



Azerbaijan in Brief

Since Azerbaijan’s independence in 1991, a tightly-knit group centered around the late President Heydar Aliyev - and now his son, Ilham Aliyev - has effectively controlled the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Baku

is quick to retaliate against critics, including journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders, civil society activists, and religious minorities, and uses tight restrictions on civil society and independent media to maintain power. The late 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, launched by Azerbaijan to retake territory lost to Armenia in the 1990s, was accompanied by enormous domestic propaganda campaigns and increased censorship.

Key Data	
GDP (2020)	\$42.6 billion
FDI (2020)	\$507 million
Population	10.1 million
FreedomHouse FreedomScore (2021)	10/100
TI Corruption Perceptions Index Score (2020)	30/100

Corruption is endemic in Azerbaijan. Oil and gas dominate the economy, accounting for 88 percent of its export revenue. The profits from these exports are significantly concentrated among a small group of the Aliyev regime’s supporters and relatives. Several hydrocarbon pipelines that supply Azerbaijan’s immediate neighbors and Western Europe with Azerbaijani and Central Asian exports begin in Azerbaijan.

The Human Rights Agenda

While Aliyev pardoned and released dozens of political prisoners in 2019, it was not the beginning of a wholesale reform of his architecture of repression that many had hoped. The most serious human rights concerns in Azerbaijan include government control over civil society and independent media, the judicial system’s lack of independence and campaign to target lawyers, and the police’s systematic use of torture.

Restrictions and Control of Civil Society

Azerbaijan must revise NGO registration and administration laws to bring them in line with international standards for freedom of association.

Azerbaijan wields its NGO law, which gives the government broad discretion to penalize NGOs for minor infractions of administrative regulations and otherwise interfere their operations and funding, against organizations it deems threatening or anti-government. While some groups were recently granted tax exemptions, many are unable to even register because they are officially rejected or never receive a decision. In May 2021, the European Court of Human Rights issued 25 judgments that found Azerbaijan violated its citizens’ right to freedom of association by failing to register NGOs. The repression against civil society extends to international groups, many of which have been forced to stop operating inside Azerbaijan, including the National Democratic Institute, IREX, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Intolerance to Independent Lawyers

Azerbaijan must stop harassing human rights lawyers and bring the Administrative Codes and the Law on Lawyers and Lawyer Activities into compliance with international standards for the independence of the legal profession.

The government has escalated its harassment and attacks on lawyers in the country, which has reduced the number of independent lawyers to only twelve percent of the average among Council of Europe states. Since 2018, lawyers have been prohibited from representing clients in court unless they are members of the government-controlled Azerbaijan Bar Association (ABA). Prior to 2018, estimates suggest that 90% of cases were handled by non-members of the ABA.

Lawyers known for representing political prisoners or publicly speaking out about human rights abuses are routinely disbarred or refused ABA membership. Since 2016, at least 15 independent lawyers known to take such cases have faced disbarment, disciplinary procedures, or other forms of judicial harassment designed to impair their practice.

Freedom of Expression

Azerbaijan should lift bans on foreign and independent media outlets, end unjustified persecution of journalists, and release those wrongfully imprisoned for their journalism activities.

The media climate is extremely restrictive, forcing independent journalists and bloggers to self-censor or otherwise face reprisal from the government. Pro-government ruling elites have captured traditional media outlets such as television, radio, and newspapers while many independent media outlets, including RFE/RL and the BBC, are blocked or banned from broadcasting in the country. Sputnik, a Russian state-owned news agency, is able to broadcast freely in Azerbaijan. The few independent Azerbaijani journalists and opposition media sources operate at great personal risk. As of September 2021, seven journalists and bloggers remain in prison. Media censorship and respect for freedom of expression worsened considerably in 2020 due to significant events including parliamentary elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the month-long Nagorno-Karabakh war.

Torture and Mistreatment

Azerbaijan must strengthen its anti-torture laws, bolster torture-prevent efforts and policies, and investigate and prosecute all instances of torture or ill-treatment.

Torture remains a systematic abuse in Azerbaijan, especially during investigations and pre-trial police custody. Young people, those with religious associations, and those detained by police in rural areas are among the most likely to report torture. Deaths in custody under perplexing circumstances are another alarming trend.

Azerbaijan in the International Context

Azerbaijan's status as a major oil and gas supplier, and location between Central Asia, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Europe enhances its geostrategic importance, especially among E.U. countries eager to decrease their reliance on Russian gas. Azerbaijan already supplies 10% of the E.U.'s gas imports and may play an important role in transporting Turkmen gas to the E.U. in the future. Nonetheless, relations with the E.U. remain tenuous, due in part to Azerbaijan's desire to avoid alliances and bristling at criticism of its repressive policies at home.

While Azerbaijan has generally avoided entanglements with Russia, Russia's role as a mediator during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, and later as a guarantor of peace, renewed its preeminence in regional security. The US' position is less clear. While Azerbaijan was successful in retaking much of the territory it had previously lost in the war, it left in shambles the decades-long peace negotiations known as the Minsk Process that were supported by the U.S., Russia, and France. Beyond the recent conflict, U.S. interests in Azerbaijan's geographic location include enhancing regional connectivity and European energy security.

Azerbaijan's relationship with Turkey, with which it shares culture, language, and a border, is among its most significant. This is especially evident in the role Turkey played in the 2020 war on Azerbaijan's behalf. Just prior to the conflict, Turkey supplied Azerbaijan significant armaments, including high-tech Turkish-made drones. In early 2021, Turkey and Azerbaijan deepened their military cooperation and agreed on a mutual defense pact. What is more, Azerbaijan recently overcame Russia as Turkey's main gas supplier, further cementing their relationship.

Azerbaijan's relationship with China is also growing, especially since the recent launch of new transport routes for Chinese goods via Azerbaijan. Bolstered by their shared authoritarian governance style, Chinese-Azerbaijani relations are likely to deepen into the future.

