

Azerbaijan's 25 Years in the Council of Europe

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Azerbaijan's admission to the Council of Europe in 2001 was not merely an act of joining an international organization, it was also a normative and ideological choice regarding the country's developmental trajectory.^[1] Membership signaled Azerbaijan's intention to move beyond its Soviet legacy and to pursue a path of state-building grounded in the principles of the rule of law, human rights, and democratic governance. For this reason, the event was widely regarded at the time as a strategic decision of exceptional significance in Azerbaijan's history.^[2]

Immediately following accession, a number of key legislative acts were adopted or substantially revised. Azerbaijan acceded to the European Convention on Human Rights^[3] and recognized the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).^[4] This not only expanded the possibilities for individual petitions by citizens but also created a new environment of legal accountability for all branches of state power. The case law of the ECtHR began to influence domestic judicial practice, and this period, to a certain extent, generated real potential for the transformation of legal consciousness. In short, membership in the Council of Europe initially opened an important window of opportunity for Azerbaijan's legal modernization.

However, these opportunities did not translate into long-term and sustainable reforms.^[5] Over time, relations between Azerbaijan and the Council of Europe shifted away from a trajectory of normative integration toward a model of formal participation and political adaptation. Within this process, institutional interactions increasingly assumed a procedural character, while the Council of Europe's monitoring mechanisms

gradually lost their effectiveness.[\[6\]](#) In essence, membership ceased to function as an instrument for internal political transformation and instead became a tool of international legitimacy. In this context, the suspension of the voting and representation rights of Azerbaijan's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) clearly demonstrated that the relationship had entered a phase of systemic crisis.

Azerbaijan's Delegation

Over time, membership in the Council of Europe shifted away from serving as a mechanism for political and legal reforms within Azerbaijan and instead increasingly became an instrument for securing the ruling authorities' international legitimacy. One of the clearest manifestations of this trend has been the prolonged lack of change in the composition – and particularly the leadership – of Azerbaijan's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).[\[7\]](#) For approximately 23–25 years, the leadership of Azerbaijan's delegation to PACE has remained effectively concentrated in the hands of Samad Seyidov. At the same time, other members of the delegation, including figures such as Asim Mollazade, were repeatedly represented across different periods over many years. This pattern stands in sharp contrast to the traditions of European parliamentarism. For other member states of the Council of Europe, delegation leadership does not remain unchanged for decades. Typically, such positions rotate regularly, reflecting internal parliamentary political balances, election outcomes, and the principle of political turnover. In this respect, the Azerbaijani case should be regarded as a clear deviation from established norms.

One of the underlying reasons for this situation lies in the mechanism through which the delegation to PACE has been formed. The composition of Azerbaijan's delegation has not been based on genuinely competitive political processes or free parliamentary elections, but rather on individuals who

obtained mandates through fraudulent and non-legitimate elections.[\[8\]](#) In this sense, members of the delegation have functioned less as elected parliamentary representatives and more as appointed figures, who are politically accountable not to society but to the executive authorities.[\[9\]](#) Such a composition has inevitably produced a pattern of behavior inconsistent with the parliamentary diplomacy of the Assembly.

Another notable issue concerns the ideological profile of the delegation. At various times, individuals holding views that openly contradict the core values of the Council of Europe – namely human rights, political pluralism, and democratic governance – have been included in its composition. These individuals have been more closely associated with an authoritarian model of governance and a rigid security-oriented discourse.[\[10\]](#) For example, Erkin Gadirli, who served as a member of PACE within Azerbaijan’s delegation between 2020 and 2024, publicly identified himself as a supporter of right-wing authoritarianism.[\[11\]](#) Similarly, Fazil Mustafa, who represented Azerbaijan in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe from 2011 to 2024[\[12\]](#), had described as “enemies” those who advocate for the implementation of Council of Europe standards in Azerbaijan or who support alternative reports and assessments in this regard.[\[13\]](#)

The primary activity of the delegation was focused on preventing the adoption within the Assembly of reports critical of the situation in the country regarding human rights, elections, and political freedoms.[\[14\]](#) To this end, various political maneuvers, procedural mechanisms, and informal connections were employed, and instances in which critical reports failed to secure sufficient votes were openly welcomed as a “positive outcome.”[\[15\]](#) Such conduct demonstrated that the delegation perceived monitoring mechanisms not as instruments of cooperation, but as threats.

