

# Generation Facebook in Baku

Adnan, Emin and the  
Future of Dissent in Azerbaijan



Berlin – Istanbul  
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*“... they know from their own experience in 1968, and from the Polish experience in 1980-1981, how suddenly a society that seems atomized, apathetic and broken can be transformed into an articulate, united civil society. How private opinion can become public opinion. How a nation can stand on its feet again. And for this they are working and waiting, under the ice.”*

Timothy Garton Ash about Charter 77 in communist Czechoslovakia,  
February 1984

*“How come our nation has been able to transcend the dilemma so typical of defeated societies, the hopeless choice between servility and despair?”*

Adam Michnik, Letter from the Gdansk Prison, July 1985

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years the Caucasian republic of Azerbaijan, independent since 1991, has experienced rapid economic change. With oil and gas revenues skyrocketing, its capital Baku is in the grips of a feverish construction boom. The new oil rigs, the sources of the country's wealth, pump oil from the Caspian seabed. Since May 2006 this oil is then transported via a 1,776 km new pipeline, the second-longest in the world, onwards to the Turkish Mediterranean coast and to global markets. For educated young Azerbaijanis the recent boom created many opportunities. Born in a communist empire that has since ceased to exist, having come of age during a tumultuous transition, they are now able to take advantage of new possibilities to study abroad and to reap the rewards – jobs at international organisations, multinational companies or Azerbaijani institutions – after returning home.

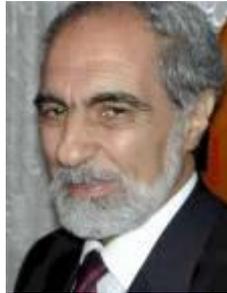
Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli, two young Azerbaijani activists, sentenced to prison on charges of hooliganism in a show trial in 2009, are members of this generation. Adnan studied in the US and later found a job with British Petroleum, the largest international investor in the Azerbaijani energy sector. Emin studied law in Germany and returned to Baku to work for various international organisations. Unable, like many others, to set aside their concerns about the increasing authoritarianism that they found at home, they became democracy activists. Instead of closing their eyes to the inequities of Azerbaijan's new gilded age they started to worry about the democratic gap between their country and the Western world. As Emin put it in a presentation at Columbia University in 2009, while corruption was permeating all spheres of public life Azerbaijan was facing the consolidation of an authoritarian regime: "The regime expands and strengthens its repressive apparatus to intimidate opposition forces and to prevent the formation of independent social groups." A few months later he and Adnan were arrested.

So far European governments, the US and international organisations - particularly the Council of Europe, Europe's oldest intergovernmental club of democracies – have failed to address the increasing repression in Azerbaijan, which had joined the Council of Europe one decade ago. Young Azerbaijanis like Emin and Adnan have nonetheless managed to rattle the regime. Their aim is to remind themselves, their friends and the rest of the world that even in this corner of the world, sandwiched between Putin's Russia and Ahmadinejad's Iran, there are those who believe in the right of democratic protest and freedom of speech – and that there are others who fear both.

Writing in the early 1980s, Timothy Garton Ash described communist Czechoslovakia as a "lake permanently covered by a thick layer of ice. On the surface nothing moves. But under the ice, among the philosopher-labourers, the window-cleaning journalists, and nightwatchman-monks – here things are on the move." The medium has changed. Today's dissidents no longer type samizdat literature in copies of 12 on typewriters, but write blogs and communicate via Facebook. But the fundamental dynamic has remained the same, with the same norms and values at its core.

Observing the events in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Middle East as a whole suggests that the hold on power of the Azerbaijani elite might also not be as firm as they like to believe. Beneath the glossy exterior that they have created lives a generation that has learned to expect more from its leaders than handouts at the expense of rights and stability at the expense of democracy. It is a generation that has not given up on the promise of Azerbaijan turning, one day in the near future, into a genuine European democracy. In their endeavours they deserve support, particularly from organisations such as the Council of Europe, whose whole *raison d'être* is to preserve democratic standards among its members. In the end it would also be in the interest of Azerbaijan's rulers to respect the rules to which they have themselves committed their country.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**



Abulfaz Elchibey (1938-2000)  
First elected president of independent  
Azerbaijan (1992-1993)



Hikmet Hajizade (born in 1954)  
First ambassador of independent Azerbaijan  
in Moscow, liberal political scientist



Heydar Aliyev (1923-2003)  
Second elected president of Azerbaijan  
(1993-2003)



Ilham Aliyev (born in 1961)  
Third elected president of  
Azerbaijan (2003 till today)



Adnan Hajizade (born in 1983)  
Azerbaijani activist and dissident

Emin Milli (born in 1979)  
Azerbaijani activist and dissident

### III



Eynulla Fatullayev



Emin Huseynov



Elmar Huseynov



Ganimat Zahid



Nigar Fatali



Erkin Gadirli



Arzu Geybullayeva



Ali Novruzov

**Ruslan Bashirli**, former leader of Yeni Fikir youth organisation, in prison since 2005

**Eynulla Fatullayev**, journalist, in prison on terrorism and drugs charges

**Elmar Huseynov**, former editor of Monitor journal, shot dead in 2005

**Emin Huseynov**, former journalist and opposition politician, Chairman of the Institute for Reporters Freedom and Safety in Azerbaijan, beaten up in 2003 and 2008

**Ganimat Zahid**, editor of Azadliq newspaper, was imprisoned on charges of hooliganism from November 2007 to March 2010

**Nigar Fatali**, blogger, blog *Fighting Windmills? Go on*

**Erkin Gadirli**, lawyer and activist, friend of Emin

**Arzu Geybullayeva**, blogger, blog *Flying Carpets and Broken Pipelines*

**Vafa Jafarova**, youth activist, living in Istanbul

**Ali Novruzov**, blogger, blog *In Mutatione Fortitudo*

## 1. BIRTHDAY FLOWERS

Heydar Aliyev, the late president of Azerbaijan, may not be well known to many people outside the former Soviet Union. Anyone visiting Azerbaijan will become familiar with his name very quickly, however. Visitors to Baku, the country's capital, land at Heydar Aliyev International Airport. To enter town, most will take Heydar Aliyev Avenue, which is lined with billboards advertising the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the largest sponsor of educational and cultural activities in Azerbaijan. Downtown, they will find the Heydar Aliyev Park, one of the city's biggest; across from it is Heydar Aliyev Palace, a concert hall.

