

A Socio-Political Assessment of Turkish and Azerbaijani Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and İlham Aliyev

A White Paper



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Description: Erdogan and Ilham Aliyev in front of the Heydar Aliyev statue, Baku, 2020

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PREFACE

In the complex landscape of international relations and political dynamics, the interplay between leaders, their personas, and the narratives surrounding them often shapes the course of nations and regions. This White paper delves into the socio-political assessments of two pivotal figures, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ilham Aliyev, whose actions and personas have reverberated beyond their countries.

Authored by experienced scholars in their fields, the academic contributions within this paper illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of leadership, power, and perception in the contemporary geopolitical landscape. By shedding light on the socio-political dynamics surrounding Presidents Erdoğan and Aliyev, this white paper invites readers to delve deeper into the complexities shaping the future of their nations and the broader region.

Moreover, this White paper aims to stimulate ongoing research and discourse on this significant topic. By offering nuanced analyses of Presidents Erdoğan and Aliyev within the broader context of global politics, this work can inspire scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to delve deeper into these themes and explore new avenues of inquiry.

Naira Sahakyan
Yerevan, May 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hriar Cabayan

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Focus of this White Paper is on a socio-political assessment of Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ilham Aliyev. The sections below briefly summarize each of the contributions. The summaries are primarily meant to entice the reader to read the full chapters and have intentionally been kept short.

In his article entitled “**The Resurgence of Cult of Personality in Türkiye and the Transformation of Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations**” Dr. Ioannis N. Grigoriadis states upfront the relationship between Türkiye and Azerbaijan has undergone a profound transformation. Türkiye’s democratic backsliding, emerging cult of personality and drifting away from the West meant that its relationship with Azerbaijan would be upgraded and acquire an unprecedented weight. This provided Azerbaijan with a rare chance to improve its regional strategic position. Leveraging its economic and influence into Turkish society, it managed to acquire both hard and soft power. He goes on to say by adopting ethnic Turkish nationalism, Erdoğan reassessed his policy towards Azerbaijan, which was no longer a minor player, but a key partner in Türkiye’s revived foreign policy ambitions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. He points out the Karabakh problem occurred as an opportunity for the operationalization of this dimension of the Azerbaijani-Turkish partnership. The improvement of personal rapport between Presidents Erdoğan and Aliyev meant that key dimensions of the Azerbaijani-Turkish relationship would be decided by the two leaders only. In this context Armenian-Turkish relations were viewed through a zero-sum game lens and remained indexed to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. He concludes by stating the profound transformation of

Azerbaijani-Turkish relations over the last decade has been facilitated by a set of developments in Turkish politics: the drift of the government coalition towards the far-right, the emerging cult of personality, democratic backsliding, and finally the concentration of foreign strategy and policymaking in the hands of the president. This has allowed Azerbaijan to acquire an influence disproportionate to its diplomatic, economic, and military clout and emerge as a *de facto* veto player in Türkiye's foreign strategy and policy in the Caucasus.

In her article entitled **"Sultan who never became a Caliph" : "Izvestia" portrays the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**" Ms. Anahit Kartashyan points out that in contemporary society, mass media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of political events and molding the images of political figures which become powerful framing mechanisms. She illustrates this by focusing on a series of events in the Russian-Turkish relationship that shaped Erdoğan's image in the daily Russian newspaper "Izvestia" in the period from 2014 to 2016. She selects this period because it illustrates how the frameworks regarding Erdoğan's image change along with the tension between the two countries. In this instance the mass media creates two varied images of the same political leader. In instances of tension, Erdogan is characterized as stubborn and emotional, and ambitious to become Sultan and Caliph. The same analysts who considered Erdoğan an experienced and wise leader after positive events, now call him a leader who "lost sense of reality". In such instances, he is characterized as "sultan, who never became a caliph", "an authoritarian personalist leader" who is "a puppet in the hands of NATO and in particular the USA", has imperial ambitions, a "dark, deliberately rude being", and a "macho janissary". She points out with the use of narratives of the Armenian Genocide and the Genocide of Kurds in Türkiye, "Izvestia" creates the image of an unreliable partner

who avoids responsibility, a "stubborn leader" who leads the country to collapse both economically and politically. She points out the caliph and sultan frames are used because the Ottoman Empire is perceived in Russian culture and public memory as an age-old enemy or at least a rival. She states after positive events however, Erdoğan is characterized as a leader, tough politician, brilliant orator, grandmaster. She points out that in such instances by creating such positive images of Erdoğan, they extend it to Türkiye as well.

In her article entitled **“Ascending from Paternal Legacy to Victorious Leadership: Ilham Aliyev’s Sources of Legitimacy After Decades of Rule”** Dr. Dr Naira Sahakian examines the evolution of Ilham Aliyev’s leadership legitimacy before and after the 2020 Karabakh war through the lens of David Beetham’s theory of legitimacy. She does so by doing qualitative discourse and narrative analysis, drawing on a sample of speeches delivered by Ilham Aliyev between 2016 and 2023. She focuses on those speeches that were addressed to the internal audience to attain a precise understanding of Aliyev’s legitimating tactics and discourse changes. In doing so, she elucidates the ramifications of legitimacy on power dynamics. She points out that the narrative surrounding his legitimacy has been developing for two decades and underwent significant changes in the wake of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Prior to 2020 and continuing post-2020, the narrative surrounding the conflict remained central, presenting its resolution in favor of Azerbaijan as a shared interest of both the Aliyev family and Azerbaijani society. As such, the discourse has remained relatively consistent, emphasizing the alignment of interests between the dominant leader and the populace, thus reinforcing Aliyev’s legitimacy through a common cause. She points out before the conflict, Aliyev’s authority was predominantly rooted in his familial lineage, particularly his father’s legacy. The role

of Heydar Aliyev in the history of independent Azerbaijan (as the national hero without which Azerbaijan would have collapsed) has been repeatedly articulated in Ilham Aliyev's discourse. However, in the aftermath of the war, a significant shift in his narrative occurred, with a greater emphasis placed on his personal qualities and his ability to govern effectively. In doing so, he subtly distanced himself from his father, although this distancing was nuanced, as he still relied on an authoritative source from which his legitimacy could be derived. As such, Dr. Sahakian helps the reader understand the characteristics of Ilham Aliyev's legitimacy narrative and the nuances of this transformation.

In her article entitled **“Aliyev's enduring authority: Unravelling Masculine Governmentality and Authoritarian traditionalism in Azerbaijan”** Ms. Sevinj Samadzade provides the reader with a comprehensive psychosocial assessment of the Azeri political landscape and explores the intricate relationship between masculine governmentality and authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. She states Aliyev's regime owes much to patriarchal and traditional values to maintain power and points out how the regime superficially included women in power structures while reinforcing gendered divisions and patriarchal norms. Almost elevating to a godlike status, Aliyev's authority manages to transform people in Azerbaijan into submissive and obedient subjects. She points out the Aliyev administration, under the guise of upholding family values, continues to exploit the resources of the population for its own “family profits”. She observes nationalism is an embodied practice of the discipline for this authoritarian regime and war constantly reemphasizes the narrative of threat to keep the regime stable.

THE RESURGENCE OF CULT OF PERSONALITY IN TURKEY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AZERBAIJANI-TURKISH RELATIONS

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Introduction

For most of the three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of post-Soviet republics, Azerbaijani-Turkish relations were at the discursive level described by a slogan symbolizing Azerbaijani-Turkish “fraternity”: “Bir millet, iki devlet” in the Turkish, or “bir millət, iki dövlət” (one nation, two states) in the Azerbaijani script reflected a romantic view of Turkic ethnic nationalism, which however failed to respond to the political realities and bilateral relations. Neither Turkey nor Azerbaijan was committed to each other to the extent that the slogan would imply, and they often sought their national interests without seeking a complete alignment. This changed in the last decade. The relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan has undergone a profound transformation which is linked both to strategic developments in the Caucasus as well as domestic political developments in Turkey. Turkey’s democratic backsliding, emerging cult of personality and drifting away from the West meant that its relationship with Azerbaijan would be upgraded and acquire an unprecedented weight.

The Early Years of the AKP Administration

It is important to remember that Erdoğan was not always the single leading figure within the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP). In fact, his deprivation of political rights by means of a court decision meant that Abdullah Gül had to run for the

prime minister's office in the November 2002 parliamentary elections. It was only under Abdullah Gül's administration that it became possible for Erdoğan to have his political rights restored, get elected in the parliament and take over the prime minister's office. With Erdoğan as Prime Minister, Gül as Foreign Minister and Bülent Arınç as speaker of the parliament, there appeared to be a *de facto* triumvirate. This appeared even reinforced when, in 2007, Erdoğan nominated Gül as a candidate for the president's office. The ensuing political crisis and AKP triumph led to the consolidation of its rule. In the first years of his term, Prime Minister Erdoğan appeared as an outsider to the Turkish establishment and a seeming paradox in global politics, being an Islamist leader with pro-Western leanings keen to promote Turkey's chances for EU membership.¹ He challenged the state bureaucracy and its long-standing positions on a series of Turkish foreign policy questions including the Cyprus and the Armenian questions. Regarding Cyprus, he went as far as to endorse the Annan Plan for the solution of the Cyprus problem on the basis of a bizonal bicomunal federation, a radical departure from the partition of the island which used to be the established Turkish position. Regarding the Armenian question, he broadened the limits of public debate and allowed views critical of official Turkish positions that culminated to the organization of a conference on the Armenian question, organized by three leading universities against the furor of nationalists of all ideological leanings. This started to change as Erdoğan managed to defeat his political adversaries but also moved closer to adopting mainstream views on a number of key political questions in Turkish politics.

