

Russia-Azerbaijan Tensions Escalate to Unprecedented Level

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Executive Summary:

A Russian raid in Ekaterinburg targeting ethnic Azerbaijanis on June 27 resulted in deaths, injuries, and allegations of torture. This ignited a severe diplomatic crisis, with Baku accusing Moscow of ethnic violence and launching a criminal investigation.

Russia-Azerbaijan relations have been deteriorating since the crash of Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243 in December 2024, leading to canceled high-level visits, suspended bilateral commissions and Russian cultural events, and harsh criticism of Russia in Azerbaijani state media.

Azerbaijan appears to be leveraging the crisis to push for a more equal relationship with Russia, although a complete break in relations remains unlikely due to strong political and economic ties.

On June 27, Russian special forces conducted a violent raid in Ekaterinburg targeting ethnic Azerbaijanis. This sparked a significant escalation in tensions between Baku and Moscow, further straining an already fragile bilateral relationship (Report.az, June 27). The operation, which focused on a group of Azerbaijanis suspected of murder in the early 2000s, resulted in the extrajudicial killing of two brothers, Ziyaddin and Huseyn Safarov, and injuries to several others, with nine individuals detained. According to Azerbaijani media, the raid involved brutal tactics, including beatings, electric shocks, and degrading treatment, prompting a fierce reaction from Baku (Report.az, June 30).

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry issued a strong response, demanding a prompt investigation and prosecution of those responsible, and the country's Prosecutor General launched a criminal case accusing Russian police of torturing and deliberately killing the brothers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, June 27; Report.az, July 2). Azerbaijani authorities and media have framed the incident as a deliberate act of ethnic violence, with the Prosecutor General's office alleging that the brothers died from "post-traumatic shock" after severe beatings (Azertag.az, July 2). Russia's claim that one death was due to a heart attack has been met with skepticism in Baku, where family members and survivors reported torture and degrading treatment (Report.az, July 1). Both sides summoned the other's ambassadors and issued verbal notes of protest due to each other's "unfriendly actions" (Report.az, July 1 [1], [2]).

In response to the Ekaterinburg raids, Azerbaijan took steps to signal its discontent. The government canceled a planned visit by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk, called off a session of the bilateral inter-parliamentary commission in Moscow, and halted all Russian cultural events in Azerbaijan (Report.az, June 29 [1], [2], [3]). State-run media outlets, such as AzTv and AZƏRTAC, unleashed unprecedented criticism of Russia and its leadership, accusing Moscow of pursuing a "systematic policy" of ethnic violence and comparing its actions to historical imperial oppression and even Nazi Germany in the 1930s (Azertag.az, June 28; Facebook/aztvresmi, June 29).

This rhetoric, combined with Azerbaijan's arrest of two Russian journalists from Sputnik's Baku office, underscored a deepening rift between the two countries. While the local media reported that the two were employees of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), the official charges against them were related to large-scale fraud, illegal business, and organized money laundering (Report.az, July 1). Earlier this year, on February 24, Azerbaijan announced the closure of the Azerbaijani branch of Sputnik and reduced its accreditation to only one correspondent (News.az, February 24). The agency appears to have disregarded the Azerbaijani government's order and continued its operations. On July 1, Azerbaijani authorities stated that the agency was operating illegally (Report.az, July 1).

Additionally, on July 1, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Internal Affairs apprehended two organized criminal groups consisting of Russian citizens suspected of involvement in drug smuggling from Iran, online drug distribution, and cyber fraud operations (Azernews.az, July 1). The publicized detention of Russian citizens, filmed and widely circulated, was largely perceived as Azerbaijan's tit-for-tat response to the violent raids in Ekaterinburg.

The Ekaterinburg incident is the latest in a series of developments that have eroded Azerbaijan-Russia relations, which began to deteriorate significantly following the crash of Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243 in December 2024 (see EDM, January 15). Despite repeated demands conveyed through various channels, Russia has yet to meet Azerbaijan's requests for compensation, a thorough investigation, and an official apology. This situation has created a rather negative background for the overall bilateral relations and was accepted in Baku as Russia's unwillingness to pursue relations with Azerbaijan on equal terms. This, coupled with subsequent events, has led to a steady erosion of trust, with Azerbaijan increasingly challenging Moscow's regional dominance.

On February 3, prior to the closure of the Baku office of the Sputnik agency, Azerbaijan had also closed the Russian Information and Cultural Center (Russian House) in Baku (Report.az, May 2). This move was followed by a reported cyberattack on Azerbaijani media outlets that month, which Azerbaijan's Parliamentary Commission on Countering Hybrid Threats later attributed to Russia (Report.az, May 2). The attack was seen in Azerbaijan as retaliation for the closure of the Russian House and the shutdown of Sputnik's Baku office. In May, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's decision to cancel his attendance at Moscow's Victory Day parade, commemorating the 80th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany during World War II, marked another significant snub (see EDM, May 20).

The Ekaterinburg raids, combined with the unresolved airplane crash crisis and other grievances, have pushed Azerbaijan-Russia relations to their lowest point in the post-Soviet period. Baku's response to perceived slights from Moscow, including the cancellation of cultural and diplomatic engagements, along with public criticism of the Russian leadership, signals that Azerbaijan is no longer willing to tolerate Russia's perceived arrogance and imperial tone. This, along with the deterioration of Russia's relations with other former Soviet countries, including Armenia, reflects Moscow's waning influence in the former Soviet space in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine (see EDM, January 28, February 6). The present level of tensions between Baku and Moscow is unprecedented in the post-Soviet period, making the future

trajectory of the relationship unpredictable. While a complete break between the two is less likely due to deep economic and political ties, Azerbaijan appears to be leveraging the crisis to renegotiate its relationship with the country's northern neighbor on more equal terms.