museums and monuments of the “*national leader*” during regional visits; he has stopped the practice of founding parks named after H. Aliyev and erecting his monuments abroad.

Currently, it appears that Ilham Aliyev's attitude toward the memory of Heydar Aliyev is primarily focused on honoring his father and political predecessor, rather than elevating him to the status of a “*national leader*”. Essentially, this is a sign of the soft dismantling of the cult of the “*national leader*”, and the new persecutions of R. Mehdiyev, among other things, can be interpreted as the decisive phase of an ideological departure from the former image of

¹⁸ “Speech by the Head of the Presidential Administration, Ramiz Mehdiyev”. Azertag (in Rus), 02.10.2004, https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/vystuplenie_rukovoditelya_administracii_prezidenta_ramiza_mextieva-635184 (download date: 16.02.2025).

H. Aliyev. Given the authoritarian nature of the Azerbaijani political system, the psychological and emotional motives of its leader's actions are quite understandable. It can be assumed that if Mrs. Aliyeva aspires to presidential status, her husband is ready to concede this matter to her, but on the condition that his ambitions to become the “*national leader*” himself must be satisfied.

In this context, the final destruction of the “*spy network*” serving Russia, led by R. Mehdiyev, takes on new significance. The power of H. Aliyev and his entourage was largely based on Moscow, rooted in the Soviet era, and the current Azerbaijani president cannot ignore this fact. A favorable peaceful outcome for Russia in the Ukrainian conflict could prompt Moscow to revise its Azerbaijani policy and seek support in this endeavor among the “Heydar's associates”, who have always found common ground with Moscow.

Despite the apparent absence of such threats, Baku received these veiled signals from Moscow, and it is unlikely that I. Aliyev did not grasp their essence. In this context, it is worth recalling the working visit of the Azerbaijani president to Russia on April 22, 2024, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM). During this joint appearance, V. Putin repeatedly mentioned H. Aliyev's name in his special speech, emphasizing his personal role in the implementation of the BAM project, as well as his contribution to the consistent deepening of Azerbaijani-Russian relations in the post-Soviet period. In this way, the Russian president indicated that Azerbaijan should not deviate from this traditional vector, which guarantees the South Caucasian republic's development and security. The mentioned meeting took place immediately after the agreement was reached on the early withdrawal of the Russian “*peacekeeping contingent*” from Nagorno-Karabakh, and thus V. Putin signaled to I. Aliyev that in exchange for such a concession, he would like to perceive him solely as the continuer of his father's rational actions in the context of relations with Russia. He also evidently hinted that I. Aliyev could not surpass the authority of his father and predecessor¹⁹.

In any case, the political persecution of R. Mehdiyev and his associates should be considered a preventive measure that addresses various tasks of the ruling family and the “*Pashayev clan*” amid the sharp escalation of Azerbaijani-Russian contradictions. This includes the neutralization of the remaining forces that could hypothetically generate resistance to the “rebranding” of the supreme political power in the person of Mehriban Aliyeva, the initiation the practical process of dismantling the Heydar Aliyev cult, and the final stage of the “cleansing” of Russian influence on some fragments of the Azerbaijani political elites. This process began long before the current crisis in Baku–Moscow relations. According to sources claiming to be knowledgeable about the internal political kitchen of the I. Aliyev regime, despite the imitation of friendship with Moscow, the Aliyevs have long since chosen the Turkish-Israeli and, in general, Western vector and are ready to completely break relations with Russia at any moment upon a signal. Even if they wished to act otherwise, they could no longer do so due to their complete dependence on their new patrons.

¹⁹ “Vladimir Putin and the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev met in the Kremlin with veteran builders and workers of the Baikal-Amur Mainline on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its construction”. Kremlin.ru (in Rus.), 22.04.2024, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73904> (download date: 16.02.2025).