The Rise of "One Man Rule"

The emergence of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan into the undisputed leader of his party challenged all those who could check and balance his power. Following the constitutional referendum of 2010, Turkey started drifting towards “one man’s rule” (in Turkish “*Tek adam rejimi*”). “*Tek adam rejimi*” started to be promoted as a solution for Turkey’s long-standing government problems. Both Gül and Arınç were eclipsed from the main stage of Turkish politics without challenging the emergence of Erdoğan as the charismatic undisputed leader of the Islamist right. Erdoğan move from the prime minister’s office to that of the president set the ground for the transformation of the Turkish government model and the deterioration of the country’s human rights record. The Gezi events of May-June 2013 were harbinger to that transformation. Democratic backsliding gained speed, as well as AKP’s distancing from reformist political forces that had in the 2000s proven crucial allies when the AKP government was promoting liberal democratic reforms against the will of the military-bureaucratic establishment.

The year 2015 proved crucial in Turkish politics; the reconfiguration of Turkish politics had a lasting effect on Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. The failure of the AKP to secure a parliamentary majority in the 2 June 2015 parliamentary elections appeared as a great shock to the government party. It seemed that the Kurdish peace process did not deliver any electoral dividends to the AKP administration. On the contrary, it weakened the party and reinforced the representative of the Kurdish political movement, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) which reached a historic 13 percent. These prompted the decision to replace Ahmet Davutoğlu with Binali Yıldırım, end the negotiations for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question and establish an alliance with a former bitter enemy of the AKP, the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP). Through this alliance and its comfortable victory in the November 2015

parliamentary elections, the AKP established a right-far-right wing coalition with profound consequences for Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. The AKP would no longer seek to attract the Kurdish or liberal vote within Turkey and would embrace the positions of the pre-AKP-era state establishment on all critical political questions. The relapse to the securitization of the Kurdish question was followed by renewed the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) attacks and harsh Turkish army reprisals leading to hundreds of deaths and the destruction of large parts of cities such as Diyarbakir and Nusaybin. The 15 July 2016 coup attempt emerged as an opportunity to accelerate that process. Through the suspension of constitutional provisions during the state of emergency declared in the aftermath of the coup attempt, the consolidation of the one-man-rule became easier. The 16 April 2017 constitutional referendum resulted in a weak endorsement of the transformation into a presidential republic. This gave Erdoğan a free hand in reshaping key aspects of Turkish domestic and foreign policy.

The consolidation of Erdoğan's power allowed him to move closer to the mainstream views of the Turkish state elite on a number of critical political issues and establish new political alliances. By adopting some of the principles of the state bureaucracy he managed to transform, he was no longer viewed as a challenger to certain aspects of the existing order. The cult of personality has grown stronger since the democratic backsliding became a defining feature of Turkish politics. In fact, ideas that were popular among far-right Islamist thinkers like Necip Fazıl Kısakürek acquired new resonance, as the far-right discourse was becoming mainstreamed. In his writings, Kısakürek had expressed his preference for a strong leader model. Such views were in resonance with the argument about the need to promote an executive presidency which would facilitate and expedite

decision-making. The mainstreaming of views such as Kısakürek's proved crucial for the reconfiguration of the Turkish political arena.² The abolition of the office of the prime minister meant that the president would be the single head of the executive. This choice appeared in line with a distrust against checks and balance mechanisms and multi-party governments as well as with the development of a personality cult around the Turkish president. The amendment of the constitution through a referendum on 16 April 2017 consolidated the dominant position of the President. The term "*reis*" emerged as the favorite used by the pro-government media and supporters of President Erdoğan to describe the charismatic leader. The role of state bureaucracy in the formation of strategies and policies was eclipsed by the Presidential Palace and his cohorts of advisors.

"One Man Rule" and its Effect on Turkey's Relations with Azerbaijan

Turkey's democratic backsliding coincided with a rise of Turkey's foreign policy ambitions. Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy in the 2010s was due to a set of reasons that permitted its growing role: its stellar economic performance in the 2000s, the collapse of several of Middle East autocracies, following the Arab Uprisings and the vacuum which the declining motivation of the West to get involved in global political issues. This entailed a new approach in its relations with Russia, the United States, and the West in general. Turkey no longer considered necessary to align with Western strategies and sought its own strategic autonomy; this raised the possibility of reconfiguring its relations with Russia. Russian-Turkish relations recovered from the low points of November 2015, when the Turkish air force shot down a Russian military aircraft operating in Syria and December 2016, when Russia's ambassador to Turkey was

assassinated by an Islamist militant. There emerged an opportunity to shift Russia's position away from defending Armenia and the status quo in Karabakh. While the interests of Russia and Turkey remained divergent in several international disputes, there emerged new common interests and cooperation opportunities. While disputes like Karabakh appeared like putting the two countries at loggerheads, Turkey's readiness to challenge NATO cohesion opened a window of opportunity for Russian-Turkish relations.

This provided Azerbaijan with a rare chance to improve its regional strategic position. Leveraging its economic and influence into Turkish society, Azerbaijan managed to acquire both hard and soft power at a time when even lip service to Western political values was considered redundant. In an environment where Western values were no longer highly regarded, if not outright discredited, the autocratic and kleptocratic features of the Azerbaijani regime looked less problematic if not insignificant. Moreover, a rapprochement resonated with the drifting of the AKP political identity towards the far right. By adopting the symbolic resources of ethnic Turkish nationalism, Erdoğan reassessed his policy towards Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan was no longer a minor player, but a key partner in Turkey's revived foreign policy ambitions in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as a rallying point for the Turkish far right. The development of Turkish defense industry emerged as an area of strategic cooperation. Azerbaijan's investment capital and interest in arms procurement reinforced the rise of a dynamic sector of the Turkish economy and helped reconfigure the Azerbaijani-Turkish relations on a more assertive basis. The traditional slogan of Azerbaijani-Turkish "fraternity" "one nation, two states" would be amended through the addition of the term "fist" (*yumruk* or *yumruq*). "One nation, one state" would now be completed by "one fist": "Bir millet, iki devlet, bir

yumruk.” This addition was an overt reference to the possibility of projecting military force within the framework of this “fraternity”, with Armenia or even Iran emerging as the addressees of that message. The Karabakh problem occurred as a rare opportunity for the operationalization of this dimension of the Azerbaijani-Turkish partnership, given the development of the Turkish defense industry and the capabilities that it could provide, as well as Russia’s gradual drifting away from a pro-Armenian stance.

Azerbaijani-Turkish vs. US-Israeli Relations

Apart from the reinforcement of the military dimension in Azerbaijani-Turkish relations, there was a structural transformation with profound consequences. As Barçın Yinanç has recently argued, the relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan has developed similarities to that between the United States and Israel.³ Before exploring that point, it is worth looking into US-Israeli relations and the debate it has generated in recent decades. The structural transformation of US-Israeli ties has been one of the most controversial topics in US foreign and security policy, and the recent Gaza War has only made this point more pertinent. In a famous March 2006 essay on US-Israeli relations that later turned into a book, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argued that the activity of the Israel lobby in the United States had a profound effect on US foreign policy and strategy in the Middle East. In fact, the definition of US national interest in the Middle East would grow dependent on Israeli foreign policy and strategy and the way Israel defined its own national interest.⁴ Despite the clear asymmetry in the military and diplomatic power of the United States and Israel, it was not the United States that was managing to impose its foreign and security strategy and policy priorities on Israel but the opposite. Israel developed a unique

capability of shaping US foreign policy in the Middle East by acquiring substantial influence in US domestic politics and public sphere. Mearsheimer and Walt highlighted how AIPAC, and other pro-Israel lobby organizations managed to acquire influence across the political spectrum and make sure that US foreign policy would adapt to Israeli foreign policy. The criticism of the two scholars explained how the United States deviated from their policy that a two-state solution is the only fair and viable solution of the Palestinian problem to accommodate maximalist Israeli positions that undermined the prospects of a sovereign Palestinian state and dragged the United States to the recognition of Israeli occupation over large parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

How do US-Israeli relations compare with the relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, according to Yinanç? Although Turkey is by far the senior member in that partnership, it has avoided exerting any influence on the junior member; on the contrary, it has allowed the junior member to exert influence disproportionate to its military and diplomatic clout. There are several permissive conditions for this. First, Turkey has allowed Azerbaijan to acquire substantial influence in Turkish domestic politics through the development of lobby structures and the acquisition of Turkish mass media it manages. This meant that it would be very difficult for Turkish media to broadcast news, which could weaken the prestige of the Azerbaijani regime. Second, Turkey's democratic backsliding and transition to a "hard" presidential system meant that there could be no institutional barriers to a sharp reconfiguration of bilateral relations, as long as the good interpersonal relations of the two leaders would allow it. The improvement of personal rapport between Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and İlham Aliyev meant that key dimensions of the

Azerbaijani-Turkish relationship would be decided by the two leaders only.

This led to a profound transformation of the bilateral relations; Turkey was no longer promoting a balanced policy on the Karabakh issue⁵ or taking part in initiatives like the 2009 Zurich Protocols between Armenia and Turkey; it endorsed, instead, Azerbaijani belligerence and provided ample resources for the development of Azerbaijani military capabilities. Armenian-Turkish relations were viewed through a zero-sum game lens and remained indexed to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, so any missed opportunities for cooperation remained discounted.⁶ While Turkey had cited Armenian military operations in and around Karabakh as the reason for its decision to close its land border with Armenia in April 1993, it eventually linked its decision for reopening the border to Azerbaijan's consent. When Azerbaijan eventually managed to reverse the status quo in Karabakh through two military operations in September-November 2020 and September 2023, the reason for closing the border was no longer. Yet even the abolition of the Republic of Artsakh failed to trigger any positive Turkish response. It became clear that Turkey would not proceed in any step towards normalization of its relations with Armenia without the explicit consent of Azerbaijan. The restoration of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Karabakh should have removed all reasons for keeping the land border between Armenia and Turkey shut. Yet it became clear that Turkey would not reopen its land border with Armenia without Azerbaijan's consent. This would only come after a "comprehensive" peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In other words, Turkey's Armenia policy became subordinated to Azerbaijan's Armenia policy, in a manner reminiscent of the subordination of US Middle East policy to Israel's Middle East policy.

