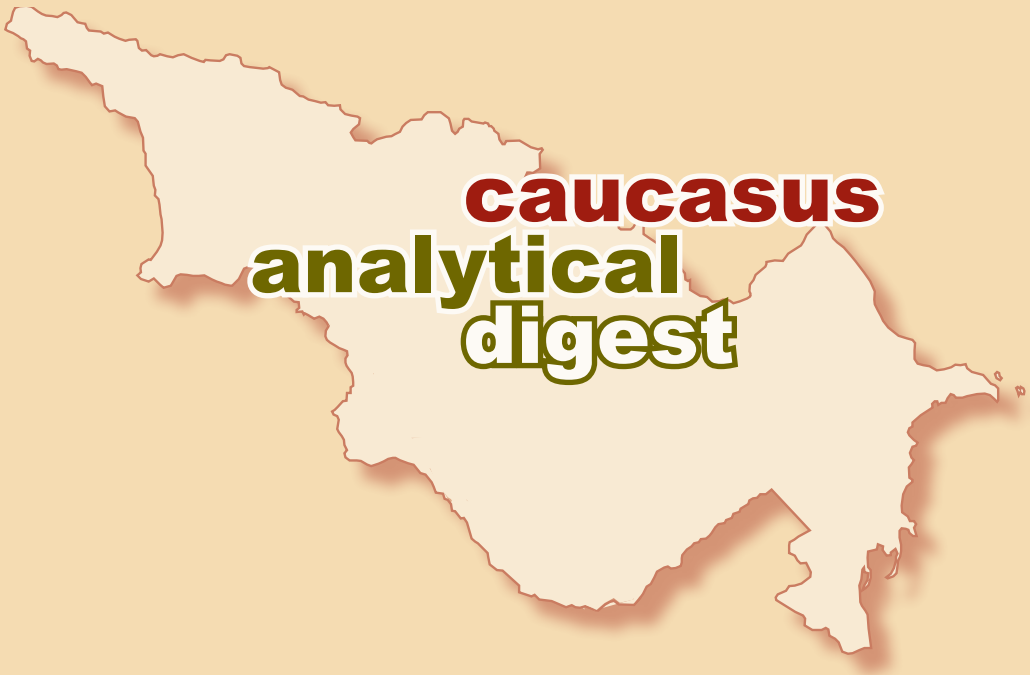




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ANALYSIS

The Russia-Azerbaijan Rift

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Abstract

The falling-out between Baku and Moscow in the summer of 2025 was arguably the most significant break in bilateral relations since the end of the Soviet Union. The current spiral of events leaves an unsolvable puzzle, as questions seem to outnumber potential answers. While some media outlets speculate about worst-case scenarios, including another war of annexation by Russia against Azerbaijan, others pay little heed to Russia's bold reactions and argue that Russia-Azerbaijan relations have not been irreversibly damaged. The objective of this paper is to examine, through the lens of these rich and intense events, how Baku maintains its partisan regime by capitalizing on regional power shifts.

The Disruption of Relations with Russia and Peace Negotiation in Parallel

Azerbaijan's relations with Russia have hit a historic low—one that, with all its hostility, recalls the tumultuous 1990s, as Azerbaijan gradually yet firmly distances itself from the remnants of the Soviet empire. In July and August 2025, verbal attacks from both sides exacerbated tensions and led to growing hysteria.

In a sudden development, in late June 2025, dozens of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Yekaterinburg were brutally beaten in the style for which the Russian security services are notorious, then arrested and charged with murder, smuggling, and organized crime. In response, Azerbaijan's security services raided a local office of the Russian news agency "Sputnik" and retaliated against unlucky Russian IT expats residing in Baku, thus deliberately mirroring the treatment of Azerbaijanis in Russia.

The rupture began in 2024, when the Russian air defence downed a passenger jet with two consecutive shots, killing 38 civilians. While Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev called this an outright "aggression," the Russian side did not admit its guilt. Unintentionally, this provided the Azerbaijani government with a pretext to shift away from Russia. In its simplest form, the tragic event helped to shape the perception of Russia (both, in the government and the public) as the primary obstacle to peace talks with Armenia.

