# The Normalization of Derogatory Language in Azerbaijani Political Discourse

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In 2003, a program began airing on Azerbaijani television that portrayed political opponents as puppets. In Lider TV's program *Kuklalar* (*Puppets*), political debate focused less on opponent's actual arguments than on caricatured portrayals of their identities. Speaking later about the spread of insults in the Azerbaijani media, media law expert Alasgar Mammadli stated that the foundations of this process had been laid precisely in 2003 with *Kuklalar*, while the program *Sitatin sonu* (*End of Citation*) broadcast on Lider TV, was another example of the same trend.[1]

At first glance, this could have been regarded as harsh political satire or an unsuccessful editorial choice by a television channel. However, the channel's political and institutional position suggested another interpetation. IREX's 2004 Media Sustainability Index report indicates that Lider TV was owned by Adalat Aliyev, the cousin of President Ilham Aliyev. The same report finds Space TV associated with the president's sister and ATV with the family of a high-ranking official in the Presidential Administration. The report notes that the main television channels in Baku are under the control of government officials, their family members, or supporters of the ruling authorities.[2]

In this sense, *Kuklalar* was not merely a television program. It was one of the first visible examples of turning a political opponent into an object of ridicule and humiliation in front of a mass audience. Subsequent events showed that

this did not remain an isolated instance. Caricature was followed by attacks on personal reputation, delegitimizing labels such as “traitor,” “supporter of terrorists,” and others, and later by the exposure of private and sexual activities on nationwide television. In other words, one of the starting points for the systematic introduction of vulgarity into Azerbaijani sociopolitical discourse must be sought precisely in television broadcasting.

The central question of this article is through what stages did the profanity, insults, personal humiliation, and stigmatization openly visible today on social media and YouTube channels pass before becoming ordinary elements of Azerbaijani political communication? At what point did a political opponent cease to be an opponent and become a “traitor,” “enemy,” “fifth column,” “separatist,” “element,” and ultimately a person whom it was considered acceptable to insult?

To answer this question, the article analyzes events observed in Azerbaijani sociopolitical discourse between 2000 and 2026. The empirical material includes television content, speeches by government officials, social media and YouTube materials, reports by international organizations, media monitoring reports, court cases, and subsequent statements by direct participants in these events.

The article does not use “derogatory language” as a synonym for profanity. Profanity is simply one of the most explicit and crude forms of derogatory language. For us, “derogatory language” includes forms of communication that target the personality, dignity, origin, family, or political legitimacy of a political opponent instead of challenging their views. Direct profanity, personal and sexual insults, labels such as “traitor,” “betrayer,” “enemy,” and “fifth column,” the transformation of ethnic affiliation into grounds for political suspicion, and coordinated insult campaigns are examined within this framework.

However, crude political polemics, hate speech, and calls for violence are not the same phenomenon, and their legal and political implications differ. In examining the normalization of far-right and right-wing populist discourse, Austrian linguist and discourse researcher Ruth Wodak demonstrates how expressions and behaviors that were previously considered unacceptable can be repeated in political and media discourse and gradually become part of acceptable political communication. From this perspective, normalization does not only involve the increased use of certain words, but rather the gradual shifting of the boundaries of the acceptable in political communication.[3]

The aim of this study is not to create an artificial moral equivalence between the government and the opposition. The same expression does not carry the same political weight when used by a person representing state power, on nationwide television, or on a YouTube channel. The inequality of institutional resources means that responsibility is not equally distributed either. However, this asymmetry does not justify excluding the language of any political camp from empirical examination.

**From Television to Political Delegitimization**

The pattern that became visible with *Kuklalar* soon continued in other television formats. Although Lider TV occupied a particular place in this regard, the empirical material shows that the problem was not limited to a single channel. In 2005, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) reported that Lider TV, ATV, and Space TV conducted a smear campaign against human rights defenders Leyla Yunus and Eldar Zeynalov. Because of their criticism of Azerbaijan's practice of holding political prisoners, both human rights defenders had been accused of "supporting terrorists."[4]

The OSCE/ODIHR monitoring of that year's parliamentary elections also revealed quantitative indicators of inequality

in the media environment. The monitoring covered AzTV, İTV, Lider TV, Space, ATV, and ANS. Lider TV devoted 78 percent of its prime-time news coverage of political and electoral matters to the president, the presidential administration, the government, and the New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), while commentary during the airtime allocated to the opposition Freedom Bloc (Azadlıq) was explicitly negative. The monitoring noted that Lider TV had produced special reports aimed at discrediting opposition candidates, and that similar tendencies were found on Space and ATV. Although the situation at Public Television was different, a significant advantage was also given to the political activities of the government there, alongside a considerably negative tone toward the opposition.[5]

The process went even further on Lider TV. In 2008, the channel broadcast a film titled "Collapse" about Ali Karimli and the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (AXCP), and rebroadcast the film following criticism.[6] During the same period, following the stabbing of Azadliq newspaper journalist Agil Khalil, television reports linked the attack to his alleged homosexual relationships.[7] Thus, attention was shifted away from the investigation of the violence suffered by the journalist.

