

On some aspects of erosion of Russian influence within Azerbaijan's political system

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Abstract

ARVAK analyzes the unprecedented asymmetry of influence mechanisms between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan that was revealed during the recent escalation of their bilateral relations. While Baku demonstrates the presence of well-organized and deeply integrated lobbying structures within the Russian political system, Moscow has lost its systemic levers of influence in the Azerbaijani elites, having failed to capitalize on economic interests into political assets. The comment highlights the key factors that have led to the erosion of Russian influence and questions Moscow's strategy of using the Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia as an instrument of influence on Baku, pointing to its failure and the Kremlin's current desire for "zero interference". These developments indicate a deep crisis in Russian-Azerbaijani relations, reducing them to a declarative "Strategic Partnership Agreement" in the absence of real mutual influence mechanisms.

Keywords: *Russian-Azerbaijani relations, external influence, asymmetry of influence, lobbying, Azerbaijani diaspora, elite groups, South Caucasus, geopolitical imbalance, Russian Federation strategy.*

1. Asymmetry of influence mechanisms in Russian-Azerbaijani relations

The new and unprecedented round of Russian-Azerbaijani political and diplomatic escalation has revealed a significant asymmetry in the influence mechanisms between the countries. Azerbaijan has well-organized lobbying structures that are deeply integrated into the Russian government system. These structures successfully operate both in legal formats and, often, resort to illegal methods to promote Azerbaijani interests. At the same time, the Russian Federation does not have internal factions of influence in Azerbaijan and is deprived of the opportunity to capitalize on the interests of financial and economic circles doing business with Russia into political assets.

Baku has effectively cultivated relationships with various segments of Russian power, including the highest political echelons, regional elites, and a portion of the expert community and media. In contrast, Moscow has seen its influence wane within Azerbaijan. With the decline of the old, pro-Russian Azerbaijani communist nomenklatura — which, even under Heydar Aliyev, has maintained some sway within the state — Moscow has failed to establish new points of support among Azerbaijan's elites.

2. Factors of erosion of Russian influence

The reasons for this imbalance are complex. Among the main factors that determined the degradation of pro-Russian groups in the Azerbaijani establishment, the following should be highlighted:

- **A rigid vertical of authoritarian power** in the Caspian republic, excluding "factionalism" and the independence of elite groups.
- **Baku's dependence on the raw materials export sector of the economy**, which is closely linked to the anti-Russian West.

- **Nationalistic sentiments** in the republic, actively cultivated by Turkey, including Russophobic narratives.

- **The passive position of Russia itself**, which appears to avoid working with Azerbaijani elites outside their central authority.

In this regard, the question arises: why, without having the necessary support in Azerbaijan, without being one of the beneficiaries of the system of checks-and-balances in the political decisions made by Baku and without possessing an effective instrument of influence from within on the thinking and mood of the broad public masses in this republic, did Moscow, until the last moment, maintain hopes that I. Aliyev would not turn away from Russia?

The process of dismantling the last groups of Russian influence in the Azerbaijani power system began shortly before the establishment of a consensus between the West, Turkey and Russia regarding a forceful solution to the Karabakh problem. This was supposed to serve as a signal to Moscow about Azerbaijan's intentions not only to seize the second Armenian republic, but also to finally get rid of the pro-Russian faction in the highest echelons of power. We are talking mainly about 3-4 most influential figures who were traditionally considered to be the conductors of Russian interests in the military-political elite of Azerbaijan and who were removed from it not without the demands and efforts of Turkey.

3. The displacement of pro-Russian elite groups

In September 2019, **Ramiz Mehdiyev**, the so-called “grey cardinal” of the Azerbaijani regime and head of the Presidential Administration, controversially resigned. He was rightfully the most influential figure during the presidency of the father and son Aliyevs and was considered to have always been a supporter of close friendly relations with Moscow. Obviously, it was Mehdiyev, who headed the presidential administration for almost a quarter of a century (1995–2019), and who deserves the credit for containing Turkish influence on I. Aliyev and limiting the growth of Russophobic sentiments in the republic. The removal of Mehdiyev marked the stage of Azerbaijan's open reorientation toward Turkey, which is incompatible with maintaining sincere friendly relations with Russia. It can be assumed that R. Mehdiyev was threatened with the prospect of trial and arrest, but he was saved from persecution by his long-term close friendship and comradeship with Heydar Aliyev, as well as the fact that after the latter's death he made every effort to transfer power to Aliyev Jr. and strengthen the new president's position.