Conclusion

The profound transformation of Azerbaijani-Turkish relations over the last decade has been facilitated by a set of developments in Turkish politics: the drift of the government coalition towards the far-right, the emerging cult of personality, democratic backsliding and the concentration of foreign strategy and policymaking in the hands of the president. The rise of “one-man rule,” the deinstitutionalization of Turkish foreign policy and strategy-planning as well as the growing role of domestic political developments, and of interpersonal relations at the top government level contributed to a reconfiguration of a relationship that had remained balanced for decades. This allowed Azerbaijan to acquire an influence disproportionate to its diplomatic, economic, and military clout and emerge as a *de facto* veto player in Turkey’s foreign strategy and policy in the Caucasus, similar to the *de facto* veto player status that Israel has gained as far as US foreign policy and strategy in the Middle East is concerned. Azerbaijan’s growing role stands in stark contrast to contemporary debates about Turkish foreign policy and strategy, normally punctuated by a novel drive for acquiring “strategic autonomy.” Turkey’s growing diplomatic, economic, and military clout, regional and global ambitions meant that it would no longer adopt Western strategic and foreign policy interests as its own, but it would formulate its own strategic and tactical goals and comply with Western demands, only if this served its own interests. While Turkey claimed to protect its strategic autonomy against Western security or economic organizations, such as NATO or the European Union, it appeared outsourcing its Caucasus policy to Azerbaijan notwithstanding its own key interests as far as the region was concerned. These interests went far deeper than Turkey’s relations with Azerbaijan and included Iran,

Russia, and Central Asian republics, as well as the establishment of trade corridors. Nevertheless, these interests appeared not to be strong enough to challenge the new structure of Azerbaijani-Turkish relations.

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"SULTAN WHO NEVER BECAME A CALIPH"¹: "IZVESTIA" PORTRAYS THE PRESIDENT OF TÜRKIYE, RECEP TAYYIP ERDOĞAN

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Introduction

In contemporary society, mass media plays a pivotal role as a primary conduit of information, wielding significant influence in shaping public perceptions of political events and molding the images of political figures. Through its framing techniques, it not only informs but also molds public opinion on crucial political matters. At the same time, it can overshadow critical political developments with more sensationalized content, diverting focus from issues of greater importance within the political sphere.

In communication studies, news stories about political issues and events contain information and frames. David Tewksbury and Dietram A. Scheufele wrote that the mass media use news frames "to exert a relatively substantial influence on citizens' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors"². A frame unifies information into a package that comprises arguments, information, symbols, metaphors, and images³. Salma Ismail Ghanem argues that the more a topic is mentioned in media content, the more powerful it becomes as a framing mechanism⁴. In this paper, frames are established by selecting the most mentioned image attributes for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the Russian newspaper "Izvestia", owned by a Kremlin-loyal business holding. Studying the attributes, metaphors, and symbols regarding Erdoğan's image, I tried to indicate which frame is often used and for what purpose. The article focuses on a series of

events in the Russian-Turkish relationship that shaped RT Erdoğan's image in "Izvestia".

The data for this paper comes from an analysis of 69 articles from "Izvestia". The content and discourse analysis methods were used in this study which provides an account of the political context in which the leader's image was portrayed. As a unit of analysis, I chose "political analysis articles" and "opinion journalism" done by researchers, politicians, journalists, and writers. I selected articles with the keyword "Эрдоган (Erdoğan)», and as a filter criterion I set "opinion".

The chronology of this study covers from February 23, 2014, the day when demonstrations were held in the city of Sevastopol, to June 27, 2016, the day when the letter of Turkish Prime Minister RT Erdoğan addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin apologizing for the downing of a Russian aircraft was published on the Kremlin's official website. The reason behind this period selection is the fact that it is visible how the frameworks regarding Erdoğan's image are changing along with the tension of Russian-Turkish relations.

A Quick Overview of Russian-Turkish Relations

The evolution of the partnership between Russia and Türkiye, initiated in the late 1990s and accelerated in the early 2000s, has not been without its challenges. However, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin, Russian-Turkish relations have reached their most amicable phase in history.

There exist contradictions and fluctuations in the relations between the two nations, which at times escalate significantly; however, they have not led to a rupture in relations. Şener Aktürk suggests that the foreign policy reorientation of Russia and Türkiye in the mid-90s stemmed from a diminishing gap in demographic,

economic, and military power between the two countries, thus alleviating Türkiye's concerns about a Russian threat⁵.

In the historiography of Russian-Turkish relations, there are different conceptual approaches to their nature. Some experts characterize them as interconnected, believing that it is an asymmetric interdependence in which Russia has a number of advantages over Türkiye. Seçkin Köstem argues that the intensification of Russian-Turkish economic ties has strengthened Russia at the expense of Türkiye. He analyzed the sanctions imposed by Russia in the aftermath of the aircraft crisis in 2015 and highlighted the asymmetric nature of the countries' economic cooperation⁶.

Russian-Turkish relations are based not only on economic but also on ideological cooperation. Since the 1990s, both countries attempted to find or develop a common ideological platform for rapprochement. Over the past decade, analysts have speculated that Russia and Türkiye could form a strategic axis based on the shared vision of "Eurasia" and that there is a similarity between Moscow's and Ankara's strategic outlooks: Russian neo-Eurasianism and Türkiye's Kemalist Eurasianism⁷. On November 16, 2001, two countries signed the "Eurasia Action Plan" which should have paved the way for finding the edges of reconciliation on the issues of policy, anti-terror cooperation, and economic partnership in Eurasia⁸.

According to Igor Torbakov, after the Justice and Development Party came to power, Ankara's vision of its strategic interests was much more determined by neo-Ottoman ideas than by Kemalist Eurasianism. Torbakov argues that Russian neo-Eurasianism and Turkish neo-Ottomanism contain significant potential for confrontation⁹. However, despite ideological differences, Russia needs Türkiye as a reliable energy partner at a time of deteriorating relations with the West and Ukraine. This is the reason that even in the

case of the worst scenarios, such as the downing of the Russian military aircraft¹⁰, Russia tries to solve the problem by applying economic pressure.

The characters of Erdoğan and Putin play a very important role in Russian-Turkish relations as well. Both Turkish and Russian media often draw comparisons between the two leaders. The similarity of personalities determines the development of Russian-Turkish relations during the administration of the two leaders. However, if Putin is presented as a much more balanced figure, then Erdoğan is characterized as stubborn and emotional, which from time to time leads to turbulence in Russian-Turkish relations. A vivid example of this is Russian military aircraft accident. Along with the changes in Russian-Turkish relations, one can follow how the perceptions of Erdoğan's character in Russian media are changing.

Erdoğan's Portrait in "Izvestia" in the Context of the Crimean and Syrian Crises

On February 23, 2014, mass protest demonstrations started in Sevastopol. The protest grew into a movement aiming at a separation of Crimea from Ukraine. As a result of the referendum held on March 16, 2014, 96.77% of Crimean residents voted to join¹¹ the Russian Federation. On March 18, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, the leadership of Crimea, and the Mayor of Sevastopol signed Agreement on the accession of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation. The Russian military's presence in Crimea was a pivotal factor in shaping the course of events. In the tumultuous period of February-March 2014, individuals clad in green Russian-manufactured military attire, lacking any identifiable insignia, emerged in Crimea brandishing Kalashnikovs. Swiftly, they secured control over Ukrainian military bases across the region and

the Simferopol airport. Dubbed "polite people" (vezhliviye lyudi) on Russian social media, they were initially shrouded in mystery, with the Kremlin disavowing any association with these enigmatic figures, whimsically referred to as "little green men" (zelyonye chelovechki). However, Russian President Vladimir Putin later acknowledged the presence of Russian military personnel in Crimea. Their influence was palpable, ultimately swaying the outcome of the referendum decisively in Russia's favor.¹²

Turkish Prime Minister R.T. Erdoğan did not welcome Crimea's accession to Russia. On March 9, Prime Minister, R.T. Erdoğan, in a telephone conversation with the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, expressed a united position that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as well as its political unity, must be supported at any cost¹³. Moreover, Erdoğan directly and indirectly began to express his ambitions towards Crimea, assuming the role of protector of the Crimean Tatars. During his visit to Kiev in March 2014 the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, Ahmet Davutoğlu met Mustafa Abdülcemil Kırımoğlu, one of the leaders of the Crimean Tatars. According to Kırımoğlu, "Davutoğlu gave the assurance that if the Tatars living in Crimea face any threat, Türkiye will immediately step in"¹⁴.

Apart from Russian-Turkish disagreements over Crimea, the interests of Türkiye and Russia did not coincide in the Syrian crisis either. In the Syrian conflict, Türkiye took the opposite position with Russia, supporting the anti-government forces of Syria.

The articles published in "Izvestia" after the Syrian crises attributed characteristics to Erdoğan such as a leader, tough politician, brilliant orator¹⁵, grandmaster¹⁶, and immediately after the Crimea incident Sultan, and Caliph¹⁷. They framed Prime Minister Erdoğan's image in positive tones. Although the authors wrote about illegal oil

trade with ISIS and were silent about the support of the ruling party in Ankara for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the Crimean Tatar Majlis in Ukraine, they used complementary frames for Türkiye, and Prime Minister Erdoğan, comparing him even with Vladimir Putin. Political scientist Sergey Markov wrote that "the leaders of Russia and Türkiye - Putin and Erdoğan - demonstrated a very positive and friendly attitude towards each other". He stated that in Türkiye, Erdoğan is even called "our Turkish Putin"¹⁸. Although Russia and Türkiye are in different camps in the case of the Syrian conflict, economic interest is preferred over political, therefore Türkiye is characterized as a partner. As for Russian-Turkish relations, they are marked as partnerships, which have a great tendency to grow¹⁹. However, Erdoğan's efforts to mobilize the Crimean Tatars right after the Crimean conflict were characterized by ambitions to become Sultan and Caliph. The frame of Sultan or Caliph is a reference to the Ottoman Empire and the centuries-old Russo-Turkish rivalry. The image of the Sultan and Caliph portrays Erdoğan relatively negatively, but this frame is used in a few articles. Erdoğan is portrayed more in a positive way.

