

Research Brief

# Tracing Expansionist Narratives

## A Comparative Analysis of Autocratic Regimes in Azerbaijan and Russia

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## Executive Summary

Comparative analysis routinely spotlights the similarities and differences among dictatorial regimes. But there is still a significant gap in understanding how authoritarian regimes mirror each other's strategies, particularly around territorial expansion, military engagement, and historical revisionism. This gap is particularly evident in the analysis of performative zero-sum approaches, where political history is either falsely reimagined or deliberately distorted to legitimize expansionist agendas.

This research brief introduces the concept of *pseudo-irredentism* to analyze how historical narratives shape the expansionist policies of Russia and Azerbaijan. The authors compare Russian President Vladimir Putin's hollow assertions around Ukrainian sovereignty with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's 'Western Azerbaijan' initiative.<sup>1</sup> Aliyev's approach involves a fabricated history that portrays Armenians as settlers on ancient Azerbaijani lands. While Putin's stance aligns with traditional irredentism, Aliyev's assertions are better understood as pseudo-irredentism, characterized by the subjective reinterpretation — and vast distortion — of historical facts.

The 'Western Azerbaijan' concept was formally adopted as Baku's new policy vis-à-vis Armenia in December 2022, following Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's unequivocal recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as an uncontested part of Azerbaijan at the Prague summit on October 6, 2022.<sup>2</sup>

This study draws parallels between the expansionist projects of Russia and Azerbaijan, exploring the overlooked role of narrative construction in shaping the territorial and geopolitical ambitions of modern autocracies. It places particular emphasis on the intricacies of Azerbaijan's expansionist agenda, offering valuable insights into how historical narratives are manipulated to advance contemporary political objectives.

## Exploring Shared Narratives: Putin and Aliyev's Performative (Pseudo)Irredentism

The political systems of Azerbaijan and Russia are considered fully consolidated autocracies, each with its own unique domestic features. Russia's political power structure, which labels itself as a "sovereign democracy" under President Vladimir Putin's highly personalized leadership, is deeply rooted in a long-standing tradition of authoritarianism.<sup>3</sup> It features a hierarchical triangle of control, notably through the *siloviki*, a close-knit circle of former KGB and armed forces cadres who dominate the nation's power institutions. This centralized power structure is marked by the leader's absolute authority, combined with an ideological merging of the leader and the state. This idea is captured in a statement made by Putin's deputy chief of staff, Vyacheslav Volodin, in 2014: "If there is Putin, there is Russia. If there is no Putin, there is no Russia,"<sup>4</sup> emphasizing the deep intertwining of Putin's identity with that of the Russian state. These material and ideological elements together form what is known as "Putinism," a defining feature of Russia's autocracy that shapes both its domestic governance and foreign policy.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, Azerbaijan's political system resembles a nepotism-based model similar to Central Asian neopatrimonial regimes, marked by the hereditary transfer of power, as seen when the presidency was passed from Heydar Aliyev to his son, Ilham Aliyev. In both regimes, the electoral process functions as a façade of democracy, wherein political pluralism is systematically excluded. This was exemplified in the snap presidential elections held in Russia and Azerbaijan earlier this year, where Putin and Aliyev secured approximately 88% and 93% of votes, respectively.<sup>6 7</sup>

Understanding the personalist nature of both regimes is pivotal. Both Putin and Aliyev's state-mentality have roots in the Soviet Security Service (i.e., KGB), fostering a unique autocratic governance style and external worldview. The significance of their ideational alignment and personalized relationship was highlighted by President Ilham Aliyev in 2018 when he recalled the first meeting between his father, Heydar Aliyev, and Vladimir Putin in the early 2000s.

