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Nations in Transit 2021 - Azerbaijan

CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

1

/ 100

Democracy Percentage 1.19 / 100

Democracy Score 1.07 / 7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

2 / 100 Consolidated Authoritarian Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.

Score changes in 2021

- Electoral Process rating declined from 1.25 to 1.00 due to the unfair, falsified parliamentary elections in February, which saw only one opposition candidate (with reported ties to the regime) elected, in addition to the removal of the only opposition candidate to win in the 2019 municipal elections.
- Local Democratic Governance rating declined from 1.50 to 1.25 due to the incremental decrease and now near-absence of autonomy of local governance.

As a result, Azerbaijan's Democracy Score declined from 1.14 to 1.11.

Executive Summary

By Robert Denis

Azerbaijan is ruled by an authoritarian regime controlled by a single family, the Aliyevs, who have been in power for almost three decades. While occasionally taking actions to placate Western critics, the government has never undertaken structural reforms. Last year was a period of crisis and instability: unfair parliamentary elections in February sparked protests; the COVID-19 pandemic placed stress on Azerbaijan's health system and economy; and the country's water shortage intensified, becoming critical in the summer. When Azerbaijan's long-frozen territorial conflict with Armenia escalated in July, the population's frustration boiled over into demands for war, which finally broke out in September. While the regime is currently enjoying a massive wave of popular support, thanks to its stunning victory over Armenia, the conflict remains a source of instability and the reconstruction of Karabakh a difficult and extremely expensive project.

In 2019, Azerbaijani authorities carried out a series of highly touted, if largely ineffectual, administrative reforms, and a number of powerful members of the political elite were removed from office after ruling the country for decades. Therefore, when President Ilham Aliyev called for snap parliamentary elections to be held in February 2020, the campaign kicked off in an atmosphere of optimism and enthusiasm. Amid these heightened expectations, the disappointment was only greater when the elections were carried out, as usual, with massive falsifications and other violations. Particularly glaring this time was the treatment of observers at polling stations. Numerous videos were shared online of poll workers obstructing, verbally abusing, and even physically assaulting observers. But despite the highly critical reports of local observers and international organizations, as well as protests by many candidates, the Central Election Committee and the Constitutional Court certified the election results, preserving the domination of the president and the ruling party over the legislative branch of government.

The COVID-19 crisis disrupted life in Azerbaijan as it did around the world in 2020. Some of the response measures imposed on the population were widely criticized as too restrictive and inefficient. For example, for much of the year, residents were required to request permission by text message before leaving their homes for any reason and were subject to large fines or even arrest in the case of violations. Such measures were abused by the government to silence criticism by harassing or imprisoning political activists and independent journalists for supposed violations. In addition to the political consequences, Azerbaijan's economic woes were further exacerbated by the lockdowns.

Particularly hard hit, oil and gas—the backbone of the economy—suffered from falling prices and demand around the world. The government took much-needed measures, such as covering wages for businesses that did not downsize during the crisis as well as issuing lump-sum payments to the unemployed, but these actions lacked transparency and, for many families, the aid was insufficient.

The already highly restrictive environment in which independent media operates in Azerbaijan became even more repressive in 2020. Amendments to the primary media law now make it easier for authorities to prosecute social media users for expressing opinions online, and also define restricted speech in vague terms allowing for the broadest of legal interpretations. In addition, as part of the COVID-19 response, the government introduced a media registration system that was presented as a lockdown measure but, in effect, bans the work of independent journalists.

Corruption remains endemic in Azerbaijan despite several high-profile anticorruption operations carried out by the security services in 2020. A number of local and national officials were arrested on corruption charges with great fanfare. However, the prosecution of corruption is highly selective and political, and usually pursued for ulterior motives, either as part of a power struggle or to distract public attention from larger issues. All of Azerbaijan's political elites, first and foremost the ruling family, have become extravagantly wealthy by abusing their power for personal gain. They have also used the country's oil wealth to buy influence abroad, something that European authorities are only beginning to deal with as evidenced by the arrests in Europe of two politicians and a banker accused of taking bribes and laundering money for the Azerbaijani regime.