From "Our Turkish Putin" to "Macho Janissary"

After the downing of a Russian aircraft by a Turkish F-16 jet on November 24, 2015, a deep crisis started in Russian-Turkish relations. Positive attributes and characteristics of Erdoğan's image changed negatively after the aircraft accident. Political scientist and journalist Boris Mezhuev calls this action scum, thereby indirectly calling Erdoğan "scum"²⁰.

The same analysts who considered Erdoğan an experienced and wise leader, call him a leader who "lost sense of reality" and "took revenge on the Russians for shooting down oil tankers targeted from

the air at the request of his corrupt son"²¹. They are already emphasizing Türkiye's close relationship with the Islamic State. Within the scope of the "Caliph, leader of the Islamic State" frame, a large information package is used: with negative attributes and metaphors "Izvestia" portrays Erdogan in a negative light.

During the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Türkiye's president, said he would be ready to quit office if allegations by his Russian counterpart that Türkiye traded oil with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) group were proven²². The Russian Ministry of Defense has released comprehensive information about the Turkish oil trade with ISIS. Photos of thousands of fuel tankers disguised as trucks, photos of their legal crossing of the Turkish border, supply routes, and pictures of Turkish refineries that receive oil from Syria and Iraq²³.

On December 3, 2015, Vladimir Putin in his message to the Federal Assembly said: "Apparently, Allah has decided to punish the ruling clique in Türkiye, depriving it of its mind and reason"²⁴. Interpreter Igor Karaulov points out that "clique" is one of the strongest words in the traditional Russian foreign policy dictionary, roughly corresponding to what is called "rogue state" in American practice. For the entire history of new Russia, no foreign government was officially called a "clique" before²⁵.

With this frame, they are trying to draw attention to Erdoğan's connection with Islamic circles²⁶, to highlight the image of Türkiye as an Islamic state, that is not safe for Russian people as a resort and the image of Erdoğan as Islamic leader²⁷. Such characteristics as "sultan, who never became a caliph"²⁸, "an authoritarian personalist leader"²⁹, who is "a puppet in the hands of NATO and in particular the USA"³⁰ and has imperial ambitions³¹, "dark, deliberately rude being", and "macho janissary"³² are used to portray Erdoğan.

Almost every article of "Izvestia" created an image of Erdoğan as a Sultan or a Caliph, who attempted within the framework of neo-Ottomanism policy to restore Türkiye's influence in the countries that were part of the Ottoman world in the past³³. According to Russian politician Konstantin Zatulin, for Russia "the Ottoman Empire was the historical enemy and threat for hundreds of years"³⁴. The frequent reference to this frame aims to emphasize the attribute of the image of Erdoğan and Türkiye as an enemy country that is resident in Russian culture. Thus, there is a transition from the image of a partner to the image of an enemy. However, both official circles in their speeches, and experts' circles in their articles emphasize that the issue should be settled by applying diplomatic and economic pressure, but not by war or anti-Turkish and anti-Turkic chauvinism.

In response to Russia's economic and diplomatic pressures, Türkiye attempted to implement its revanchist policy in Crimea and the South Caucasus. In particular, during his visit to Ukraine in February 2016, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu announced that the territorial integrity of Ukraine is important for Türkiye and that his country considers Crimea a part of Ukraine³⁵. Political scientist Oleg Matveychev believes that the April 2016 four-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh, which was provoked by Erdoğan's initiative, should also be considered within the framework of Erdoğan's revanchist policy. According to Matveichev, President Recep Erdoğan, who has lost his international authority, decided to give a lesson to Russia for the reaction to the incident with the downed Russian jet, as well as for sanctions³⁶.

"Erdoğan's Difficult Repentance"

Along with the sanctions, Russia creates new and activates the existing frames to exert political pressure on Türkiye through the mass media.

With the use of narratives of the Armenian Genocide and the Genocide of Kurds in Türkiye, "Izvestia" creates the image of an unreliable partner who avoids responsibility³⁷. Erdoğan's rejection of agreements with the EU regarding Syrian refugees in 2016 also fits within this framework as well. Deputy Director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies Anna Glazova characterizes the agreement between Türkiye and the EU "under which refugees are sold, bought and exchanged as goods" as immoral. Glazova portrays Erdoğan as an unreliable "Sultan" who can at any time abandon the agreements reached and blackmail his partners³⁸.

On the one hand, "Izvestia" speaks harshly, on the other hand, it is looking for ways to reconcile. It is gradually changing its highly critical language, trying to find the edges of reconciliation with Türkiye. In the pages of the newspaper, we meet the narrative of "interiority". The expert circle suggests that the apology of the Turkish ruling elite can settle the Russian-Turkish crisis, from which only the West benefits³⁹.

"Izvestia" creates for Erdoğan an image of a "stubborn leader", which leads the country to collapse both economically and politically. The failure of negotiations with the EU regarding refugees due to Erdoğan's efforts, the diplomatic crisis with Germany after the adoption of the resolution accepting the Armenian Genocide by the German parliament, and the strained relations with Russia led Türkiye to political isolation. In addition, the ban on Turkish agricultural

products from the Russian market and the Russian tourist boycott of Turkish resorts greatly damaged the economy which will not be able to exist in isolation, without large markets and an influx of tourists. As a result of all this, Erdoğan had to send an apology letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the cost of pride, which was published on the Kremlin's official website on June 27. International Observer Sergey Filatov interprets Erdoğan's apology as "a forced revelation, which stubborn Erdoğan went to the detriment of his pride"⁴⁰.

Conclusion

The aftermath of the jet crisis has highlighted the asymmetric nature of the countries' cooperation. The ups and downs of Turkish-Russian relations show the priority of politics. This is the reason for Russia's measured approach to Türkiye even in the tensest situations. Russia needs Türkiye as a reliable energy partner at a time of deteriorating ties with the West and Ukraine. If we summarize this small but substantial episode of the complex Russian-Turkish relations, we will see how the mass media creates two varied images of the same political leader. The findings from "Izvestia" show that under the conditions of sanctions rooted in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Russia aimed to keep Türkiye as a partner country, not an enemy. They are trying to influence the Russian society through mass media. By creating a positive image of Erdoğan, they extend it to Türkiye as well, but at the same time, they also keep in the background frames containing negative attributes that can be highlighted to suppress Türkiye if necessary. Especially the caliph and sultan frame is used, because the Ottoman Empire is perceived in Russian culture and public memory as an age-old enemy or at least a rival.

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ALIYEV'S ENDURING AUTHORITY: UNRAVELLING MASCULINE GOVERNMENTALITY AND AUTHORITARIAN TRADITIONALISM IN AZERBAIJAN

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Introduction

A decade has passed since Hajibala Abutalibov, the former mayor of Baku, stated that "*There is only one man in Azerbaijan, and he is our president*"¹. At that juncture, Ilham Aliyev, then in his third presidential term, was wielding and consolidating authority by crushing opposition forces, including civil society. The statement of Abutalibov sparked disagreement on social media, causing frustration². Nevertheless, this consequential declaration served as a foresighted sign of a reality that, with the passage of time, emerged as less surprising and more acceptable in the collective consciousness of the Azerbaijani nation.

Today Ilham Aliyev, is not regarded as the only men in the country, yet certainly has asserted a dominance as the foremost figure in the hierarchical structure of masculinity. Almost elevating to a godlike status, his authority managed to transform people in Azerbaijan into submissive and obedient subjects adhering to his perceived power. Although his ascendancy is predominantly attributed to the historical victory achieved in Karabakh, the hegemonic masculinity embodied by Aliyev emanates from more profound structural and social power dynamics. After the last snap presidential elections in February 2024, the ongoing collective neurosis has become severe, as Aliyev secured his fifth consecutive term, thereby maintaining his authority for an additional seven years, at least³.

Aliyev's appropriation of authoritarian strategies becomes evident through an analysis that intersects anti-feminism and anti-democratic policies, aligning with the prevalent trend of right-wing authoritarianism embodied by the global emergence of "Strongmen" like Putin, Erdoğan, Modi and many others⁴. Despite the universalities of these "strongmen" characters, such as exercising top-down domination, anti-feminist and anti-LGBT policies, embracing selectively the modernity and capitalist reproduction, there are also some particularities that underscores the authoritarian playbook. Therefore, a crucial inquiry emerges when observing Aliyev's dominance: *What role does masculine governmentality play in shaping the seemingly perpetual nature of authoritarian traditionalism of Aliyev's regime?*

To comprehend the reproduction of Aliyev's enduring authority, this study adopts a poststructuralist feminist lens, drawing from Foucault's theories on governmentality and power⁵. Looking beyond the construction of authoritarian personality and authoritarian leadership styles that most believe to play a crucial role in the power grab and top-down domination of many authoritarian leaders, this paper will look at the structural dimension of becoming a "strongman" by delving into the examination of gendered power dynamics within autocratic leadership. By delving into the interplay of masculinity and governmentality, this paper will explore the relationship between *masculine governmentality* and *authoritarian traditionalism*.

Masculinity and Governmentality from a Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective

Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality provides a framework for analysing the dynamics of power within society⁶. Governmentality encompasses the diverse techniques and strategies employed by both

institutions and individuals to mold and oversee individual behaviour. This encompasses not only the formal mechanisms of governance but also the nuanced ways in which power is exercised in everyday life⁷.

Thus, from a governmental perspective, masculinity is not only an individual trait, but also a set of norms and behaviours that are strategically promoted and regulated by various societal agents. These agents include the family, army, educational systems, media, and religious institutions, all of which contribute to the formation of masculine and feminine identities. By moving beyond traditional analyses that oversimplify the relationship between political authority and gender-based oppression, a poststructuralist feminist approach sheds lights to this complex power dynamics.

Referring to Foucault's conceptualization of power as a dynamic and diffuse force, operating at the micro level of social interaction, this approach helps to understand how power, political authority and patriarchy perpetuate and reinforce each-other. Seeing power beyond repressive top-down domination challenges common understanding of dictatorship as the mere authority of the state. According to Foucault, power is not only repressive but also productive, shaping both individuals and social reality: "Power produces; it produces reality. It produces domains of objects and rituals of truth"⁸. A poststructuralist feminist perspective encourages us to examine how power permeates various aspects of society, including gender relations.