*The first meeting of Heydar Aliyev with Vladimir Putin lasted for a very long time, and, once it was over, my father shared his impressions of Vladimir Putin. Of course, they had a lot in common: they were both trained in the Higher School of the KGB in Leningrad, so being colleagues, they understood each other very well and built a very trusting relationship. He said, "I'm happy for Russia and also for Azerbaijan, because Putin is a reliable partner for Azerbaijan."*<sup>8</sup>

As Ilham Aliyev further explained in 2023, the alignment between him and Vladimir Putin in terms of state mentality, ideas, and worldview has established a solid foundation for the relationship between their countries. Under Aliyev's current presidency, bilateral ties have truly reached the level of "allied relations not only de-facto but also de-jure."<sup>9</sup>

Azerbaijan's close ties with Turkey are grounded in the ethno-cultural principle of "one nation, two states," a concept first introduced by President Heydar Aliyev. Meanwhile, the evolving strategic partnership between Baku and Moscow, which has strengthened since the mid-2010s, is often framed as a "one elite, two states" dynamic. This highlights the alignment of key strategic interests between the Putin and Aliyev regimes, along with their personal ties.

Beyond material differences in domestic governance aimed at sustaining autocratic rule, Russia and Azerbaijan share unified narrative strategies and external orientations toward perceived adversaries to justify their revisionist positions. Both countries consider military force a legitimate means of achieving political objectives and advancing geopolitical interests. They openly glorify the use of hard power against their opponents while downplaying mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, and the extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure.

Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev both emphasize the importance of a national idea to mobilize and consolidate their nations. For both leaders, this national idea has outward-looking aspects. Putin describes this concept as "active patriotism," which encompasses not only dedication to one's own state but also a readiness to pursue expansionist ambitions.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Aliyev's interpretation of the national idea is clearer, more tangible, observable, and actionable. Recently, while discussing the need for a new national idea, the Azerbaijani president stated that the previous focus on the reconquest of Nagorno-Karabakh had become exhausted. He highlighted a shift towards the emerging concept of 'Western Azerbaijan.'<sup>11</sup> This idea represents a deliberate state agenda targeting Armenia, which is considered Azerbaijan's strategic adversary. Aliyev framed this concept within a new national vision, suggesting that contemporary Armenia should be viewed as part of historical Azerbaijan:

*Because the number of Azerbaijanis expelled from Western Azerbaijan and their descendants in Azerbaijan today accounts for millions, if we consider the regional context of Azerbaijan, it is the largest region in terms of population. We expect the Armenian government to make a clear statement on how the Azerbaijanis expelled from the present-day territory of Armenia, from Western Azerbaijan, or the descendants of those who were expelled, can return to their historical lands, visit them, or live on these lands.<sup>12</sup>*

The emerging concept of 'Western Azerbaijan' represents a significant shift in Azerbaijan's national strategy, marking a move towards a forward-looking agenda focused on legitimizing territorial claims and population resettlement. This emerging concept, rooted in a zero-sum perspective and a realpolitik approach, reflects a broader Soviet-style model characterized by ideological narrative construction and the dehumanization of adversaries. It draws on the Soviet tradition of defining subversion in a politico-psychological sense, as well as adversary and conflict. Furthermore, the alignment between the Russian and Azerbaijani regimes extends beyond mere survival strategies to include a shared worldview and similar methods for identifying external adversaries and articulating historical-territorial grievances. This mutual narrative framework suggests a reciprocal learning process or a "like unit" model, where both regimes engage in performative irredentism.

ISA's analysis reveals that Aliyev's 'Western Azerbaijan' concept and Putin's framing of Ukraine as an integral part of the "Russian World" exhibit significant ideational and perceptual similarities. These similarities arise from the alignment in the political elites' mindsets in both Russia and Azerbaijan, demonstrating regime compatibility in developing historical-territorial narratives and adopting aggressive stances toward perceived external enemies. These narratives are built around discourses of irredentism in Russia's case and pseudo-irredentism in Azerbaijan's, highlighting the revisionist goals of both countries. Russia's irredentist position is based on historical accounts that view Ukraine as historically linked to the Russian Empire and later as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. And Azerbaijan's narratives around Armenian territories rely on far-fetched historical interpretations and distorted claims of past territorial sovereignty.

Upon analyzing the narratives of Russia and Azerbaijan, it is evident that both are based on a similar interpretation of a "great injustice" allegedly inflicted upon these states. The 'great injustice' perpetrated against Russia and Azerbaijan, as articulated by the regimes of Putin and Aliyev, implies a strategic alignment in confronting their respective adversaries, Ukraine and Armenia. This alignment has driven Moscow and Baku to develop solution models that combine military, ideological, political, economic, and hybrid-informational strategies. These models highlight both nuanced similarities and differences in their outcomes, rooted in a shared worldview of geopolitical dissatisfaction and political revisionism.