The major event of the year was the escalation of the frozen Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia into full-scale war. Fighting in July led to the deaths of several Azerbaijani servicemen, including the highest-ranking casualty on the Azerbaijani side of the entire 30-year conflict. Public anger erupted into a massive prowar rally in the capital Baku in July, attracting tens of thousands of people. President Aliyev angrily fired the foreign affairs minister, asserting that the strategy of negotiating with Armenia had failed to return Azerbaijani territory. Emboldened by strong support from Turkey, Azerbaijan launched a major military campaign in September. The war was a huge success for the Azerbaijani army, which rapidly took large swaths of territory. The peace deal brokered by Russia in November extended Azerbaijan's territorial gains significantly and even forced Armenia to agree to a transportation corridor along its border with Iran between Azerbaijan proper and the Azerbaijani exclave Nakhchivan.

Currently, the Azerbaijani regime is enjoying an outpouring of public support thanks to its stunning victories, with even many traditional opposition figures celebrating the military success. The war seems to have cemented President Aliyev's position for the foreseeable future. In the long-term, however, the conflict remains a source of instability. Armenia retains control of a significant part of Karabakh, and about 2,000 Russian troops are stationed in the region as peacekeepers. In addition, the territories recovered will require huge investments to make them habitable again. It remains to be seen whether Azerbaijan has the capacity to turn its military gains into a source of peacetime prosperity.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, 1.00 / effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches. 7.00

- Azerbaijan has been ruled by the Aliyev family since 1993. Power is highly concentrated in the figure of the president, with the executive dominating the legislature and judiciary, and the national government exerting control over local government. The victory in the war in Karabakh in 2020 has made President Ilham Aliyev a genuinely popular leader for the first time, consolidating his and his family's position.
- Elections to the *Milli Mejlis*, or National Assembly—Azerbaijan's 125-seat unicameral parliament—were held on February 9 in an atmosphere of optimism.¹ But election day was marred by numerous violations,² particularly the widespread obstruction of the work of observers and journalists, including physical assaults.³ The results of the parliamentary elections only confirmed the dominant position of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) and nominally independent candidates loyal to the regime.⁴
- On February 27, the Cabinet of Ministers created an "Operational Headquarters" to manage Azerbaijan's COVID-19 response.⁵ The headquarters enacted broad authorities to restrict citizens' rights, although a national state of emergency was never declared and the parliament exercised no oversight as required in such cases by the constitution and international agreements.⁶
- The first case of COVID-19 in Azerbaijan was registered on February 28, and a partial lockdown was announced on March 11 banning weddings and mourning ceremonies and restricting the operation of businesses.⁷ On April 5, a problematic system was instituted requiring residents to request permission by text message before leaving their homes.⁸ Anyone caught outside without a code could be fined up to \$120 or receive a 30-day administrative detention.⁹ Restrictions were relaxed from May 18 until October 19, when a new lockdown was implemented due to a sharp spike in cases.¹⁰ By year's end, there had been a total of 218,000 cases of COVID-19 and 2,641 coronavirus-related deaths.¹¹
- In response to the pandemic, the central government provided about \$800 million for the purchase of medical equipment, \$196 million in lump-sum aid payments of \$110 each to the poor and unemployed, \$45 million in aid to micro-entrepreneurs, and \$59 million to provide salary support for businesses.¹² Overall, both the distribution of aid and the procurement of medical supplies lacked transparency.¹³
- On July 12, fighting escalated between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the long-frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁴ Two days later, the funeral of an Azerbaijani officer who was killed in the clashes turned into a

massive prowar protest in Baku drawing tens of thousands.¹⁵ The July escalation lasted only a few days, but on September 27, a full-scale war reignited.¹⁶ The National Assembly immediately imposed martial law¹⁷ and severely restricted the internet throughout the country.¹⁸ Several regions inside Azerbaijan territory were shelled by Armenian forces, including the major city of Ganja, killing 93 civilians and wounding 407.¹⁹ The conflict ended on November 10 after Russia negotiated a peace deal.²⁰ As part of the agreement, about 2,000 Russian peacekeepers were stationed indefinitely along the line of contact.²¹ Azerbaijan’s victory generated an enormous groundswell of public support for the government and for Aliyev personally.²²