According to Azadliq Radio, there are close to 60 museums and centres named after the former president. (One of them, the Heydar Aliyev Heritage Research Centre, was set up for the sole purpose of studying his legacy.)<sup>1</sup> Statues and billboards depicting Aliyev are ubiquitous. His photo hangs in every government office, usually next to that of his son Ilham Aliyev, who has ruled Azerbaijan since 2003. Whatever their topic, Azerbaijani public officials begin their speeches by invoking the elder Aliyev's accomplishments. The rules of diplomatic protocol require foreign delegations to visit his tomb.

A veteran political leader who joined the Azerbaijani KGB in the 1940s, Aliyev ruled Soviet Azerbaijan from 1969 to 1982 before moving to Moscow to become the first ever Muslim member of the Politburo, the highest executive body of the Soviet Communist Party, and deputy prime minister of the USSR. In 1987, having fallen out of favour with Mikhail Gorbachev, Aliyev lost his position in Moscow. In 1990, he returned to his home region of Nakhchivan, an Azerbaijani exclave hemmed in by Armenia, Iran and Turkey.

In August 1991, Azerbaijan's communist leaders declared independence from the crumbling Soviet Union. In June 1992, the first competitive elections for president took place. Their winner, Abulfaz Elchibey, leader of the opposition Popular Front, inherited a deteriorating economic situation and a war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Azerbaijan was suffering severe losses. A rebellion broke out against Elchibey in the summer of 1993.<sup>2</sup> Elchibey reluctantly invited Heydar Aliyev to return to Baku in order to mediate. Having taken over as chairman of the parliament in June 1993, Aliyev negotiated a deal with the rebel leader, appointing him to the position of prime minister. He also organised a referendum which produced a no-confidence vote for Elchibey.<sup>3</sup> Elchibey refused to concede that he was no longer president, but did not resist and remained in self-imposed exile in his home village.<sup>4</sup>

On 3 October 1993, Heydar Aliyev was elected Azerbaijan's new president with 98.8 percent of the vote.<sup>5</sup> As *The New York Times* put it at the time, an almost "perfect child of the Soviet

<sup>1</sup> "Heydar Aliyev adına..." (In the name of Heydar Aliyev...), Sahnaz Bəylərqızı, 7 October 2010, Azadliq Radio website, <http://www.azadliqradiosu.az/content/article/2183208.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Goltz' *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic*, M.E. Sharpe, 1998, p. 243, as well as in Charles van der Leeuw's *Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom. A History of the Caucasus*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 226-228.

<sup>4</sup> Elchibey said in an interview in December 1996: "Until June 1997, I consider myself *de jure* president of Azerbaijan. I was elected by the people and I have refused to sign any formal resignation." "I Will be a Free Man", *Uncaptive Minds*, vol. 9, no. 1-2, 1997, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence*, M.E. Sharpe, 2011, p. 90. The official turnout was 96 percent. Aside from Aliyev, only two largely unknown candidates contested the vote. Some observers, including Thomas Goltz, have wondered why Aliyev felt the need to produce these unlikely "Brezhnevian" figures when it was clear he would win the elections in any case.

system,” Aliyev had successfully managed to reinvent himself “as an anti-Soviet Azerbaijani nationalist.”<sup>6</sup> During the decade that followed, Aliyev recreated a de-facto one-party regime around his New Azerbaijan Party, which went on to win all future parliamentary elections. He improved relations with Russia, reversing Elchibey’s decision to lead Azerbaijan out of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and with Iran, repudiating Elchibey’s proclaimed interest in a future union between Azerbaijan and the Azeri regions in Northern Iran. In 1994, he signed a ceasefire agreement with Armenia. (Three previous rulers had lost power against the background of losses in the war with Armenia.<sup>7</sup>) He proved a reliable partner for Western oil and gas companies, signing a massive contract for the exploration of offshore oil in the Caspian Sea with an international consortium led by British Petroleum. Heydar Aliyev remained president until a few weeks before his death in December 2003, when he resigned and was succeeded by his son Ilham. As one analyst put it, looking back at Aliyev’s remarkable career, he had been “Azerbaijan’s supreme ruler for the 34 years since 1969, with a six-year break in 1987–1993.”<sup>8</sup>

Today two public holidays celebrate the late president. In 1997, a National Day of Salvation was introduced “on the insistence of the people” to commemorate the day (15 June 1993) when Aliyev became speaker of the national parliament before pushing aside President Abulfaz Elchibey.<sup>9</sup> A second holiday, introduced after Aliyev’s death, celebrates his birthday. It is known as “Flower Day” and is one of the most important public holidays in Azerbaijan. Every year on 10 May, imported flowers adorn the streets of Baku, fireworks illuminate the sky and concerts are held on Baku’s waterfront promenade. In 2009, the Flower Day festivities were particularly lavish, celebrating a regime that looked as secure in its power as at any moment since 1993. Presidential elections in 2008 had solidified the younger Aliyev’s uncontested rule. No serious rival had emerged to challenge the incumbent, with Aliyev obtaining 89 percent of the popular vote.<sup>10</sup> A subsequent referendum in March 2009 removed limits on the number of terms that a president could serve, opening up the prospect that Ilham Aliyev might remain in power indefinitely. This was a leadership seemingly at the pinnacle of unchallenged power.

Yet at the same time, Flower Day in 2009 also illustrated the power of small groups of Azerbaijani youth activists to expose the regime’s insecurities. Young Azerbaijani critics had many reasons to protest in May 2009. One was a rumour reported in the local media that the Flower Day celebrations were to feature 1.5 million flowers imported from 81 countries, at a cost of almost €14 million.<sup>11</sup> Another was the fact that the festivities were taking place only 10 days after tragedy had struck Baku’s State Oil Academy, a public university, when a Georgian of Azeri descent shot and killed 12 students and staff before taking his own life. There was also a deeper sense of unease among the protesters, however. By removing presidential term limits, the March 2009 referendum had raised the very possibility that Ilham Aliyev might emulate his father and stay in power for decades, cementing dynastic rule. Caucasus expert Sergei Markedonov expressed the concern of many young Azerbaijanis when he wrote:

<sup>6</sup> New York Times, “Ex-Kremlin Figure Returns to Power in Azerbaijan”, 16 June 1993. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/16/world/ex-kremlin-figure-returns-to-power-in-azerbaijan.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Prior to Elchibey in 1993 the two last communist rulers of Azerbaijan, Abdulrahman Vezirov and Ayaz Mutalibov, both lost power against the background of battlefield losses in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in 1990 and 1992 respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Alec Rasizade, “Azerbaijan after Heydar Aliyev,” *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 32, no. 1, March 2004, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> “Azerbaijan marks National Salvation Day”, *Trend.Az*, 15 June 2010, <http://en.trend.az/news/official/chronicle/1703321.html>.

