



Forum Einiges Europa

Ilham Aliyev: Political portrait

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Background

President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has been the leader of Azerbaijan for the last 17 years. He inherited his power from his father late President Heydar Aliyev. Heydar Aliyev was a prominent statesman in Soviet Azerbaijan. He was the head of the Soviet Azerbaijan KGB in 1967-1969, and the first secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist party in 1969-1982. During the last decade of the Soviet Union Heydar Aliyev was the member of the influential Political Bureau of the Soviet Union's Communist Party Central Committee and the Vice Prime Minister of the Soviet Union in 1982-1987.

Heydar Aliyev returned to the leadership role in Azerbaijan in summer 1993, when the military coup ousted from the power pro-Turkish Azerbaijani President Abulfaz Elchibey, and was elected President of Azerbaijan in October 1993. After the ceasefire agreement signed between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno Karabakh Republic in May 1994, Heydar Aliyev paid significant attention to the development of the oil sector of Azerbaijan and signed the "The Contract of Century" with Western oil companies in September 1994¹. Meanwhile, Ilham Aliyev graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) in 1982 and defended his Ph.D. thesis there in 1985. Ilham Aliyev lectured in MGIMO for several years, then started a business career and left for Istanbul in 1992.

Ilham Aliyev returned to Azerbaijan in late 1993. He was the Vice President, then the first Vice President of the State oil company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR), and was elected as a member of the Azerbaijani Parliament in 1995 and 2000. Since the late 1990s, he was widely perceived as a successor to his father and his appointment as Prime Minister in August 2003 caught no one by surprise. Given the sharp deterioration of Heydar Aliyev's health, Ilham Aliyev participated in the Presidential elections of October 2003 and received almost 80 percent of the votes².

Domestic policy

¹ The contract of the century – a national strategy for success, https://www.bp.com/en_az/azerbaijan/home/who-we-are/operationsprojects/acg2/the-contract-of-the-century---a-national-strategy-for-success.html.

² Azerbaijan Report: October 18, 2003, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1340743.html>.

However, even after the death of Heydar Aliyev in December 2003, Ilham Aliyev was fully dependent on the state apparatus developed during the Presidency of his father. The key figure was the head of the Presidential Administration Ramiz Mekhtiev, who was playing a decisive role in the state. Not surprisingly, the Prime Minister of Azerbaijan Artur Rasizade, who was appointed in that position by Heydar Aliyev in 1996, kept his position until 2018. Thus, during the first 15 years of his rule, Ilham Aliyev was forced to keep in key positions almost all representatives of the Heydar Aliyev's inner circle.

Meanwhile, for a better understanding of the domestic political situation in Azerbaijan after the election of Ilham Aliyev, we have to analyze "The clan-based system there". The key two clans in Azerbaijan were the "Nakhijevan clan" led by Heydar Aliyev, who was born in Nakhijevan, and "Pashaev's clan". Pashaevs was an influential intellectual family in Soviet Azerbaijan. In 1983 the representative of this clan Mehriban Pashaeva married Ilham Aliyev and thus, these two clans joined their forces. After the election of Heydar and then Ilham Aliyevs as President of Azerbaijan, these two clans fostered their positions in the country. The uncle of Mehriban Pashaeva was the Azerbaijani ambassador in the US in 1993 – 2006 and then was appointed as the rector of the Azerbaijani diplomatic academy. Pashaev's are actively involved in business activities through the establishment of "Pasha bank" and "Capital Bank". They have business interests also in construction, telecommunication, etc³.

During the first decade of Ilham Aliyev's rule, his main goal was the consolidation of his power and keeping the balance between these two influential clans. Despite being a member of the Nakhijevan clan, he sought to play the role of arbiter, whom both clans should respect and apply as a final decision-maker. In March 2009 he initiated the referendum to abolish Presidential terms limits, which allowed him to participate in the 2013 Presidential elections. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani authorities have launched tough measures against the opposition, journalists, and civil society sector. Many offices of the international civil society organizations were closed in Azerbaijan in 2013-2014⁴. However, the 2015 economic crisis, which resulted in a sharp depreciation of Azerbaijani currency, and the significant increase of the levels of poverty, put tough dilemmas in front of Azerbaijani authorities. Despite many statements, Azerbaijan was unable to overcome its dependence on oil and gas export which were providing up to 85 percent of budget revenues in Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, the sharp drop in oil prices in the second half of 2014, and the decline of oil production in Azerbaijan created a long-term risk for domestic instability. For the first time since 1994, there have been large scale protests in different towns of

³ US embassy cables: Who owns what in Azerbaijan, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/245758>.

