

Russian-Azerbaijani rapprochement of October 2025

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Summary

ARVAK analyzes the meeting between Russian President V. Putin and Azerbaijani leader I. Aliyev in Dushanbe (October 2025), aimed at de-escalating the recent acute crisis in bilateral relations. It argues that the AZAL plane incident served merely as a pretext, while the main cause of the tension was the Russian authorities' campaign against criminalized structures of its Azerbaijani diaspora and Baku's subsequent harsh anti-Russian rhetoric. The comment examines in detail the socioeconomic and geopolitical factors that prompted both sides to attempt normalization: economic difficulties in Azerbaijan due to Russian pressure, Moscow's need to manage internal elite conflicts, mutual interest in macro-projects (INSTC "North–South" International Transport Corridor), and Baku's awareness of the geopolitical risks of escalation. It concludes that the meeting is a tactical maneuver rather than a strategic settlement, as deep-seated contradictions persist, casting doubt on the long-term stability of the relationship.

Keywords: Russia, Azerbaijan, V. Putin, I. Aliyev, Russian-Azerbaijani relations, crisis, de-escalation, diaspora, North-South NSITC, geopolitics, Caspian Sea, AZAL plane incident.

On October 9, 2021, a meeting was held between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev as part of the CIS Heads of State Summit². This was their first one-on-one conversation since last December's incident involving the crash of an Azerbaijani passenger liner of AZAL airlines, presumably mistakenly shot down by Russian air defense systems in the airspace of the North Caucasus. The situation with the plane, along with the detention of members of the Azerbaijani diaspora in Yekaterinburg, significantly increased tensions between the political authorities of the two countries, bringing their relations to the brink of collapse. Consequently, both sides needed to delicately present the Dushanbe meeting to their respective publics, explaining it as a geopolitical necessity while mutually demonstrating that they had not compromised their principles and interests.

In this context, the Russian president's wording proved most diplomatic, providing Moscow and Baku with room for broad maneuver. V. Putin, after talks with I. Aliyev, characterized the events between the parties as a "crisis of emotions", emphasizing that it should not be qualified as an "interstate crisis."³ According to him, despite the misunderstanding arising from the airliner catastrophe, constructive contacts between Russia and Azerbaijan continued throughout this time, and economic cooperation not only did not suffer but even deepened in some areas.

It is likely that the Russian president, driven by political-diplomatic necessity, somewhat exaggerated this point. However, globally, contacts and multifaceted interaction were indeed not suspended, as evidenced by the high-level meeting of governmental commissions held on August 22, 2025, in Astrakhan. During this meeting, consultations were conducted in a routine manner across the entire spectrum of economic cooperation, including both ongoing joint projects and promising new initiatives⁴.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 19.10.2025.

² "Meeting with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev". President of Russia, 09.20.2025, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78179> (download date: 14.10.2025).

³ "Putin described the situation in relations with Baku as a crisis of emotions". RBC, 10.10.2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/10/10/2025/68e8fbcd9a7947596015dabe> (download date: 14.10.2025).

⁴ "Delegations from Russia and Azerbaijan met in Astrakhan". Caspian Herald, 25.08.2025, <https://casp-geo.ru/delegatsii-rossii-i-azerbajdzhana-vstretilis-v-astrahani/> (download date: 14.10.2025).

The conversation between the leaders in Dushanbe, according to their concluding assessments, was “*frank and sincere*” and supposedly brought much clarity regarding last December’s airliner incident. However, it is unlikely that the Russian president provided his Azerbaijani counterpart with details and specifics of the investigation of which the latter was not already aware. Especially since the investigation is being conducted under the leadership of the “*neutral*” Kazakh side, with the participation of Russian and Azerbaijani specialists. It is evident that I. Aliyev is well acquainted with the progress of the case, and all considered versions, yet it was important for him to show his public that V. Putin began the meeting by discussing the airliner incident and acknowledged that it was shot down by the Russian side. At the same time, it was fundamentally necessary for the Azerbaijani leader that the Russian president officially apologize to him, but this did not happen. Despite subsequent attempts by pro-government Azerbaijani media to portray the Dushanbe meeting “*as an act of apology*”⁵, the transcript and video recording of all details of the open-format conversation did not document anything of the sort.

