

Ramiz Mehdiyev's arrest: clan struggle and foreign policy maneuvers in Azerbaijan

ARVAK Center comment, November 8, 2025¹

Summary

ARVAK's comment analyzes the news of a disclosed anti-state conspiracy in Azerbaijan (October 2025) led by the former head of the presidential administration, Ramiz Mehdiyev. Particular attention is paid to information alleging that Moscow provided Baku with the intelligence about the plot. Several versions of events are examined. According to one, Moscow "surrendered" its pro-Russian assets in Baku (Mehdiyev's group) in exchange for normalizing relations with I. Aliyev, having been forced to recognize the strength of his position. According to another, no conspiracy existed; rather, it was a jointly staged event by Moscow and Baku to provide I. Aliyev with a pretext to evade his anti-Russian obligations to the West. The analysis also examines the internal political reasons for the removal of Heydar Aliyev's "old guard", including inter-clan struggles (Pashayevs vs. "Nakhijevanis") and I. Aliyev's efforts to dismantle his father's personality cult.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, Ramiz Mehdiyev, Russia, Vladimir Putin, plot, conspiracy, Russian-Azerbaijani relations, clan struggle, AZAL.

In mid-October 2025, Azerbaijani authorities informed the public that the republic's law enforcement agencies had allegedly uncovered an anti-state conspiracy, part of which included an assassination attempt on President Ilham Aliyev².

This news was quite unexpected, given that the rigid power vertical constructed by the Aliyevs in Azerbaijan did not presuppose the formation, either within its own system or in the opposition field, of substantial groups capable of posing a serious political challenge to the Aliyev family, much less deciding on radical measures against it. The forceful capture of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and 2023, as well as the snap parliamentary elections held in September 2024—which resulted in no real opposition force gaining entry to the Milli Majlis³, have finally strengthened the Aliyev regime. Consequently, the real opposition was expelled from the parliamentary platform and fully marginalized. Furthermore, major political and financial-economic clans potentially capable of offering an alternative to the ruling family were deprived of the ability to leverage the unresolved "Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict" and the "occupation of Azerbaijani territories" following the "Karabakh victory".

However, the central intrigue of this announcement is the allegation that Moscow transmitted the intelligence about the impending coup to the Azerbaijani side. According to Azerbaijani media outlets close to the government, the relevant information was passed to Baku just days before the meeting between Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev on October 9, 2025, in Dushanbe. At this meeting, the Russian president, in a closed-door format, personally briefed his Azerbaijani counterpart on the details of the "conspiracy". According to information circulating in Azerbaijani media, citing an "anonymous informed source", the Azerbaijani authorities are inclined to believe that the conspiracy was initially prepared with the participation of the Russian side and its "military circles".

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 08.11.2025.

² "A Coup in the Wrong Direction: Why Azerbaijan Could Imprison a Close Associate of the Aliyevs". Izvestia (in Rus.), 02.11.2025, <https://iz.ru/1983378/igor-karmazin/perevorot-ne-tuda-za-cto-v-azerbaidzane-mogut-posadit-blizaisego-soratnika-alievyyh> (download date: 03.11.2025).

³ "Azerbaijan parliamentary elections: Aliyev supporters win majority; opposition wins zero seats". BBC (in Rus.), 02.09.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/cvg5zpn92470> (download date: 03.11.2025).

It is alleged that they planned to shoot down Aliyev's plane *en route* to the RF on 25.12.2024, but by mistake destroyed a civilian liner that had departed from Baku's airport 30 minutes before the presidential aircraft. This error, allegedly, prompted Moscow to "*reverse course*" and, to divert suspicion from itself, expose its co-conspirators in Azerbaijan⁴.

In any case, the main suspect in the organization of the coup, Ramiz Mehdiyev, was placed under house arrest. At present, Azerbaijani law enforcement agencies are conducting an investigation to uncover all details of the "*prepared conspiracy*" and identify all individuals involved. According to Azerbaijani sources, although the investigation has not yet disclosed specific names, a large number of political figures from R. Mehdiyev's circle have come under pressure. These individuals held high-ranking positions in the state apparatus, army, and secret services during his tenure as head of the presidential administration (1995–2019).