Meanwhile, a new diplomatic dynamic unfolded. In February 2025, US President Donald Trump's special representative Steve Witkoff visited the Caucasus. Behind closed doors, Azerbaijan and Armenia, with US diplomatic mediation, prepared the ground for peace talks. On 8 August 2025, at a White House ceremony, President Aliyev and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed a peace declaration and resolved their longstanding dispute over a transportation link connecting the Nakhichevan enclave to mainland Azerbaijan

through Armenian territory (the so-called Zangezur Corridor) with the "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity" (TRIPP). Effectively sidelining Russia in a *fait accompli*, the two leaders thwarted the terms of the November 2020 trilateral declaration (about stopping the Second Karabakh war) that had granted Russia's federal security service FSB control over the Zangezur Corridor.

Initially, Azerbaijan's stance on Zangezur was that it should gain extraterritoriality, meaning the connection to its exclave should be as free and uncontrollable as possible. Its tactic was characterized by sustained pressure on Armenia, with Armenia gradually conceding to Azerbaijan's demand for "unimpeded connectivity," a term now enshrined in the joint declaration (US State Department, 2025). Azerbaijan managed to establish direct negotiations with Armenia, eliminating interference and manipulation by external powers.

Closely observing the situation and irritated by the growing strategic interests of Israel and the US near its borders, Iran has repeatedly expressed opposition to the opening of the Zangezur Corridor. From Iran's perspective, the corridor provides strategic transit opportunities to its regional rivals—and indeed, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps had previously threatened to intervene militarily were the regional borders of the South Caucasus to be redrawn. Yet having been subjected to a 12-day military campaign that demonstrated Israel's military and intelligence supremacy, Iran responded with relative silence to the opening of Zangezur. This reflected Tehran's diminishing capacity and willingness to counter the shifting power dynamics in the South Caucasus.

Symbolic Snubs and Mutual Ignorance

The fact that relations between Russia and Azerbaijan, who not long ago considered themselves "allies"¹,

¹ Just two days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan signed the Declaration on Allied Interaction with Russia, which was intended to elevate bilateral relations to an "allied level" and committed both parties to refrain from harming their strategic partnership—

have become strained is evident from the open ignorance and negligent behaviour of each side toward the other. Azerbaijani officials boycotted the highest-level Commonwealth of Independent States summit (Apa.az, 2025) and the planned meeting of Russian President Vladimir Putin's aide and Deputy Ministry of Emergency Situations Aleksandr Kurenkov with Aliyev was cancelled following the Yekaterinburg incident. The diplomatic spat followed a year of honeymoon, during which the president himself and Azerbaijani pro-government media had lauded Russia as the guarantor of stability, paying tribute to its constructive role in the South Caucasus (President of Azerbaijan, 2024). That narrative has now flipped, with references to President Putin's mischief-making in Russia's so-called "backyard" and critiques of Russia's imperial ambitions.

The turning point occurred after Russia showed inertia when the Azerbaijani army regained full control over the rest of Karabakh in September 2023 (Çakmak and Özşahin, 2023), which experts call one of Russia's major foreign policy blunders in the post-Soviet space. Also, during the final phase of this "anti-terrorist operation", as it was officially called by Baku, Russian peacekeepers stationed there maintained a low profile, then fully withdrew by April 2024. This was reckoned the biggest concession to Azerbaijan's sovereignty in the history of bilateral relations. This was followed by President Putin's one-day visit to Baku in August 2024, a rare occurrence that marked his first foreign trip since the start of the war in Ukraine. Domestically, the Azerbaijani regime launched a widespread crackdown and cleared out all oppositional activism, arresting many activists and independent journalists.

Russia's lack of support for Armenia, a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty (CSTO) as well as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and thus by design a close ally of Russia, was caused by Turkey's assertive breach of its commonly restrained foreign policy in favour of actively supporting Azerbaijan (Babayev and Jumayeva, 2024), deploying several of its F-16 fighter jets to Azerbaijani soil. Initially intended for joint drills, they were not removed throughout the 44 days of the Second Karabakh War. For its part, Russia had no desire to clash with the second-largest NATO member, which would have entailed opening a second front at a time when Moscow was already embroiled in a war of aggression against Ukraine on its western flank. It has also been suggested that Russia, with its longstanding imperial mindset, always finds a common language and comes to terms with its two historical rivals in the Near East, Iran and Turkey.

Big Media Blow-up

Alexei Venediktov, a veteran of Russia's "Ekho Moskvyy" radio station, alleged that Azerbaijan itself instigated the escalation of the conflict with Russia. This aligns with my own assessment: looking at internet news published on the morning of the Russian "police carnage" in Yekaterinburg, a coordinated campaign of Russia-critical reporting on all fronts was launched at around 7–8am, when news outlets were just opening. This points to a central signal, most likely given from the president's office, hence why all Azerbaijani media, even privately owned outlets, joined the government's narrative.