- The year was also marked by increasingly severe water shortages. Rainfall has been decreasing in recent years, and the country’s most important source of water, the Kura River, is drying up.²³ On June 17, residents of Ibrahimhajili in the Tovuz region blocked a highway after their village lost access to drinking water.²⁴ On July 23, President Aliyev announced that “drinking water and irrigation projects” were “the most important issues” on the government agenda.²⁵ The water shortage also played a role in the Karabakh conflict: in 2016, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) found that Armenian authorities were using the Sarsang and Madagiz reservoirs in Karabakh as “an instrument of pressure” against Azerbaijan.²⁶ The village of Madagiz was taken by Azerbaijani forces on October 3 and immediately renamed Sugovushan (“where the waters meet”), and on October 8 it was reported that the Sugovushan reservoir was already supplying water to nearby Azerbaijani regions.²⁷
- Major shake-ups among Azerbaijan’s political elite, which began in 2019, continued in 2020. Most significantly, on July 16, Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov was dismissed by President Aliyev after having served in the same capacity for 15 years. His dismissal came during a months-long corruption investigation targeting the foreign affairs ministry, which led to the arrest of an ambassador for embezzlement (see “Corruption”) just days after the July military escalation in Karabakh. The following month, Mammadyarov was put under a travel ban.²⁸

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of 1.00 / multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process. 7.00

- The electoral system in Azerbaijan is highly corrupt and controlled by the president and the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP). The most recent OSCE election observation mission noted “restrictive legislation and political environment,” and that the rights and freedoms necessary for the democratic process—namely, the freedom of expression and assembly, along with access to information—were “significantly limit[ed].”²⁹
- On December 5, 2019, President Aliyev dissolved the parliament and declared snap elections to be held February 9, 2020.³⁰ In a year marked by numerous nominal reforms, authorities hinted that these elections would be freer and fairer than in the past,³¹ and a new generation of political activists registered their candidacies and campaigned enthusiastically.³² However, the OSCE observation mission reported that the campaign was not competitive and that “serious procedural shortcomings” were observed on election day.³³ Journalists documented numerous instances of voter fraud,³⁴ ballot tampering,³⁵ ballot stuffing,³⁶ and obstructing the work of observers and journalists to the point of physical assault.³⁷ Yet, on March 5, Azerbaijan’s Constitutional Court confirmed the election results in 121 out of 125 regions despite the reports of systemic violations.³⁸
- In the elections for the National Assembly, the *Milli Mejlis*, over 1,300 candidates battled for 125 deputy seats: 122 candidates ran under the ruling YAP; 124 ran for numerous smaller parties, many of them loyal to the regime; and the remaining candidates, over 1,000, were unaffiliated with any party.³⁹ With voter turnout of 47.81 percent, YAP received a majority of 71 seats compared to 72 in the previous parliamentary formation,⁴⁰ while the remaining seats were won by candidates loyal to the regime, whether independent or from minor parties. Erkin Gadirlı of the opposition REAL party also won a seat, but pointing to election violations in his own district, some experts expressed doubt that he would truly represent the opposition.⁴¹
- On February 11, a sit-in protest against the numerous violations observed in the snap elections was held in front of the Central Election Commission (CEC); police detained 22 participants, including journalists and former candidates.⁴² Ahead of another unauthorized protest in front of the CEC on February 16, police detained over 100 people, including REAL party leader Ilgar Mammadov, Musavat party leader Arif Hajili, and D18 movement leader Ruslan Izzatli. Most of those detained were released the same day.⁴³ Some, such as activist and former candidate Mehman Huseynov, were simply driven by police away from the capital Baku and left to find their way home.⁴⁴ On March 4, a letter demanding new elections signed by 236 former parliamentary candidates was sent to the Constitutional Court and the presidential administration, and the next day, a number of those candidates protested outside the court as it certified the election results.⁴⁵