This list includes the former assistant to the President of Azerbaijan for socio-political issues, Ali Hasanov; the former Chief of the General Staff of the MoD, Najmeddin Sadikov; the ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Elmar Mammadyarov; the former head of the Ministry of National Security, Eldar Mahmudov; the ex-Minister of Culture, Abulfaz Garayev; and dozens of other individuals considered close associates of R. Mehdiyev, the regime's former "*grey cardinal*".

These figures had fallen into disgrace with I. Aliyev long before the recent events and were, for the most part, removed from power on the eve of the 2020 Karabakh War. The process of their sequential dismissal was accompanied by an intensive propaganda campaign in pro-government Azerbaijani media, denouncing their alleged close ties with Russia and unacceptable anti-state actions in Russia's interests.

According to the narratives circulated in controlled media, R. Mehdiyev was "*a Kremlin man*" and, through his *protégés* in all branches of Azerbaijani government, implemented a policy "*at Moscow's dictation*" that contradicted Azerbaijan's national interests. As a result, R. Mehdiyev himself was dismissed from the post of head of the presidential administration, after which he briefly (2019–2022) headed the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS).

It was believed in Azerbaijan that I. Aliyev did not dare to complete the political elimination of the "*grey cardinal*" at that time, merely out of respect for his father's memory, who had highly valued his long-time associate Mehdiyev. Furthermore, it was Mehdiyev who had organized the successful transition of power from Aliyev Sr. to Aliyev Jr. and introduced the young president to high politics. However, judging by incoming information from Azerbaijan, R. Mehdiyev and his "*old guard*" will not escape severe punishment this time, as this measure is existentially necessary for the Aliyev family to maintain its power and the "*sovereignty of the country*" as a whole.

It is noteworthy that in the context of the coup plot, besides Mehdiyev's former appointees, representatives of the traditional Azerbaijani opposition also came under the scrutiny of law enforcement. The former "*grey cardinal*" had allegedly recruited them during his time as head of the presidential administration, planning to assign them significant roles in the state apparatus after the supposed coup⁵.

⁴ "Ramiz Mehdiyev planned the assassination of Ilham Aliyev". Vesti Baku (in Rus.), 17.10.2025, <https://vestibaku.com/politics/ramiz-mehtiev-planiroval-ubijstvo-ilhama-alieva/> (download date: 03.11.2025).

⁵ "Mehdiyev's List: People who were supposed to join the 'State Council' after the coup have been named". MEDIA.AZ (in Rus.), 29.10.2025, <https://media.az/society/spisok-mehtieva-nazvany-lyudi-kotorye-dolzny-byli-voiti-v-gossovet-posle-perevorota> (download date: 03.11.2025).

Thus, Azerbaijan is openly stating that Russia was involved in the planned conspiracy against I. Aliyev, and that it was Russia itself that, in effect, exposed the individuals in Baku who were the initiators of the illegal attempt to change power. Russian official bodies are not responding to the rumors spread by pro-government Azerbaijani media and are not commenting on them in any way. Meanwhile, according to Azerbaijani sources, by providing Baku with information about the “*conspiracy*”, Moscow sought to achieve two objectives.

1. Azerbaijani special services may have been close to uncovering the alleged conspiracy involving the Russian side on their own. This would have definitively exacerbated the crisis in Moscow–Baku relations, becoming a pretext for overt hostility with no chance of normalization.

