
AZERBAIJAN PERCEIVED AS INDEPENDENT PLAYER BOTH WEST AND EAST: PRESIDENT ALIYEV'S INTERVIEW WITH ROSSIYA SEGODNYA

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On December 17, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan İlham Aliyev was interviewed by Dmitry Kiselev, Director General of the Rossiya Segodnya International News Agency, author and host of the Vesti Nedeli program on the Rossiya-1 television channel, for the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company and Russias RIA Novosti agency.

- Mr. President, please accept our heartfelt gratitude for agreeing to give an interview to the Russian company VGTRK and the RIA Novosti agency. In 2022, literally a few days before the start of the special military operation, just a few hours before it, you signed the Declaration on Allied Interaction with President Putin in Moscow. The world has dramatically changed ever since. What does the alliance between Azerbaijan and Russia mean now?

- Yes, you are absolutely right. The Declaration on Allied Interaction was signed on 22 February 2022. And, as you correctly noted, the situation in our region and in the world as a whole has undergone significant changes. However, it has not affected the nature and form of cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan. I believe that the signing of such a declaration is a demonstration of the long path that we have traversed together in more than 30 years, working hard and building up the capacity for cooperation in trade, economic and political spheres and testing each other in various difficult situations. Therefore, I believe that the very fact of signing such a declaration is a major political step both on the part of Russia and on the part of Azerbaijan. It is the highest form of interaction and cooperation, especially if we take into account the fact that we are neighboring countries, neighbors both in the Caucasus and in the Caspian region. In many ways, the foreign policy priorities of our countries coincide, so, of course, the signing of such a document is a historic event, I would say.

But, of course, as allies, we immediately began to work hard in various areas, even those that were somewhat in the shadow of the bilateral format.

In the years that have passed since the signing of the declaration, Russian President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin paid a very significant and historic visit to Azerbaijan. He had visited us many times before, but this visit was quite special. It was a state visit, it was made in the summer of this year for the first time, and within the framework of that visit we not only reaffirmed the allied nature of our relations, but also outlined ways to further develop bilateral cooperation. Today, Russia and Azerbaijan are two reliable partners, and I think that there is no doubt about this in

Azerbaijan or Russia. As I have already said, in difficult times for our countries, we have always demonstrated understanding of the situation and acted in a friendly manner. I am confident that this will continue to be the case.

Of course, we keep on finding new areas for trade and economic cooperation, our trade is on the rise, perhaps not as fast as we would like it to, but there is a momentum nonetheless. We are also reaching pre-COVID levels in terms of visits of Russians to Azerbaijan, which also shows that the atmosphere both politically and in terms of people-to-people contacts is as positive as possible, because such trips and mutual visits are carried out in directions people feel comfortable in. We are observing a significant increase in mutual visits over the last two to three years. But the main evidence is the increase in the number of flights between our countries. I think there are at least twice as many flights now as in Soviet years.

So, we are happy with the way our relations are developing, we value them, and I am sure that this positive dynamic will be maintained next year as well.

- Nevertheless, it is a war time for Russia now. NATO says that the bloc should be ready for war with Russia in the next five to seven years. Practical preparations for that are underway. The conscription system has been changed, and Andrey Belousov spoke about that at the expanded board meeting of the Russian Defense Ministry on Monday. He said that in 10 days there should be 100,000 NATO soldiers near Russia's borders, 300,000 soldiers in 30 days, and 800,000 in 180 days. NATO plans to deploy medium-range missiles to Germany in 2026, despite Putin's warning that Russia will not do so unless NATO does. Defense Minister of Russia Andrey Belousov said at an expanded Defense Ministry board meeting in the presence of the president on Monday that Russia should be ready for war with NATO in the next decade. What will this mean for allied relations between Azerbaijan and Russia?

- I would like to express hope that things will not reach the point of a clear confrontation between NATO and Russia. First of all, because everyone understands the catastrophic consequences of this for the whole world, for all countries and, of course, for countries bordering the region. Secondly, I do hope that the change of administration in the United States will also usher changes in foreign policy objectives. The experience of Mr. Trump's first presidential term, as well as the statements made by him and members of his team during and after the election campaign allow us some hope. Therefore, imagining a scenario in which NATO and Russia will engage in a hot war would be tantamount to imagining a global apocalypse. It is clear that there will be no winners in this war. And no countries, even those located far away from the NATO region or Russian territory will feel safe. I do believe that there is enough political wisdom in Washington, Moscow, and other capitals to prevent such a nightmare scenario from materializing.