⁴ Azerbaijan detains prominent human rights activists in fresh crackdown, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/15/azerbaijan-detains-human-rights-activists-fresh-crackdown>.

Azerbaijan at the beginning of 2016. People were criticizing the authorities and were complaining about the rampant corruption and inefficiency of the state apparatus. It was clear that the previous economic model of Azerbaijan, which was based on corruption, and the distribution of state profits between two main clans, was not sustainable.

Azerbaijan needed reforms and representatives of Pashaev's clan started to portray themselves as supporters of the reforms while calling the key figures of the Nakhijevan clan as protectors of the status quo. These ideas were resonated quite well with some parts of the society and eventually, President Aliyev decided to start a struggle against the Nakhijevan clan, hoping to unite both clans and become the undisputed leader of the country with his wife. The first step towards big changes was the constitutional amendments referendum held in September 2016. The amendments created the office of the First Vice President and Vice Presidents and extended the Presidential term from five to seven years. According to these amendments, the First Vice President will become acting President if President resigns or is incapacitated. Before these amendments, those duties were devoted to the Prime Minister of Azerbaijan. The First Vice President and Vice- Presidents are being appointed and dismissed by President himself.

In February 2017 President Aliyev appointed his wife Mehriban Aliyeva as the First Vice-President of Azerbaijan. This step received mixed reactions and many both in Azerbaijan and abroad were criticizing this appointment as another move towards establishing full-fledged family dictatorship in Azerbaijan⁵. However, from domestic political perspectives, this move was a clear sign of the growing influence of Pashaev's clan and the decline of the Nakhijevan clan led by the head of the Presidential administration Ramiz Mekhtiyev. If before February 2017 all knew in Azerbaijan that the second person in the state was Mr. Mekhtiyev, now he was replaced by President's wife.

The second wave of changes started in April 2018 with early presidential elections. Aliyev easily won the elections and immediately dismissed the long-serving Prime Minister of Azerbaijan Artur Rasizade replacing him with Novruz Mamedov. Mamedov himself was born in Nakhijevan, was representative of the Nakhijevan clan and has been serving in Presidential administration since 1997 as the head of the foreign relations department. However, the dismissal of Rasizade opened the way for further changes, as Mamedov was the only transitional figure and was dismissed in October 2019. The culmination of the efforts to weaken the Nakhijevan clan was the dismissal of Mekhtiyev from his position of the head of the Presidential office in October 2019⁶. Mekhtiyev was elected as the President of the National Academy of

⁵ Leader of Azerbaijan Goes Full 'House Of Cards' And Appoints His Wife As Vice President, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/azerbaijan-house-of-cards_n_58adaf2ce4b0d0a6ef46bdfe.

⁶ Azeri leader dismisses head of administration in deepening shake-up, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/us-azerbaijan-politics-idUSKBN1X227F>.

Sciences but obviously lost much if not all of his administrative powers. Thus, after 16 years of ascending to power in Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev managed to free himself from the friendly grips of close partners of his father and currently is an undisputed leader of Azerbaijan together with his wife. Meanwhile, there is a process of merging of remnants of the Nakhijevan clan with Pashaev's clan which may result in further consolidation of power by Ilham Aliyev and Mehriban Aliyeva. The snap parliamentary elections held in Azerbaijan in February 2020 further fostered Aliyev's position. As of now, he faces no serious threats to his power and only potential health problems may hinder his re-election in the upcoming 2025 Presidential elections.

Foreign policy

Ilham Aliyev inherited a balanced foreign policy from his father. Heydar Aliyev signed "The contract of the century" with western oil companies in 1994 and did not prolong the Collective Security Treaty with Russia and some other post-soviet states in 1999 (in 2002 Collective Security Treaty was transformed into Collective Security Treaty Organization). However, after the too pro-Turkish policy of the former Azerbaijani President Elchibey, who was even supporting the idea of inclusion of Azerbaijan into Turkey, Heydar Aliyev was able to stabilize relations with Russia. Ilham Aliyev continued this balanced foreign policy. The key ally of Azerbaijan was Turkey but since the 2010s Azerbaijan has fostered its relations with Russia mainly focusing attention on military-technical cooperation and the establishment of international transport and energy corridors linking Russia and Iran via Azerbaijan. However, the key issue in Azerbaijan – Russia relations was the Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan didn't hide that by increasing its cooperation with Russia and by buying up to 5 billion USD Russian weaponry, Baku hoped that Russia would use its influence over Armenia to facilitate the return of territories to Azerbaijan⁷.