2. It is probable that V. Putin thereby demonstrated to I. Aliyev his complete refusal to exploit internal political and inter-clan contradictions in Azerbaijan. The guarantee of this was the definitive abandonment of all his agents of influence within the country’s elites to the ruling regime. In doing so, Moscow effectively undertook a guaranteed obligation not to interfere in Azerbaijan’s internal affairs, to negotiate exclusively with Aliyev, and to renounce the practice of influencing him through specific elite groups that traditionally adhere to a pro-Russian vector. In this light, according to sources in Baku, Moscow concluded that sacrificing the loyal Mehdiyev and his associates was a price worth paying for normalizing relations with Azerbaijan, which is geopolitically and geo-economically crucial for Russia. This is especially true if the former “*grey cardinal’s*” circle and he himself had lost real leverage over the socio-political landscape in Azerbaijan and had failed to meet Moscow’s expectations.

Baku sources insist that this “*dumping of pro-Russian forces*” was a forced measure by Moscow, as I. Aliyev’s position is currently too strong, leaving V. Putin no choice but to conduct a “*horizontal*” policy with him and not “*irritate*” him by interfering in the internal structure of Azerbaijan’s power system. Thus, the alleged abandonment by the Kremlin of its supporters in the Azerbaijani elites is seen as a major concession to I. Aliyev and an attempt to “*earn*” his trust and loyalty against the backdrop of the complex geopolitical situation surrounding Russia.

In this regard, the exchange of information about the Azerbaijani coup is highly reminiscent of the events of July 2016, when Russia warned Turkish authorities of an impending putsch⁶. This move, by Moscow’s calculations, was intended to foster mutual trust with Ankara and to promote foment and division within NATO, which was critically needed by the RF ahead of the active phase of the struggle for Syria and Ukraine. The Kremlin expected that R. T. Erdoğan would highly value this “*friendly*” gesture from Putin, both politically and personally, creating a basis for a special relationship between the two leaders and neutralizing the threat of Ankara’s involvement in the anti-Russian front and U.S. financial-economic isolation initiatives.

According to Baku observers, Moscow resorted to a similar move now regarding Ankara’s closest ally. It was an apparent signal to Baku that Russia intends to work with Azerbaijan only through I. Aliyev, that it no longer questions the legitimacy of his rule, and sees no other forces in the Caspian republic capable of replacing the current regime. The only difference is that the information about the alleged coup was transferred *after* its “*failed*” implementation, not before, and the blame was directed not at pro-Western forces, as in Turkey’s case, but at pro-Russian circles, whose failure forced Moscow to disassociate from them and, in effect, surrender them to Aliyev.

⁶ “Media: Russia warned Erdogan about the military coup being prepared”. TASS (in Rus.), 21.07.2016, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/3472671> (download date: 03.11.2025).

This scenario, however, inevitably raises a question: why did I. Aliyev, upon learning of Russia's alleged participation in the coup and receiving V. Putin's belated admission of contacts between Mehdiyev's supporters and Russian security services, not proceed with another round of escalation with Moscow? Logic suggests that Baku should have presented its complaints to the RF in the most categorical terms, up to severing all relations. Participation in an assassination attempt on a president and organizing a change of power in another country is an overtly hostile act that implies severe consequences. Yet, understanding that the Russian leader must have been aware of Mehdiyev's alleged plan, and that Russian security forces in contact with him could not have acted without V. Putin's sanction, I. Aliyev still opted for a certain easing of the crisis with Moscow.

The meeting with the Russian leader in Dushanbe and the noticeably softened Aliyev's rhetoric that followed indicate that Baku did not succumb to emotion and found it necessary to affirm the prospect of future cooperation with Russian authorities. This behavior surprised experts who had predicted that I. Aliyev would use any additional, significant pretext to, at a minimum, denounce the strategic partnership treaty with the RF⁷. It also surprised the Azerbaijani public, among whom state propaganda had already managed to stir up considerable anti-Russian sentiment. Thus, I. Aliyev demonstrated a move that contradicts conventional logic.

Meanwhile, this tactic, contrary to the views of Baku observers, may be explained by several factors not on the surface of the public political agenda.