As for Azerbaijan's commitments, we treat all our commitments as responsibly as possible and we will continue to do the same. I think that Azerbaijan can also contribute to the cause of détente, a slightly forgotten word. I believe that this word is in demand in the international lexicon these days and I hope it will be used □ due to the peculiarities of Azerbaijan's foreign policy and the fact that Azerbaijan is perceived as an absolutely independent player both in the West and in the East, a country pursuing an independent foreign policy, and also due to the fact that it is the only country that is an ally of Russia and, at the same time, an ally of Türkiye, a NATO member. There is no other such country in the world. So, if we go further down the logical chain of our commitments, we have a diversified network of allied commitments. And we will naturally proceed from the real situation on the ground. I want to say again that at some stage Azerbaijan's efforts may prove to

be in demand. A series of meetings were held here at the level of the Chief of General Staff of the Russian Army and the Chief of NATO Military Committee. The top brass of the United States and Russia have also met in Baku. After all, Baku was not chosen by chance. There are not too many countries that enjoy the trust of the West, Russia, and the East. And there are not too many countries that are not biased by formal or informal membership in some military and political structures. Therefore, should there be such a need, we are ready to make our contribution to defusing tensions.

- In Russia, this war is perceived not as a war with Ukraine, but as a civilizational battle with the West on the territory of Ukraine for a new world order, because any peace is the result of war, and Azerbaijan knows this very well, of course. You talk about allied relations with Türkiye. Do you need a Turkish military base in Azerbaijan?

- No, we don't in a nutshell. If I expand my answer a bit, taking into account the fact that such information appears in certain media from time to time, I have to say that there is no need for that. Azerbaijan has been cooperating with Türkiye militarily since the restoration of independence, since the beginning of 1992. This is when our military cooperation started and it continues to this day. Of course, the forms change depending on the need, but I have to say that over the course of more than 30 years, Türkiye and its military structures have played a great role in modernizing the Azerbaijani army and bringing it to high standards in terms of combat capability, planning of operations, situation analysis, and military intelligence potential. So, we are very grateful to our Turkish friends for such assistance.

The Declaration on Allied Relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, which was signed a year before the Declaration between Azerbaijan and Russia, contains a clause that provides for mutual military assistance in case of threat or an act of aggression. So, it is an obligation of both Azerbaijan and Türkiye to come to the aid in case one or the other country faces an external threat and an act of external aggression. Therefore, this paragraph of the declaration essentially makes the establishment of permanent military infrastructures on this or that territory absolutely unnecessary.

Going back to the fake news, I would like to say that it is virtually impossible to hide any military base in any part of the world these days. Therefore, such fake news are nothing but political speculation. We and Türkiye annually conduct more than 10 joint exercises – half in Azerbaijan and half in Türkiye. In fact, we have achieved a high degree of operability of military operations. Of course, this is an important factor for stability in the Caucasus. Because today's world, and the way events are unfolding, is further evidence that the world has changed dramatically. The realities that were created, and the rules of the game defined by the results of World War II, no longer work. Even global actors are not hiding it. The power factor is once again coming to the forefront of political aspirations. And countries that realized this sooner than later can feel safer today – although no country can feel completely safe in today's world.

- Does Azerbaijan plan to continue buying Russian weapons and in what volumes?

- Yes, we do, but I have to say that no new contracts for the purchase of Russian weapons were signed in the last three years at least. And the reason for this is that the Russian defense industry works for the domestic consumer, so to speak. As far as I know, Russia has temporarily withdrawn from the international arms market for obvious reasons. The deadline for the implementation of some contracts that were signed even four years ago was pushed back at Russia's request. We did

this too, understanding the situation, as a result of which these contracts cannot be realized. But we are also closely following the innovations of the Russian defense industry. We have already developed new requests. We sent them relatively recently, and as the Russian defense industry is ready, we will, of course, enter into new contracts. So, I consider this process as temporarily suspended for objective reasons.

- Nikol Pashinyan has declared a point of no return in his relations with the CSTO and is intensifying relations with France. What does this mean for regional security, for Azerbaijan in particular?