In 2010, this practice took one of its most explicit forms. Two weeks before parliamentary elections, Lider TV broadcast a video, reportedly recorded secretly, depicting an intimate encounter between Azar Ahmadov, technical editor of Azadliq newspaper, and a woman, under the title "The Naked Truth of the Opposition." According to RFE/RL, the footage had previously circulated on the internet and had been sent to several media outlets in DVD format. However, by broadcasting the footage on 25 October 2010, Lider TV presented it to a nationwide television audience for the first time.[8]

The OSCE/ODIHR's 2010 report specifically noted that the intimate footage had been shown as a four-and-a-half-minute

segment during a regular news program. The report indicated that Space, ATV, and Khazar TV demonstrated political approaches similar to those of AzTV, while Lider TV, Space, and ATV produced materials aimed at discrediting opposition candidates and journalists.[9] The fact that similar tendencies were documented during two separate election periods in the monitoring reports of 2005 and 2010 makes it difficult to explain the problem as the result of individual journalists exceeding ethical boundaries.

Another important aspect of the Azar Ahmadov case is the statements that emerged from the representatives of the pro-government media years later. Emin Ahmadov, the Lider TV employee who narrated the report, stated that he had not wanted to interfere in another person's private life and had not known that the text he was reading would be shown over the footage.[10] Vusal Mammadov, one of the authors of the text, later said that he had not wanted to write such material but had carried out the editorial assignment. [11]Unlike an external observer's assessment of media bias, these statements are accounts provided by individuals who had worked within the communication mechanism itself.

In parallel with these developments on television, the status of the political opponent was also changing in the official political lexicon. In one of his speeches in 2017, President Ilham Aliyev used the expressions "fifth column," "anti-national traitorous elements," and "enemies of the Azerbaijani state" in reference to the opposition.[12] In a speech in March 2020 concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, he described certain political and media opponents as a "fifth column" and "enemies sitting among us."[13]

The main issue here is not so much the harshness of individual words as the political construction they create. When "opposition," "traitor," "fifth column," and "enemy of the state" are brought together within the same semantic field, the debate shifts from the plane of "your politics are wrong"

to that of “you are against the state.” This cannot be declared the direct cause of the subsequent derogatory language. However, presenting an opponent as an enemy and traitor rather than as a legitimate political rival from the country’s highest political platform necessarily has consequences for the boundaries of political communication.

Another dimension of humiliation is the incorporation of private life into political struggle. The use of secretly recorded intimate footage against Khadija Ismayilova is one of the most extensively documented examples of this practice. In 2021, Amnesty International reported that it had documented at least 15 such incidents over the previous two years in Azerbaijan These secret recordings targeted women human rights defenders, activists, and their relatives. The organization stated that women had been portrayed as “bad wives,” “bad mothers,” and “mentally unstable,” and that their private correspondence and sexually explicit materials had been disseminated.[14] Although these incidents also have a distinct legal dimension, the main point for the purposes of this article is that Azerbaijani state and state-adjacent media transform private and sexual life into political material for undermining an opponent’s dignity.

**Social Media and the Mainstreaming of Derogatory Language**

Social media did not create derogatory political language, but rather changed the technology through which it was produced and disseminated. While delivering derogatory political content to a mass audience on television required an editorial team, broadcasting airtime, and technical infrastructure, on social media, hundreds of accounts could turn the same message into thousands of comments within a short period of time.

One of the most significant empirical examples of this is Facebook’s investigation into coordinated inauthentic behavior, disclosed by the company in 2020. The company removed 589 Facebook accounts, 7,665 pages, and 437 Instagram

accounts operated from Azerbaijan and, following its investigation, linked the network to the Youth Union of the New Azerbaijan Party.[15] The network created pages that appeared to be user profiles, amplified the popularity of pro-government content, and posted mass comments on media outlets, public figures' pages, and political pages. Accusations of "treason" against opposition leaders were among the recurring themes in these comments.