Meanwhile, anti-Azerbaijan rhetoric in Russia reached previously unknown heights, escalating to open derision. President Putin, who no longer calls the shots in the South Caucasus, was unwilling to restrain the propaganda machinery at home, too, that fuels the daily agitation and ever-intensifying defamation campaign. The main discourse centred on betrayal, with accusations such as "you took an oath, but now behave in an unfriendly way toward us". Xenophobic acts erupted across Russia, as news spread about vigilante groups congregating to expel Azerbaijanis from their markets, chanting "our people live poorly because of the Azerbaijani mafia".

President Aliyev's remarks at the 3rd Shusha Media Forum added fuel to the fire. In response to a Ukrainian journalist's question, he commented, "Ukraine should never accept occupation". The remark was blown up and framed by Ukrainian and Russian media as an active opposition to Russia and full support of Ukraine. Immediately thereafter came news of prominent Azerbaijanis in Russia facing reprisals. Baku-born Mikhail Gusman, the deputy director of the ITAR TASS news agency, was reproached by "Z-Blog Media" for not denouncing Ukraine at the Shusha Forum and instead praising Ilham Aliyev for his outstanding foreign policy course. Within a few days, he was fired from his job. Political pundit Sergei Markov, another pro-Azerbaijan voice, was designated a foreign agent (Meduza, 2025). The Russian information war even expanded into a dispute over toponyms: Russian state media agencies used the Armenian versions of town names in Karabakh, while Azerbaijan responded by threatening to start calling Kaliningrad "Königsberg" and the Volga river "Itil" (AzeMedia, 2025).

All these developments signal, with striking clarity, that Russia is working to diminish the leverage that the influential Azerbaijani diaspora has in various parts of Russia. This was once a soft power asset for Azerbaijan, especially as it pertained to certain well-connected members who could reach out to powerful Russian elites (the head of the FSB, Sergey Naryshkin, and others).

which for Russia meant securing its southern flank (Agha, 2025).

According to Moscow, the Azerbaijani diaspora should pledge loyalty to Russia and refrain from lobbying for Azerbaijani interests. Likewise, the Kremlin can pressure Russian oligarchs to speak out against the Azerbaijani regime. Also, if the around 50,000 Azerbaijanis, who are assumed to reside and work illegally in Russia, were to be repatriated, they might easily become a destabilizing force by blaming the government of Azerbaijan for their loss of livelihood.

With the rise of digital (social) media, similar to paid journalism and political communication controlled by state propaganda, it is no surprise to see the media become a tool of disinformation, clinging to biased explanations or unverified facts. They often peddle biased narratives, inflate events, and sensationalize issues to serve strategic interests. The Ukrainian media portrayal of Azerbaijan as having turned against its staunchest ally, Russia, oversimplifies the complex reality of the region.

Azerbaijan as the Next Ukraine? Risks of a Special Military Operation

Officially, Baku chose to support its strategic partner Ukraine; a strategic partnership between the two countries has existed since May 2008 (Safiyev, 2024). Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Azerbaijan's humanitarian aid to Ukraine totalled over US\$50 million despite the Russian foreign ministry expressing bewilderment over it (Huseynov, 2023). In August 2025, in something of a reprisal, the facilities of Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR in Ukraine were destroyed by the Russian military, intensifying the debate in Azerbaijan about delivering Azerbaijani-manufactured weaponry to Ukraine.

Haunted by separatism, the Azerbaijani public is sensitive to relying on military force to deal with a neighbour. The Azerbaijani public views Russia's use of asymmetric warfare as a dangerous precedent, since they see parallels with Nagorno-Karabakh, where a separatist quasi-state had been created. In recent years, the government-controlled media has sought to avoid outright condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine. Still, in view of Russia's disproportionate and excessive behaviour in eastern Ukraine, it has become less possible to conceal their sympathies.

There is a societal consensus in Azerbaijan that Russia's actions in Ukraine contain the potential for a catastrophe. For many, Russia has de facto "razed Ukraine to the ground" and might next set its sights on Azerbaijan. This is considered an existential threat to Azerbaijan, and the Azerbaijani media exaggerates President Aliyev's prudence, praising him to the skies for "saving" the country by avoiding direct conflict with Russia. There is some fear in Azerbaijan that Russia might start a war

against it, as Russian nationalist media continues to float the idea of "Special Military Operation" or "strike with an Oreshnik [missile]" (which in their view would be more effective due to Russia's recent military deficits); thus, the longer the war drags on, the more uncertain the future becomes for Azerbaijan.