For instance, Russia's president has justified addressing perceived historical injustices by asserting, "these are facts of history that the southern Russian lands were transferred during the formation of Ukraine during the creation of the USSR. There was no Ukraine before."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Azerbaijan's president declares Armenia an "artificial state created on Azerbaijani lands," emphasizing that "present-day Armenia is our [Azerbaijani] land," which he presents as a "historical fact."<sup>14 15</sup> This rhetoric functions as a politico-psychological tool to reinforce longstanding territorial claims against Armenia and Armenians, integrating these claims into Azerbaijan's evolving national vision.<sup>7</sup>

In the comparative analysis presented in the following table, ISA breaks down how Azerbaijan and Russia exploit historical narratives to legitimize territorial ambitions. The table highlights specific public statements and policy actions that illustrate the use of performative autocratic irredentism to advance territorial ambitions. This analysis reveals a parallel approach in narrative formation, where both leaders utilize (pseudo)irredentist justifications to support their claims vis- à-vis Ukraine and Armenia, respectively. Through this comparative framework, we aim to underscore the depth of narrative alignment between the two countries — and potential implications for regional stability and international relations.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of (Pseudo)Irredentist Narratives of Russia and Azerbaijan

Context	Putin on Ukraine	Aliyev on Armenia
Ideological Designation	Inherent part of the “Russian World”	Historical “Western Azerbaijan”
Historical Revisionism	Fake state established by Lenin <sup>16</sup>	Fake state created by the Soviet government <sup>17</sup>
Government Labelling	Nazi junta <sup>18</sup>	Fascists <sup>19</sup>
Alleged External Patrons	NATO, Soros, the United States, the West	France, the United States, Soros, the West <sup>20,21</sup>
Threat Perception	Anti-Russia project <sup>22</sup>	Artificial project designed to destroy Azerbaijan. <sup>23</sup>
Border Reinterpretation	Borders are conditional and must be redrawn. <sup>24</sup>	Borders are conditional and must be redrawn. <sup>25</sup>
State Illegitimacy	Ukraine was always part of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire, and hence belonged to Russians. <sup>26</sup>	“Those lands belong to us [Azeris].” <sup>27</sup> Those were territories of Azerbaijani Khans and historically owned by the Azerbaijani Republic of 1918-1920, where we must return. <sup>28, 29</sup>
Exclusive Access to Infrastructure and Territory	Must provide “servitude” - legally formalized right of access to the Crimean Peninsula through the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions. <sup>30</sup>	Must provide “Zangezour Corridor” with exclusive rights to connect Azerbaijan’s mainland with its Nakhichevan exclave. <sup>31</sup>
National Identity	The ethno-cultural division between Russians and Ukrainians is artificial, Ukrainians are Russians. Ukrainian history textbooks must be revised. <sup>32</sup>	Armenians are aliens to the Caucasus. They are “savages with no culture.” <sup>33</sup> Their “history is false and heritage is fabricated.” <sup>34</sup> Armenian history textbooks must be revised.
Domestic Interference	Constitutional amendments to align with Russia’s interests. (i.e., permanent neutrality, demilitarization, denazification.) <sup>35</sup>	Renunciation of the Declaration of Independence. Constitutional amendments to align with Azerbaijan’s interests. (i.e., demilitarization.) <sup>36</sup>
Geopolitical Objectives	Reduced Ukrainian sovereignty and politico-military capitulation.	Reduced Armenian sovereignty and politico-military capitulation.

## The ‘Western Azerbaijan’ Concept: A Pseudo-Irredentist Project

While international media and researchers have focused on Russian expansionist narratives toward Ukraine, the intricacies of Baku’s ‘Western Azerbaijan’ concept are largely overlooked. This concept is promoted in Azerbaijani state media as a historical term meant to replace the official name of the Republic of Armenia in Azerbaijan’s socio-political discourse. According to the official website of the ‘Western Azerbaijan Community,’ an initiative supported directly by Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidential Administration, ‘Western Azerbaijan’ is described as a historical-territorial entity — “one of the oldest and most geographically diverse regions of Azerbaijan.”<sup>37</sup> This narrative effectively denies the existence of the Armenian Republic.