This fact adds a new dimension to the normalization of political language. An artificially amplified audience reaction can create a false impression of which language and positions constitute the "public norm." When users are unaware that hundreds of similar comments are the result of coordinated activity, they perceive them as spontaneous reactions from society. Thus, the audience becomes not merely a consumer of political discourse, but also its producer and amplifier.

**Exiled Political Discourse and "Insult-Based Opposition"**

The expansion of social media also partially undermined the government's dominance over television. Azerbaijani political activists living abroad gained direct access to large audiences inside the country, particularly through YouTube. In this environment, openly vulgar insults directed at government representatives and, in some cases, their family members also emerged. In certain videos, the boundary between political criticism and personal insult disappeared, and expressions targeting sexual and family relationships were used.

This phenomenon cannot be ethically legitimized on the grounds that it constitutes a reaction to political repression. In my opinion, the government's use of the label "traitor" against an opponent does not give an opposition activist the right to insult that person's family. However, it would also be empirically inaccurate to attribute this vocabulary to the entire exiled political environment. There are individuals and

media outlets that share the same political position but do not use such language.

Nevertheless, in pro-government media, YouTube channels operating in exile, such as “Azad Söz,” “Osmanqızı TV,” “Azərbaycan saatı,” and “AzerFreedom TV,” have at various times been presented under the label of the “insult-based opposition” or within a similar political framework.[16] However, a channel’s political position, the presenter’s vocabulary, the expressions used by a guest on air, and the insults written by the audience in the comment section are not the same empirical indicators. Therefore, classifying a media platform as part of the “insult-based opposition” should be justified through a separate analysis of its editorial line and the presenter’s vocabulary, rather than through the label assigned to it in political media.

The expression “insult-based opposition” can be found in pro-government media at least as early as May 2018.[17] In 2019, articles titled “The Transformation from Social Media Opposition to Insult-Based Opposition” presented various political exiles and opposition media platforms within the same category, despite their differing communication styles. Interestingly, in the very texts criticizing the use of insults, opponents were described using expressions such as “fake-tubers,” “deserter,” “traitor,” and “coward,” while their activities were associated with the concept of “treason.” [18]Thus, while arguing that insults coarsened political discourse, the criticism itself was conducted through language that targeted the opponent’s personality and political legitimacy rather than their arguments.

Thus, two aspects of the concept of the “insult-based opposition” must be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the actual and persistent phenomenon of vulgar insults in the political communication of certain exiled activists. On the other hand, there is the presentation of a much larger political and media group under the same label by expanding

the boundaries of this phenomenon. Denying the former or accepting the latter as a scientific classification would be equally problematic.

In this context, the boundary between verbal and physical violence must also be clearly maintained. Mahammad Mirzali and Vidadi Isgandarli, known abroad as outspoken critics of the government, have been targets of physical attacks.[19] Their own political speech may be a subject of this study, but speaking vulgarly does not give anyone the right to beat, stab, or kill them. The ethical responsibility associated with speech and a person's right to life and physical integrity do not belong on the same plane.

**Identity, Political Suspicion and Intolerance**

Derogatory political language reaches a more dangerous threshold when an opponent's ethnicity becomes an argument in a political dispute. At this point, not only the individual's dignity but also the political legitimacy of the group to which they belong can be called into question.

A dispute that arose in 2022 between political activist Leyla Arif and former parliament member Gultakin Hajibayli is one example of this. Leyla Arif filed a lawsuit, stating that Hajibayli had called her a "separatist." Speaking about the broader problem, Arif stated that when she defended her Talysh identity, she was called a "separatist" and an "Iranian agent."[20] What is more significant here than the specific legal dispute is the function of the label "separatist." The defense of a minority identity or language is transformed into grounds for questioning political loyalty.

The "Lankon/Ostoro" controversy of 2025 brought this problem to light in another form. Umid Party Chairman Iqbal Agazadeh questioned the use of the Talysh names "Lankon" for Lankaran and "Ostoro" for Astara, suggesting that the use of these toponyms could constitute deliberate propaganda and, in some cases, be associated with separatism.[21] Thus, a dispute that

ostensibly concerned the spelling of place names touched upon a more fundamental issue: At what point does a citizen's use of the name of the city where they live in their native language cease to be a linguistic matter and become a question of political loyalty?

The dispute that took place on social media in September 2026 demonstrated a more extreme form of this tendency.[22] A discussion that initially involved political disagreements concerning the relationship between the state, ethnicity, and citizenship quickly shifted from arguments to the ethnic origin of the person expressing them. In the materials related to the dispute, Talysh identity was associated with negative political and intellectual characteristics. The statement "Politics is not for the Talysh! It never has been! And never will be!" was even made about the entire ethnic group. At a further stage, in the context of combating separatism, notions of collective violence such as "aggression, rape" and "assimilation through the destruction of genetics" were expressed.[23]

The mechanism at work here is more significant than an individual dispute. First, a political opinion is challenged, then attention shifts to the origin of the person expressing it, that origin becomes grounds for political suspicion, and finally, a collective characteristic is attributed to that ethnic identity. This goes beyond the boundaries of ordinary political incivility.