<sup>10</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, “Republic of Azerbaijan, Presidential Election, 15 October 2008. OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report”, Warsaw, 15 December 2008, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> “Gül bayramına xərclənən pullar niyə açıqlanmır?” (Why is the amount of money spent on Flower Day not revealed?), *Maarif Çingizoglu*, 13 May 2009, <http://www.azadliqradiosu.az/content/article/1730611.html>.

“The Caucasian state made a symbolic transition. But unlike Novruz [*traditional New Year’s celebration in spring*], it is a transition from spring (early spring, if we consider the condition of state institutions and their power) to winter. The personal power of the head of state will be practically unlimited.”<sup>12</sup>

On 10 May, small groups of young people dressed in black appeared in the streets of Baku. A group of some 30 people, carrying red carnations, the flowers that Azerbaijanis commonly bring to funerals, gathered on the steps of the Music Conservatory next to Heydar Aliyev Park.<sup>13</sup> The group then decided to walk over to the State Oil Academy to place the flowers on the school’s steps, as thousands of mourners had done in previous days.<sup>14</sup>

Before they could do so, members of the group were stopped by plainclothes policemen and detained. Among them was 29-year-old Emin Milli, founder of the Alumni Network (AN), a pro-democracy group bringing together Western-educated Azerbaijanis; 31-year-old Rashad Shirin, founder of the Youth Atlantic Treaty Organisation of Azerbaijan (YATA); and Nigar Fatali, a blogger active in the Alumni Network.<sup>15</sup> According to Emin Milli, the police were unable – or unwilling – to present the activists with any reason for their arrest.<sup>16</sup> Some participants posted videos of the protests on the internet. Emin Milli appears in some of these, asking viewers to share information about the protests with friends and relatives.<sup>17</sup> Later many thought that he had masterminded them. In fact, he had only responded to a call by others on Facebook.<sup>18</sup>

Other groups of young people protested elsewhere. Some whistled in front of Sahil Park (Seaside Park). Others turned their backs to the stage during the Flower Day evening concert. Among them was Adnan Hajizade, 25, one of the founders of another youth movement, OL. More arrests followed. All detainees were held for several hours.<sup>19</sup> Some claimed to have been arrested simply because they happened to wear black.<sup>20</sup> Predictably, Azerbaijani public media ignored both the protests and the arrests, focusing instead on the flower displays. The protesters’ numbers were dwarfed by the hundreds of thousands of Baku residents who turned up to enjoy the fireworks. Only Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty interviewed the protesters after their release.<sup>21</sup> A confident elite might have ignored these modest signs of disaffection. However, Baku’s rulers were anything but confident. The official reaction to the Flower Day protests betrayed the insecurities of an authoritarian state uncertain about the loyalties of its people. Police blocked

<sup>12</sup> Sergei Markedonov, “Azerbaijan: From Bad to Worse”, *Open Democracy*, 30 March 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/email/azerbaijan-from-bad-to-worse>.

<sup>13</sup> A description and photos of the Flower Day celebrations can be found on Arzu Geybullayeva’s blog, “Was it really worth it?”, <http://flyingcarpetsandbrokenpipelines.blogspot.com/2009/05/was-it-really-worth-it.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Ali S. Novruzov’s blog *In Mutatione Fortitudo*, “Holiday of Flowers: 10 May Saga”, 14 May 2009, <http://blog.novruzov.az/2009/05/holiday-of-flowers-10-may-saga.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Nigar Fatali’s current blog, launched in November 2009, is in English and called “[Fighting Windmills? Go On](#)”. Her previous blog is available at <http://fatalin.blogspot.com/>. She also used to blog in Russian (“[Don Quixote](#)”).

<sup>16</sup> Arzu Geybullayeva, “Celebrating Flower Day in Azerbaijan”, *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*, 12 May 2009, <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Azerbaijan/Celebrating-Flower-Day-in-Azerbaijan>.

<sup>17</sup> Ali S. Novruzov’s blog *In Mutatione Fortitudo*, “Holiday of Flowers: 10 May Saga”, *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> Amanda Rivkin, “Shown Trials: Emin Milli and the Future of Azerbaijan”, *Fortnight Journal*, 26 November 2010, <http://www.fortnightjournal.com/amanda-rivkin/103-shown-trial/read.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Arzu Geybullayeva’s blog, “Detailed account of the events of 10 May and prior”, 12 May 2009. <http://flyingcarpetsandbrokenpipelines.blogspot.com/2009/05/was-it-really-worth-it.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Institute for War and Peace Reporting, “Outcry in Azerbaijan After Student Protest Broken Up”, 15 May 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a125930c.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Ali S. Novruzov’s blog *In Mutatione Fortitudo*, “Holiday of Flowers: 10 May Saga”, *ibid*.

roads leading to the Oil Academy. The protesters were monitored. A total of 76 people were arrested.<sup>22</sup> Police investigations continued after the protests. As Ali Novruzov, a blogger and one of the protesters, wrote on 14 May, “Today, my father received a call from the Crime Investigation Department of our district’s police – they were opening a file for me.”<sup>23</sup> Nigar Fatali reported that two days after the protests the police showed up at her house and questioned her mother.<sup>24</sup> Two months later, a suitable pretext was found to arrest both Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade, two of the protesters, and try them on charges of hooliganism.

Moderate as their actions had been, a small group of young Azerbaijanis managed to rattle the authoritarian regime. Their sole aim had been to remind themselves, their friends and the rest of the world that, even in this corner of the world, sandwiched between Putin’s Russia and Ahmadinejad’s Iran, there were those who believed in the right of democratic protest and freedom of speech – and others who feared both.