In dictatorships, power is often concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, and this centralized power is usually associated with masculine attributes⁹. The centralised power operates in the capillaries of the social body, affects individuals, constructs gender norms and regulates it. One of the main aspects of Foucault's analysis that proves useful is his examination of disciplinary power. As explored in works such as *Discipline and Punish*, this form of power involves small rules

and methods of control that turn individuals into “docile bodies”¹⁰. Feminist scholars such as Sandra Bartky, Judith Butler, Susan Bordo extend Foucault's insights to demonstrate how disciplinary practices are gendered by making women's bodies more submissive than men's¹¹.

Bartky contends that while Foucault acknowledges disciplinary practices affecting both men and women, he overlooks those producing a uniquely feminine embodiment¹². This oversight perpetuates the powerlessness of women subjected to these disciplines. In contrast, Bartky highlights a dispersed and anonymous disciplinary power shaping feminine embodiment. This power, invested in everyone and no one in particular, contrasts with formalized structures. Bartky's critique of gendered disciplinary practices such as restrictions on movement and body adornment highlights how women become self-policing subjects, panopticons in Foucault's terms¹³.

This internalization of patriarchal norms coincides with poststructuralist feminist understanding of power as a force that not only operates externally, but also shapes the subjectivities of individuals. The connection between dictatorship and patriarchy is evident when women unwittingly participate in their subjugation by adhering to society's expectations.

In authoritarian regimes, despite of exercising top-down domination and repressive violence, the tactic of invisible disciplinary power is therefore prevalent. Through this disciplinary mechanism, modern dictatorships often enforce gender norms through various mechanisms and contribute to the subjugation of women¹⁴. Reinforcing traditional roles and norms, therefore, helps the autocratic to maintain their masculine superiority which gains the consent of

society by default. It looks rather natural and normal that the state is run through the masculine hegemony¹⁵.

Thus, masculine governmentality encapsulates the ways in which governance structures and practices are imbued with and perpetuate traditional masculine norms, values, and power dynamics. It elucidates the intersection of gender, power, and governance, highlighting the ways in which patriarchal ideologies manifest in the shaping and execution of political and administrative structures¹⁶. This concept underscores the pervasive influence of masculinity in policy formulation, institutional norms, and societal expectations, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating gender-based hierarchies. Consequently, this approach offers a comprehensive lens through which to assess the relationship between authoritarianism and patriarchy. By examining how power operates at different levels and shapes individuals' subjectivities, this approach enhances our understanding of the complex ways in which gender norms are constructed and reinforced in authoritarian regimes like Azerbaijan.

Like Father, Like Son

To understand the current nature of masculine governmentality in Azerbaijan, the historical tracking of its leadership becomes necessity. Along this historical line, the most prominent transition has been from the former president of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev to his son Ilham Aliyev. Ilham Aliyev's trajectory from a Soviet-educated elite to an authoritarian political figure reflects the manifestation of continuity of the masculine governmentality that he inherited from his father¹⁷. The father-son dynamic between Ilham Aliyev and Heydar Aliyev, who had been ruling Azerbaijan since 1969, reveals ideas about the generational transfer of power and the evolution of the

governmentality. Heydar Aliyev's KGB background and subsequent leadership in Azerbaijan shaped Ilham Aliyev's early years, setting the stage for his transition from Soviet-era governance to a more personalized and seemingly neoliberal form of governance. Ilham Aliyev's gradual transition to global financialized capitalism by expanding their "family companies" that later completely monopolized the market ensured this transition. Thus, during Heydar Aliyev's post-Soviet rule, people who still expected the state to provide for their social welfare, just like in Soviet Union, were unaware that they would not receive any social security from the state or "corporates" under Ilham Aliyev.

However, this transition required not only material, but also symbolic changes. In 2003, when Ilham first took the power from his father, many indicated that Ilham Aliyev's rise was the emergence of a Western-oriented "liberal with a global outlook," as Ali Hasanov, the president's that time chief aide, once said¹⁸. Eventually, Aliyev's reformist image, backfired at those Soviet "apparatchiks", including Ali Hasanov, who was the most powerful "watcher" and "controller" of the media in Azerbaijan¹⁹. The subsequent purge of Ali Hasanov and other Soviet-era bureaucrats, and promotion of Western-educated loyalists provided the façade of the shift toward a more liberal, and Western-friendly governance structure.

In fact, when the Azerbaijani society embraced re-traditionalism after the collapse of Soviet Union, Aliyev and his close circles as former Soviet intelligentsia stayed at the side of Western modernity. Despite his privileged upbringing and education in Moscow's elite institutions entrenching him with Soviet power structures, young Aliyev was leaning towards the Western modernity in the 1980s. While it is not clear how and when exactly Aliyev took a departure from Soviet indoctrination, his biography shows that while studying

his PhD in the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) during 1980s, his immersion in Western culture was apparent, as he also later completed his thesis on British anti-war movements²⁰.

This ideological shift was reflective to many youths going through the transition period from communism to the liberal hegemonic world order in the late 1980s and 1990s. Yet Ilham Aliyev later strategically leaned towards traditionalism, after effectively combining all varieties of authoritarian neoliberalism²¹. Within the interplay of modernity and traditionalism, he endorsed national modernity that promotes traditionalism to the population to keep them under control and keeps modernity for the function of market economy. While autocrats like Aliyev often come with the argument of being against post-modernism, they themselves employ the ideas of post-modernity by absorbing the real and the imaginary into the symbolic²².

To ensure this collection delusion, the administration of Ilham Aliyev patronized the cult of Heydar Aliyev in the country after his death in 2003 and used it as a strategic manoeuvre to control and discipline population. From schools to office rooms, barber shops, from road posters to street names, from regional centres that have grown like mushrooms with their unknown functions, to museums that symbolize and memorize Heydar Aliyev, the personality cult was effectively deployed²³. The Heydarism cult reflects a form of governance deeply rooted in Heydar Aliyev's image of hegemonic masculinity and authority. The perpetuation of his cult serves as a mechanism to advance the narrative of continuity through his son, Ilham Aliyev, consolidating power.

The use of titles such as “*Ümumilli öndər*” (national leader), “*ulu öndər*” (great chief), contribute to a narrative that positions Heydar as a divine figure who embodies national leadership and greatness²⁴. The

ubiquity of his image in various aspects of public and private life reinforces the patriarchal form of governance by creating a visual and symbolic landscape dominated by Heydar's hegemonic male authority. The dynamic character of the cult, its response to new events and achievements further emphasizes its role as a tool for legitimizing and perpetuating male power within the political landscape of Azerbaijan.



This infamous picture of Ilham Aliyev standing by the side of Heydar Aliyev was immediately disseminated after the death of Heydar Aliyev in 2003 in every region, school, office, and public places. Among many other pictures of the duo, this one remains as the most powerful.

Ilham Aliyev's high importance to the cult of Heydarism lays the groundwork for the transition to his own cult and tries to characterize the eternal leadership transmitted through this family bond. Getting back Shusha (Shushi for Armenians) city during 2020 Karabakh war, Aliyev's greatest success, shows that he proudly achieved climax in

this transition by saying "*I am happy to have fulfilled my father's will*"²⁵. Although the victory ensured the transition from his father's cult to his own, Aliyev's enduring popularity and perceived indispensability have been bolstered not only merely through a victory, but also through years of strategic propaganda orchestrated by the regime and its purported "grassroots" allies, notably the various pro-Aliyev youth factions affiliated with the ruling YAP party (New Azerbaijan Party) founded by his father. Groups, such as *İlhamçılar* and *İrəliçilər*, emerged soon after Aliyev assumed power and have played a pivotal role in shaping the narrative of widespread support for him²⁶. Under the rallying cry of "*İlhamla irəli*," (Forward with Ilham) they emphasize his attributes of strength, patriotism, and safeguarding Azerbaijan's national interests²⁷.

A notable aspect of these groups is their organization of post-Soviet style youth military camps, introducing a contemporary form of disciplinary practices that involve both young men and women. This multifaceted approach contributes to the cultivation of a communal image celebrating Ilham Aliyev and his father Heydar, while concurrently fostering a sense of loyalty and duty among the youth towards the regime's ideals.

Thus, despite the symbolic change of governance of the transition of power from Heydar to his son Ilham, the underlining ideology has been remaining: the selective neoliberal governmentality juxtaposed with authoritarian traditionalism. Indeed, this combination sheds light on the core principles of neoliberal governance, supporting the assertions of numerous feminist scholars who argue that liberal governance inherently perpetuates and reinforces gendered divisions²⁸. This framework is structurally embedded, creating a clear delineation between the public and private spheres while ensuring that labor allocation remains gendered. The perpetuation of gendered labor

is further exacerbated by official narratives promoting family as a “sacred unit”, despite both male and female “earners” facing challenges such as low wages, precarious employment, and mounting debts. Meanwhile, the Aliyev administration, under the guise of upholding family values, continues to exploit the resources of the population for its own “family profits”²⁹.

Symbolic Femininity as a Facade

The connection between hegemonic masculinity and governmentality is also evident in the power structures that perpetuate male hegemony by including women in those power-structures. While political, economic, and social institutions in Azerbaijan are dominated by men, the inclusion of women in these hierarchies has become a neoliberal strategy that appropriate women’s agencies and needs.

Therefore, the shift from Soviet apparatchiks to Western-educated circle in Azerbaijani governance in theory might sound like emergence of the liberal feminist governance, while in reality, it reproduced the gendered division, that let women to become “the second position” in the hierarchies, thus ensuring their subordination once again. In essence masculine governmentality that Aliyev’s regime embraced is not inherently contradictory to the liberal modes of governmentality.

Trying to create the facade of equality by including women in these structures is a long-standing tactic of liberalism. We can see this “equal opportunity domination” more in the liberal democratic settings, where the co-optation of feminism is more visible. However, in case of authoritarian traditionalist regimes like Azerbaijan, the representation of Ilham Aliyev's wife Mehriban Aliyeva in power makes it relevant too.