The PACE Resolution 2511, adopted in 2023 and titled "The Threat Posed to Democracy and Human Rights by Ultra-Right Ideology in Europe," identifies xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance among the main elements of ultra-right radicalization.[24] It also presents pluralism, tolerance, and respect for diversity as fundamental values of a democratic society. The fact that the author of Report 15826, which served as the basis for the resolution, was Samad Seyidov, a member of the Azerbaijani delegation, is particularly

noteworthy in the Azerbaijani context. The ECRI report on Azerbaijan, published in 2023, also identified inflammatory rhetoric, including at the highest political level, hate content in traditional and social media, and the absence of systematic data in this area as problems.[25]

It is more appropriate to use the concept of the "ultra-right" not as a political label readily attached to specific individuals, but as a concept for analyzing certain characteristics of discourse. If a particular ethnic group is presented as the "natural owner" of the state, while others are portrayed as conditional participants in its political space, the principle of citizenship is replaced by a political hierarchy based on origin. When the expression of minority identity becomes grounds for the suspicion of separatism, and an individual's origin becomes a criterion for political trustworthiness, the issue is no longer simply one of crude political polemics.

**Conclusion**

The material examined in this study shows that derogatory political language in Azerbaijan did not begin with social media. Its visible institutional history can be traced back at least to the early 2000s. The caricaturization that became visible with "Kuklalar" was followed by television smear campaigns, the incorporation of private and sexual life into political contests, and the presentation of opponents in the official political lexicon as "traitors," "fifth column," and "enemies." Social media then decentralized and popularized this already existing behavior and turned the audience itself into a producer of such content.

The emergence of extremely vulgar insults in the language of some of the government's exiled opponents within this new communication environment is also an empirical reality. However, creating a category of "insult-based opposition" that encompasses the entire opposition on the basis of this fact is

equally inaccurate. Moreover, the fact that the state discourse condemning insults itself employs derogatory terms such as “traitor,” “deserter,” and “betrayer” demonstrates that the problem is not limited to the vocabulary of obscene words.

Although derogatory language is reproduced across different political camps, the responsibility of the parties is not symmetrical. In the early 2000s, the opposition did not have an electronic media infrastructure comparable to the television resources available to the government. Although social media reduced this gap to some extent, it did not eliminate the institutional asymmetry. State power is not merely a participant in political discourse. It is also a force that shapes its legal, media, and institutional environment. Therefore, its responsibility cannot be equated with that of an individual activist or a YouTube channel.

The collected material shows that derogatory language can cross another boundary as well. When the degradation of a political opponent’s personal dignity goes so far as to turn their ethnic affiliation into a political argument, the issue is no longer merely the coarseness of political communication. It concerns the very principle of equal citizenship.

As this process continues, the danger is not limited to more people using more severe insults. The political value of arguments declines, while the audience appeal of humiliation increases. An opponent is first judged not by their views but by their personal character. Then their family, private life, and origin become legitimate targets of political struggle. When respect for a political opponent’s dignity ceases to be the norm, the psychological and communicative distance required to call their equal political rights into question also becomes shorter.

The materials examined show that political actors do not bear equal responsibility in this process. Given the long-term

repetition of derogatory and delegitimizing language on nationwide television, in official political rhetoric, and across communication networks associated with the government, the government bears the primary institutional responsibility for turning such language into a norm of political communication.

The way out of this situation cannot consist solely of calling on people to "speak respectfully." If the problem has manifested itself in political institutions, spread through the media, and become widespread on social networks, its solution cannot be sought solely in individual behavior. To address it, government officials must refrain from using language that portrays opponents as enemies and traitors. The media must not turn private and family life into a means of political discreditation. Coordinated insult campaigns must be exposed, and political forces must not justify insults by their supporters on the basis of political affiliation. Ensuring that ethnic and linguistic identity does not become a test of political loyalty is the constitutional boundary of this approach.

Therefore, the central question at the end of this study is not "who uses more insults?" The central issue is when and how targeting a political opponent's personal character, family, origin, and dignity instead of responding to their arguments became an accepted form of political behavior. Today's insults are not the beginning of this process. They are among the crudest manifestations of derogatory political language that has been normalized over a long period.

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