- It means a direct threat, which we have repeatedly spoken about both publicly and in my talks with the Armenian Prime Minister. We conveyed our concerns to him. We have also communicated our concern to the government of France, to the leadership of the United States, which, during the Biden administration, changed its balanced approach to countries of the South Caucasus and embarked on a path of unilateral support for Armenia. There are plenty of examples showing that these threats are quite serious. The weapons that Macron's government is supplying to Armenia are offensive weapons, lethal weapons that pose a practical threat to Azerbaijan. Given the fact that our border with Armenia is more than a thousand kilometers long, many settlements are close to the border and former refugees are returning to most of these settlements, we, of course, cannot be mere bystanders in this process. We have repeatedly informed Armenia and its patrons in the U.S. State Department that this must be stopped. But unfortunately, we have not been heard, the process of arming Armenia is going on at an alarmingly fast pace. We are monitoring everything that is going on there as much we can. From a technical point of view, given the depth of the Armenian territory, it is not particularly difficult to do this today. France, of course, is the leader in this issue. India is in the second place and the United States is in third. Although France and India do not hide the fact that they supply lethal weapons to Armenia, they even somehow brag about it, probably in an effort to annoy us, the USA does not admit it. We, however, have tracked military transport planes that landed in Armenian airports and carried weapons there.

We naturally had to take adequate measures. Our military budget for 2025 will be record high. It is about five billion dollars. We are forced to do that. We would not spend at least 60 percent of this amount if there were no such threats. We would spend it on the reconstruction of Karabakh, on social payments, etc. But we are forced to do it and we will do it. I believe that this is a detrimental path. First of all, Armenia will not stand the arms race with us, despite the fact that they get most of the arms from the West for free or on loan, which, of course, will be written off. But even in this case they will not withstand an arms race with us. They should not forget the results of the Second Karabakh War and the anti-terror operation of September 2023. They should also realize that despite the maximum support from Macron's regime, as well as the U.S. State Department, if they plan yet another provocation against us here on the ground, no-one will help them. After all, how did Macron help them in 2020 or 2023? Did he support them by holding them by the arm or I don't know by what other place? That's it. We know very well what he is capable of. So, we have been informing and will continue to inform the Armenian sponsors – conditionally speaking, the Soros people in Washington – both within the framework of negotiations and within the framework of the delimitation commission working between Armenia and Azerbaijan that this must stop. But if it continues, it will mean that there should be no claims against us afterwards either.

- *But at one time, it looked as if a peace treaty was imminent. Why hasn't it been signed? People were literally standing on tiptoe.*

- Yes. For some reason, these two processes are somehow viewed separately in the West. We believe that these two processes should be integrated. The peace treaty and the simultaneous arming of Armenia against us are two incompatible courses. After all, we have actually made great progress with the peace treaty. Of the 17 articles of this document, 15 have been agreed upon, and only two remain outstanding. And during my last meeting with the Armenian Prime Minister in Kazan, what I heard and felt was that these two outstanding articles can also be accepted by Armenia. I mean our conditions. In this case....

- *Which articles, if I may clarify?*

- One of them is about refraining from filing international lawsuits against each other. I think this is a mutually acceptable article. We have recently completed a damage analysis, a very detailed one. We spent four years on it and it documents everything. The damage caused to us during the years of occupation exceeds 150 billion dollars. So, I think that refraining from mutual lawsuits would be mutually acceptable. And the other article concerns the non-deployment of representatives of other countries on our border. Why is this important for us? Because, under the guise of so-called European observers, NATO infrastructure has been created on the Armenian side of the border with us. After all, the issue of sending these observers was agreed upon with us in October 2022 at a quadrilateral meeting between Pashinyan, President of the European Council Charles Michel, the President of France, and myself. At that time, we had not yet excluded France from the normalization process. And it was agreed that for two months, a limited contingent of EU representatives would...

- *Specifically observers...*

- Specifically observers. Forty people were supposed to be deployed for two months. After that, this mission was extended without our consent, and the argument was as follows: why should we agree to this with you if it is a mission on the territory of Armenia? Our argument was this: then why did you agree with us in the first place? This is wrong. Then, the number was increased to more than 200 people. Moreover, this mission seamlessly turned into a NATO mission, as representatives of Canada also joined it. So, this is the second article on which we must come to an agreement.

There are two more things the Armenian side needs to do. The first is to amend its Constitution. Because the Armenian Constitution contains a reference to the Declaration of Independence, which, in turn, includes territorial claims against Azerbaijan and declares the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region as part of Armenia. Therefore, changing the Constitution is not a whim of ours but an objective necessity. Our second condition is the abolition of the OSCE Minsk Group. Since this issue is decided by consensus, it is formally impossible to do it without Armenia's consent. Although the OSCE Minsk Group has not been functional for a long time, it still formally exists. Our question is this: if Armenia has recognized Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan and the Minsk Group was created to solve the Karabakh issue, why is it still needed? So, Armenia's reluctance to liquidate it and to apply together with us to the OSCE for its abolition demonstrates that the plans of the revanchists are quite serious. This is essentially it. If all this is resolved, there will be no more obstacles to signing the peace treaty.