Before the 2018 presidential elections, Aliyev's appointment of his wife as vice-president began to show how power is distributed within

the family³⁰. Mehriban Aliyeva belongs to the influential Pashayev's family, which has significant influence in the political and cultural sphere of Azerbaijan. Some believed that the Pashayev clan, represented by Mehriban Aliyeva, was gaining strength and would bring Mehriban Aliyeva to the position of president. But in fact, since those times, it was clear how Aliyev preserved the patriarchal values by emphasizing the traditional view by placing Mehriban as a "symbol of peace, harmony and love within the family"³¹ rather than a political force. Being a symbol of femininity, lavish life and philanthropy, similar to the wives of other authoritarian leaders, the image of Mehriban effectively created a public assumption about the pure benevolence of Aliyev's family and made Ilham look more natural and human. Mehriban asserts a national identity or a national joy that represents both classed, gendered and sexualized bodies.

Analysing this, Elisabeth Miltz's research sheds light on the intricate ways in which women's bodies in Azerbaijan become subject to scrutiny within the context of national joy³². The study unveils that women's bodily appearance and lifestyle choices are pivotal in contributing to the idealized national woman, who is expected to conform to specific corporeal beauty standards and exhibit disciplined behaviour. Deviations from these norms, whether through unacknowledged ethnic identity, specific types of labour, or mundane activities like smoking, are construed as failures to embody the national ideal³³. Mehriban Aliyeva not only has fitted into those national expectations, but also has established the ideal feminine image that shapes these expectations.

"I love Ilham Aliyev, I wish he was my husband," says a woman in a survey about Ilham Aliyev conducted by RFE/RL before the 2018 elections in Baku³⁴. This answer, which later turned into a meme, actually shows family relations in Azerbaijan and how it is represented

in power. Thus, the representation of Aliyev's family not only encompasses the ideal Azerbaijani family, but also contributes to the formation of public desires and norms, especially among the younger generation.

As societal changes and women resist patriarchy, old forms of domination wane, making way for new ones. Normative femininity, evolving beyond traditional roles, now centres on a woman's body, particularly her presumed heterosexuality and appearance, making sure that the double burden of femininity embodies traditional duties or maternal roles remains alongside this normativity. Therefore, neoliberal governmentality infused with authoritarianism is a perfect combination to build a robust state to mold society in market-driven ways and avoid unpredictabilities by strengthening gendered division of labour.

Despite embracing traditionalism in Azerbaijan, women's bodies are controlled in a way suitable for the state's continuous surveillance. That is why, in 2010, the ban of wearing hijab in the educational institutions was a deliberate attempt to control symbolic femininity and to make sure that it allies with the state's biopolitics and nation-building agenda³⁵. Receiving a public backlash, this ban was eliminated later, however in practice, panopticon had been activated, making women's body a ground for political instrumentalization of religion.

From War to Hegemony

Understanding the transformation of the gender regime in Azerbaijan necessitates acknowledging its interconnectedness with the evolution of national imaginaries and myths that emerged during and after the Karabakh war and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The aftermath of the war and the shift to a new market economy in the 1990s, played a

crucial role in shaping evolving masculinities³⁶. The disruptions in class hierarchies and material disparities transcended established gender norms, consequently redefining the nature of masculinity within evolving neoliberal framework.

The re-traditionalization evolved both in the societal and political level, through deeply militarizing and nationalising every disciplinary institution, including schools and media. It became rather acceptable that the masculinity naturally and only is complete by joining the military and thus successfully passing the “*kişilik məktəbi*” (school of masculinity)³⁷. It also later ensures one’s opportunity to participate in the job market, as participating in the military is informally and, in some cases, formally required. The notion of graduating from a supposed “school of masculinity” also holds significant sway in determining a man's desirability to women. Parents express sentiments such as, *“I will not let my daughter marry a man who avoids military service under the name of being sick or other reasons,”* highlighting the entrenched societal expectations dictating not only the preferences for a girl's future partner but also the militaristic undertones within them³⁸. This outlook not only places immense pressure on young men to conform to a narrow definition of masculinity but also perpetuates a culture where military service is glorified as a prerequisite for worthiness in marriage.

As far as there was a societal longing for the idealized image of “real” men as heroes, intricately tied to militarized politics, the glorification of becoming a soldier as the ultimate goal became ingrained in the media, school propaganda, and narratives promoted by those in power. These disciplinary institutions make sure that, from a young age, individuals are socialized to conform to established gender roles, with masculinity directly linked to military. Schools are probably the most fertile ground of expanding militarisation ideology.

Majority of schools are named after war heroes or martyrs, and usually have sides commemorating them. For high school students at 10th and 11th grade, there are compulsory classes called “pre-service training of young people” aiming to prepare young people, namely boys to the military service and girls to the first aid services³⁹. However, this ideology is certainly strengthened in the level of media propaganda and the official narratives.

Aliyev himself, representing the top of the militarized masculinities reinforces the necessity of military for young boys both in discursive and structural level. Therefore, during one of his visits to the IDP community, he deliberately supported of a young child who wanted to become a soldier and rejected the child who wanted to be a doctor⁴⁰. This manifestation of militarized masculinity as the state's political agenda directly drives young men from lower classes to be pushed into the military service.

However, Aliyev and his inner circle for a long time exhibited a well-known paradox: despite their lack of personal military achievements, they adeptly orchestrate militarized policies while conveniently avoiding direct military service themselves. This dissonance is further exacerbated by the public's awareness that the political elite rarely, if ever, send their own sons to serve in the military. To mitigate public discontent over this glaring double standard, Aliyev made a calculated move in 2018 by sending his son, Heydar Aliyev, to serve in the military⁴¹. To exaggerate the significance of Heydar Aliyev's military service, majority of governments mouthpieces emphasized the necessity of military services for all, despite of one's privileges. Addressing this, one of the MPs, representing the ruling party commented: *"Mr. President's son Heydar Aliyev going to military service is an exemplary step for*

*everyone, including all the children of officials. If the President's son goes to military service, why shouldn't others serve?"*⁴².

Such gestures, while superficially addressing public concerns, clearly did not change the fact that the elite continue to wield power and influence without bearing the same burdens as ordinary citizens on any issue, including the military. This glaring hypocrisy changed after the 2020 war, when Ilham Aliyev, bestowed with the title "*Qalib Sərkərdə*" (Victorious Commander) as the victory in Karabakh made him a strong warrior without fighting. He later strategically exhibited his leadership prowess by visiting *Suqovushan*, a territory in Karabakh that was returned to Azerbaijani control during 2020 war and addressed a message to the former president of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan, by saying: "*Serjik, if you are a real man, come here*"⁴³. With this message, he aimed to inform Serzh Sargsyan, who once fought on the side of Armenia in the First Karabakh War, that he-Aliyev was on the battlefield and that the victory made him a real man.

While Aliyev's self-declared sovereignty owes to the results of the Second Karabakh War, hegemonic masculinity he embraces is a dominance that directly stems from the relationship between the state, the ruling class, and the nationalist myths they promote. With the power of the victory in addition to the decades of authoritarian control of the information, Aliyev's regime dictates the discourse of war, victory, and honour shaping masculine memories, ambitions, humiliations, and masculinized hopes. And these myths of masculinity do not necessarily conflict with reality; instead, they make them look innocent and natural⁴⁴. President Aliyev embodied this for many Azerbaijanis during his victory speeches and expressed it with a metaphorical "iron fist". His speeches, which appealed to large audiences with threatening, yet sincere rhetoric, demonstrated the muscular power that reinforced male hegemony and power.

Although he gained strong popularity after the war, to keep his power stable, Aliyev's regime still requires everyday disciplining and fear-mongering techniques to keep people in this consent. Political opposition and civil society are going through waves of crackdowns and the general population seems to observe this in apathy. On one hand, people clutch onto the belief that Aliyev is, perhaps the mythical saviour they have been waiting for, who solved their "Karabakh problem" and alleviated their collective suffering. On the other hand, within this neurosis, they are part of the hegemonic consent that pushes them to live or survive with existing conformity, and a distorted perception of the reality.

Resisting Disciplinary Gender Regime

Aliyev's autocratic power comes with the full package of nationalist, traditionalist, and neoliberal policies. The interplay of using gendered disciplinary power and gendered violence allows Azerbaijani state's prevailing ideology maintain the societal and state consensus. The violence including policing, surveillance, and negative dominance is completed with the various disciplinary tactics involving civil society, cultural and educational institutions, mass and social media.

Nurlana Jalil classifies this authoritarian gender policy formed on the basis of re-traditionalization in Azerbaijan as emergence of gender-based panopticon, LGBTQ+ hostility, invisible institutional sexism, protection of patriarchal legislation and promotion of patriarchal family institution⁴⁵. She highlights the various dimensions of an authoritarian gender policy in Azerbaijan, emphasizing how the government utilizes different strategies, including surveillance, legal frameworks, and societal norms, to control and regulate gender-related issues in the country⁴⁶.

To counter both gendered violence and disciplinary gender regime means to directly resist Aliyev's autocratic power. It is precisely why, the counter ideology of the feminist movement in Azerbaijan isolated itself from many other male-dominated political and social movements as well as female-dominated patriarchal structures, such as State Committee on Family, Women and Children's Affairs, or NGOs working on the women's issues and providing care work. It is also the reason why the only people that openly resisted against the Aliyev's popular war were feminist and some leftist groups⁴⁷. Nationalism is embodied practice of the discipline for the authoritarian regimes and war constantly reemphasis the narrative of threat to keep the regime stable.

Whilst with the securitisation of the feminist and queer resistance, they face continuous marginalisation and become less potent in gaining political transversality across domestic politics⁴⁸. Yet it proves that the dominant ideology of the current regime cannot be challenged without considering the feminist perspective. As political opposition and social movements getting weaker and politically invisible with either co-optation or through repressions, the solidarity around joint feminist stance can mutually strengthen these movements to deconstruct the political space.

