

AZERBAIDJAN. REPERE ISTORICE, CULTURALE ȘI POLITICE

Contours of Power and Identity: A Political History of Azerbaijan Across Epochs of Nation- Building and Ideological Continuity

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Abstract: *This article examines the evolution of Azerbaijan's political identity through the lens of party ideology, nation-building, and the institutionalization of authoritarianism. Using a multidisciplinary framework that draws on political sociology, authoritarianism studies, post-Soviet transitions theory, and ethno-psychological analysis, the article evaluates the persistent dominance of right- and centre-right ideologies in Azerbaijan. It employs qualitative content analysis of political party charters, historical documents, parliamentary speeches, and media discourse, as well as comparative regional case studies. Findings reveal that the political landscape in Azerbaijan reflects a historically conditioned, culturally resonant, and politically instrumental preference for strong state-centred conservatism. The consolidation of authoritarianism is not merely a regime strategy but a reflection of path-dependent development shaped by conflict, memory, and state-building imperatives.*

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, Political Identity, Nation-Building, Authoritarianism, Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, Geopolitics*

Introduction

The Republic of Azerbaijan presents a case of ideological convergence toward conservatism, characterized by the enduring dominance of right-wing and centre-right parties, as well as an entrenched authoritarian political order. The inquiry begins with a fundamental question: why has Azerbaijan, since its independence, failed to develop a pluralistic ideological spectrum and instead gravitated toward a conservative, nationalist, and authoritarian configuration?

To answer this, the article undertakes an in-depth analysis of Azerbaijan's political history, using an empirical and theory-driven framework. Drawing on nation-building theory¹, authoritarian resilience², and post-Soviet political sociology³, this analysis identifies key structural, institutional, and socio-cultural mechanisms that have facilitated the ideological narrowing of Azerbaijan's political field. The profound impact of the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War on the energy landscape and geopolitical alliances of the South

Caucasus further underscores the strategic significance of the region, emphasizing national interests and security. Azerbaijan's pivotal role as a critical transit route for Caspian energy resources destined for European markets elevates its strategic importance in global energy geopolitics. External recognition of Azerbaijan's strategic importance is evident in the United States' active engagement, which promotes energy security and diversification through initiatives such as the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). This initiative aligns with broader U.S. foreign policy objectives to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and historical-institutionalist approach, triangulating evidence from multiple sources. Primary sources for a comprehensive study typically include party statutes (e.g., YAP, Musavat), political declarations, official speeches, and parliamentary transcripts from 1991 to 2023. Insights into elite discourse and public reception are often gleaned from analysis of contemporary media discourse. Secondary academic literature, including peer-reviewed monographs and institutional reports⁴, provides comparative grounding. The analysis draws on discourse theory, narrative politics, and cultural hegemony⁵ to interpret findings. Theoretical insights from Barry Buzan and Ole Waever regarding regional security complexes pro-

vide further understanding of security processes and regional formation in the South Caucasus.

Historical Overview of Political Ideologies in Azerbaijan

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the emergence of Azerbaijani political identity, shaped by Turkic nationalism, Islamic reformism, and resistance to imperial domination. The Musavat Party, established in 1911, integrated secular nationalism and modernism, laying the ideological groundwork for the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) from 1918 to 1920. Although brief, the ADR combined parliamentary democracy with national self-determination, creating a prototype for post-Soviet aspirations. This period laid the groundwork for fundamental concepts of national self-definition and sovereignty that would resurface in later periods of state-building.

During the Soviet era, political pluralism was suppressed, but specific ethnocultural values persisted beneath the surface. The administrative centralism and hierarchical governance of the Soviet system, particularly during Heydar Aliyev's leadership from 1969 to 1982, cultivated public expectations for stability and predictability. These experiences institutionalized a top-down administrative culture and fostered a societal disposition that valued order and strong leadership, traits that continue to influence the contemporary political landscape and contribute to the nation's ethno-social

psychology. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a power vacuum and a competition model in regions previously governed or influenced by Moscow, including the South Caucasus, where instability and conflict quickly emerged both within and among newly independent states.

Consolidation of Conservative Governance: Party System, Ideological Alignment, and Structural Drivers Post-1991

Following independence, the brief tenure of the Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) under President Abulfaz Elchibey witnessed an experiment in ideological openness. This liberal-nationalist platform, however, quickly lost legitimacy due to military failures in the Karabakh conflict and internal fragmentation, leading to its rapid decline. The 1993 return of Heydar Aliyev and the consolidation of the New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) initiated a decisive era of presidential dominance and ideological realignment.

