

Azerbaijan ahead of the parliamentary elections

Azerbaijan is an authoritarian country in the southern Caucasus. Part of the Eastern Partnership, Azerbaijan has attempted to keep a pragmatic balance between the European Union (EU) and Russia. Rich in oil and natural gas, Baku's poor human rights record and consistent failure to hold free and fair elections have continued to hamper its ties with the EU. The 9 February 2020 snap elections in the wake of abrupt top-down reforms in late 2019 are not expected to substantially change the country's leadership or its overall (geo-)political orientation.

Background: A stable, neutral, oil-fuelled autocracy

Political system

Azerbaijan has enjoyed relative political stability since its renewed independence in 1991, in contrast to the political upheavals of its neighbours in the Caucasus. President [Ilham Aliyev](#) succeeded his father Heydar in 2003 and has since consolidated the current [authoritarian](#) system. The National Assembly is [firmly](#) in the hands of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP). A 2009 referendum [abolished](#) the terms limit for the presidency, and the post of Vice-President created in 2016 was granted to Mehriban Aliyeva, the President's wife. Political opposition is suppressed, with key figures regularly harassed and arrested. Examples from the past decade include human rights activist Leyla Yunus and journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, who was [abducted](#) from his residence in Georgia in 2017 only to reappear in an Azerbaijani prison.

Foreign relations

The country's [main political preoccupation](#) since independence has been the military conflict with neighbouring Armenia over [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), a region internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but *de facto* under control of a breakaway state supported by Armenia. An uneasy ceasefire has kept the peace since 1994, but the OSCE-led '[Minsk Group](#)' has so far failed to produce a lasting peaceful resolution. The last major escalation in April 2016 cost the lives of over 200 people. Because of this conflict, Baku seeks to foster cordial relations with a wide variety of partners. Relations with Russia remain good but complicated due to Russia's close ties to Armenia. Azerbaijan also pursues [strategic cooperation](#) with Georgia and Turkey, largely in order to facilitate its exports of oil and natural gas through the European Commission's 'Southern gas corridor' initiative. The EU is a key buyer of this natural gas, and imports are expected to [increase](#). While the [European Parliament](#) has repeatedly condemned Aliyev's regime for its human rights abuses and flawed elections, cooperation with the EU is set to increase (see below).

All told, Azerbaijan has negotiated limited but successful bilateral cooperation initiatives, both military and economic, with the [United States](#), [Belarus](#), [Ukraine](#), [Iran](#), and [Israel](#). The country is expected to maintain this stance of flexible neutrality, with many friends but few real allies, for economic as well as military reasons: Azerbaijan remains [highly dependent](#) on hydrocarbon exports, which accounted for around 40 % of its gross domestic product (GDP) and more than 90 % of its merchandise exports in 2019.

EU-Azerbaijan relations are based on the [EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement](#), in force since 1999. Azerbaijan joined the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative. The latter, adopted in 2009, was created to support political, social and economic reform efforts, with the aim of increasing democratisation and good governance, energy security, environmental protection, and economic and social development. More recently, in February 2017, the EU and Azerbaijan began [negotiations](#) on a new framework agreement designed to give new impetus to political dialogue and cooperation. Azerbaijan is a strategic energy partner for the EU and plays a key role for the EU's import of Caspian energy resources.

The European Parliament's Delegation for relations with the South Caucasus [represents](#) Parliament in the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (PCC) with Azerbaijan. Formal inter-parliamentary relations were [resumed](#) in 2016 after a four-year break. Azerbaijan has previously hosted Members of the European Parliament as part of electoral missions of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). However, as all the elections observed by those missions were deemed to fall short of international requirements, Parliament decided against sending observers to the 2015 parliamentary elections or the 2018 presidential election. Parliament has [stated](#) that it will not observe Azerbaijan's snap parliamentary elections on 9 February.