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and 1.25 / political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group 7.00 participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

- Azerbaijani legislation creates a severely restrictive environment for civil society.⁴⁶ The past year brought no significant changes, but authorities did take advantage of COVID-19 and the Karabakh war to clamp down on the activities of opposition and civic activists.
- On March 22, Tofiq Yagublu, deputy chairman of the opposition Musavat party, was arrested on charges of hooliganism, and on September 3, he was sentenced to four years and three months in prison.⁴⁷ The day

before his sentencing, Yagublu began a hunger strike and demonstrations in support took place around the world. On September 18, citing health concerns, the court released Yagublu under house arrest.⁴⁸

- Scores of opposition activists were arrested on charges related to the COVID-19 crisis during the year. For example, Baba Suleymanov, a member of the opposition Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (PFPA), was arrested on the street as he was going to the home of party chairman Ali Karimli, despite the fact that he had received permission for the trip by text message. Suleymanov was sentenced to 30 days of detention for “violating the quarantine.”⁴⁹
- On July 14, a prowar rally broke out in Baku city center. This massive demonstration followed the latest escalation of fighting in Karabakh, which began on July 12 and killed several Azerbaijani soldiers including Major-General Polad Hashimov, the highest-ranking casualty since the beginning of the conflict.⁵⁰ The crowd—estimated at 50,000 strong—briefly occupied the National Assembly building and chanted slogans, such as “End the quarantine, start the war” and “Death to the Armenian.” The rally was broken up by riot police and many people were reportedly arrested.⁵¹
- Although the July 14 protest appears to have occurred spontaneously,⁵² President Aliyev nonetheless accused the opposition of organizing it, referring to them as “traitors” and a “fifth column.” According to activists, 17 members of the PFPA were among those arrested, including Fuad Gahramanli and Mammad Ibrahim, who are charged with attempting to overthrow the government, which carries a maximum penalty of life in prison.⁵³ In November, 12 of the arrested PFPA members were released under house arrest as they await trial.⁵⁴
- As tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia led to a return to full-scale war on September 27, much of the population was strongly supportive of a military solution to the conflict,⁵⁵ including prominent human rights defenders and opposition activists.⁵⁶ Some peace activists faced police questioning, threats, and online harassment.⁵⁷
- There was an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic lockdowns. While Ministry of Internal Affairs statistics indicated a small but significant growth trend, the head of the Clean World shelter for women and children, Mehriban Zeynalova, reported in August that the number of domestic violence cases had “doubled, if not tripled.”⁵⁸
- On ILGA-Europe’s latest Rainbow Map, Azerbaijan remains in last place out of 49 European country’s for LGBT+ rights.⁵⁹ The group’s 2020 Annual Review noted numerous cases of hate crimes and bullying, while also noting increasing visibility for LGBT+ people on social media as well as statements of support for the first time from local celebrities.⁶⁰