As for the ongoing arms race, it cannot be part of the peace treaty, of course, but it will be a part of another format of interaction with Armenia. We will continue to try to make the Armenian side aware of the harmfulness of such actions, first and foremost, for themselves.

- Are there any Armenians left in Karabakh? What is the situation like there now?

- As of about two months ago, the latest information indicated that there were approximately 20 residents of Armenian nationality living there. Even before we conducted the one-day anti-terror operation in September 2023, we had officially published a plan for the reintegration of Karabakh Armenians into the Azerbaijani state. This was done publicly and posted online. Because our numerous attempts to establish contact with representatives of the Armenian public turned out to be unsuccessful. They ignored us, did not want to meet with us and did not want to talk to us. And then, in order to reach out to those who live there, we posted it on the Internet. And everything in it was spelled out quite clearly. Anyone can look at it – starting from education, preservation of the cultural environment, reintegration, ways of integration, applying for a residence permit, applying for citizenship or applying for a work permit. So it is like this. If any of them thought that they were living in an obscure Nagorno-Karabakh Republic after everything that had happened, that's their own problem. That is, they are just like any other person. A person from Azerbaijan goes to Russia to work, gets a residence permit or a work permit, gets registered, and then applies for citizenship. This is the process. We proposed that too, but it was rejected. And when the situation there changed, those who stayed there – they turned out to be few, more than 30 people, some of them subsequently left – but those who stayed are still receiving social assistance from Azerbaijan, from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, their treatment, provision with food, etc. So, their life there is fully secured. So, this is the situation.

At the same time, the community of Azerbaijanis who were natives of Armenia and were deported in the late 1980s and early 1990s, about 300,000 people, has officially applied to the Armenian leadership, requesting conditions for their return and reintegration.

- Already in Armenia?

- Already in Armenia. The fact that they were deported from there in the early 1990s does not mean that they have no right to return. Therefore, we are still waiting for a response from the Armenian leadership on how they envision the reintegration of Azerbaijanis into their historical lands. I think that if these two processes follow a parallel course, it will create an even better

public atmosphere for peace. Because peace is not solely about a signature under a peace treaty, it is also about a public consensus. And the wounds we received during the years of occupation have not yet healed, despite 30 years. It takes time. And this requires a public environment, it requires communication, we need to speak in a human language. This is approximately the situation now.

- Are Russian companies involved in the reconstruction of Karabakh? Tell us about it.

- Yes, a project on the construction of a kindergarten has recently started on behalf of the governor of the Astrakhan region. He recently visited us and also traveled to the Gubadli district, where this social infrastructure facility will be built. So, we are very grateful for this attention. There are several companies from Russia that are involved as suppliers of goods and services for the reconstruction. There are also Russian contractors, but I wouldn't say there are a lot of them. I think there could be more because the scope of the reconstruction work is quite extensive and primarily covers now infrastructure projects, roads, railroads, tunnels, bridges, i.e. many Russian companies that have good experience in this field. So we...

- Would welcome them?

- Yes, absolutely. We would welcome this and we do □ both in terms of assistance, like from the Astrakhan region, and in terms of simply participating in projects. There are investment projects. The first investment project, by the way, was implemented by Tatarstan. It is a KAMAZ service center in the Jabrayil district, which was inaugurated by the head of Tatarstan and myself. By the way, today I will also have a meeting with the head of Tatarstan. The Tatarstan delegation is in Baku. So, this was the first investment project, i.e. the first foreign investment project was also Russian. So, we look forward to investments, but contractors are also welcome.

- Its very nice. Does Azerbaijan need a nuclear power plant?

- I will reveal our energy agenda a little bit so that it will be clear to the viewers where we are and what we are doing. The proven reserves of natural gas in Azerbaijan are around 2.6 trillion cubic meters. Considering that the oil field we have been developing over 30 years has gone from 500 million tons to one and a half billion tons, according to the latest estimates, the same can be roughly said about our gas and gas condensate fields. In other words, 2.6 trillion is the estimate of 10 years ago. It is clear that with this potential and export volumes of 25 billion cubic meters, we do not need additional sources of energy. In addition, over the past three years, we implemented projects on the creation of small hydropower plants in Karabakh and East Zangezur with a capacity of about 300 megawatts, and in two years this figure will reach 500. We are also extensively developing solar and wind energy through foreign investments. The World Bank estimates wind energy potential in the Caspian Sea alone at 157,000 megawatts. By 2030, the contracts already signed and those already in operation will give us 6,000 megawatts. So, this is a part of the answer to the question of whether we need a nuclear power plant. Now let me move on to the other part, which I think might also be interesting. First of all, from the perspective of another sector of the economy.