The Russian leader expressed his condolences and regrets, promised to consider the issue of compensation, cited the attack by Ukrainian drones in the North Caucasus as the cause of the catastrophe, and once again made it clear to his Azerbaijani counterpart that Russia assumes responsibility for the crash insofar as the tragedy occurred “*in Russian skies*”. However, I. Aliyev did not hear an apology from V. Putin. This is a fundamentally important detail, indicating that the thesis previously repeatedly voiced by Azerbaijani politicians about the futility of restoring former partnership relations without an official apology from Moscow has currently been set aside by Baku. Consequently, the Dushanbe meeting, which was also preceded by I. Aliyev’s phone call to V. Putin congratulating him on his birthday⁶, was organized without the preconditions previously stated by Azerbaijan.

An important feature of the Dushanbe meeting was the absence of any mention in its official part of the ongoing struggle in the Russian Federation against the criminalized structures of the Azerbaijani diaspora, as well as the campaign to identify and deactivate agents of Azerbaijani influence in political, media, expert, and business circles in Russia. Meanwhile, it was primarily these processes that predetermined the subsequent deepening of the crisis. Many Russian and Azerbaijani experts, commenting on the latest attempt to reset relations, overlook these events. They mistakenly, and perhaps intentionally, foreground the AZAL liner incident as the main cause of the political-diplomatic conflict. In this regard, it should be noted that about a month after the plane crash, which indeed provoked an “*emotional outburst*” between the parties, relations nevertheless stabilized. Moscow and Baku reached a mutual agreement that a joint commission led by Kazakh representatives would conduct a thorough investigation and issue an objective verdict, after which Russia and Azerbaijan, in accordance with international practice and legislation, would settle issues of official apologies, compensation, and other matters. The real, full-blown crisis began with the events in Yekaterinburg⁷, which Baku perceived much more painfully and proceeded with

⁵ “Azerbaijan’s New Model with Russia: A Partnership of Equals”. Haqqin.az, 10.10.2025, <https://haqqin.az/news/362530> (download date: 14.10.2025).

⁶ “Peskov: When Aliyev congratulated Putin on his birthday, they agreed to meet”. TASS Agency, 12.10.2025, <https://tass.ru/politika/25322833> (download date: 14.10.2025).

⁷ “From Yekaterinburg to Baku: How the investigation into 20-year-old murders led to a new round of international conflict”. BBC, 14.08.2025, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c30z624382go> (download date: 14.10.2025).

asymmetric measures against Russian citizens, tourists, and relocants on its territory. As a result, these measures not only failed to stop the actions of Russian law enforcement agencies but, on the contrary, contributed to increased pressure on Azerbaijani diaspora structures and business groups closely linked to ethnic Azerbaijani crime in the Russian Federation. This campaign resulted in the arrests of dozens of criminal leaders, entrepreneurs, and public figures, the revocation of Russian citizenship for hundreds of ethnic Azerbaijanis, and the extradition of thousands of labor migrants from the aforementioned South Caucasian republic back to their homeland.

In this regard, the widely publicized “*reconciliation*” meeting between V. Putin and I. Aliyev creates the impression of a mutually agreed-upon diversion of public attention from the true causes of the conflict. Clearly, the plane incident served only as a pretext, not the underlying cause, for the tensions that arose. Consequently, resolving this issue cannot guarantee the establishment of normal and stable relations.

In reality, the Russian and Azerbaijani leaders must address the geopolitical, economic, and ideological roots of the conflict for its effective settlement, provided there is a mutual desire to restore relations. The misunderstandings surrounding the crashed airliner, being a precedent, could not serve as the true reason for Azerbaijan’s open accusation against Russia of an occupation policy against the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) and the subsequent alienation in favor of Armenia of “*ancestral Azerbaijani territories*”, made by I. Aliyev in an August interview with *Al Arabiya*⁸. It also seems doubtful that the incident with a civilian aircraft could be sufficient grounds for him to make public calls to the Ukrainian side to continue the war for the liberation of “*territories occupied by Russia*” and to use Azerbaijan’s available support in this endeavor⁹.