## 2. A NEW GENERATION

### A. *Birth of a nation*

In 1983, the year Adnan Hajizade was born into a family of intellectuals in Baku, Azerbaijan was one of 15 members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Adnan’s parents, Bahar and Hikmet Hajizade, both from Baku, had met while studying in Moscow. As in many of Baku’s middle-class households, Russian was widely spoken at home and Adnan grew up bilingual. His father Hikmet Hajizade obtained a PhD in physics in 1983. The USSR’s long-time ruler Leonid Brezhnev had just died, and a more dynamic leader, a former KGB official, had succeeded him as general secretary of the Communist Party.<sup>25</sup> There were no visible signs that the Soviet Union was heading towards disintegration or that the Cold War stalemate between the two nuclear superpowers was coming to an end.

In Azerbaijan, however, a few omens of the trouble ahead began to emerge. The Azerbaijani oil industry, which had produced three-quarters of the Soviet Union’s oil at the start of the war against Nazi Germany, was in decline. Continuous underinvestment (after the second World War the bulk of investment went to oil fields in Russia) and the lack of technological know-how for offshore drilling translated into steadily falling production levels.<sup>26</sup> The drilling installations off the Caspian coast, the so-called Oily Rocks, once the pride of the Soviet oil industry, were working at less than half capacity. Rusting and decrepit, miles of roads of the complex of oilrigs, pipes and apartments sitting on stilts off the coast were submerged beneath the sea. The environmental situation across the country, in particular in the industrial city of Sumgait on the

<sup>22</sup> Arzu Geybullayeva’s blog, “Detailed account of the events of 10 May and prior”, *ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> Ali S. Novruzov’s blog *In Mutatione Fortitudo*, “Holiday of Flowers: 10 May Saga”, *ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> Fatalin’s blog, *Fighting Windmills? Take a Pill*, “Two Days after Arrests”, 12 May 2009, <http://fatalin.blogspot.com/2009/05/two-days-after-our-arrest-1.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Yuri Andropov, who was also the man who brought Heydar Aliyev to Moscow to join the Politburo. As former KGB leader he believed in the need to reform a system he knew had serious troubles, but thought that the way to achieve reform was by reinforcing central control. Then, after only two years in power, he unexpectedly died in 1984.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 170. De Waal adds that “by the time the Soviet Union ended, Azerbaijan was producing only 3 percent of the Soviet oil output.”

Caspian near Baku, was devastating. In 1984, one year after Adnan's birth, the Azerbaijan authorities introduced mandatory rationing of meat and butter.<sup>27</sup>

By the time Adnan turned five, the whole edifice of the USSR and of Soviet Azerbaijan had begun to shake. 1988 saw mass demonstrations of popular fronts across the Baltic states. In early 1988, Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous enclave inside Azerbaijan, proclaimed their region's unification with neighbouring Armenia. One week later, bloody anti-Armenian riots broke out in Sumgait, leaving a few dozen people dead and displacing thousands of Armenian residents. There was an exodus of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, and of Armenians from Azerbaijan, as tensions increased and clashes multiplied.

Abulfaz Elchibey, a romantic Azeri nationalist, emerged as a leader of an anti-Soviet national movement. He had written his doctoral thesis on the Tulunid dynasty, a state created in the 9<sup>th</sup> century by a Turkic officer in Egypt. Elchibey had been imprisoned in the 1970s for anti-Soviet activities. By the end of the 1980s, Elchibey was working at the Academy of Sciences – alongside Adnan's father, Hikmet Hajizade. In 1988 Elchibey, Hajizade and other intellectuals – historians, writers, and Orientalists – founded the Azerbaijan Popular Front. Hikmet Hajizade became editor in chief of the Front's newspaper *Azadliq/Svoboda* and one of the authors of its statutes, which drew on the program of the Estonian Popular Front for inspiration.<sup>28</sup> In November 1998 mass demonstrations began in Baku. Though he may not have been aware of it at the time, little Adnan Hajizade, watching his father at work, was seeing the birth pangs of an independent Azerbaijani state. As he later recalled,

“Azerbaijan's new state was in a sense founded in our living room. Elchibey, my father and others would gather for hours talking, smoking ... I was five, going in and out. My father held me by my hand and took me to the big gathering of the Popular Front in 1988, so I witnessed it first-hand.”<sup>29</sup>

At its first Congress on 16 July 1989, the Azerbaijan Popular Front declared its commitment to “ensuring the independence of Azerbaijan” and “situating Azerbaijan on a free and democratic foundation.”<sup>30</sup> In January 1990 Soviet authorities, citing the supposed menace of surging “Islamic fundamentalism” and the need to prevent communal violence, dispatched troops to crush the popular movement. More than 200 Azerbaijanis died as a result and many leaders of the Popular Front, including Elchibey, were arrested. The January 1990 events destroyed any remaining legitimacy of Soviet rule. A year and a half after “Black January”, following a failed coup against President Gorbachev in Moscow, a number of Soviet republics declared independence. Azerbaijan's Supreme Soviet did so on 30 August 1991. In May 1992, a crowd of Popular Front supporters stormed the parliament building, forcing the ouster of Azerbaijan's last communist ruler. Democratic presidential elections were called for June 1992 and Abulfaz Elchibey won with 55 percent of the vote. At his swearing-in ceremony, Elchibey's supporters sang the national anthem of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic, an independent Azerbaijani state which existed from 1918 to 1920. Tears were streaming down their cheeks.

<sup>27</sup> Audrey Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*, Hoover Institution Press Publication 410, April 1992, p. 183. There were also many strikes in Azerbaijan, depriving Siberian oil fields of vital equipment (Altstadt 192).

<sup>28</sup> ESI Interview with Hikmet Hajizade, 1 December 2010.

<sup>29</sup> ESI Interview with Adnan Hajizade, Baku, December 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Azərbaycan Halk Cephesi ve Ebulfez Elchibey (Azerbaijan Popular Front and Abulfaz Elchibey), [nihalatsiz.com](http://nihalatsiz.com).