The official website also asserts that, “in the past, it [Armenia] was located along important caravan routes that connected the northern and southern parts of Azerbaijan, as well as the entire Caucasus and the Near East. Currently, it is bordered by Georgia to the north, the Azerbaijan Republic to the east and southeast, Turkey to the west, and Iran to the south and southeast, covering an area of 29,800 square kilometers. While this land is now recognized as Armenia, its territory has historical significance as the ancient Turkic-Oghuz homeland and the historical land of Azerbaijan.”<sup>38</sup> According to this office narrative — which contributes to the dehumanization of Armenians — “the Armenians committed massive massacres of Azerbaijanis throughout the recent centuries and expelled them from their native lands.”<sup>39</sup>

Aziz Alakbarli, the head of the ‘Western Azerbaijan Community,’ is an MP affiliated with the ruling New Azerbaijan Party. He is one of numerous officials actively propagating hatred and xenophobic sentiments towards Armenians. In August 2023, he asserted, “Today, Armenians must understand one thing clearly: they are at the end of the road, and they have brought blood to the region with every step. They must either go back the way they came or jump into the abyss in front of them. The choice is theirs.”<sup>40</sup>

The ‘Western Azerbaijan Community’ also operates a TV channel, launched in July 2023, which spreads propaganda questioning the Armenian presence in the South Caucasus.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, “Baku TV” has introduced a special series titled “QƏRBİ AZƏRBAYCAN XRONİKASI” (‘Chronicles of Western Azerbaijan’), which aims to reinterpret and revise the socio-cultural and ethno-political history of the Republic of Armenia.<sup>42</sup> These programs frequently question the legitimacy of Armenia. Baku TV began broadcasting this series in March 2023 and presents content in Azerbaijani, English, and Russian, indicating an attempt to reach an international audience as well.

Other TV channels, including ITV, CBC TV, and the state-owned Az TV, actively promote the ‘Western Azerbaijan’ project, regularly broadcasting sympathetic content. For instance, Azerbaijan's state television channel produced a series titled “The Villages of Western Azerbaijan,” where the Republic of Armenia is referred to as ‘Western Azerbaijan.’<sup>43</sup> This programming advances the government’s policy of normalizing territorial expansion vis-à-vis Armenia.

In addition to media propaganda, the Azerbaijani state also sponsors initiatives to promote the ‘Western Azerbaijan’ concept. For instance, on September 3, 2023, the Ministry of Culture hosted an event titled “Journey to the Ethno-Cultural Landscape of West Azerbaijan,” which was attended by members of the Milli Majlis, media representatives, and Baku residents.<sup>44</sup> This event highlighted state efforts to reshape the public narrative around Armenian ethno-historical heritage.

Further demonstrating these efforts, the “Return to Western Azerbaijan” festival took place in Nakhichevan on November 23-24, 2023, following the “Road to Western Azerbaijan” conference.<sup>45</sup> This festival, organized by Baku’s representative office in Nakhichevan, the Ministry of Education and Science of Azerbaijan, and Nakhichevan State University, featured politicized maps that claimed vast swathes of Armenia. The festival also promoted photographs and decorative art that depicted Armenian territory with Azerbaijani place names.

Additionally, on January 10, 2024, the State Pedagogical University of Azerbaijan announced the establishment of a ‘Western Azerbaijan’ research center. This center is set to host symposia, seminars, and conferences around the ‘Western Azerbaijan’ project.<sup>46</sup> This initiative aims to provide a pseudo-scientific basis for state policies, reinforcing a collective historical memory and normalizing territorial claims against the Republic of Armenia through systematic historical revisionism.

The outlined evidence demonstrates that Azerbaijan has adopted the ‘Western Azerbaijan’ project as a state strategy to create a new sense of national unity around a revised national vision. As part of this long-term plan, questioning the Republic of Armenia's right to exist reveals Azerbaijan's underlying intentions, similar to its approach towards Nagorno-Karabakh. This strategy aims for the de-Armenization of the region's population and the elimination of any traces of Armenian heritage that could signify their historical presence and claim to their homeland.