First, it must be considered that V. Putin, following the private conversation in Dushanbe where he essentially admitted to, at minimum, contacts between Russian security forces and the conspirators, was likely forced to make significant concessions to the Azerbaijani leader that were not intended for the public domain. This concerns not only the aforementioned refusal of the RF to interfere in Azerbaijan's internal affairs but also hypothetical compromises across a broad spectrum of political, financial, economic, and, finally, personal relations. One can only guess at the nature of such concessions, but in aggregate, they could indeed form the paradigm of horizontal relations between Moscow and Baku, which would satisfy I. Aliyev's ambitions.

Second, it should be assumed that Moscow's "*surrender*" of the so-called "*conspirators*" provided I. Aliyev with room for foreign policy maneuver in the context of increasing pressure from Western partners demanding that the Azerbaijani leader escalate relations with Russia and Iran. In a recent [publication](#) the ARVAK Center already considered the possibility that I. Aliyev, at the suggestion of his Russian colleague, gained an opportunity to reduce Western pressure by using the pretext of purging the elites of "*state traitors*" to avoid open confrontation with the RF and IRI⁸. There is another important aspect. Had the alleged collusion between Russian security forces and "*Mehdiyev's putschists*" been revealed to I. Aliyev by his Western partners, he would have been unable to avoid escalating the confrontation with Russia. However, V. Putin's preemptive admission helped I. Aliyev demonstrate to the West the existence of mutual trust between Russia and Azerbaijan. It also allowed him to indirectly file a grievance against his

⁷ "Declaration on Allied Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan", President of Russia (in Rus.), 22.02.2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5777> (download date: 04.11.2025).

⁸ "Azerbaijan and Armenia at the Epicenter of Global Rivalry for the South Caucasus". ARVAK Center (in Rus.), 27.10.2025, <https://arvak.am/ru/азербайджан-и-армения-в-эпицентре-гло/> (download date: 04.11.2025).

Western partners, whose “almighty” services, operating freely in Azerbaijan, were unable or unwilling to detect and prevent the conspiracy against the Azerbaijani government and the attempt to physically eliminate the president.

All these factors, along with the formally active strategic partnership treaty with the RF dated February 22, 2022, give I. Aliyev the opportunity to step back from the dangerous confrontational line to which close cooperation with the NATO bloc, Israel, and Turkey had led Baku. It is evident that I. Aliyev, by taking steps toward V. Putin, is trying to restore the previous balance and the paradigm of complementarity in relations with global and regional centers of power. This task is so crucial for his personal power and the security of Azerbaijan that he is willing to overcome his emotions and animosity towards Moscow, which accumulated during the crisis and especially after the information about the alleged attempt by Russian security forces to attack the Azerbaijani “board №1”.

In any case, in this new stage of the great geopolitical struggle for the South Caucasus region, in which Azerbaijan finds itself at the epicenter, the first victims have already appeared. This is the so-called “*old guard*” of Heydar Aliyev, which once contributed to strengthening the current regime and ensured the transition of power within the same family. In Azerbaijan, a full-scale process is already underway to liquidate the remnants of its political influence, expropriate property and financial assets, and initiate legal proceedings whose outcomes are obvious.

In this connection, it is worth briefly considering another noteworthy version, according to which no coup attempt actually occurred in Azerbaijan. Instead, what took place was a jointly staged mutiny of “*Heydar's aqsaqals*” by Moscow and Baku, again, for the purpose of providing I. Aliyev with room to maneuver and evade his commitments to Western partners, as mentioned above.

The fact is, the capabilities of R. Mehdiyev and his disgraced associates to organize a coup under the conditions of the existing system in Azerbaijan were nullified from the start. It should be emphasized that the resignation of the “*grey cardinal*” from his post as head of the presidential administration in October 2019 was officially framed as an honorable send-off for a distinguished statesman into retirement⁹. However, the political nomenclature and the public in Azerbaijan, not without reason, perceived this news as a move by Ilham Aliyev to oust the powerful official who was considered his political mentor.