- It is an entire industry.

- Of course. It is an industry , it is potential, it is personnel, it is something completely new, which we have never had before. Secondly, it is a trend that exists in the world, and we do not want to fall behind it. Thats why I have already issued instructions to explore the potential of experimental

structures – experimental, scientific, mini-reactors for scientific purposes, to see what benefits this might bring us from that perspective.

Considering that this idea is fairly expensive, and taking into account that solar and wind energy projects in Azerbaijan are implemented by foreign investors, with the state not investing anything but simply receiving the potential, then, of course, we would be more interested in investment projects. If a company from a certain country shows such interest, we could act as co-investors as well. I think that this could be a good project for investment, because now, literally these days, in the next few weeks or perhaps a couple of months, the feasibility study for the construction of an energy cable from Azerbaijan to Europe along the Black Sea will be finalized. At the initial stage, it is 4,000 megawatts, but taking into account the energy needs of European countries, and even considering that they are investing a lot themselves, we know they will still be in short supply. So, additional sources of clean green energy will be needed. So, this could be a good driver. Also, domestic electricity prices in Azerbaijan are such that investing in this sector and selling electricity to consumers would be absolutely acceptable for companies from a commercial point of view. So, I have tried to answer the question. It's neither yes nor no. It is most likely yes, but... And then our somewhat of a homework begins.

- Azerbaijan recently hosted a grandiose climate summit. What difficulties did you encounter, and what were the main results of this summit?

- The primary difficulty was associated with the fact that we had limited time. Countries are usually allowed two years to prepare. In our case, it was 11 months. This was because just two to three days before the decision was made last December, Armenia was blocking Azerbaijan's candidacy. Since there was no consensus, the question of whether COP29 would be held in Baku was to be decided in the last days. So, we only had 11 months to prepare, and that was the biggest difficulty. We had to create space so that we could host more than 70,000 people. There were 76,000 registered participants. We also had to accommodate them, recertify the hotel facilities because we do not have a hotel infrastructure for such a large number of visitors, and determine the location of their accommodation. For this purpose, different recreation areas were identified, along with finished but not yet commissioned housing facilities. These had to be brought into compliance with hotel standards. It was a huge organizational effort, but we coped with it with dignity. As far as I know, there were 10 complaints about the organization during the entire period of the conference, but they were immediately and promptly resolved, so, as they say, the guests were all satisfied.

The second difficulty, if we can call it a difficulty, rather a certain discomfort, was about the absolutely unmotivated feeling of aggression, anger mixed with envy, and some kind of rejection of Azerbaijan - how is it that such a country was suddenly awarded such a conference? They started to call us a petro-state in various Western media, although there is nothing bad about it. Speaking at the opening ceremony, I said that if we were described as a petro-state in the 19th century, when we supplied more than 50 percent of the world's oil, it would have been normal, but not today, when the fake news of a country that produces almost a billion tons of oil, I mean the United States, as opposed to our 30 million, describes us as a petro-state.

- Thirty?

- Yes, our oil production is around 30 million in total. When the neighbor of this country, I mean Canada, produces 10 times more oil than we do, and describes us as a petro-state, it is unfair. But

a group of such fake news outlets – by the way, this is not my expression, I borrowed it from President Trump and I like it very much, I think it is very concise and very targeted, the lying four, as we call them - the Washington Post, the New York Times, Figaro, and Le Monde – this lying four, together with the State Department toadeaters in the form of various non-governmental organizations, have unleashed a smear campaign, a campaign of daily attacks on us. Every day, there were at least a couple dozen articles. This did not cause us any difficulties, it simply caused a feeling of disgust and revulsion. And, of course, it was difficult to achieve a result, because we are not a global actor in this area. Azerbaijan's share in global gas emissions is 0.1 percent, while the US accounts for 12 percent and the European Union has more than...

- *And even that they underestimate.*

- They underestimate even that. Yes.