The 2019 reshuffle: More form than substance

Timeline of the 'reform'

The last months of 2019 saw a series of changes in personnel within the Aliyev regime. They have come in the wake of a wave of administrative and economic reforms spearheaded by the President since his latest re-election in 2018. These [include](#) tackling corruption in the Ministry of Taxes, the Ministry of Transportation and among customs officials, for instance by adding electronic declaration forms to increase transparency. The government has also sought to [improve](#) FDI attractiveness through special economic zones, as well as boosting sectors such as transport, where Azerbaijan sees potential to position itself as a major transit hub, and tourism. Then, in October, the [reshuffling](#) of cabinet positions began with the stepping down of Prime Minister Novruz Mammadov on 8 October, who was replaced by Ali Asadov. Then came the Minister of Economic Development, who was sacked on 22 October and replaced by Mikhayil Jabbarov, a younger technocrat who won praise for his recent work as Minister of Taxes. The next day, Ramiz Mehdiyev, the Presidential chief of staff since 1995, was also [sidelined](#). Later, in November, came the [dismissal](#) of Ali Hasanov, a presidential advisor considered to be one of the Aliyev regime's main ideologues. Numerous [junior positions](#) also saw changes in personnel ahead of the call for early elections in December.

Aims and reactions

Analysts see various [motivations](#) behind this attempt at reforms. First, President Aliyev seems genuinely concerned about the Azerbaijani economy and its desperate [need to diversify](#). The post-2014 drop in oil prices caused a serious economic crisis in which exports contracted by more than 50%, forcing the government to devalue the national currency in 2015. This has caused significant [discontent](#) in the country, where growth remains [slow](#) and wealth inequalities significant. The introduction of younger, Western-educated technocrats like Jabbarov and Samir Nuriyev, a 44-year-old who replaced 81-year-old Mehdiyev, has also been seen as a [signal](#) that Aliyev seeks to stabilise ties to the United States and the EU.

However, analysts also see more prosaic reasons for the move. Many of the new appointments, including the new Prime Minister, have [close ties](#) to the first lady's family, the Pashayevs, and observers see the changes as part of the growing influence of the Pashayevs in relation to the President's own 'Nakhchivan clan', which included Mehdiyev and Hasanov. Additionally, the reshuffle only truly gained speed after a series of protests in October 2019. An opposition rally on 19 October [suffered](#) the usual crackdown, but it [was followed](#) the next day by a women's rally against domestic violence. This unusual reaction is a sign of increased unrest and of a [budding willingness](#) to contest the regime, which in turn saw itself forced to push for reforms.

The 9 February elections: Snap continuity

Azerbaijan's National Assembly [voted](#) to dissolve itself on 2 December 2019 after calls from President Aliyev to hold early elections, ostensibly as part of the 'reform' agenda. The Aliyev regime has a considerable history of electoral malpractice, and these elections promise to be no different: municipal elections [held](#) on 23 December saw numerous complaints of irregularities, including multiple voting and intimidation of journalists. As a result, opposition parties are in two minds as to how to approach the elections. Many have chosen to participate, but the National Council of Democratic Forces (NCDF), the umbrella organisation of opposition parties that organised the 19 October rally, is [opting](#) for a boycott.

No significant change is therefore expected from these elections. While the ongoing 'reform' process and the shifting public mood has created some optimism among opposition activists, they remain [sceptical](#) that the regime will allow any substantial change. The 'reforms' heralded by President Aliyev are likely to continue, but so far they represent a change of style more than of system, in line with other instances of '[authoritarian modernisation](#)'. As opposition parties [point out](#), no progress has been made towards guaranteeing fair elections, an open parliament, a liberalised media or an end to human rights abuses. Recent actions by the Aliyev regime point in the same direction. On 16 December, just days ahead of a visit by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to Baku, Ukraine [deported](#) Elvin Isayev, a government critic, back to Azerbaijan, where he is currently being held on unclear charges. Holding snap elections in these conditions seems more like an attempt to [pre-empt](#) opposition to YAP candidates from growing further rather than offering it an avenue for democratic expression.