Adnan was nine when Elchibey became president and asked Adnan's father to become independent Azerbaijan's first ambassador to Moscow in 1992. A year later, after Elchibey fell and Heydar Aliyev returned to take over at the helm, Adnan's father returned to Baku. Growing up in the chaotic early years of Aliyev's rule – with numerous attempted coups and growing economic chaos – Adnan saw his father's generation of anti-communist activists begin to ask themselves what had gone wrong. As Hikmet Hajizade wrote in 1996, the early years of independence witnessed a general search for a “national idea”, much like the debates taking place all across the former USSR:<sup>31</sup>

“The nation started looking for answers to basic questions: Who are we? What new values should we acquire? What shall we do afterwards?”<sup>32</sup>

There were various competing answers to such questions. The Popular Front, with its strong tradition of ethno-centric (Turkic) nationalism, focused on cultural and identity issues. Some, taking their cue from Elchibey, continued to prioritize the heady objective of uniting all ethnic Azeris, including those in “South Azerbaijan” (in the north-western part of Iran).<sup>33</sup> Heydar Aliyev's governing New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) espoused a competing ideology, placing an emphasis on what it called Azerbaijanism, with a focus on strong leadership and, above all, stability.<sup>34</sup> The powerful chief of staff of both Heydar Aliyev and his successor and son Ilham, Ramiz Mehdiyev, would later argue that Azerbaijanism referred to a “responsible democracy” with a strong presidency, similar to the “sovereign democracy” model in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Some liberals, however, strongly emphasized the importance of democracy. Adnan's father, who produced a draft programme for the Musavat party in 1995, was among the most outspoken defenders of pluralism throughout the 1990s.<sup>35</sup> As he wrote in 1996,

“The way to an independent state based on rule of law goes through the development of civil society. Our goal is not the creation of a new dictatorship, but a democratic state, in which the human rights and human dignity are the priority. Human rights are superior to class rights and religious and national interests.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Hikmet Hajizade, “The Afterword from the The Year of 2006: On the Real Balance of Forces”, Report to the conference “Security and Cooperation in the Caucasus and Central Asia”, University of Georgia, 24 May 1998, p. 5. <http://www.kitabxana.org/site/?name=view&page=1&id=605>.

<sup>32</sup> Hikmet Hajizade/ FAR Centre, “Azerbaijan: In Search of a National Idea”, FAR Centre, 1996. <http://www.zerbaijan.com/azeri/hhz7.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Against the background of a collapsing state and economy, one of Elchibey's first decisions was to rename Azerbaijan's official language “Turkish” (as it had been called between 1918 and 1936). The change was reflected in a law on language passed in December 1992. The name of the language was then changed back to “Azerbaijani” under Heydar Aliyev. Jacob M. Landau and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele, *Politics of Language the Ex-Soviet Muslim States*, Hurst, 2001, p. 151. The name of the language was then changed back to “Azerbaijani” under Heydar Aliyev.

<sup>34</sup> Ceylan Tokluoglu, “Definitions of national identity, nationalism and ethnicity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4 July 2005, p. 728, <http://intersci.ss.uci.edu/wiki/eBooks/Articles/National%20Identity%20in%20Postco%20AZ%20Tokluoglu.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> The Musavat (Equality) Party of current Azerbaijan was established in 1992, as a resurrection of the party leading the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918-1920. Isa Gambar, who has been chairman of the party since its establishment, was one of the leaders of the Popular Front movement. Since 1993, Musavat Party has been the leading opposition party.

<sup>36</sup> Hikmet Hajizade/ FAR Centre, “Azerbaijan: In Search of a National Idea”, FAR Centre, 1996. <http://www.zerbaijan.com/azeri/hhz7.htm>.

Three years after his father penned these lines, 16-year-old Adnan Hajizade left Azerbaijan for America, having obtained a FLEX (Future Leaders Exchange) scholarship from the US government to attend a US high school for one year. Thanks to another scholarship, Adnan later enrolled at Richmond University in Virginia, where he graduated in political science in 2005.

After graduation Adnan returned to Azerbaijan. Baku had changed: with oil and gas revenues skyrocketing, the city was in the early stages of a construction boom. Out in the Caspian Sea, one could see the sources of the country's wealth, the new oil rigs, pumping oil from the seabed and, from May 2006 onwards, into a newly built 1,776 km pipeline to Tbilisi and onwards to the Turkish Mediterranean coast.<sup>37</sup> Baku was also beginning to attract more people like Adnan: young Azerbaijanis in their 20s, born in a communist empire that had since ceased to exist, having come of age during a tumultuous transition, taking advantage of new opportunities to study and travel abroad and reaping the rewards – jobs at international organisations, multinational companies or Azerbaijani institutions – after returning home. Adnan found a job as an internal communications officer at British Petroleum, the largest international investor in the Azerbaijani energy sector. As long as the young returnees set aside concerns about the contrast between the level of rights and freedoms they had experienced abroad and the authoritarianism that they had found at home, they were set on a path to a promising career. All it took for them to partake in the new wealth was to close their eyes to the growing inequities of this new gilded age.

### ***B. How (not) to make a revolution***

2005, the year of Adnan's return, was also a year of anticipation for all those who hoped to see the emergence of a different Azerbaijan, a country that would follow in the footsteps of Central Europe and the Baltic states on a democratic path. Parliamentary elections – the first since Azerbaijan's entry into the Council of Europe in 2001 and since Ilham Aliyev's rise to the presidency in 2003 – were scheduled for November.

Since the 1992 presidential vote, no election in Azerbaijan had met democratic standards. The 2003 election – in which Ilham Aliyev emerged victorious with 77 percent of the vote, while runner-up Isa Gambar received less than 14 percent – had been particularly bad. Words like “nepotism” and “dynasty building” figured prominently in the Western press. The election night and the following day witnessed serious abuses on the part of the police and internal security forces. As unauthorized opposition rallies took place throughout the capital, the police launched a brutal crackdown, killing several people, injuring many more and detaining over 600, including election commission officials. Isa Gambar was kept under effective house arrest for 25 days as state-allied media outlets accused him of conspiring to overthrow the government.<sup>38</sup> The elections “failed to meet OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections,” the OSCE observation mission stated in its final report.<sup>39</sup>

Things were supposed to be different in 2005. On 10 May 2005, two years after Georgia's Rose Revolution, US President George W. Bush appeared in Tbilisi. Speaking before jubilant crowds, he appeared to have a message for Georgia's neighbours:

<sup>37</sup> The pipeline became operational in May 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Sabine Freizer, “Dynasty and Democracy in Azerbaijan”, *Open Democracy*, 5 December 2003. [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/article\\_1626.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/article_1626.jsp).