The YAP party charter (1994) emphatically emphasized unity, traditional values, and state sovereignty. The 1999 congress further solidified this stance by declaring political pluralism a „destabilizing illusion.” A close reading of party congress reports and charters demonstrates the ideological convergence of most political entities around themes of national sovereignty, cultural integrity, and state primacy. Even nominal opposition parties, such as Musavat and the Azerbaijani Democratic Party, alt-

hough formally committed to liberalism or social democracy, rarely articulated strong economic left or redistributive agendas. Their programmatic documents primarily focused on nationalism, the rule of law, and anti-corruption—themes conservative in tone, even if their structural platforms implied different governance models.

Several overlapping dynamics have skewed Azerbaijan’s ideological spectrum toward the right. The most significant is the national security imperative deeply embedded by the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This protracted conflict has generated a pervasive siege mentality, elevating unity as a paramount political virtue within the national consciousness. Narratives surrounding the conflict crystallized a national identity emphasizing territorial integrity and resilience, strongly connected to international legal norms. The victory in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 symbolized a profound rebirth in Azerbaijani national identity, signifying not only the recapture of lands but also a resurgence of national pride, honour, and the struggle for independence. This military success, achieved under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev, dramatically strengthened national identity and forged a deep sense of unity and solidarity among the people. Martyrs, veterans, and stories of heroism from the Karabakh Wars became cornerstones of national identity, profoundly shaping social memory. Commemorations of events like the Khojaly Massacre and the widespread display of victory flags

serve as powerful symbols reinforcing this national identity. These wars played a critical and formative role in shaping the national consciousness and identity of the Azerbaijani people, and this impact is expected to continue in the future.

A second dynamic is the state's legal and administrative framework. The Electoral Code (Article 91)⁶ and the Law on Political Parties⁷ impose stringent restrictions on funding and registration conditions for parties, creating significant barriers to entry for new political actors. Since the early 2000s, leftist rhetoric has often been viewed with suspicion, frequently linked to instability or perceived foreign manipulation, thereby limiting its appeal and political space. The third driver is resource-based statecraft. Oil and natural gas revenues have enabled the creation of a robust patronage network that effectively blurs ideological lines. As Luong and Weinthal⁸ illustrate, hydrocarbon economies tend to consolidate elite power and significantly reduce citizen leverage over political processes. Consequently, genuine ideological competition is often muted by distributive politics and state largesse rather than through substantive policy differentiation or public debate. Azerbaijan actively pursues a balancing policy between the West and Russia, a strategy influenced by regional and trans-regional powers vying for dominance over the South Caucasus's political landscape and energy resources. Recent geopolitical developments, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war and energy crises

in the Balkans, underscore the strategic urgency of energy cooperation in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan's strategic agreements with Balkan countries, for example, aim to bolster energy exports and establish additional supply routes, further fortifying regional energy security. President Aliyev has outlined plans to double gas exports by 2027, expressing confidence in achieving this goal due to the country's ample resources and active development of partnerships with regional allies, such as Romania and Serbia, thereby strengthening its position as a reliable gas supplier to Europe.

Authoritarianism as a Resilient Socio-Political Culture

Azerbaijan's hybrid regime blends electoral formalism with an underlying authoritarian substance. As described by Levitsky and Way⁹, competitive authoritarianism relies on asymmetrical institutional control. While elections are held, the playing field is heavily tilted through extensive control over media¹⁰, the co-optation of the judiciary, and selective repression of dissenting voices.

Key moments such as the 2003 and 2013 presidential elections, documented by OSCE/ODIHR¹¹, illustrate systematic vote irregularities, harassment of observers, and a stark lack of media parity. The intensified crackdown on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) post-2014—including restrictions on foreign grants—significantly curtailed civil

society's ability to act as an independent ideological counterweight. Gramsci's notion of „passive revolution” is particularly applicable here: rather than relying solely on overt mass coercion, the regime actively manufactures consent by monopolizing public discourse. School curricula, state-controlled media, and pervasive patriotic narratives consistently reinforce loyalty to the state and frame political opposition as destabilizing or influenced by foreign interests. The Four-Day War in April 2016, despite its brevity, significantly boosted morale within the Azerbaijani army and heightened a collective sense of national responsibility among the populace to protect the homeland. This event notably enhanced the “Homeland” identity within the broader Azerbaijani national identity, reinforcing its unifying, “umbrella” function for the nation. The elevated spirits fostered by this conflict subsequently prepared both the military and the general population for the more substantial engagements of the 2020 Tovuz War and the 44-Day Second Karabakh War. The military success achieved in the 2020 conflict further cemented the legitimacy of the ruling elite, effectively recasting authoritarian governance as a manifestation of patriotic resilience and national strength.