It was clear that this was about reconfiguring the system and liberating it from Mehdiyev's cadres, who occupied dominant positions in the state apparatus. Furthermore, the dismissal of many of these cadres was accompanied by the initiation of criminal cases and overt persecution in pro-government media. This meant that R. Mehdiyev had fallen into disgrace and, along with his numerous *protégés*, came under the scrutiny of law enforcement and special services with I. Aliyev's sanction. Practically all significant figures in his circle, and he himself, were under close, round-the-clock surveillance; their communications were tapped, and some were forbidden from leaving Azerbaijan.

Under such conditions, organizing a coup is an extremely difficult initiative with minimal chances of success. As an experienced nomenclaturist, well-aware of all the mechanisms of control and information gathering within the system, Mehdiyev could not have been ignorant

⁹ “Ramiz Mehdiyev's resignation marks the end of an era for Azerbaijan”. Commonsplace.eu (in Rus.), 24.10.2019, <https://www.commonspace.eu/ru/news/otstavka-ramiza-mekhhtieva-znamenuet-soboy-konec-celoy-epokhi-dlya-azerbaydzhana> (download date: 04.11.2025).

of this. Moreover, the “evidence” presented for organizing the mutiny, some of which was leaked to the media, raises serious questions. In particular, a plan to reorganize the state’s governing structure after I. Aliyev’s elimination, which R. Mehdiyev allegedly passed to his Russian “accomplices”. The letter presented to the public, purportedly from Mehdiyev, is typewritten and unsigned, which does not exclude a simple fabrication of “evidence”¹⁰. Finally, the enthusiasm of an 87-year-old man, allegedly intending to take “revenge” on Ilham Aliyev and, despite his advanced age, vigorously organizing an assassination attempt, a coup, and a radical restructuring of the entire political system, is, in itself, doubtful.

Considering the above and a number of other arguments not mentioned here, one gets the impression that the factor of the long-disgraced official and his circle was used by I. Aliyev in the context of a larger foreign policy game, and possibly for internal political purposes as well. It can be assumed that I. Aliyev, even during the dismantling of the power pyramid built by R. Mehdiyev, was prepared for the full exposure and political destruction of his guardian and his father’s closest ally. However, he prudently stretched this high-profile action out over time, intending to use it in a larger combination. The “Mehdiyev case” was “canned” and was not given wide publicity for a time; however, the disgraced officials were constantly kept in suspense with investigations and lawsuits. Thus, President Aliyev constantly kept the disgraced politicians “on the verge of a foul”, forcing them to balance between mercy and final retribution. R. Mehdiyev himself, as noted, was dismissed from the presidential administration with honors, including being awarded the “Heydar Aliyev” Order. He formally retained his place in the leadership of the “Yeni Azerbaijan” party, remained a member of the Security Council, and headed ANAS. But after some time, investigative bodies began to take an interest in the sources of his colossal financial assets, various real estate holdings, and corrupt schemes at the Academy of Sciences that allegedly took place during his presidency there¹¹.

It can be assumed that the disgrace of the “Mehdiyevists”, which began in the late 2010s, was driven by several factors.

1. R. Mehdiyev and his associates – Foreign Minister E. Mammadyarov and Chief of the General Staff N. Sadikov, considered figures close to Russia – did not suit NATO and Turkey. Therefore, a consensus on granting Azerbaijan the opportunity to resolve the Karabakh issue by force was reached on the condition that I. Aliyev would rid himself of these cadres before the 2020 military campaign and conduct large-scale purges in the state apparatus and army to neutralize all pro-Russian elements.

2. R. Mehdiyev and his circle fell victim to the clan struggle within the Azerbaijani elites and specifically within the Aliyev family. In this dynamic, the president is the nominal head of the “Nakhijevani” (“Kurdish” or “Yeraz”) clan, while his wife and Vice President, Mehriban Aliyeva (née Pashayeva), is the leader of the Pashayev (Absheron) faction. This rivalry intensified after the death of Heydar Aliyev, as the first lady’s clan began to actively push the powerful “Nakhijevanis” from key positions, gaining access to economic levers of influence

¹⁰ “Ramiz Mehdiyev’s letter to Russia published in the media”. Oxu.az (in Rus.), 27.10.2025, <https://oxu.az/ru/obshestvo/opublikovano-pismo-ramiza-mehtieva-kak-on-namerevalsya-osushestvit-gosperevorot> (download date: 05.11.2025).