On July 16, 2020, some three months prior to the 44-day Artsakh war, **Elmar Mamedyarov**, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, resigned. He was accused of a lack of initiative in the Karabakh issue and submissive adherence to Moscow's policy, which allegedly hindered Baku's efforts to resolve the issue peacefully. Ankara and Baku agreed that E. Mamedyarov, who was close to Russia, was not in a position to provide the necessary political and diplomatic cover for the already planned Karabakh war. His removal from office, as in the case of R. Mehdiyev, was accompanied by an “exposing” propaganda campaign in pro-government media, apparently with the aim of

justifying Baku's transition from peaceful initiatives to plans for a military solution to the Karabakh problem before the international community.

On January 28, 2021, news emerged of the resignation of **Najmaddin Sadikhov**, who had served as the Chief of the General Staff of the Azerbaijani Armed Forces since November 1993. This confirmed rumors about his disgrace, but the Azerbaijani authorities have not officially specified when exactly Sadykov was dismissed. It is known for certain that during the “44-Day War” he was effectively removed from command of the Armed Forces, which were mainly controlled by generals delegated from Turkey. Sadykov generally disappeared from public view for a long time, which gave rise to rumors about his arrest. The chief of staff was also considered in Azerbaijan “*a man of Moscow*”, and was also allegedly caught in connection with Armenia through his relatives, so mistrust of him developed long before the autumn campaign of 2020. Subsequently, in 2022, a criminal case was opened against N. Sadykov for embezzlement and theft in the Ministry of Defense, but it should be assumed that the true reasons for the disgrace of the Colonel General lie in his past connections with Moscow and the Russian generals.

The controversial case of **Eldar Mahmudov**, former head of the Ministry of National Security (now the State Security Service – SSS), who was dismissed on October 17, 2015, may also have had some connection to the “*Russian influence*”. Makhmudov and his entourage were charged with criminal offenses related to corruption, racketeering, corporate raids, etc., but according to other sources, in fact, he was allegedly caught in unregulated connections with the special services of a foreign state. It should be assumed that we are talking about the Russian Federation, which was openly hinted at by some Azerbaijani journalists. It is possible that the narrative about Makhmudov working for a foreign special service was invented and deliberately launched into the information field with the aim of thoroughly tarnishing the once all-powerful minister. However, the very fact of mentioning Moscow in such a context testifies to the anti-Russian sentiments that had already emerged in 2015 in the highest echelons of the Azerbaijani government. It should also be noted that E. Makhmudov, unlike a number of generals and colonels of the Ministry of National Security from his immediate circle, was not tried and sentenced to imprisonment, which in Azerbaijani opposition and dissident circles is explained by the fact that he has extremely significant compromising information on I. Aliyev and his family.

Along with the aforementioned influential persons, ministers, high-ranking officials, bankers, diplomats and military personnel were excluded from the system. Nominally, they were charged with corruption, abuse of office, embezzlement of state funds, etc., but all of them were in one way or another connected with the aforementioned influential figures and were part of their immediate circle. The “great purge” organized by President I. Aliyev was qualified by independent Azerbaijani experts as a victory of “*Pashayev clan*” over the “*Nakhijevan clan*”, since the ruling system in the President's Administration, the banking sector of the republic and the diplomatic corps were entirely transferred to the hands of the family of Mehriban Aliyeva (née Pashayeva). In terms of internal power struggles, this was indeed accurate. However, in a broader context, it represented the systematic dismantling of remaining Russian influence across Azerbaijan's political-diplomatic, financial-economic, and military spheres. Moscow had historically relied on Heydar Aliyev's “*old guard*”,

primarily represented by the “Nakhijevan” faction, for its political and diplomatic engagement with Baku.