- *They underestimate it several times. This is a separate topic.*

- I am simply quoting the figures that are supposedly official. Therefore, we used all our diplomatic experience and, first of all, the experience of presiding over the Non-Aligned Movement. There are 120 countries there, after all. And, the experience of active membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in building bridges and achieving results. It was not easy. But, we call this conference the Baku Breakthrough for a reason. We managed to agree on Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which had been discussed since 2015. In other words, the issue of carbon markets was not agreed upon for almost 10 years. Here in Baku we achieved this, and it became functional. This will allow countries the opportunity to sell quotas and thus try to keep global emissions within the desired limits. The second point some considered a failure but I see it as a success is that we managed to agree the amount of annual spending on climate issues. This is an amount of 300 billion dollars. The request was for a trillion. But it was obvious that no one was ready to give a trillion. If we proceed from the fact that the previous agreed amount was 100 billion and here it was 300 billion, it is certainly hard to call this a failure. And, much more. A total of 14 initiatives were put forward by Azerbaijan. The vast majority of countries joined these initiatives, with the exception of countries such as France and Luxembourg. Well, it is clear why France, why Luxembourg follows France is probably also clear. So, this is how I would describe this conference. And, of course, 197 countries, 80 heads of state and government, 76,000 registered participants. And this is against the backdrop of boycott attempts. It was the presentation of our country.

- *Of course, Azerbaijan deserves congratulation on this.*

- Thank you.

- *You mentioned France and how Azerbaijan is facing attacks from fake news. The President of France even allowed himself to attack Azerbaijan at the UN General Assembly. In response, you recalled the overseas territories of France, which are facing real neocolonialism. Then, Josep Borrell stepped in and also attacked Azerbaijan. Can't Europe be criticized? What is the matter? What's going on?*

- They are not used to someone lecturing them on justice. They are used to lecturing others. They are used to being bowed to, asked for something, consulted, that nothing can be done without their permission. This is how former colonial and now some neocolonial countries are used to living and thinking, and this is deeply rooted in their minds. In principle, we have never had any

problems with France. I will tell you even more. We cooperated with France perhaps even more than with any other European country before Macron came to power in France. When my father was elected President in 1993, he made his first official visit to France. They were the first to invite him. When I became President in 2003, France was also the first country to invite me, and my first visit was there. Then, we actively cooperated, many French companies worked here. We have 13 twin cities with French cities.

- *Twin cities?*

- Yes, of course. But these exorbitant ambitions and unfounded megalomania of the Macron government essentially threw all this into the abyss. Because when the Second Karabakh War began and they clearly sided with the occupiers, this was the first such signal that something in our relations wasn't right. Well, on their part. Then, they had to accept these results, but continued to do everything to harm the process. Mr. Barnier, who was recently thrown out of the post of prime minister, illegally visited Karabakh as a French politician after 2020. So, all these interference attempts led to the fact that our relations simply slid into a crisis. But, even more was to follow. After September 2023, they tried to push this issue through to the Security Council five times and failed all five times. We were supported by a number of countries that did not allow them to even put this issue onto the agenda. Then, they went the other way – as the saying goes, we will go the other way – to the European Union. They tried to sanction Azerbaijan. What for? For restoring our sovereignty? And they failed yet again. Then, they became completely embittered with us and are now using all methods to discredit us.

As for their colonial past, some perceive this as our response, but I think that this probably has a deeper nature. Whereas at the very beginning perhaps, it was possible to see it this way, now, when we are deeply immersed in this topic, when we see the disgusting face of French colonialism, when our representatives actively communicate with residents of French colonies – in their countries, in Baku and in other locations – we actually see what has been hidden from the world public for so many years. And why? Because no one wanted to get involved. No one wanted a headache. Because they blackmail others. Even to us, when our relations entered the cold war phase, the initial messages were: Don't forget that we are a great country.

- *But what is hidden? You mentioned that something is hidden. What is it?*

- What do you mean? The merciless exploitation of natural resources.

- *Do you mean New Caledonia?*

- Not only that. I think there are thirteen or fifteen places like New Caledonia. Recently, a tsunami occurred in one of them, the island of Mayotte. Euronews reported yesterday: 75 percent of the population of the island of Mayotte lives below the poverty line, 30 to 40 percent of housing is dilapidated. And this is legally French territory, although it is a part of the Comoro Islands. It is one of the islands of the Comoro state. France illegally holds it, but by what right?