A Thesis on Azerbaijan's "Tightrope" and Balancing Policy

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is often described as "balancing" or "tightrope diplomacy". Mainstream analysts of Azerbaijan believe that the country is compelled to uphold a delicate balance between the West and Russia. Some interpret this as a struggle for survival while navigating between competing influences and not fully committing to either side. It combines elements of bandwagoning (i.e., aligning or siding with a stronger or rising power) and hedging, which means avoiding permanent alliances and instead maintaining flexible relations with competing great powers (Valiyev and Mamishova, 2019). As an example of hedging strategy, some point to Azerbaijan's refusal to renew the CSTO in 1999, which marked a critical moment of denying Russian dominance. Later, these analysts claim, Azerbaijan changed to bandwagoning after observing that the Russian invasion left countries unprotected, as nobody came to help when Ukraine and Georgia raised the alarm. For these reasons, they say, the Azerbaijani political elite has abstained from a clear pro-Western orientation.

Another view prevalent in the academic discourse is that the South Caucasian countries lack a shared regional identity, which prevents meaningful cooperation between them (Ismayil and Yilmaz, 2022). This absence of regional cohesion creates a "security deficit" that causes each state to seek security guarantees and rely on external powers rather than on regional solidarity. In this highly volatile geopolitical context, Azerbaijan is left with a non-bloc policy, remaining outside CSTO, EAEU, EU, and NATO. In fact, Azerbaijan benefits from the current status quo of highly strained Armenian-Russian relations, which has de facto frozen one of the security blocs (i.e., CSTO) due to Armenia's suspension of its membership.

A major shortcoming of much of this expert analysis is its dismissal of the fact that Azerbaijan's foreign policy is intertwined with domestic power stabilization: geopolitical balancing is always prioritized to secure the current regime, whose rule is ultimately contingent on external powers. Indeed, Azerbaijan's stalled progress toward integration with the West is rarely examined in the light of the government's chosen authoritarian pathway. Few studies recognize that Azerbaijan is one of the key regional actors sustaining the authoritarian status quo, which aligns well with Moscow's broader goals.

Unlike smaller neighbouring states, such as Moldova or even Georgia (Kakachia et al., 2024), Azerbaijan does not pursue value-based hedging—that is, it does not pursue closer alignment with the EU as a way to reduce security and economic risks from Russia. Whereas Moldova or Georgia might pursue EU integration to distance themselves from Moscow, Azerbaijan avoids this course, not because of Russian pressure, but because its own power position and regime security priorities make such alignment unnecessary. Azerbaijan sees itself as Russia's ideological ally and feels comfortable around the post-Soviet autocratic regimes.

The trajectory of Azerbaijan's relations with the West clearly shows that the regime has distanced itself from Western institutions and democratic instruments. In fact, it is the increasing conditionality of its relationship with the West that, more than anything else, has pushed Azerbaijan to lean heavily on Russia (Bedford and Aliyev, 2024). As Baev (2013) notes, Azerbaijan has always had an ambivalent relationship and hypocritical partnership with the West, while its alliance with Russia in suppressing the opposition has remained reliable. Accordingly, President Putin calculated in the past that Russia and Azerbaijan's shared authoritarianism would eventually help generate tension with the West.

Azerbaijan's recent actions may be aimed at reducing Western criticism of its human rights record by framing itself as a state under potential threat from Russia. By presenting itself as a bulwark against Moscow, the regime seeks to gain Western support and, in turn, prompt the West to overlook Azerbaijan's authoritarian practices. Barberis and Zanatta state, "In the case of Azerbaijan, it functions like a deceptive pendulum, swinging between external powers. It is a form of strategic ambiguity that allows Baku to extract concessions from different actors and avoid risky entanglements" (Barberis and Zanatta, 2025).

Imperial Melancholia and Neo-Postcolonialism

Claims of Russia's imperial worldview never ceased to exist. Russia continues to have significant leverage on what Moscow calls the "Near Abroad". It pressures neighbouring nations "to accept more Russian military and intelligence presence, [...] join Russian-backed multilateral bodies, strengthen economic ties, adopt Russian-style laws targeting civil society, and accept a larger Russian military and intelligence presence on their territory" (Mankoff, 2025).