<sup>39</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, “Azerbaijan: Presidential Elections 15 October 2003”, Election Observation Mission Report, Warsaw 12 November 2003, p. 1. <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/13467>.

“We are living in historic times, when freedom is advancing, from the Black Sea to the Caspian, and to the Persian Gulf and beyond. As you watch free people gathering in squares like this across the world, waving their nations’ flags and demanding their God-given rights, you can take pride in this fact: They have been inspired by your example and they take hope in your success ... The seeds of liberty you are planting in Georgian soil are flowering across the globe.”<sup>40</sup>

Bush was not the only one given to a spirit of hope. In June 2005, *The Economist* ran an article with the title, “A Watermelon Revolution: Azerbaijan and Democracy – Might Azerbaijan be next in line for a democratic revolution?”<sup>41</sup>

In May 2005, the Azerbaijani opposition formed an electoral bloc, Azadliq (Freedom), uniting three parties – Musavat (led by Isa Gambar), the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party (led by Ali Kerimli), and the smaller Democratic Party. Azadliq’s strategy was inspired by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, whose leaders and participants had successfully contested electoral fraud in 2004. The coalition, which attacked the Aliyev regime as a ‘corrupted dictatorship’, adopted the orange colour as its symbol.<sup>42</sup> Some opposition leaders expected to do well in the elections; others expected manipulations at the ballot box but hoped that, this time around, voters’ protests might trigger a non-violent revolution similar to those which had taken place in Serbia (in 2000), Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004).

In both the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, youth organizations, Kmara (Enough) in Georgia and Pora (It’s time) in Ukraine, had played a role in challenging the official results of rigged balloting. Both had drawn on the experience of the Serbian Otpor, which helped topple Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia. Young Azerbaijanis took note.<sup>43</sup> In April 2004, the Popular Front party created its youth wing, Yeni Fikir (New Idea). The movement, led by 26-year-old Ruslan Bashirli, began to campaign for free and fair elections. Early 2005 saw the launch of another youth organization, Maqam (It is time). Led by Emin Huseynov, a journalist who had covered the October 2003 presidential poll (and been beaten up in the process), the group, counting some 200 members, aimed to raise interest in the proper conduct of the upcoming elections.<sup>44</sup> Another newly established organization, Yox! (No!), soon joined the fray. The organization’s motto was “Yox to Antidemocratic actions! Yox to violence! Yox to a dictatorial regime!” Razi Nurullayev, the group’s leader, ran as an independent candidate in the elections. “The series of democratic colour revolutions in which people angered by rigged elections had toppled entrenched, corrupt leaders in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan,” Nurullayev predicted at the time, “would now march into Azerbaijan.”<sup>45</sup>

It was tempting for young activists to believe that a magic formula for electoral revolutions had been discovered. From Serbia to Ukraine, youth activists had read Gene Sharp’s manual *From*

<sup>40</sup> BBC; “Text: Bush’s speech in Georgia”, 10 May 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4534267.stm>.

<sup>41</sup> “A Watermelon Revolution: Azerbaijan and Democracy – Might Azerbaijan be next in line for a democratic revolution?”, *Economist*, 4 June 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Anar Valiyev, “Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan, A Failed Revolution”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 3, May/June 2006, p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> Murad Hassanli and Emin Huseynov of Maqam featured in a BBC documentary titled “How to plan a revolution” in which these struggles in run-up, conduct and follow up of the 2005 November elections are presented. How to plan a revolution, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6283659946022683358#>.

<sup>44</sup> Maqam Youth Civic Movement, Open letter to US President Bush, “Stand Up to Your Words. An Appeal to President George W. Bush from Azerbaijani Youth”, 27 April 2006, <http://www.idee.org/Azerbaijan%20Youth%20Appeal%202006.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Anar Valiyev, “Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan, A Failed Revolution,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 3, May/June 2006, pp. 17-35.

*Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* on how to organize non-violent protests. Originally published to support Burmese activists, it had been translated into over 30 languages, including Azerbaijani.<sup>46</sup> Activists across Europe also watched “Bringing Down a Dictator”, a 2002 film on the fall of Serbia’s Slobodan Milosevic. The movie’s director, Steve York, argued that the experience of the Serbian Otpor youth movement was directly applicable to other countries. “Virtually all of the weapons used by Otpor,” he claimed, “could be directly adopted, or slightly adapted, by resistance and opposition movements in other places. It’s already happening.”<sup>47</sup>

In Azerbaijan, pro-democracy activists were beginning to seek out youth groups in Ukraine and Georgia. Murad Hassanli, a graduate of the London School of Economics who returned to Baku to become a spokesperson for the Azadliq coalition, travelled to Georgia to meet with representatives of the youth movement Kmara. “How to Plan a Revolution”, a 2005 BBC documentary about the elections in Azerbaijan, showed Kmara activists providing confident advice (“Have a clear chain of command” and “celebrate victory right after the elections, don’t wait to find out the results”) to their Azerbaijani counterparts.<sup>48</sup> The leader of Yeni Fikir, 27-year-old Ruslan Bashirli, also travelled to Tbilisi in late July 2005 to meet with democracy activists. Members of Yeni Fikir also made contact with Pora activists in Ukraine.<sup>49</sup>

Azerbaijani authorities, growing increasingly worried, banned Ukrainian activists from entering the country. On 3 August 2005, the Azerbaijani police arrested Bashirli on charges of plotting a coup “at the instigation of Armenian intelligence”.<sup>50</sup> The charge carried a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Bashirli later “confessed” that he was acting at the request of the Washington-based National Democratic Institute.<sup>51</sup> State television repeatedly ran a video of him accepting US\$2,000 in cash from a man whom Azerbaijani intelligence later claimed to be an Armenian agent. Several media outlets also alleged that Bashirli was involved in a homosexual relationship with Popular Front leader Ali Kerimli, already the target of similar smear campaigns.<sup>52</sup> On 12 and 16 September, two deputy chairmen of Yeni Fikir were arrested: Ramin Tagiyev for his role in the alleged coup plot, and Said Nuri for conspiring against the government on instructions allegedly received in Poland at an event sponsored (again) by the National Democratic Institute. In July 2006, Bashirli was sentenced to seven years imprisonment, Ramin Tagiyev to four and Said Nuri to five.<sup>53</sup>

In the period leading up to the elections, Journalists known to be critical of the government were also targeted. On 24 February 2005, Ganimat Zahid, the editor of the *Azadliq* newspaper, and

<sup>46</sup> See Albert Einstein Institution, Cin Şarp, *DİKTATURADAN DEMOKRATİYAYA DOĞRU: Azadliq üçün Konseptual Çərçivə, From Dictatorship to Democracy* (Azeri), released in February 2005 by Yox Movement Azerbaijan, <http://www.aeinstein.org/organizations/1aef.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Questions & answers with Steve York, Producer of *Bringing Down a Dictator* film, <http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/bdd/producer.php>.