¹¹ “Ramiz Mehdiyev: Who’s filing a criminal case against me? Mind your own business”. BAKU.WS (in Rus.), 30.10.2024, <https://baku.ws/ru/obschestvo/ramiz-mehtiev-kto-zavodit-na-menya-ugolovnoe-delo-zanimajtes-svoimi-delami> (download date: 05.11.2025).

and the banking sector. In the protracted struggle, Mehdiyev, the real head of the “*Nakhijevanis*”, could not withstand the pressure from the “*Pashayevs*”. His defeat was sealed by the nominal leader of the Nakhijevani clan – I. Aliyev – siding with his wife’s relatives. It is believed the fate of the clan confrontation was decided not by Mehdiyev’s resignation, but a year and a half earlier, when M. Aliyeva was appointed First Vice President, with the right, according to law, to replace the president in the event of his premature departure¹². This demonstrated the planned scenario for the transition of power and confirmed that the Aliyev family did not see the “*Nakhijevanis*” as a unified, leading faction in the future.

3. I. Aliyev himself grew burdened by the cult of H. Aliyev and is taking steps to free his personal power from his father's shadow. Especially after the military resolution of the Karabakh problem, I. Aliyev acquired a sense of his own exceptionalism in Azerbaijan’s history, a narrative hindered by the officially imposed cult of Aliyev Sr. It was R. Mehdiyev who stood at the origins of the “*national leader*” cult in Azerbaijan, making it the axis of the state system that ensured the longevity and apparent stability of the Aliyevs’ rule. Without the political neutralization of Mehdiyev and his team of the “*old Heydarist comrades*”, Aliyev Jr. could not have restructured the state ideology. Therefore, Mehdiyev had to leave the arena, and to do so with disgrace and personal discredit. This was necessary so that the memory of his merits in mentoring the young Aliyev Jr. would disappear; so that the “*scientific field*” of “*Heydarism*” founded by Mehdiyev would be forgotten; and so that all the writings of the disgraced academic, which formed the foundation of Aliyev Sr.’s personality cult, would be removed from circulation. Evidently, the ambitious Aliyev Jr. believes he is no less worthy than his father of being considered the “*national leader*” and of taking personal credit for Azerbaijan’s establishment as a “*regional power*”.

In a broader sense, this may indicate an effort by the Aliyev couple to turn an epochal page in Azerbaijan’s history, leaving the country’s post-Soviet heritage in the past along with the Heydarist cult. They may be seeking to imbue their rule with new, more modern ideological content and to rebrand the regime. It is possible that in the general context of the deep regional transformation, similar messages are being voiced by Azerbaijan’s partners, who prefer to see the Caspian republic’s future free of elements linking it to the Soviet and then – Russian political-ideological space. The “*Mehdiyevists*”, considered a relic of the republic’s political past and ill-suited to the new formation of the Aliyev regime and its adopted ideology of “*monarchical democracy*”, were destined to become victims of these processes.

Evidently, all the enumerated factors, in combination, determined the dismantling of the power pyramid R. Mehdiyev had built within the Aliyev system. The simultaneous use of this process in the interests of I. Aliyev’s foreign policy strategy only completes the picture. Nevertheless, the foregoing should be considered an attempt to analyze the events in Azerbaijan based on fragmentary and contradictory open-source information. Meanwhile, one can assume the existence of other facts and nuances which, for objective reasons, remain outside the observers’ field of vision, but which might underlie these resonant, mystery-shrouded events in the South Caucasian republic.

¹² “Why Aliyev Appointed His Wife as Vice President of Azerbaijan”. BBC (in Rus.), 21.02.2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-39042289> (download date: 05.11.2025).