It seems more realistic to assume that the Azerbaijani leader was pushed towards such dangerous rhetoric by the hope of stopping the process of dismantling Azerbaijan’s criminal, political, and financial-economic presence in Russia, which poses significant problems for Baku. However, such behavior, perceived in Moscow as blackmail, only intensified the process of “decriminalizing” the Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia and stimulated discourse in certain Russian circles about the need to hold Baku militarily and politically accountable for its actions, up to preparing a “*second SMO*” (*Special Military Operation*) in Azerbaijan. Starting from this point of conflict, Baku’s leverage over Moscow was exhausted, and, fearing the escalation getting out of control, the Azerbaijani leader was forced to request from his Russian counterpart the opportunity to re-establish personal contact and try to contain the looming threats.

It should be assumed that V. Putin, in turn, was also interested in defusing the crisis, given the complicated military situation in Ukraine, increased escalation from the West, and Azerbaijan’s important role in Russian schemes to overcome trade-economic and energy-logistical isolation.

Thus, the parties showed mutual interest in attempting to reset relations, on the condition of “saving face” and considering the need for compromise solutions on the most sensitive

⁸ “Ilham Aliyev gave an interview to Al Arabiya TV channel. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, 27.08.2025, <https://president.az/ru/articles/view/69968> (download date: 14.10.2025).

⁹ “Keep up the good work”: Aliyev thanked a Ukrainian journalist for the gift of Ukrainian Armed Forces National Battalion chevrons. Military Review, 20.07.2025. <https://topwar.ru/268354-prodolzhajte-v-tom-zhe-duhe-aliev-poblagodaril-ukrainskuju-zhurnalistku-za-podarennnye-shevrony-nacbatov-vsu.html> (download date: 14.10.2025).

issues for both leaders. The reasons that pushed them towards contact, opening the prospect of normalizing relations, can be divided into three main blocks:

1. Socio-economic component

Azerbaijan is currently facing serious consequences from the pressure exerted by Russian authorities on its citizens working in Russia, as well as on the ethno-social and criminal structures ensuring mass employment for Azerbaijanis in Russia. Agricultural markets across the Russian Federation, managed by Azerbaijanis and selling, among other things, Azerbaijani products, are either closing down or being transferred to the control of other business groups. Tens of thousands of Azerbaijani citizens employed in Russia have already been extradited to their homeland, where there is already a shortage of jobs and an acute socio-economic crisis. Russia is blocking the import of large volumes of agricultural goods and produce from Azerbaijan, leading to stagnation in the republic's food industry sector (production of canned goods, beverages, dairy products, etc.) and contributing to the ruin of farms. This, in turn, provokes a social crisis fraught with unrest directed against the political system and the hierarchy of power, built by the Aliyev family over the past three decades. Dissatisfaction with the situation is also shown by the republic's tourism sector, which, according to statistical data, recorded a drop in the influx of Russian tourists by more than a third after the latest escalation of relations in July¹⁰. According to some reports, signs of brewing anti-government protests are already observed in Azerbaijan, one reason being the regime's short-sighted anti-Russian policy.

Moscow, in turn, also faces serious problems in unraveling the illegal activities of Azerbaijani diaspora structures and criminalized financial-economic groups. Federally sanctioned investigations reveal increasing evidence of close ties between ethnic Azerbaijani groups engaged in illegal business and regional elites, as well as certain circles in the country's highest political-administrative echelons. Without normalizing relations with Baku, stopping the process of “de-Azerbaijanization” of the system does not seem reasonable from the perspective of playing to public sentiment. However, on the other hand, continuing the exposure process threatens to bring anti-corruption investigations to the highest echelons of Russian power. Given the specifics and peculiarities of the post-Soviet system, the Kremlin cannot allow such a development. The current political power in Russia largely rests on a consensus between it and various elite segments regarding control over spheres of influence and attempts to disrupt this consensus would be a blow to the Kremlin's own political and financial-economic platform.