## *Azerbaijan's Irredentist Playbook*

- ▶ The strategy's first stage involves questioning historical facts and fabricating an artificial history, portraying Armenians as 'newcomers' with hollow claims to territorial rights.
- ▶ The second stage entails fostering hatred and animosity towards Armenians among the Azerbaijani public, advancing the idea that Armenians are perpetrators of violence.
- ▶ The third stage involves preparing for war and normalizing aggression (*politico-psychological justification*) against Armenia's people — and statehood.

## *Back up from Russia*

ISA's analysis indicates that Baku's 'Western Azerbaijan' project is likely supported by Moscow. Recently, Russian policy figures have referenced the 'Western Azerbaijan' concept in discussions around Armenia. As Dmitry Suslov, Deputy Director of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at Moscow's National Research University Higher School of Economics, highlighted during his speech in Yerevan, "If Armenia were to leave the CSTO and negotiate the withdrawal of Russian bases from its territory, Western Azerbaijan would become a de facto and de jure reality."<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Azerbaijan and Russia's irredentist strategies exhibit notable similarities. Both regimes — drawing from Soviet-era methods of adversary dehumanization — are advancing their respective irredentist ambitions via popular, high-caliber campaigns. These campaigns serve to legitimize expansionist agendas, while normalizing irredentist sentiments among public audiences. Both Putin and Aliyev seek to validate geopolitical ambitions by challenging the legitimacy of neighboring states and rationalizing aggression through purported historical claims.

Baku's active promotion of the 'Western Azerbaijan' concept reflects a strategic effort to reshape historical and territorial narratives around Armenia. This strategy is multifaceted, involving extensive media propaganda, state-sponsored cultural and historical events, and systematic revisionism of historical facts. State-owned and affiliated media channels play a pivotal role in this narrative construction, frequently broadcasting programs that recast the Republic of Armenia as 'Western Azerbaijan.' This campaign effectively aims to delegitimize Armenian statehood while rallying Azeri society around a common irredentist goal, paralleling Russia's tactics in its own regional endeavors.

Against this backdrop of maturing irredentist sentiments, Azerbaijani discourse around regional peace is increasingly driven by a collective vision in which Armenia — and its people — are marginalized or eliminated from the geopolitical map.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term 'irredentism' is understood here in line with Oxford Dictionary's explanation, as a policy of advocating the restoration to a country of any territory formerly belonging to it.

<sup>2</sup> Statement following quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel, 6 October 2022. European Council/ Council of the (Accessed 13/05/2024)

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<sup>6</sup> Итоги выборов-2024: Путин побеждает с рекордными результатом и явкой — как и хотел Кремль. 17 March, 2024, BBC Russian. (Accessed on 01/05/2024) <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/clj16yn123wo>

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<sup>8</sup> Ильхам Алиев о первой встрече Гейдара Алиева и Путина. 16 March, 2018. MediaAz. (Accessed on 12/05/2024) <https://media.az/politics/1067699599/ilham-aliev-o-pervoy-vstreche-geydara-alieva-i-putina-video/>

<sup>9</sup> Встреча с Президентом Азербайджана Ильхамом Алиевым. 25 May 2023. Kremlin. (Accessed on 01/06/2024) <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71205>

<sup>10</sup> Путин рассказал о национальной идее России. 10 May 2020, TASS. (Accessed on 26/06/2024) <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8438743>

<sup>11</sup> Meeting of the President Ilham Aliyev with the participants of the 2nd Shusha Global Media Forum, 20 July, 2024. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (Accessed on 26/06/2024)

<https://president.az/en/articles/view/66533>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Путин напомнил о формировании огромной Украины при советской власти. 3 November, 2023, Izvestiya. (Accessed 11/06/2024) <https://iz.ru/1599786/2023-11-03/putin-napomnil-o-formirovanii-ogromnoi-ukrainy-pri-sovetskoi-vlasti>

<sup>14</sup> Президент Ильхам Алиев: Нынешняя Армения – это искусственное государство, созданное на исторической азербайджанской земле. 25 November 2015, Trend News Agency. (Accessed 11/06/2024) <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2460642.html>

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