Taken together, these factors provide grounds to conclude that Azerbaijan’s delegation to PACE did not genuinely represent

the Azerbaijani people. Rather, this model of representation served to defend, at the international level, the existing authoritarian system of governance[16], a regime of political absolutism, and its need for legitimacy. Consequently, the activity of Azerbaijan's delegation within PACE diverged from the classical function of parliamentary diplomacy and instead evolved into a political mechanism that did not engage in dialogue with normative values, but rather adopted a defensive posture against them.

Caviar Diplomacy

Another key factor contributing to the distortions observed in certain phases of Azerbaijan's relations with the Council of Europe since 2001 has been the emergence of informal influence mechanisms. The term *caviar diplomacy* entered the political lexicon to describe this period, which intensified between 2001 and 2013.[17] Normatively, the Council of Europe is expected to transmit democratic values and legal standards to its member states; however, during this period, a reverse dynamic was observed. Azerbaijan exported to certain structures of the Council of Europe practices characteristic of its own political culture, particularly those marked by a lack of transparency.

These mechanisms of influence manifested in various forms. Certain members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe were presented with expensive carpets produced in Azerbaijan, valuable souvenirs, and other material gifts, while all-expenses-paid trips were organized under the pretext of invitations to high-level international events.[18] In addition, deputies and their family members were accommodated in luxury hotels, hosted in expensive restaurants, and offered individualized attention and privileges, while jars of caviar were distributed as specially packaged "national gifts." Sex workers were reportedly used as part of efforts to influence PACE members. For example, according to testimony by PACE rapporteur Dick Marty, during an official mission in Baku, at

approximately 1:00 a.m., he heard a knock at his hotel room door, and looking through the peephole, he observed two young women, partially undressed and holding a bottle of champagne, but he refused to open the door.[\[19\]](#)

In some cases, caviar diplomacy involved direct financial transfers and the provision of monetary payments. For instance, in Italy, former PACE member Luca Volontè was found guilty of receiving substantial sums of money in exchange for adopting positions aligned with the interests of the Azerbaijani authorities, and he was convicted on corruption charges.[\[20\]](#) Similar investigations were conducted in Germany and Belgium. In Germany, investigative measures were taken against several former members of the Christian Democratic Union in connection with allegations of corruption and illegal lobbying[\[21\]](#), while in Belgium criminal proceedings were initiated concerning the activities of former PACE members.[\[22\]](#) Some of these cases resulted in court verdicts, while others led to the termination of political careers.

These processes across different countries have demonstrated that *caviar diplomacy* is not merely the result of individual behavior, but rather a structured and coordinated model of influence. It is important to note that these criminal investigations and judicial proceedings were primarily carried out by law enforcement authorities in European countries, whereas on the originating side of the corrupt practices – namely, Azerbaijan – there was no legal response. No criminal cases were initiated in Azerbaijan in connection with these activities, nor were formal internal investigative procedures ever undertaken.[\[23\]](#)

Unfulfilled Obligations

The situation regarding Azerbaijan's compliance with the core political and legal commitments it undertook upon joining the Council of Europe has systematically deteriorated over time. These commitments,[\[24\]](#) initially presented as key indicators

of democratic transition, have not only remained unfulfilled but have instead taken on a largely formal character against the backdrop of deepening authoritarian consolidation.

Although the resolution of the *political prisoner issue* was one of the principal conditions for Azerbaijan's accession to the Council of Europe, developments in this area have clearly moved in the opposite direction. Over time, politically motivated arrests have ceased to be exceptional and have become an integral component of governance practices. Opposition politicians, civil society activists, journalists, and human rights defenders have been deprived of their liberty on fabricated charges.[\[25\]](#) In particular, the targeting of journalists conducting corruption investigations, the mass arrests of religious believers, and the staging of *artificial coup* scenarios intended to instill fear in society have demonstrated the institutionalization of political repression.[\[26\]](#)

The institution of elections has entirely lost its function as a source of democratic legitimacy. Presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections have been consistently conducted under conditions of widespread fraud, the total mobilization of administrative resources, and the suppression of genuine political competition. While a significant number of international observation missions have not recognized these elections as free and fair, the adoption of loyal positions by certain international actors—under the influence of so-called “caviar diplomacy”—has enabled each falsified election to be presented in official discourse as *another step toward democracy*.[\[27\]](#) This indicates that elections have effectively been transformed from mechanisms of legitimacy production into instruments of legitimacy simulation.