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media. 1.00 / 7.00

- The mainstream media in Azerbaijan always present officially sanctioned narratives, and independent outlets that stray from those narratives regularly face repression. In 2020, the legal framework in which the media operates became even more restrictive, and the COVID-19 pandemic was used as an excuse by authorities to detain and harass independent journalists.
- On March 17, amendments were made to the Law on Information, Informatization, and the Protection of Information that allow for users of “informational-telecommunications networks” to be added to the list of those who can be held responsible for violating information regulations. Legislators also added Article 2.3.10-1, which bans the dissemination of information that “may cause harm” or create a “threat of socially dangerous results.” The vague wording of these amendments seems to give authorities a legal basis for prosecuting both traditional media and social media users for an extremely broad range of speech.⁶¹
- Azerbaijani officials used their expanded authorities during the COVID-19 lockdown to silence independent journalists. On April 9, for example, freelance journalist Natig Izbatoev was arrested while conducting interviews during a protest in Khirdalan, his footage was deleted, and he was sentenced to 30 days in prison on false charges that he had violated quarantine rules. On April 13, blogger Ibrahim Vazirov was arrested in Shirvan and held for 25 days for refusing to delete online content criticizing the way the authorities were handling the crisis.⁶² There have been numerous similar cases.⁶³
- On May 13, Afghan Sadigov, editor of the independent AzelTV, and Sakit Muradov, editor of the progovernment Xeberfakt.az, were arrested on charges of extortion.⁶⁴ Muradov made a confession and was released pending an investigation, but Sadigov maintained his innocence.⁶⁵ On November 3, Sadigov was sentenced to seven years in prison and he launched a hunger strike in protest.⁶⁶
- On June 19, journalist Tezahan Miralamli was convicted of hooliganism and “sentenced to wear an electronic bracelet and stay at home every night from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. for the next 12 months.” Miralamli works for the opposition newspaper *Azadliq* and has been a target of police harassment for years.⁶⁷
- On June 20, the Cabinet of Ministers began requiring journalists and media outlets to register online in order to continue their work during a lockdown that was scheduled to last until July 5. Journalists were only able to apply through a media outlet that was already officially registered with the government, thus ruling out most independent media organizations.⁶⁸
- On October 26, independent news outlet Meydan TV published an appeal, claiming that it had been targeted by a campaign in state-affiliated media for its coverage of the Karabakh conflict encompassing a range of

views.⁶⁹ The most egregious example was an article from Azvision.az, which published the names and pictures of independent journalists who had worked with Meydan TV, branding them as "traitors" and calling into question their ethnicity, since "none of them has the mentality of the Motherland and the State."⁷⁰

- On November 16, Polad Aslanov, chief editor of the independent news site Xeberman.com, was sentenced to 16 years in prison for treason. Prior to Aslanov's arrest, authorities had demanded that he remove articles about corruption from his website.⁷¹

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.

7.00

- Local government in Azerbaijan is grossly underfunded and has no real authority. While municipal councils are elected by the public, the local chief executives are appointed directly by the president and answer only to him. In 2020, local government played no significant role in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In 2019, the average municipal annual budget in Azerbaijan was only AZN 22,700 (\$13,360). The sum of all municipal budgets in 2019 was AZN 36.4 million (\$21.4 million), meaning that Azerbaijan's total annual expenditures on local self-government amounted to about two dollars per capita.⁷²
- The only opposition candidate nationwide to win in the December 2019 municipal elections, feminist activist Vafa Naghi, was removed from her position on the municipal council in the village of Kholgaragashli on August 20, 2020.⁷³ While Naghi was undergoing medical treatment in Istanbul, municipal chairman Alibala Salimov unexpectedly held several council meetings and gave Naghi's absence as the reason for her dismissal.⁷⁴ Earlier, on June 19, Naghi had been detained by police in Baku while she was demonstrating in front of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, protesting corruption in the use of state-owned lands in Kholgaragashli.⁷⁵ After Naghi's dismissal, Salimov sued her for defamation, but the hearing scheduled to take place on August 27 was canceled, and on September 3, the court dismissed the case without explanation.⁷⁶
- On February 20, Azerbaijan's State Security Service carried out a special operation in the Neftchala region, arresting several high-ranking officials at the regional executive authority as well as the head doctor at the regional central hospital, the head of the regional department of education, and others. They were charged with giving and receiving bribes, and the 61-year-old head of the executive authority, Ismail Valiyev, was charged additionally with abuse of his authority and misappropriation of state funds.⁷⁷ Valiyev had been decorated by President Aliyev as recently as October 2019 "For Service to the Homeland."⁷⁸ Experts believe that the arrests were likely calculated to distract from the results of the parliamentary elections on February 9, which were being discussed and harshly criticized on social media at the time.⁷⁹

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.