2. Macroeconomic component

Political tension between Moscow and Baku has created numerous problems in financial-economic cooperation, energy operations, and joint trade-logistics projects. Despite V. Putin's assurances that business ties between the parties were not interrupted, the synergistic effect of macroeconomic interaction has significantly decreased. Operations involving gas swaps and the chartering of the Azerbaijani tanker fleet carrying “*non-sanctioned*” Russian oil were threatened. Agreements on the program for constructing the comprehensive North-South trade-energy route (Russia–Azerbaijan–Iran–Persian Gulf) were also called into question. It is no coincidence that a few days after the “landmark” conversation between V. Putin and I. Aliyev in Dushanbe, an

¹⁰ “Russians have begun to cancel their trips to Azerbaijan en masse following the arrests”. Southern Federal District, 17.07.2025, <https://u-f.ru/news/society/u9/2025/07/07/399102> (download date: 14.10.2025).

emergency meeting was held in Baku between governmental delegations from Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran regarding the North-South transport-energy corridor¹¹. Previously, consultations of this trilateral group were frozen immediately after the deterioration of relations between Moscow and Baku, striking a blow to Russia's plans to complete the project intended to carve out a “saving window” to the Indian Ocean amid increasing Western isolation. At the same time, Azerbaijan, for its part, is keen to become a central link in this logistics project, which promises significant budget revenues and a new tool of influence over Russia and Iran in the future.

Furthermore, it is evident that the issue of the Caspian Sea's shallowing became a significant factor for Baku in the context of resetting relations with Moscow. In Azerbaijan, as well as in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, there is an understanding that the fate of this enclosed body of water largely depends on the Russian Federation, through whose territory flows the main water artery – the Volga River – that feeds the Caspian. Russia, however, rejects accusations from the Caspian republics, primarily Azerbaijan, of excessively large water withdrawals from the Volga and the negative impact of new hydropower facilities on the river's natural flow. Despite the creation of joint working groups and commissions tasked with establishing the causes of the sea's shallowing and developing an action plan, the Russian Federation initially proceeds from the premise that the root of the problem lies in regional climate anomalies and the environmental damage caused by oil and gas extraction on the offshore shelf belonging to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Turkmenistan.

Baku views Russia's reluctance to “fairly” resolve the Volga water flow issue as an attempt to turn the Caspian's shallowing into a geopolitical tool of pressure on neighboring states. However, in practical terms, Baku is unable to counter this Russian strategy. The political-diplomatic crisis between the countries further radicalized Moscow's position on this issue, and if the conflict continues, Azerbaijan will have even fewer chances to persuade Russia to revise its “water policy”. In this case, the ongoing shallowing process will reach catastrophic levels in the near future, threatening not only the fate of the crucial trans-Caspian logistics and the “Middle Corridor” for Baku but also definitively altering the climatic and ecological picture of the entire region, triggering unprecedented socio-economic problems for Azerbaijan in particular. Thus, it can be assumed that the Caspian ecological problem also played a significant role in compelling Ilham Aliyev to restore “*constructive relations*” with the Russian Federation.

3. Geopolitical component

It is evident that the forceful resolution of the Karabakh issue played a certain role in provoking the crisis in relations with the Russian Federation, convincing Baku of its ability to significantly weaken its dependence on Russian influence. The act of the early withdrawal of the Russian contingent from the de-Armenianized Nagorno-Karabakh, as Baku saw it, put a final point on the issue of neutralizing Moscow's pressure and its military-political leverage in the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. Azerbaijan considered it possible, using the airliner incident and the events in Yekaterinburg as pretexts, to demonstrate to Moscow that it prefers a model of “horizontal” rather than “vertical” relations with Russia. With its