While opposition continuously shows the position against the autocracy, they do not challenge the gendered disciplinary regime or gendered violence of the state. They overlook the relationship between the patriarchy and the authoritarianism and repeat the similar mistakes with their androcentric and misogynist stance. During one of the latest protests in May 2022 by the civil society against the government's repression of activists, organisers were later attacked by the so-called independent civil society and opposition for including an LGBT flag to be present in the demonstration. Gendered self-discipline of

opposition demonstrated how problematic it is to build allies across different political ideologies when they are not too different from the current regime in their gender politics.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the intricate relationship between masculine governmentality, and authoritarianism in Azerbaijan, focusing on President Ilham Aliyev's regime. Employing a poststructuralist feminist lens, the analysis revealed the strategic promotion and regulation of masculine norms, aligning with global right-wing authoritarian trends.

The study emphasized several nuances about the nature of masculine governmentality and the authoritarian traditionalism in Azerbaijan. Firstly, the transition of masculine governmentality in the father-son dynamic between Heydar Aliyev and Ilham Aliyev, and probably soon, to his son Heydar Aliyev included, highlights the perpetuation of a dynasty, personality cult and the strategic embrace of traditionalism despite embracing selective-modernity. While the evolution of Aliyev's hegemonic masculinity is linked to the political context, particularly the Karabakh war, the gendered disciplinary tactics has ensured his legitimacy and strengthening power.

Secondly, the examination of neoliberal governmentality illustrates how the regime superficially included women in power structures while reinforcing gendered divisions and patriarchal norms. This emerging trend present how the dichotomy of traditionalism and modernity is effectively moderated by the state, creating completely post-modern discourse around gendered reality.

Thirdly, it is evident that Aliyev's regime owns much to patriarchal and traditional values to maintain his power and thus, if his gendered regime is not challenged by the political opposition will

remain strong. While it is hard to predict any regime change in Azerbaijan in the near future, feminist resistance has a potential to challenge this by establishing a political stance that will go beyond the traditional opposition.

In essence, recognizing the interplay between gender dynamics, authoritarian governance, and the complex strategies employed by regimes like Aliyev's present the power of masculine governmentalities. On this end, feminist perspective emerges as a crucial tool for understanding, challenging, and potentially reshaping the authoritarian landscape in Azerbaijan.

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ASCENDING FROM PATERNAL LEGACY TO VICTORIOUS LEADERSHIP: ILHAM ALIYEV'S SOURCES OF LEGITIMACY AFTER DECADES OF RULE

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Introduction

Through their speeches and performance leaders create certain narratives supporting their legitimacy. These narratives often evolve in response to shifting political landscapes and external pressures. In the case of Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, the narratives surrounding his legitimacy has been developing for two decades and underwent significant changes in the wake of the 2020 war in Nagorno Karabakh. This paper aims to analyze and understand the characteristics of Ilham Aliyev's legitimacy narratives and the nuances of this transformation, shedding light on the strategies employed by Aliyev to bolster his legitimacy focusing on the domestic discourse. By examining the rhetoric used by Aliyev before and after 2020, we can gain valuable insights into the dynamics of power and legitimacy in authoritarian regimes, as well as the impact of geopolitical events on their narratives of governance.

This paper directs its attention to the case of Azerbaijan, specifically examining how Ilham Aliyev constructs a discourse around his legitimacy and cultivates belief in that legitimacy among Azerbaijanis. Rather than interrogating the objective legitimacy of Aliyev's rule, the focus shifts towards understanding the mechanisms through which he engenders and reinforces perceptions of legitimacy within the Azerbaijani people.

Drawing on David Beetham's framework on the legitimation of power, it argues that prior to the 2020 Karabakh war, Ilham Aliyev

positioned himself as a leader whose legitimacy stemmed primarily from his familial lineage, particularly his father's legacy. However, following the war, there was a notable shift in narratives, emphasizing Aliyev's personal qualities and his ability to govern effectively, setting him apart from both the Azerbaijani society and opposition forces. This shift in emphasis toward his leadership qualities, underscored by military success and widespread popular support, has since become a significant foundation for Aliyev's authority in Azerbaijan. By leveraging the 2020 war and emphasizing his personal qualities, Ilham Aliyev expanded the sources of his legitimacy beyond solely relying on his familial lineage. Now, in addition to his familial ties, Aliyev's legitimacy also rests on his demonstrated leadership qualities and ability to achieve national victory.

Theoretical Framework

Exploring the legitimation of power, discerning its foundations, and understanding its significance are inherently complex endeavors. These inquiries have long occupied the minds of those entangled in power dynamics, particularly during periods marked by legal ambiguity, ethical divergence, or societal upheaval. Various professionals, including legal scholars, moral and political philosophers, and social scientists, have grappled with these questions, each approaching them through distinct conceptual lenses shaped by their respective disciplines.

Following David Beetham, in this paper, I refrain from delving into the legitimacy of Ilham Aliyev from legal or political philosophical perspectives. Instead, I pivot towards a social scientific viewpoint. As aptly articulated by David Beetham, social scientists are not primarily concerned with resolving legal disputes or moral

quandaries regarding power; rather, their focus lies in elucidating the empirical ramifications of legitimacy on power dynamics.¹ They analyze how legitimacy shapes the organization of power relations and influences the degree of obedience or support that the powerful garner from those under their authority. Therefore, social scientists study legitimacy within specific historical contexts, recognizing that societal norms and perceptions play a pivotal role. What constitutes legitimate power in one society may diverge significantly from another.

Beetham talks about the threefold structure of legitimacy: ruled-derived, justifiability of power rules, and expressed consent. Here, my main examinations will be related to the *justifiability of power rule*.² As Beetham states, those rules “should be based upon a principle of normative differentiation between dominant and subordinate and that they should satisfy some general interest or social purpose in which subordinates have a concern.”³ In this regard, the source of legitimacy and differentiation is crucial.

Beetham speaks about the legitimacy deriving from an authoritative source. He divides those authoritative sources into external (divine will, natural law, scientific doctrine) and internal (society in the past, i.e. tradition, society in the present, i.e. representatives).⁴ In the case of Azerbaijan, we are mainly talking about the internal source and particularly the society in the past/tradition where Heydar Aliyev’s image plays an iconic role in his son’s narratives. Furthermore, as Beetham states, this also favours rules of succession, such as hereditary, which embody continuity with the past.⁵

An important part of Beetham’s theory is what he calls “justifiable content of rules.” This is crucial as demonstration of authoritative sources for the rule of power does not suffice to answer the question: why these rules? The answer in this case is twofold: principles of differentiation between dominant (i.e. Ilham Aliyev) and subordinate

(Azerbaijani society), and demonstration of common interests uniting dominant and subordinate. The first one is a key to distinguish the dominant from the subordinate, and “justify their respective access to and exclusion from essential resources, activities and positions.”⁶ The principle of differentiation is crucial, they are used to separate dominant from subordinate and to justify that division on the ground that those who hold power possess qualities lacking in those subordinates to them, and these qualities are appropriate to the particular form of power that is exercised.

In this context one can imagine an aristocracy that has some qualities, or at least was believed to have some qualities that those with no link to aristocracy lacked. The situation in Azerbaijan does not differ from this: the Aliyev family which tends to become dynasty can be considered as such. As Beetham says, “it is the family into which a person is born that determines his or her natural position in society, and that confers the qualities appropriate to that position.”⁷ Such belief can be associated with traditionalism as the ultimate source of legitimacy and can justify the hereditary nature of power.

The second principle, on the other hand, relates to the common interest that links the dominant with the subordinate and that “distribution of power serves the interest of subordinate, and not those powerful alone.”⁸ For the case of Azerbaijan, as we will see, this is the recapturing of the Nagorno-Karabakh and revenge against Armenians.

By applying this theoretical framework to the analysis of Ilham Aliyev’s self-portrayal and narrative shift before and after the 2020 Karabakh war, we can gain insights into the changing dynamics of political authority, governance, and legitimacy in Azerbaijan. This framework allows us to understand how Aliyev’s leadership narrative has evolved in response to shifting political contexts and the imperatives of legitimacy.

Methodological Framework

I employ qualitative discourse and narrative analysis, drawing on a sample of speeches delivered by Ilham Aliyev over a specified period. The speeches examined in this paper are mainly directed towards the Azerbaijani audience.

My analysis of Ilham Aliyev's legitimating tactics examines speeches made between 2016 and 2023, focusing on speeches addressed to the internal audience in order to attain a precise understanding of Aliyev's legitimating tactics and discourse changes. In this chronology, I have two subdivisions: the years between 2016 April 4-Day fighting and the 2020 Karabakh war and the years following the Azerbaijani victory. In the rhetoric of his own legitimacy, the year 2020 marked significant changes.

Legitimacy Deriving from Authoritative Source: The Image of Heydar Aliyev

In Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev has been sworn in as president, taking over leadership from his father, Heydar Aliyev, who served as the third president of Azerbaijan from October 1993 to October 2003. This long lasting rule of Aliyevs in the oil-rich Caspian state and the victory of Ilham Aliyev in 2003 provoked controversy at home and abroad. To deal with his opposition and avoid any nation-wide uprising against his rule, Ilham Aliyev has been developing narratives designed to legitimise his rule stemming from the authoritative figure of his father.