Ethno-Social Psychology, Conflict, and Ideological Preferences

Political behavior in Azerbaijan is shaped not only by formal institutions

but also by deeply rooted social psychology, often forged through collective experiences. According to data from the CRRC Caucasus Barometer (2011-2021)¹², trust in the presidency consistently exceeds 70%, while trust in opposition parties typically remains below 15%. When queried about their primary concerns, respondents frequently cite “fear of instability,” the “Karabakh issue,” and the imperative of “national unity”. These attitudes are not simply imposed from above, but rather arise from the lived experiences of war, displacement, and social instability.

This political culture privileges obedience, loyalty, and national continuity over robust debate or redistributive justice. Memories of the turbulent 1990s, particularly the widespread collapse of social order and devastating war losses, form a robust cognitive schema that frames liberal or leftist discourse as inherently threatening. This historical conditioning creates a durable psychological preference for conservative governance, often irrespective of underlying economic grievances. The fundamental human inquiry of “Who are you? Who are you from?” helps individuals define their identity, providing a profound sense of belonging and membership. Creating a cohesive “we” consciousness is paramount for fostering societal solidarity within the national context, as social identities are often constructed in contrast to an “other.” The strengthening of this feeling of “otherness” is also considered crucial for assessing the security posture of an in-

group and can catalyze inter-group competition. Ethnocentrism and ethnogenetic myths, as elucidated by various theorists, play a significant role in legitimizing collective claims to material goods, territory, political status, or cultural dominance within the post-Soviet landscape. The protracted Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict stands as a prominent and illustrative example of these complex dynamics of ethnic identity and conflict, underscoring how deeply such historical antagonisms can shape collective psychology and ideological predispositions.

The Constraints on Opposition Ideologies and Divergent Regional Trajectories.

While the early 1990s saw modest attempts to revive social democracy (e.g., by the Azerbaijan Socialist Party), these movements were quickly marginalized. The state's ideological branding of leftism as foreign-influenced or subversive, combined with a persistent lack of institutional platforms such as independent trade unions or vibrant student movements, stunted bottom-up mobilization for alternative ideologies.

Prominent opposition parties, such as Musavat and the Azerbaijani Popular Front, despite their often-stated liberal credentials, frequently opted to avoid explicit leftist rhetoric in favor of nationalist or anti-corruption themes. Public interviews and speeches reveal a calculated strategy: a deliberate avoidance of alienating a population deeply skeptical of revolution-

ary or class-based discourse, given the traumatic memory of the early post-Soviet years.

The South Caucasus, a region historically shaped by a complex interplay of ethnic and political conflicts, continues to pose significant threats to regional security. The presence of both economic opportunities and persistent security threats has consistently positioned South Caucasus security as a heated political debate since the early stages of independence. The inherent fragility of the region is starkly illustrated by events such as the “five-day” war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 and the “44-day” war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020, both of which demonstrated how easily ostensibly “frozen conflicts” can escalate into full-scale hostilities.

Armenia, traditionally drawing on an ethnic and cultural identity narrative, appears to be actively transitioning toward a modern nation-state focus in the post-2020 era. This shift includes concerted efforts by the Pashinyan government to move away from its historical reliance on Russia and to strengthen national security through military reforms. Armenia's defense budget, for instance, increased by a substantial 81% from 308 billion drams (approximately \$762 million) in 2020 to 557 billion drams (approximately \$1.37 billion) in 2024. Furthermore, Armenia is diversifying its arms suppliers, engaging in new arms deals with countries such as India and France. French arms deliveries have included Thales's “Ground Master 200

(GM200)” radar systems, Safran Group's night vision goggles, and MBDA's “Mistral” type short-range air defense systems. Additionally, 24 Arqus brand Bastion-type armored personnel carriers were delivered from France in December 2023, with commitments for an additional 26. Armenia's participation in joint peacekeeping exercises with the U.S., such as “Eagle Partner 2023,” further signals this strategic reorientation away from traditional alliances like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which Armenian authorities have claimed left them unsupported during the Second Karabakh War. Russia and Iran, in turn, have expressed concerns that the presence of the European Union Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMA) could exacerbate geopolitical tensions in the region.

