

# Azerbaijan and the West: Azerbaijan On the Verge of A Choice

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Baku's foreign policy has entered a period of mystery for several months now. Two main lines have very clearly manifested themselves in Azerbaijani foreign policy since about 1995: high-level political ties with Moscow and high-level economic and political ties with the West. The government views it as *a balanced foreign policy*, a brief summary of which has been as follows: Azerbaijan doesn't envision allying with either the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Similarly, Azerbaijan seeks neither NATO nor EU membership.

However, since 2014, after the third attempt of democratization in post-Soviet countries, Ilham Aliyev has been hesitant to continue this "balanced" foreign policy. This year, for the first time, open political tensions have begun to arise in the US-Azerbaijan relationship. Those tensions continued throughout the year with [propaganda](#) in state and pro-government media against the U.S. and repressions against political and civil activists, all of which culminated with a decision to close Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Baku office by the end of the year.

However, there has been no parting of ways between the West and Azerbaijan as a whole. Simply put, the closing of RFERL in Baku was a clear message from Ilham Aliyev to Western political centers that he is adamant in preserving his hold on power. He has since advanced his draft thesis about the European integration process, a process which started in 1999 and encompasses political-economic and legal (human rights) adaptations: Political-legal (human rights) issues should be

excluded from all future agreements, while Azerbaijani relations with the West should be limited to economic agreements. It is for this reason that the EU and Azerbaijan failed to sign a bilateral, later to be called associative, agreement. However, last year a [Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy](#) was signed between Azerbaijan and the EU. This document no longer contains the phrase “human rights.”

It can be asked: If the confrontation reached such a high level in 2014, what conditions prevented the rupture of the Azerbaijani relationship with the West? Firstly, the geopolitical circumstances were not a decisive factor in the conflict that occurred around that time. U.S.-EU relations had not been in sync. On top of that, tendencies towards de-integration (e.g. [Brexit](#)) had intensified inside the EU. Secondly, the U.S. had not yet left Afghanistan, and official Baku continued to be a very important logistical center for the West's and the U.S.'s, in particular, vision of global security. Thirdly, Russia had not launched a war to occupy Ukraine, and petty authoritarian regimes were not perceived as a threat in Western political centers. Fourthly, for the West, which sought to protect Georgia's weak democracy from Russian influence through Azerbaijan's energy and Türkiye's political and economic assistance, official Baku was an indispensable partner.

Relations between the United States and Azerbaijan have once again become tense in recent days. Pro-government [media outlets](#) have launched relentless anti-American propaganda. It has been announced that Western “spies” will be silenced. Official Baku presents the recent confrontation, as it has traditionally, as a manifestation of the Armenian lobby's influence on the US administration. Of course, the allegations of the Armenian lobby's influence on the US political elite are true in a way. The organizers of the recent congressional hearings are also congressmen known mainly for their pro-Armenian stances. However, it would be naive to think that the

Armenian lobby is capable of undermining US-Azerbaijani relations. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan won a victory in the 44-day Second Karabakh War, liberated all the occupied territories, restored sovereignty over its entire territory, including Khankendi, Azerbaijan has not encountered stiff resistance from either Europe or the US throughout these events. For the Armenian lobby, however, it has been a matter of life and death. Baku's portrayal of the Armenian lobby, a lobby that failed to rally US political elite against Azerbaijan during the second Karabakh War, as the sole architect of the current tension between Azerbaijan and the USA is nothing but Azerbaijani propaganda. Moreover, it is obvious that Baku is interested in presenting relations as tense.

However, the reality of relations is completely different than Baku propaganda presents it. The situation has changed dramatically from 2014. Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, official Baku has lost its value in the eyes of the White House in terms of security. The Russia-Ukraine war is perceived by the collective West as a war between democracies and autocracies. In other words, the current geopolitical situation defines the current global situation as one of confrontation between an authoritarian coalition and western democracy. From this point of view, small autocracies such as Azerbaijan, which were not viewed as a threat to Western values until recently, have already come to be seen as dangerous to the West because of its official alliance with Putin. If before the West's general approach towards official Baku did not go beyond luring the latter towards reform through persuasion, now everyone understands that this method has come to an end. In this regard, it can be said that Western circles are already concluding how their relationship with Aliyev should develop further. For his part, Aliyev does not intend to join the ranks of the democratic front.

Well aware of all this, Aliyev is moreover doomed to search for alternatives to defend his autocracy in the reality of the

transition of the international authoritarian coalition, the locomotive of which has been Russia, which has considerably lost strength in world politics. What are the alternatives? If we look at the economic [scale](#) of Azerbaijani relations with the West, we can say that official Baku has no alternative. Out of every [\\$100](#) Azerbaijan earns from foreign trade, \$91 comes from the energy sector, that is, from revenues from the oil and gas products sold to Europe. Given that all of Azerbaijan's [strategic](#) documents (National Security Concept 4.1.2) also formalized integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures as a key aspect of its national security, it is logical that Azerbaijan should immediately leave the autocratic front and seek protection on the opposite front to secure its future.

But does this actually represent some salvation for Aliyev himself? It doesn't. The problem is that for Aliyev, seeking protection from the democracy front will mean that a ticking clock for his time in power. However, his goal is to remain in power forever. It is for this reason that Aliyev now faces a hard choice. It is a choice between *losing everything* and *losing many things*. On the one hand, he has consistently demonstrated his commitment to anti-Western rhetoric, and on the other hand, he has so far avoided revealing the country's official stance that its geostrategic direction has changed.

If Aliyev chooses the democracy front, only Azerbaijan will be the winner. Aliyev himself will eventually have to lose his autocratic power and then his authority, i.e., everything. If he chooses the autocratic front, Aliyev will eventually lose all his property, finances and oil money in the West, the latter of which means everything for the country's economy. But he will preserve his power. The desire to put off this miserable choice, which cannot be entirely foreseen in advance, has now turned Baku's foreign policy into a mystery.

The first visible clues suggest that Aliyev's choice will not be between the West and Russia. Russia is severely weakened

and the Kremlin alone cannot defend Aliyev's autocracy. He intends to make his choice between the [regional authoritarian states](#)—Türkiye, Iran, Russia— and the West. We can already see some of Aliyev's moves towards the former. In January, despite the terrorist attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, Aliyev pushed to improve Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, which had reached an especially tense level. Additionally, he has frequently talked openly that he sees no need for the presence of [far-abroad countries](#) in the Caucasus, which was previously the rhetoric voiced by Moscow and Tehran only.

Even if authoritarian regionalism is not strong enough and limited in stating ambitious programs, it can still serve the interests of smaller authoritarian countries by increasing their legitimacy locally. Political leaders enthusiastically manage to position themselves as supporters of regional integration and gain political benefit from the existence of a regional organization. The 3+3 format involving the South Caucasus countries and Russia, Türkiye, Iran, which has been voiced for almost 3 years now, is in fact a disguised name for a regional authoritarian union planned by the larger countries. It is quite obvious that Georgia is not participating in this format. It is also clear that Armenia's participation in this format, which intensifies its relations with the West, is only temporary. What remains is 3 + 1, i.e., three strong authoritarian centers and Azerbaijan. Aliyev intends to save his autocracy under the umbrella of this regional authoritarian union.

Of course, Aliyev would very much like geopolitical conditions to return to those before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so that he would not be forced to make a choice between the democratic and autocratic fronts. But as I've argued, with current geopolitical conditions deepening the confrontation between the two sides, Aliyev will increasingly need to make a choice.