The process of dismantling the previous system of governance of the Nakhijevan Autonomous Republic (NAR), which started in parallel and has now reached the point of revising its Constitution and effectively liquidating the exclave’s autonomy, also deserves special mention. Not only has the removal of the old communist cadres traditionally loyal to Moscow been recorded here, but also **actual denunciation of the Moscow and Kars treaties**, which retained the legal basis for intervention, if necessary, by the successor of the USSR – the Russian Federation – in the political processes surrounding the NAR.

4. Consequences of the loss of influence & Moscow’s new strategy

Thus, the processes of elite reorganization in Azerbaijan that started before the Karabakh war led to the decline of the mechanisms of direct and practical influence of Moscow to the formation of a favorable climate in Russian-Azerbaijani relations. The intra-system factions open to dialogue with the RF were able to balance Azerbaijan’s policy for a certain time, preventing a sharp tilt towards Turkey and, in a broad sense, the West. They were driven by both the inertia of traditional ties from the common Soviet era and a pragmatic calculation stemming from an understanding of the threats posed to Azerbaijan by the policy of alienation and hostility towards the Russian Federation. The elimination and actual defeat of these factions had an extremely severe impact on Moscow’s ability to keep Baku in the orbit of its geopolitical interests. Neither empty declarations of a “strategic partnership” nor the “special chemistry of personal relationships” between V. Putin and I. Aliyev, nor even Russia’s efforts to sustain its cultural and educational presence in Azerbaijan, could offset the diminishing influence on the Azerbaijani elites and the general public. Optimistic assessments regarding the effectiveness of the activities of public and cultural organizations in Azerbaijan, such as the “Russian House”, all sorts of festivals and forums under the “*Russian-Azerbaijani friendship*” sign, narratives about “*hundreds of Russian-language schools*”, which turned out to be phantoms, do not reflect the true state of affairs. At the same time, the Russian diaspora in Azerbaijan is extremely weak and unorganized in terms of forming and putting forward its socio-political demands to the system. The dynamics of the outflow of the Russian diaspora from the republic is steadily increasing every year. Even the Russian Orthodox Church in Azerbaijan, represented by the Baku Diocese of the ROC, is absolutely unable to perform the functions of a “stabilizer” of relations. It largely carries out activities in the vector of the Aliyev regime’s policy, often openly running counter to the interests of the Russian state, the Russian people, and, in fact, the ROC itself.

It can be posited that, upon recognizing the complete erosion of its influence mechanisms within Azerbaijan, Moscow deliberately permitted the proliferation and deep integration of Azerbaijani diaspora structures into Russia’s political echelons. Concurrently, the Kremlin facilitated the expansion of Azerbaijani business operations within the Russian Federation. This strategic choice may have been predicated on leveraging the significant financial, economic, and social interests of the burgeoning Azerbaijani diaspora in its

engagement with Baku's political leadership. Moscow likely calculated that this privileged and affluent diaspora, maintaining robust ties and providing financial sustenance to the Azerbaijani system, would serve as a crucial **balancer** in Russian-Azerbaijani relations.

However, recent events indicate that these calculations proved unsound, further distorting the dynamics of mutual influence between Moscow and Baku. Consequently, the Kremlin is now demonstrating a clear intent to dismantle the entire Azerbaijani lobbying framework within Russia. This framework, initially conceived as an instrument of political influence, has ostensibly transformed into a potent criminal structure deeply embedded within the Russian state apparatus. In all likelihood, Moscow seeks to achieve a state of “*zero mutual influence*”, aiming to equalize the diminished opportunities of the Azerbaijani diaspora and Baku-loyal political factions in the Russian Federation with the near-total absence of Russian influence in Azerbaijan itself. Should this objective be realized, the parties, in the end, in addition to the numerous and multifaceted acquisitions of Azerbaijan, will have only the “*Strategic Partnership Agreement*” signed on February 22, 2022, which, in the new reality will essentially turn into a meaningless text.