In Georgia, the “Georgian Desire” party's prominent anti-war rhetoric and emphasis on national solidarity have been central themes in recent elections. The controversial “Russian law,” officially known as the “Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence,” which mandates that organizations receiving over 20% of their funding from abroad register as “agents of foreign influence”, has triggered widespread protests across the country. This legislation, seen by many as a clear departure from European integration and a move closer to Russia, led to the indefinite suspension of Georgia's EU accession process by Brussels. Despite significant public support for EU integration (approximately 80% of Georgians favor join-

ing the EU), the law fueled considerable concerns about growing Russian influence in the country, particularly given Georgia's uneasy historical relationship with Moscow, including the 2008 war and the ongoing occupation of its territories.

In contrast, Azerbaijan's significant resource endowments and more entrenched Soviet-era executive traditions have facilitated greater institutional inertia. Moreover, unlike Armenia's often-cited diaspora-liberal axis or Georgia's heavier reliance on Western aid, Azerbaijan has forged a distinct geopolitical posture centered on transactional realism and the steadfast assertion of sovereignty, which further reinforces its ideological centrism and contributes to its internal political stability. Regional and trans-regional actors propose various security designs for the South Caucasus, reflecting their competing interests and priorities. Azerbaijan, often seeking to attract extra-regional powers, adopts a “3+2+2” approach (representing the three South Caucasus countries, plus Turkey and Russia, and finally the USA and the EU). Georgia's strategic stance, conversely, strongly favors the West, manifesting in a “3+1+2” model (the three South Caucasus countries, plus Turkey, and the USA and the EU) with the explicit goal of full integration into Western political frameworks. Russia, however, views the Caucasus as its traditional security perimeter and “backyard,” proposing a more restrictive “3+1” model that includes only Russia and the three South Caucasus countries,

pointedly excluding Turkey, Iran, the U.S., and the European Union. Russia's "Nearby Region" or "Nearby Doctrine" serves as a definitive red line, indicating that intervention, often leveraging ethnic, religious, ideological, or economic fragilities, will occur if countries in its perceived sphere attempt to form joint security pacts with actors outside the region or host foreign military bases. This stance suggests that as long as the South Caucasus remains within Russia's perceived sub-security complex, full membership in Western alliances like NATO or the EU for regional states will remain significantly constrained, contributing to ongoing regional instability.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's political history reveals a complex interplay of historical legacy, institutional design, ethno-social psychology, and external environment. The persistent dominance of right- and center-right ideologies is not merely a reflection of regime choice, but also emerges from deep-seated cultural memory, established

legal frameworks, and a pragmatic geopolitical prudence. The ideological spectrum has narrowed, not solely through overt suppression, but significantly through the subtle shaping of public expectations and the effective co-optation of elites. The profound impact of the 2020 military victory further reinforced the legitimacy of the ruling elite, solidifying a powerful narrative of patriotic resilience and national unity across society. While structural change remains constrained by these deeply entrenched dynamics, the gradual shifts associated with generational change and increased exposure to transnational narratives may eventually introduce new political sensibilities, potentially unsettling the current equilibrium. However, the South Caucasus remains a pivotal region due to its strategic location and rich energy resources, making its internal dynamics and external engagements crucial for broader global geopolitics. This enduring geopolitical significance will likely continue to exert a powerful influence on Azerbaijan's political trajectory and ideological preferences for the foreseeable future.

Notes

- ¹ A. D. Smith, *National Identity*, University of Nevada Press, 1991.
- ² S. Levitsky & L. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- ³ H. E. Hale, "Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in

Post-Soviet Eurasia", *World Politics*, 58(1), 2005, pp.133-165.

- ⁴ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit: Azerbaijan*, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org>; OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Reports (2003-2020).

- ⁵ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers, 1971.

- ⁶ Azerbaijan Electoral Code (Article 91, revised 2018).
- ⁷ Law on Political Parties, Azerbaijan, 1992; amended 2003, 2022).
- ⁸ P.J. Luong, P. J., & E. Weinthal, *Oil is Not a Curse: Ownership Structure and Institutions in Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- ⁹ S. Levitsky & L. Way, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁰ “Law on Mass Media”, Official Gazette of Azerbaijan, 2021.
- ¹¹ OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Reports (2003-2020).
- ¹² “CRRC Caucasus Barometer”, *Public Opinion Data for Azerbaijan*, (2011-2021).

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