<sup>48</sup> “How to plan a revolution” documentary, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6283659946022683358#>.

<sup>49</sup> Anar Valiyev, “Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan: A Failed Revolution”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 3, May/June 2006, p. 24-25.

<sup>50</sup> Liz Fuller, “Azerbaijan: Baku Implicates Armenian Intelligence In Alleged Coup Bid”, *RFE/RL*, 5 August 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060460.html>.

<sup>51</sup> “Revolution in Azerbaijan May Begin on 21<sup>st</sup> of August”, 18 August 2005, [www.axisglobe.org](http://www.axisglobe.org).

<sup>52</sup> RFE/RL, “15: Arrested Activist’s Father Alleges Harassment by Azerbaijani Authorities”, RFE/RL Newline, 9 August 2005, <http://www.hri.org/news/balkans/rferl/2005/05-08-09.rferl.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Shahin Abbasov and Khadija Ismailova, “Verdict against Azerbaijan youth raises concern”, 18 July 2006, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?lng=en&ots627=fce62fe0-528d-4884-9cdf-283c282cf0b2&id=52186>.

Azer Ahmedov, the paper's technical director, were abducted and taken to a restaurant in Baku. They were forced to strip and were photographed in compromising fashion with several women, allegedly prostitutes. They were then beaten and threatened for publishing materials criticizing President Aliyev. After two days, the two men were released.<sup>54</sup> Soon thereafter, pro-government media published photos of Zahid and Ahmedov with the women as proof of the opposition's "immorality."<sup>55</sup> On 2 March 2005, Elmar Huseynov, editor of the independent journal *Monitor*, was shot dead in front of his house. For years prior to his murder, Huseynov was repeatedly slapped with heavy fines for "libel and defamation" of high-ranking government officials, including the president and the defence minister. In 2001, he was sentenced to six months in prison for defaming Baku Mayor Hadjabala Abutalibov. Huseynov's funeral was attended by some 10,000 people in Baku. His assassins were never found.

In the run-up to the elections, opposition parties were not allowed to organize rallies in the Baku city centre, notionally for security reasons. Ali Hasanov, head of the presidential administration's political department, defended this ban, explaining, "Stability in Azerbaijan is much more important than the country's international image. Why do we need [this] image if we cannot keep stability and order in the country?"<sup>56</sup> When Azadliq defied the ban by staging rallies in downtown Baku throughout September and October, violent police crackdowns followed. President Aliyev informed the BBC that the protestors' intention was "to be beaten and then to present themselves as victims, to be shown on international TV and in newspapers and to create a wrong image [of] the government of Azerbaijan."<sup>57</sup>

Finally, the government sent a strong signal to potential opponents within the elite itself. On 17 October a former finance minister, Fikret Yusifov, was arrested for his alleged role in funnelling money to Azerbaijani dissidents. Soon thereafter, two senior cabinet members, minister of economic development Farhad Aliyev and minister of health Ali Insanov, were arrested for "abuse of power", "misappropriation of state funds", and "attempting to overthrow the government."<sup>58</sup> Some 100 others were detained on charges of abetting the alleged plot.

This was the backdrop to the elections of 6 November 2005. The conduct of the vote itself was no better. According to OSCE observers, "a wide range of serious violations were observed during the vote count at the polling stations (in 41 per cent of counts observed)."<sup>59</sup> An OSCE/ODIHR report mentioned systemic problems and irregularities at many polling stations, including "attempts to influence voter choice, interference of unauthorized persons and cases of

<sup>54</sup> Freedom House, "Azerbaijan: Nations in Transit 2006", <http://www.freedomhouse.hu/pdfdocs/azerbaijan2006.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Anar Valiyev, "Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan, A Failed Revolution", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 3, May/June 2006, p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> Khadija Ismailova and Shahin Abbasov, "Opposition-Police Clashes Again Rock Baku", *EurasiaNet*, 9 October 2005, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav101005.shtml>.

<sup>57</sup> BBC Documentary, *How to Plan a Revolution* (2006), directed by Ivan Mahoney. <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6283659946022683358#>. For more information on the film, see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this\\_world/4908406.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this_world/4908406.stm).

<sup>58</sup> Ferhat Aliyev was in 2007 sentenced to 10 years in prison for tax evasion, corruption and other economic crimes. Ali Insanov was convicted of abuse of office and other economic charges. Lawyers complained of procedural violations. In 2007 he was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment.

<sup>59</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, "Republic of Azerbaijan: Parliamentary Elections, 6 November 2005", Election Observation Mission Final Report, p. 2, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/17946>.

ballot box stuffing.”<sup>60</sup> The elections, OSCE experts concluded, failed to meet “a number of OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections.”<sup>61</sup>

In the end, the three opposition parties won only six seats in the 121-seat parliament. On 19 November, up to 30,000 of their supporters took to the streets to protest the conduct and the outcome of the vote. Many called for Aliyev to step down.<sup>62</sup> Some, wearing orange bandanas, carried posters saying “Stop selling our democracy for oil!” The movement soon lost momentum, however. As the crowds shrank, Popular Front leader Ali Kerimli called for a sit-in rally on 26 November. It was broken up by a brutal police intervention.<sup>63</sup> Many members of youth groups were injured and arrested.<sup>64</sup> In February 2006, the Azadliq bloc broke up.