Given the worsening of the situation on human rights and rule of law in Azerbaijan, there was criticism against Azerbaijan in some European and American circles. However, both the US and EU were fully supporting the launch of the Baku - Tbilisi – Ceyhan oil pipeline and the construction of the Southern Gas Corridor, which brings Azerbaijani gas to Europe via Baku – Tbilisi – Erzurum, Trans Anatolian, and Trans Adriatic pipelines.

Azerbaijan managed to maintain balanced relations with Iran too. Azerbaijan is probably the most important country for Iran in the South Caucasus. It has the majority Shia Muslim population, which creates strong religious bonds between two states, though due to 70 years of Soviet rule, Azerbaijani society is much less pious. But the key factor for Iran's attention towards Azerbaijan is the existence of approximately 20 million Azerbaijani speaking population in Iran leaving alongside the Iran – Azerbaijan border. Iran has a concern that Azerbaijani territory may

⁷ Azerbaijan purchases military products worth \$5 bln from Russia, <https://tass.com/world/1019588>.

be used as a launchpad to sow dissent and separatist mood in these regions. The several reports on US and Israeli intelligence services activities in Azerbaijan targeting Iranian interests only increase concern in Tehran. However, since the election of President Rouhani in 2013 two states significantly fostered bilateral relations, and Russia – Iran – Azerbaijan trilateral format of cooperation was launched in 2016⁸.

The key foreign policy problem of Azerbaijan is the Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan was participating in the OSCE Minsk Group facilitated negotiations, but Baku rejected the 2011 Kazan document which envisaged the return of 5 regions outside the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region 1988 borders to Azerbaijan and organization of legally binding expression of a will to fix the final legal status of Karabakh sometime in indefinite future. Since 2011 negotiations have been in deadlock, while Russia put forward Lavrov's plan in 2013. It envisaged the return of 5 and after one year another two regions to Azerbaijan, deployment of only Russian peacekeepers, and postponement of the settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh status for indefinite future without mentioning organization of expression of will. Azerbaijan was resisting the idea of bringing Russian peacekeepers to Azerbaijan as it would mean the establishment of the de facto Russian military base in Azerbaijan. However, at the beginning of 2020 Azerbaijan agreed to Lavrov's plan, and was waiting for Russia to convince or to force Armenia to accept it.

Armenia's rejection of the plan in Spring 2020 and the July 2020 clashes along with Armenia – Azerbaijan international border resulted in Azerbaijan's disappointment of Russia. President Aliyev thought that either Russia was unwilling or unable to force Armenia to accept Lavrov's plan. Thus, in mid-July 2020 decision was made in Azerbaijan to foster relations with Turkey and to seek Turkey's support to get the upper hand over Armenia. Most probably, the decision to start the war on September 27, 2020, was made in late Summer 2020. However, Azerbaijan and Turkey were not able to start the war without tacit Russian consent. Thus, we may assume that some sort Russia – Azerbaijan – Turkey deal was done in late Summer 2020 to implement Lavrov's plan either peacefully if Armenia agreed to accept it or through the military defeat of Armenia. Meanwhile, the deployment of the Russian peacekeepers could be in line with President Aliyev's strategic interests to avoid full dependence on Turkey. Thus, despite growing Turkey's influence in Azerbaijan during and after the war, which was proved again by President Erdogan's participation on December 10, 2020 Victory parade in Baku⁹, President Aliyev will seek to continue his balanced policy between Turkey and Russia. The start of the supply of Azerbaijani gas to Europe in mid-November 2020 will play a key role in future Azerbaijan – EU

⁸ Trilateral meeting of the presidents of Azerbaijan, Iran and Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52666/photos>.

⁹ Azerbaijan celebrates Nagorno-Karabakh victory, Erdogan attends, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/10/azerbaijan-celebrates-nagorno-karabakh-victory-erdogan-attends>.

relations. During the 17th Cooperation Council meeting between the European Union and the Republic of Azerbaijan held in Brussels on December 18, 2020, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell stated that the EU wanted to conclude an ambitious new comprehensive agreement with Azerbaijan¹⁰. As for the US – Azerbaijan relations during the Biden administration, we have to wait to see what will be Biden’s policy towards Turkey and Russia as this will determine the US approach towards the South Caucasus.



¹⁰ EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council, 18 December 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/azerbaijan/eu-azerbaijan-cooperation-council-18-december-2020>.