During the riots in New Caledonia, they killed 13 people, injured more than 100, and arrested more than 1,000. Moreover, the leaders of the popular protest were taken to France and are held in custody. So, this is Macron's dictatorship. This is Macron's regime. And when I talk about this, they unleash all their watchdogs on me in the form of non-governmental organizations or the media. So again, whereas we, the Azerbaijani public, began to keep this topic on the agenda as a response, now everything is much more serious. Naturally, our hearts are with these peoples because they

have been denied all rights. What is there to be said about New Caledonia if here, right in the center of Europe, in Corsica, they ban the Corsican language, the Corsican language cannot be used in public places? What is this after all? Is this democracy? Are these human rights? In other words, France may have once been a great country, a country of great thinkers, great scientists, and writers. But it is no longer the case. The Macron regime is essentially turning France into a failed state. Let me give you a few examples: failure in Africa, the Sahel region. They were told - adieu. Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali. Next up is Chad, which has already asked them out, and Senegal, where the president has changed and a man of national spirit has come to power. And this is only the beginning. A failure in Lebanon, a complete failure, a failure in Azerbaijan, a failure in Georgia. Look at what's happening in domestic politics. A complete chaos. A new prime minister is appointed. And his husband or wife, I don't know who is who there, is appointed minister of foreign affairs. After a failure in the European Parliament elections, they are turned into scapegoats. Barnier, who is pulled out of mothballs, is appointed, but he also becomes a scapegoat. Now they have found someone else. Wouldn't it be better to start with yourself? This is how they used to say in Soviet times, start with self-criticism. Well, look, Moody's is downgrading France's ratings month after month. What triple-A rating? Now it's just a little 'A'. Small, small, very small.

- The external debt is enormous there.

- Failure. Failure after failure. And who is the author of this failure? Mr. Macron. That is what they need to think about, not how to harm Azerbaijan. They have already broken their teeth on us. Let them at least save the rest.

- How would you assess what is happening in Georgia now?

- In Georgia, I see that the situation is stabilizing. And we are happy about this. Georgia is an important partner and a close friend for us. For centuries, our nations have lived in peace and harmony. Therefore, destabilization, or the threat of destabilization, in Georgia, as harmful as it is for Georgia, is also harmful for Azerbaijan. Therefore, for our part, we strive for, and are doing everything to ensure, that the situation in Georgia aligns with the political direction, is stable, and that Georgia develops successfully.

Again, returning to external influence, it turns out that there are thousands of non-governmental organizations operating in Georgia that receive funding from the West. And the people working in these organizations or receiving salaries are probably tens of thousands, if not more. And we know what this means.

Because there was a period here in our country when grant-eaters and grant-givers felt perfectly at ease, but we stopped that. Therefore, any grant issued by any structure, be it Azerbaijani or foreign, must be registered and relevant authorities must decide whether to allow it or not.

- Does this correspond to the national interests of Azerbaijan?

- Yes, of course. And secondly, assistance must be unobtrusive. What will the Biden administration be remembered for, among other things? For many things, but among other things, for being too obtrusive. We want to help you. We say: thank you, there is no need for that. But we want to. They have this structure called USAID, which wants to help, but for some reason it helps in the wrong places.

- *It is banned in Russia.*

- It is not banned in our country yet, but I think Trump may ban it.

- *We banned it ourselves in Russia.*

- Ah, you banned it, well, you did the right thing. Now I think that maybe it will be removed. They insistently want to help. But after all, we, as they say, are adults, we understand everything. That is why we have put it all in order. For example, Azerbaijani media cannot be financed by a foreign source even by one percent. They cannot. Why? We do not finance US media, right? Then why should they finance ours? Through their obedient resources like "Voice of America" and "Radio Liberty," they throw dirt at our people and our country day and night anyway. They cast a shadow on our victory over Armenia. So, it seems to me that Georgia has missed a certain amount of time in putting this in order, and when it was done, as they say, the train was already gone. But it is good that now the situation is already moving towards stability. And again, as you can see, Macron's ears are sticking out again. This man just can't sit still in his own country. He must get into Georgia too. What did we see at that ceremony in Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral? Pope Francis ignored the ceremony, he didn't forgive Macron for this Olympic disgrace, of course. And he did the right thing. He went to Corsica, as if to pinch him in one place more painfully.