At the *normative level*, a systematic divergence from European standards has also taken place. The legislative framework has been gradually made more regressive, with stricter laws on political parties limiting the possibilities for genuine

political activity. Through constitutional amendments and manipulated referendums, mechanisms have been established to ensure the concentration of power in a single authority.[\[28\]](#) Notably, all of these referendums were held during Azerbaijan's membership in the Council of Europe, yet the organization largely confined itself to formal and ineffective statements rather than imposing meaningful sanctions. Legislation governing freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, and the media has been consistently tightened, while a number of fundamental commitments included in the initial accession package remain unfulfilled to this day.[\[29\]](#) In particular, the failure to adopt a law on national minorities, the non-accession to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and the non-adoption of a law on alternative military service confirm that these commitments have remained largely on paper.[\[30\]](#)

Formal requirements concerning the establishment of *democratic institutions* have also proven ineffective in practice. For example, the Ombudsman institution, established to protect human rights, has functioned not as a genuine mechanism of protection but rather as a structure serving as a façade of legitimacy for the authorities.[\[31\]](#) Such institutions have neither demonstrated independence nor possessed the capacity for effective intervention in the face of systemic human rights violations.

In sum, the situation regarding Azerbaijan's implementation of its obligations toward the Council of Europe should not be understood as a collection of isolated shortcomings, but rather as the outcome of a consistent policy aimed at consolidating authoritarian governance.

Exclusion from PACE

In 2024, Azerbaijan's delegation was excluded from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe due to its long-standing failure to fulfill the obligations it had

undertaken before the Council of Europe.[\[32\]](#) This decision represented a delayed political response to systemic violations that had been tolerated for many years.[\[33\]](#) For a long time, the Council of Europe had remained largely passive in the face of Azerbaijan's persistent breaches, limiting itself to formal statements. The Azerbaijani case demonstrated that while international institutions may tolerate deviations from normative principles up to a certain point, such a situation cannot persist indefinitely, and a response ultimately becomes inevitable.

In the history of the Council of Europe, the Azerbaijani case can be regarded as one of the most serious and difficult-to-repair setbacks. The implementation of this decision also underscores the necessity for PACE to demonstrate its commitment to its own values: concessions, political compromise, or diplomatic maneuvering cannot substitute for the application of fundamental principles. The Council of Europe must act with seriousness, consistency, and principled determination, refraining from compromising on the adherence of its member states to its core values. This decision also carries strategic importance in establishing a normative precedent for other member states of the organization in the future.

For Azerbaijan, this exclusion has not only created a diplomatic challenge but has also dealt a significant blow to the country's credibility within the European legal and political space. Human rights, democracy, and the rule of law constitute the foundational values of the Council of Europe and serve as normative guidelines for all member states. However, Azerbaijan has remained distant from these values for many years and has not demonstrated a serious commitment to adhering to them in the foreseeable future. In this context, the dissatisfaction expressed by Azerbaijan's delegation with the Council of Europe and PACE, as well as its attempts to justify its position through various arguments or legal claims, reflects a systematic resistance to European

standards.

The Outcome of 25 Years

A review of the twenty-five years of membership makes it clearer what each side has gained and lost. Over this period, Azerbaijan gained access to European legal mechanisms. However, these opportunities did not translate into genuine democratic transformation. The system of governance retained its authoritarian character, legal institutions were subordinated to political will, and membership in the Council of Europe remained largely a formal status. At the same time, while the Council of Europe expanded its geographical reach, it significantly weakened its claim to normative authority and its moral legitimacy.

Ultimately, the relationship between Azerbaijan and the Council of Europe represents an instructive political case demonstrating how democratic institutions in the post-Soviet space can be reduced to formal structures that are only imitative in practice. Likewise, it demonstrates the extent to which international organizations are capable of responding effectively to such imitation. These relations once again show that membership in an international organization and declarative commitments are not sufficient to guarantee democratic values. Only systematic oversight, a principled stance, and genuine political will can ensure the real implementation of these values.

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