¹¹ “International Transport Corridor North–South: What is known, prospects”. Izvestiya, 20.14.2025, <https://iz.ru/1972441/elizaveta-gritcenko/mezhdunarodnyi-transportnyi-koridor-sever-iug-cto-izvestno-perspektivy> (download date: 15.10.2025).

démarche, Baku staked a claim to ending the era of Russian dominance in the South Caucasus and asserting its own leadership in the region. This initiative also fit into the West's plans to oust the Russian Federation from its areas of interest in the South Caucasus, the Caspian region, and Central Asia. There is practically no doubt that I. Aliyev would not have undertaken such a demonstration of strength and political independence without the backing of traditional Western allies, as well as Turkey—a NATO member country.

Nevertheless, the subsequent course of events showed that the démarche was ill-timed. Forecasts of Russia's imminent defeat in Ukraine have not materialized, and the Russian leadership, despite the need to maintain strategically important constructive relations with Baku, showed no desire to accept the Azerbaijani president's ambitions. Targeted Russian strikes on Azerbaijani economic and energy assets in Ukraine¹² signaled to Azerbaijan that Moscow might, at some stage, resort to more severe measures—including attacks on Baku's cross-border assets supplying its enemies with energy resources and fuel for military equipment.

In Russian expert circles close to the Kremlin, the narrative about the need for the “*second SMO*” on Azerbaijani territory began to be voiced more frequently, which could not but cause serious concern in Baku. Such signals became particularly alarming against the backdrop of simultaneous statements from the radical wing of the Iranian military-political establishment about the need to punish Baku for participating in Western subversive activities against Iran and inviting hostile global forces into the region. The political discourse about Aliyev's unreliability in countries currently facing an existential security threat in their confrontation with the West could, at some stage, lead to practical actions threatening Azerbaijan with the gravest consequences. It is likely that Baku realized it had gone too far in confronting “*Russian imperialism*” and that its own ambitions were gradually becoming an object of manipulation by Western partners and Turkey, which is promoting the project of “*reuniting*” Turkic nations in Russia's vital interest space through the Azerbaijani “*ram*”.

Attention should also be paid to another interesting version of the sudden “reset” of relations between Moscow and Baku. The period of the Russian-Azerbaijani political-diplomatic crisis provided Azerbaijan with an opportunity to involve the United States in the process of “*normalizing relations*” with Armenia, which led to the signing in Washington, mediated by D. Trump, of the agreement on the creation of TRIPP. Under conditions of equal and stable relations with Moscow, such a combination could not, by definition, have been successful. However, the crisis related to the downed airliner and subsequent incidents opened a window of opportunity for Baku to conclude an agreement on land access to Nakhichevan with a convenient format for Washington's participation in the project. Currently, the Russian Federation is effectively out of the game, and Azerbaijan has gained the opportunity to calmly step back from the confrontational vector, while simultaneously demonstrating constructiveness and a desire to continue partnership with Russia.

An analysis of the reasons and circumstances that prompted Moscow and Baku to attempt to establish a partnership dialogue allows us to conclude that unresolved contradictions in their relations persist. Both in Russia and in Azerbaijan, political figures and experts

¹² “Russia is again striking Azerbaijani interests with ‘Shahids’”. Caliber.az, 18.08.2025, <https://caliber.az/post/rossiya-vnov-byot-shahedami-po-interesam-azerbajdzhana> (download date: 15.10.2025).

demonstrate a cautious approach, refraining from unconditional optimism in assessing the leaders' efforts to “reset”. Many independent commentators express skepticism about the steps taken by V. Putin and I. Aliyev, viewing them not as a sincere desire to restore dialogue and resolve existing disagreements, but as a tactical maneuver aimed at buying time for subsequent, possibly more radical and unfriendly actions against each other. A significant number of ideological-civilizational and orientational contradictions, as well as conflicting ambitions, have accumulated between the countries: one side seeks to assert its self-sufficiency and influence in the region, while the other aims to restore its former state greatness and power. The realization of these ambitions without infringing on the vital interests of both sides seems impossible.