So, going back to the question about Georgia, it is much broader than it seems. I think this is why those who are usually allowed to go ahead so that they, I mean countries, can articulate sanctions and so on. Because this, if I may say so by analogy, is a battle for the Caucasus. It is clear where Armenia is going. It has essentially de facto withdrawn from the CSTO. According to our verified information, the only reason they are not leaving de jure is because they have not yet received the go-ahead from the Department of State. As soon as they receive it, they will leave. Azerbaijan is an independent and qualified player able to stand up for itself. Therefore, Georgia is an important factor in the battle for the Caucasus. What will it be like? Will it be traditional based on our Caucasian values?

By the way, it was mentioned that I have neglected Borrell. I would like to send him a couple more signals in conclusion. Although in one of my speeches at COP, I even quoted Borrell - he said that Europe is a blooming garden and everything else is a jungle. I said that if we are a jungle, stay away from us. As for Borrell, I think that if he had lived a few decades earlier, he would have been a good foreign minister for dictator Franco. He is just unlucky to live in a different time.

- *Azerbaijan is considered the most Russian-speaking country in the Caucasus, which is actually confirmed by research by the Pushkin Institute of Russian Language. The Russian language is a subject of special care for you. How do you manage this and what does it give to Azerbaijan?*

- It is easy, because it is in demand in society and there have never been and will never be any restrictions, at least during my father's and my time. On the contrary, we are trying in every possible way to create additional conditions so that people know the Russian language better, know it perfectly. We have more than 320 schools with teaching conducted in Russian. In total, about a million of our students are either taught in Russian or study it as a second language. A total of 800,000 people study it as a second language. There are two universities – Moscow State University and Sechenov Academy. Creative groups, mainly theater troupes come here very often, on a regular basis. Therefore, it is in demand, it lives and feels good. What does it give us? Well, first of all, from a purely practical point of view, knowledge of any language enriches you. And a

good knowledge of the language gives you the opportunity to fully delve into literature and some scientific developments. After all, our scientists, for example, receive a lot of information from Russian sources. This gives our people the opportunity to communicate with their friends and colleagues not only in Russia, but also in other CIS countries. So, this communication takes place through the Russian language. I communicate in Russian with all presidents of CIS countries. Our teams communicate in Russian. When we meet, we speak Russian. This is what it gives us. And, of course, this is also a factor of comfort for the Russian community in Azerbaijan. This is one of the factors of positive intergovernmental relations between our countries. This suggests that, again, I partially return to what we talked about earlier: such an attitude to the Russian language does not categorically infringe on the Azerbaijani language, our identity or culture. Absolutely not. On the contrary, it creates a friendly atmosphere. It is no coincidence that we stand out not only in this regard but also in how we address issues of interfaith interaction and intercultural connections. It is no coincidence that Baku is the place where the World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue takes place. So, everything is interconnected. I think that our policy has proven right. And those who try to discriminate against a language for political reasons are making a big mistake.

- You once said that you would not allow the creation of an emigrant nest in Azerbaijan aimed at subversive activities in Russia. And so it happened. Did it require effort?

- No, what I said was enough. They heard me and chose other directions, in the neighborhood.

- Just briefly, Ilham Heydarovich, what would you wish for the Russians in the coming year?

- The first thing that comes to mind is, of course, peace, so that in 2025 the war ends, people return home and live in peace and, of course, learn to understand each other. Of course, given such a sanctions policy against Russia, I would like to wish the leadership the same confidence in their strength, determination, and the President's team to continue to do everything to minimize the negative consequences of the sanctions policy, because it is clear that this cannot happen completely without consequences. Like any society in a difficult period, it consolidates, and we see this consolidation in Russia. The only wish is to continue in the same way.

Another point that I would like to note, and I have already partially touched upon it answering one of your questions: what else brings our countries, peoples and leadership together? It is a commitment to our national roots and traditional values. Today, this is a great rarity in some regions. Either there is external control or complete moral degradation, or both together. So, this is what distinguishes us favorably, and the trends we are observing in the world – including the election of Trump as President – show that one of the factors is precisely that he, as they say, is in the same boat with us when it comes to traditional values. I think that we will be able to reverse this trend that is harmful to humanity, this debauchery, this ostentatious obscurantism that we saw at the opening of the Paris Olympics, to turn it back. The leaders will do this, the society that believes in its leaders will do this, we will do this. By all means! Otherwise, we will find ourselves in the minority. And we cannot be in the minority.

And of course, I wish happiness and prosperity to all Russians in the New Year.

- Thank you very much, Ilham Heydarovich, for this wonderful interview.

- Thank you.

<https://news.az/news/azerbaijan-perceived-as-independent-player-both-west-and-east-president-aliyevs-interview-with-rossiya-segodnya>

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