Post-colonial theorists demonstrate how Russia, despite historical interludes, can maintain a dominant role in a shifting geopolitical landscape. For example, Azerbaijan still observes 9 May as Victory Day, reflecting its historical ties to the Soviet past and the defeat of

Nazism. Although the 2025 festivities were a quiet celebration without any fanfare, officials chose not to cancel it entirely. This cautious approach indicates the lasting symbolic significance of the Soviet legacy.

At the same time, the war in Ukraine is a massive drain on Russian attention and resources, a fact of which Russia's neighbours have been taking advantage. Observers note a growing trend toward sovereignist and non-interference discourses across the post-Soviet region, with former subalterns feeling increasingly emboldened in their relationship with Moscow (Schmitz and Smolnik, 2024). However, the main point is that, even more than thirty years after the Soviet Union collapsed, Azerbaijan's internal political dynamics have seen little change.

Close examination of President Aliyev's reactions as he expressed concerns over Georgia's fate and provided backing to the incumbents in the disputed elections of October 2024 reveals that he has resigned himself to being in Russia's sphere of influence (Eurasianet, 2024). Sharing in President Putin's rhetoric of alleged "attempts made to overthrow [the Georgian Dream government] and illegally seize power," he positions himself alongside Russia as a regional power-broker with a stake in the persistence of authoritarianism in the region. While Azerbaijan may not be a Russian satellite, it aids in implementing Russian imperial ambitions, propping up Russian hegemony over the post-Soviet space.

In recent debates, Russian nationalists have contrasted the Baltic states with the states of the Caucasus: the former are already "gone", firmly anchored in Euro-Atlantic institutions, while the latter remains within reach for Russia—a melancholia of many Russians hoping to regain lost "old friends". For the general Russian public, although these are allies, their behaviour reveals a paradox: they often act as if trying to liberate themselves from the very alliance they are part of. This tension highlights that the Russian public perceives Azerbaijan as an *otrezannii lomot*—a cut-off piece, no longer part of the imperial body, but not yet fully integrated elsewhere.

It is striking that in this controversy, President Aliyev draws a comparison between recent Russian actions against Azerbaijan and the year 1920, when the Red Army entered Baku, calling both an act of "occupation". This marks a major rhetorical shift: neither he nor his father has ever used the word in connection with Russia. Even in Azerbaijan's educational institutions the word "occupation" has largely been avoided and is never explicitly mentioned. Thus, he is quite naturally reproached for the fact that his father rendered great services to this "occupying" power for decades, and that he himself acquired his rhetorical skills at a Soviet university, MGIMO, the Soviet elite diplomatic university. This leads many to a seemingly logical accusation:

how can someone who has so greatly benefited from the imperial legacy now suddenly oppose it?

Indeed, the Russian Oscar-winning and propagandist film-maker Nikita Mikhalkov has recalled how President Aliyev referred to Vladimir Putin in his presence as *nachalnik*, which translates to “chief” in English. To him, if the Azerbaijani president once showed obedience like a Russian governor, he now betrays this loyal partnership.

President Aliyev’s use of anti-imperialist rhetoric often masks that he benefits from the ascent of Donald Trump and the broader fragmentation of the global liberal order, which have reduced the likelihood of Western interference into Azerbaijan’s domestic affairs. In fact, Azerbaijan has not moved away from empire, but rather helped to bolster a different type of empire. Azerbaijan’s stance on the Ukraine war suggests that it has not fully broken with its Soviet legacy and feels more comfortable among states that allow their foreign policies to be colonised by Russia and permit Moscow’s soft power—through language, culture, and education—to permeate their societies.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Górecki (2024) posits that with the restoration of territorial integrity, which took over 30 years, Azerbai-

jan’s foreign policy now contributes to the purpose of national consolidation. Given the assumption that the external projection of the enemy image implies that any opposition politics is a priori detrimental to the national interest, the last Karabakh war largely legitimizes and strengthens the president’s power as a successful and victorious leader.

Two risks, however, remain salient for the regime. One is a spontaneous revolt, driven by the impoverishment of the population, particularly in the regions, and the other is a split within the ruling elite. Oil price fluctuations have in the past been a trigger for such risks, particularly in terms of job losses and reduced income. The regime’s estrangement from the West has deepened into a cultural alienation, with Western liberal values perceived as a threat that could challenge traditional societal norms.

In today’s age of transactionalism, “focusing on short-term wins rather than longer-term strategic foresight” (Bashirov and Yilmaz, 2020), it is easy to imagine that the current rift between Azerbaijan and Russia will soon dissolve and is merely temporary. The internal logic of these authoritarian regimes will inevitably pull them back together.

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