1.00 /
7.00

- Despite some minor reforms in 2019, there were no significant changes to Azerbaijan's judicial system in 2020. The president retains firm control over the judicial branch, directly appointing judges of the first instance as well as nominating appellate judges, who are then rubber-stamped by the National Assembly.⁸⁰
- In March, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe demanded that Azerbaijan overturn the convictions of eight people who had been recognized by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) as political prisoners referred to as the Ilgar Mammadov group, including REAL party chairman Ilgar Mammadov and human rights defenders Rasul Jafarov, Anar Mammadli, Rashad Hasanov, Zaur Gurbanli, Uzair Mammadli, Rashad Akhundov, and Intigam Aliyev. The Committee of Ministers set a deadline of April 30 for implementing the ECtHR decisions, and threatened sanctions against Azerbaijan if it failed to do so. Azerbaijani authorities had ignored the previous deadline of December 31, 2019, effectively blocking Mammadov and the other former prisoners from taking part in the February parliamentary elections.⁸¹ On April 23, Azerbaijan's Supreme Court overturned the convictions of Mammadov and Jafarov, awarding them compensation of \$137,730 and \$33,785, respectively, significantly more than had been required by the ECtHR.⁸² The convictions of the remaining six human rights defenders have not been overturned, and they continue to face negative consequences. For example, Intigam Aliyev's bank accounts are frozen, and he has been banned from leaving the country.⁸³
- On March 20, the Supreme Court issued a recommendation that, under the special quarantine regime, courts should delay hearings on any matters that were not considered urgent, but they should continue to hold in-person hearings for urgent matters. Only public reception areas were closed entirely, and citizens had to contact the courts through the internet, by phone, or by mail.⁸⁴
- In April, it was reported that prisons were not supplying masks or disinfectant to prisoners.⁸⁵ In July, officials reported a total of 46 cases of COVID-19 in the penitentiary system, but activists worried that widespread overcrowding in Azerbaijani prisons could spread the virus quickly.⁸⁶
- On April 30, Prosecutor General Zakir Garalov was dismissed by the president, who praised the legacy of his 20-year tenure.⁸⁷ His replacement, Kamran Aliyev, formerly served as head of the anticorruption department of the prosecutor's office. Experts do not expect any serious change of course or meaningful reforms from Aliyev.⁸⁸

- On May 26, the ECtHR ruled against Azerbaijan in its handling of the case of Ramil Safarov, an Azerbaijani army officer who brutally murdered an Armenian officer at a NATO-sponsored event in Budapest in 2004. Sentenced to life in prison in Hungary, Safarov was transferred to Azerbaijan in 2012, where he was immediately pardoned and generously rewarded by President Aliyev. The ECtHR found that Safarov’s pardon was politically motivated, directly related to his victim’s Armenian nationality, and in violation of the right to life (Article 2) and protection from discrimination (Article 14) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).
- In August, the European Human Rights Advocacy Centre published a list of over 20 lawyers in Azerbaijan who had been unfairly imprisoned, disbarred, reprimanded, or had their licenses suspended for political reasons since 2005. Most recently, on June 9, the Bar Association issued a warning threatening serious consequences to Javad Javadov after he posted online photographic evidence of physical abuse of one of his clients by police.⁸⁹

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on 1.00 / financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives. 7.00