The narrative of his father was the most widespread story in his speeches. In 2016-2020, Ilham Aliyev addressed the Nagorno-Karabakh issue in the vast majority of his speeches. However, when he addresses Azerbaijani audience, Aliyev frames the conflict and the history of the dispute in a way that strengthens the legitimacy of the

Aliyev dynasty. While the responsibility of the conflict is, expectedly, still attributed to Armenia, one of the primary functions of Ilham Aliyev's rhetoric becomes polishing the Aliyevs' reputation. In almost all of his speeches, Aliyev attributes Armenia's victory in the First Karabakh War not to the Armenian military force, but to the internal problems in Azerbaijan in the 1990s, which he argues, are resolved when Heydar Aliyev and afterwards himself came to power, and the era of development and stability ensued.⁹

As Beetham stated, the authoritative internal source such as tradition or elders favours rules of succession embodying continuity with the past. Ilham Aliyev's reign started in 2003 as a continuation of his father's rule and policies; 'the Azerbaijani people had so much wisdom' that first they asked Heydar Aliyev to take power, and then he gave the mandate to his son. Speeches addressed to the Azerbaijani youth are of special significance. Like in any other opportunity, Aliyev used the Azerbaijani Youth Day in 2019 to stress his narrative on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and his family's role in 'solving' it. Describing the events of the early 1990s, he states:

...the first years of our independence were difficult and tragic. The country was in an uncontrolled state. The situation was particularly exacerbated after the military coup by the PFFA-Musavat tandem in 1992. Chaos, anarchy, arbitrariness, and gangs with machine guns walked in the streets. (...) If the Azerbaijani people had not shown wisdom by inviting Heydar Aliyev to take up power in 1993, no one knows what could have been in store for us.¹⁰

This reference to Heydar Aliyev is foundational, as it refers to the establishment of a dynastic rule. Another example, among many, is his speech on the occasion of the 94th anniversary of Heydar Aliyev:

As a result of negligent activities of the PFPA-Musavat tandem, our country was faced with very serious problems. (...) Of course, the people of Azerbaijan could not tolerate such anti-national authorities. The people bore with them only for one year and invited Heydar Aliyev to power in 1993. (...) In those difficult days, the people saw the only way to salvation in Heydar Aliyev, and he, as always, [lived up to the] people's trust. The policy conducted under his leadership quickly led to stability and development in Azerbaijan. Although there were two attempted coups in 1994 and 1995, the Azerbaijani people prevented them. Once again demonstrating his leadership qualities, Heydar Aliyev addressed the people on television and called on them to protect the state. In response to his appeal, tens of thousands of people gathered in the streets and squares outside the presidential administration. Thus, both coup attempts failed in 1994 and 1995. The period of stability and development began in 1996. Heydar Aliyev, the architect and creator of independent Azerbaijan, put forward a number of important initiatives.¹¹

This story about Heydar Aliyev is found in dozens of speeches from Aliyev in 2016-2020. With rare exceptions, these are speeches addressed to the internal audience. In particular, these are the speeches made on the independence day of Azerbaijan, the celebration of Iftar, or the meeting with the refugees, servicemen, and youth. These speeches, creating the image of Heydar Aliyev, have five main components:

(1) Azerbaijan's development from backwardness during the Soviet years was conditioned by Heydar Aliyev's coming to power in the 1960s;

(2) the removal of Heydar Aliyev led to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, as anti-government forces came to power in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s and were used by Armenian nationalists (the sentence ‘if Heydar Aliyev was in power, there would be no Karabakh issue’ is one of the most common narratives in Ilham Aliyev’s speeches);

(3) if Heydar Aliyev was not in Nakhichevan, the fate of Nagorno Karabakh was awaiting Nakhichevan;

(4) the people of Azerbaijan were wise: they called Heydar Aliyev to power, which started the restoration and development of Azerbaijan’s stability;

(5) in 2003, the people of Azerbaijan, wanting to see the continuation of Heydar Aliyev’s policies, elected Ilham Aliyev.¹²

As one can notice, these five points, while supporting the image of Aliyev as the heroic figure in Azerbaijani history, also have anti-Armenian connotations. In other words, we see that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is used to strengthen the legitimacy of Ilham Aliyev’s governance. It is not accidental that Aliyev very often used to mention the need for unity of the government and the people, due to which the development and solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could be possible. The role of Heydar Aliyev in the history of independent Azerbaijan (as the national hero without which Azerbaijan would have collapsed) has been repeatedly articulated in Ilham Aliyev’s discourse. Fletcher examines this phenomenon in the context of a personality cult. This cult already began during the life of Heydar Aliyev, especially after the ceasefire with Armenia and the economic boost due to the contracts with foreign oil companies and reached its peak during the reign of his son, Ilham Aliyev.¹³ This post-mortem cult is promoted through multiple channels, such as posters, documentaries, billboards, statues, and glitzy regional Heydar Aliyev centers. I believe

that the narrative of Heydar Aliyev in the speeches of his son and their connection to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be added to this list.

If one analyzes the component of the story, many details silenced by Ilham Aliyev can be found.¹⁴ Obviously for his legitimating tactics, the story and the image of his father serve as authoritative sources from which his legitimacy derives.

Justifiable Content of Rule and the Post-2020 Self-Image of Ilham Aliyev

In Beetham's framework, the justifiable content of rule revolves around two main aspects: the principles that differentiate the dominant figure (such as Ilham Aliyev) from the subordinate (Azerbaijani society), and the demonstration of shared interests that unite both parties. Prior to 2020 and continuing post-2020, the narrative surrounding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains central, presenting its resolution in favor of Azerbaijan as a shared interest of both the Aliyev family and Azerbaijani society. Consequently, the discourse has remained relatively consistent, emphasizing the alignment of interests between the dominant leader and the populace, reinforcing Aliyev's legitimacy through a common cause.

The alteration in Ilham Aliyev's discourse becomes apparent when examining the principles that differentiate the dominant leader from the subordinate. Before 2020, the narrative predominantly revolved around Aliyev's familial connections, particularly with his father, Heydar Aliyev. However, in the aftermath of the 2020 Karabakh war, a notable shift occurred. Ilham Aliyev found himself leading a transformed nation following Azerbaijan's victory. The 2020 Karabakh War became a new source of legitimacy for Aliyev. Pre-war speeches often referenced Heydar Aliyev as a source of legitimacy and continuity. Yet, in the post-war era, Ilham Aliyev's speeches began to

emphasize his own role in the recent triumphs, marking a shift towards narratives that highlight his personal authority and qualities, rather than solely relying on familial ties for legitimacy. In this new situation, the “I” of Ilham Aliyev is sharply highlighted. Three vivid examples follow:

Ex.1: I am absolutely right when I say that we are restoring historical justice. During the live debates at the Munich Security Conference, I proved to the whole world that this is our historical land. I provided information about the Kurakchay Peace Treaty signed at the beginning of the 19th century.

However, I have instructed Azerbaijan's Armed Forces to show restraint for the time being and not succumb to provocations. My position is known to my people. This issue must be resolved either by the military or by peaceful means. I suggested: if you want a peaceful solution, well, we will stop. But we must be told immediately that Armenia is vacating our lands. A timetable should be provided – in how many days they would leave a particular district, after how many days they would leave the next one and when they would leave the rest of the districts. A timetable should be provided. Has Armenia provided this timetable? It has not. That means that the ceasefire continues, and the issue remains frozen again - this does not work for us. That is the first thing.¹⁵

Ex.2: We were able to force the enemy. I gave them an ultimatum. I said – you must leave, if you don't, I will go to the end. Until the end! On November 8, I said in the Alley of Martyrs that I would go to the end, and no force could stop me.¹⁶

Ex.3: As President, I have done my best over the years to ensure that the Nagorno-Karabakh issue remains on the agenda;

it is always at the top of the list. Nurture the feelings of patriotism, national pride and solidarity, helping them rise to a higher level within the country. And this issue should always be on the agenda at the international level. Let everyone know what the truth is, let everyone know who is the aggressor and who is the victim, and we have achieved this.¹⁷

After the military victory, he even went so far as to connect the construction of the mosques in Shusha with his own ideas.

We laid the foundation for a new mosque in Shusha today. A new mosque will be built here. I made the decision to build a mosque a long time ago. After the liberation of Shusha from the occupiers, I began to think about the architecture of this mosque.¹⁸

Beetham's analysis suggests that the distinction between the dominant and subordinate is often upheld by the perceived qualities attributed to the dominant figure, a concept often intertwined with the familial background from which the dominant arises. In the case of Ilham Aliyev, while his lineage within the Aliyev dynasty holds significance, the discourse following the war emphasizes his personal characteristics and qualities. This shift suggests a deliberate attempt to portray Aliyev as a leader whose legitimacy stems not solely from his family legacy, but also from his individual merits and abilities, particularly highlighted in the post-war context. Sentences such as "I know what to do, how, and when," and "I lead all the work and want to assure the people of Azerbaijan that I will continue to do my best to protect the national interests of our country and our people" are often stated by Ilham Aliyev.¹⁹ No longer relying as heavily on references to his father, Aliyev began to underscore the legitimacy he derived

from the triumphs of the 2020 Karabakh conflict as a proof of his personal qualities.

It's essential to note that while references to Heydar Aliyev may have diminished in frequency, they have by no means disappeared entirely from Ilham Aliyev's speeches.²⁰

In 2003, for the first time, the people of Azerbaijan showed confidence in me and once again demonstrated their loyalty to the policy of the National Leader. In my turn, I said that if the people of Azerbaijan showed confidence in me, I, as President, would follow the path of Heydar Aliyev. I will stay true to this path and achieve the restoration of the territorial integrity of our country. I swore an oath. I am happy to have fulfilled my promise, and Karabakh is free today. Today, the Azerbaijani flag flies in Karabakh and Zangezur.²¹

However, while his father's legacy undoubtedly remained a foundational element of his legitimacy, Aliyev began to assert his own authority more prominently, aligning himself with the victorious outcomes of the recent conflict. His speeches portrayed him not just as the custodian of his father's legacy but as a decisive leader who navigated the complexities of international relations and military strategy to secure Azerbaijan's interests.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the evolution of Ilham Aliyev's leadership legitimacy before and after the 2020 Karabakh war through the lens of David Beetham's framework on the legitimation of power. Before the conflict, Aliyev's authority was predominantly rooted in his familial lineage, particularly his father's legacy. However, the aftermath of the

war marked a significant shift in narratives, with a greater emphasis placed on Aliyev's personal qualities and his efficacy in governance. This transition underscores his leadership qualities, bolstered by military success and widespread popular support, which now serve as a cornerstone of Aliyev's authority in Azerbaijan.

Analyses demonstrated that Ilham Aliyev instrumentalized the 2020 war to foster belief among the Azerbaijani people in his personal qualities as a leader capable of guiding the nation to victory. In doing so, he subtly distanced himself from his father, although this distancing was nuanced, as he still relied on an authoritative source from which his legitimacy could be derived. This indicates that Aliyev did not entirely change the source of his legitimacy but rather diversified it. Consequently, these sources are cumulative and complementary rather than alternative requirements of legitimacy.

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