- Corruption remains endemic in Azerbaijan despite several highly publicized investigations in recent years. The fight against corruption is always pursued with ulterior motives, usually as a convenient tool for removing political figures who have fallen out of favor with the regime.
- On January 30, police raided the homes and offices of two individuals in Germany and a third unnamed person in Belgium suspected of accepting bribes from the Azerbaijani government. One of those targeted, Eduard Lintner, a former Bundestag member from the Christian Social Union, is alleged to have received about €4 million for bribing fellow PACE members to promote a favorable image of Azerbaijan.⁹⁰
- In April, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) revealed that the company SerbAz, which received government contracts worth \$65.8 million for construction projects in Baku in 2006–09, likely belonged through a series of subsidiaries to Zulfiya Rahimova, the wife of Azerbaijan’s Minister of Youth and Sports, Azad Rahimov. The company brought construction workers from the Balkans, confiscated their passports, forced them to work 12-hour days in extremely poor conditions, and withheld wages.⁹¹ SerbAz was awarded its first \$5.3 million contract by Rahimov’s ministry without any bidding procedure and a week before the company was even incorporated.⁹²
- In May, investigative journalists revealed leaked bank documents showing that the children of former national security minister Eldar Mahmudov have vast real estate holdings and other assets across Europe, including a London townhouse valued at about \$22.5 million and a seventeenth-century farmhouse estate in Spain valued at about \$17.5 million. Mahmudov family members have given conflicting accounts of the sources of their wealth.⁹³
- In July, it was reported that the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) had held five tenders in May worth a total of \$527,000, and four of them were awarded to companies that had all been newly registered in February at the same address. Other companies registered at that address had earlier been awarded state contracts worth at least \$200,000.⁹⁴
- On August 13, Eldar Hasanov, Azerbaijan’s ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, was arrested on charges of embezzlement. Hasanov was formerly head of the country’s Interpol office (1992–93) and later served as Prosecutor General (1995–2000).⁹⁵ Experts suspect that Hasanov’s arrest is political, part of the ongoing power struggle in the upper echelons of the Azerbaijani government.⁹⁶
- In November, the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet* published evidence that Turkish businessman Mehmet Cengiz may have bribed Ahmad Ahmadzada, head of Azerbaijan’s state water resources management company, in order to win a lucrative dam construction contract. In 2008, a company owned by Cengiz transferred \$3.07 million to an offshore company that proceeded to purchase a \$2.3 million luxury flat in London occupied by Ahmadzada’s son, Juma, as well as two neighboring apartments, which Juma renovated in 2017. Two months after the transfer, another company owned by Cengiz was awarded a contract to participate in the construction of the \$948 million Shamkirchay hydroelectric dam.⁹⁷

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Footnotes

- ¹“In Azerbaijan’s elections, a new hope,” Durna Safarova, Eurasianet, 20 December 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/in-azerbaijans-elections-a-new-hope>
- ²“Republic of Azerbaijan. Early Parliamentary Elections, 9 February 2020. ODIHR Election Observation Mission: Final Report,” Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, OSCE, 17 July 2020, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/e/457585_0.pdf
- ³“Ölkəboyu seçkiləri müşahidə edənlərə və jurnalistlərə təzyiqlər olub” [Aggression against election observers and journalists across the country], Meydan TV, 9 February 2020, <https://youtu.be/zjs0K8xafdQ>; “Müşahidəçini məntəqədən döyüb çıxarırlar” [Election observer beaten and thrown out of polling station], Meydan TV, 9 February 2020, <https://youtu.be/pY0xwMHGs0>; “Məntəqələrdə qarşıdurmalar: Polislər müşahidəçilərə təzyiq göstərib” [Clashes at polling stations: Police take aggressive actions against election observers], Meydan TV, 9 February 2020, <https://youtu.be/koPXMLaIZHY>; “Müşahidəçi seçki

məntəqəsində bu cür döyüldü” [How an election observer was beaten at a polling station], Meydan TV, 10 February 2020, <https://youtu.be/8pePBL5SIe0>

- 4“Azərbaycanda parlament seçkiləri: daha bir itirilmiş şans” [Parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan: another missed opportunity], Shahin Jafarli, Baku Research Institute, 13 February 2020, <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/az/az%99rbaycanda-parlament-seckil...>
- 5“COVID-19 Azerbaijan: First Wave,” Economic Research Center, p. 46-47, December 2020.
- 6“COVID-19 Azerbaijan: First Wave,” Economic Research Center, p. 42, December 2020.
- 7“Azərbaycanda koronavirus: toy və yaslara qadağa, apteklər və mağazalar əvvəlki kimi işləyəcək” [Coronavirus in Azerbaijan: weddings and mourning ceremonies banned, pharmacies and shops to continue working as before], BBC Azeri, last updated 13 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan-51830059>
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