The Council of Europe had earlier underlined that the 2005 parliamentary elections would be “a decisive test for the democratic credibility of the country.”<sup>65</sup> The one obvious sanction available to the Parliamentary Assembly following these fraudulent elections was largely symbolic: to refuse to seat the newly elected parliamentarians from Azerbaijan in the Strasbourg Parliamentary Assembly. On 23 January 2006, a motion challenging the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation was tabled.<sup>66</sup> In a resolution adopted two days later, the Parliamentary Assembly confirmed that “the way the November elections were conducted clearly shows that there is a persistent failure by Azerbaijan to honour its commitments to the Council of Europe. This must be sanctioned.” The text built up to a surprising decision, however:

“The Assembly concludes that the conduct of the November 2005 parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan falls within the provision of Rule 8.2.b of the Assembly Rules of Procedure: persistent failure to honour obligations and commitments ... However, the Assembly decides to ratify the credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan.”<sup>67</sup>

By stopping short of applying any sanctions, the Council of Europe had failed to use the only significant tool at its disposal to signal its disapproval of such blatant electoral manipulation. The institution appeared to have ignored its core mandate – to uphold democratic standards among its member states.<sup>68</sup>

The lessons from 2005 were sobering. There would be no electoral revolution. There would certainly be no outside support for democratisation. The US, the European Union and Turkey all

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> OSCE Election Observation Mission Results published on 2 February 2006: [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2006/02/17923\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2006/02/17923_en.pdf). More information at Election monitoring center analysis: [http://www.ndi.org/files/1981\\_az\\_emcbrief\\_020106.pdf](http://www.ndi.org/files/1981_az_emcbrief_020106.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> BBC, “Thousands in fresh Azeri protest”, 19 November 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4452174.stm>.

<sup>63</sup> Fariz Ismailzade, “Musavat Decides to Join New Azerbaijan Parliament”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 3, issue 29, 10 February 2006, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=31372](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=31372).

<sup>64</sup> Anar Valiyev, “Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan, A Failed Revolution”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 3, May/June 2006 p. 23.

<sup>65</sup> PACE, Resolution 1456 (2005), “Functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan”, 22 June 2005. <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta05/eres1456.htm>.

<sup>66</sup> See PACE, Resolution 1480 (2006), “The challenge of still unratified credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan on substantial grounds”, 25 January 2006. <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta06/ERES1480.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> PACE, “Implementation of Resolution 1480 (2006) on the challenge of credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan”, 26 June 2006, <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta06/eres1505.htm>.

<sup>68</sup> PACE, Resolution 1456 (2005), “Functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan”, 22 June 2005, <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta05/eres1456.htm>.

accepted the obvious electoral manipulations without much comment. Meanwhile, it was becoming clear that there would be neither a transfer of power nor any real move towards genuine democracy in Azerbaijan. The political youth movements began to disintegrate. The regime had succeeded in making political activity seem not just dangerous but futile.

### C. “To be the change”

*“I maintain that the Poles do not expect any help from outside ... Although they are happy to receive every gesture of solidarity that comes in from the outside world, they are perfectly aware (and willing to say this to others) that they must and will, count only on themselves.”*

Adam Michnik, Letter from the Gdansk Prison, July 1985<sup>69</sup>

In the wake of the November 2005 elections, apathy set in among government critics. Traditional channels of dissent had proven ineffective. The mass media were under firm government control. Few people outside Azerbaijan appeared to care much about the state of its democracy. This mood of resignation and apathy has persevered. In a July 2009 interview with ESI, Isa Gambar, leader of the Musavat party, said: “There is no belief left that things can change with democratic struggle. People see the arrests, the elections and that nothing changes. They have no inspiration anymore.”<sup>70</sup>

It was in this gloomy post-election atmosphere that a group of 11 students and young graduates, many with university experience abroad, met in one of Baku’s cafés in November 2005. One of them later wrote that members of the group did not know each other well, but all shared a sense of frustration with the way the country was developing, all agreed that something had to change, and all believed that their generation had an important role to play.<sup>71</sup> The idea for a new youth movement was born there and then. As Adnan Hajizade, who participated in the meeting, told ESI, the decision to stay away from politics was clear from the beginning.<sup>72</sup> The struggle for mandates, parliamentary seats or power, as the experience of groups like Yox, Yeni Fikir and Maqam had shown, and as members of the new group realised, was both dangerous and ineffective. The aim was now to create a social movement which would educate, inspire and empower young people to take an active role in different spheres of society.<sup>73</sup> The group would promote a change in mentality, repudiating the acceptance of corruption and cronyism, challenging established gender relations, promoting a different kind of youth culture, and learning from the bitter experience of their parents’ generation. As Ilkin Gambar, the son of Musavat party chairman Isa Gambar, put it, the young activists wanted to set up an organisation that “would bring together young people in Azerbaijan and promote leadership skills and teamwork.”<sup>74</sup>

After several months of discussions, planning and preparations, OL was born on 11 February 2006. (The translation of the group’s name in English is the imperative “Be!”) The organisation’s

<sup>69</sup> Full text of the letter is available online at the New York Review of Books, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1985/jul/18/letter-from-the-gdansk-prison/?page=4>.

<sup>70</sup> ESI interview with Isa Gambar, July 2009.

<sup>71</sup> OL! blog, “‘OL’ un yaranma ‘mif’i” (Myth on the creation of OL), <http://ol-az.blogspot.com/2009/02/ol-yaranmas-mifi.html>.

<sup>72</sup> ESI interview by e-mail with Adnan Hajizade, January 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Vugar Salamli’s blog, “‘OL’ un yaranma ‘mif’i”, *ibid*.

<sup>74</sup> ESI interview with Ilkin Gambar, Istanbul, November 2009.

motto was a challenge: “Do you want to see change? Then BE the change.”<sup>75</sup> Never officially registered and thus unable legally to receive funding, OL cooperated instead with registered NGOs as project partners. OL was careful about admitting new members, with candidates asked to provide recommendations from existing members. Membership has grown over time to about 200 people (from 20 in 2006), with hundreds more participating in the group’s activities. All documents were put online; no effort was made to hide from the prying eyes of the authorities.

To disseminate its message, OL relied both on word of mouth and social media. YouTube had gone online in 2005. Facebook had become open to all users in September 2006. Twitter, a micro-blogging platform, had emerged the same year. OL activists made the internet their home, launching their own blog which featured, among other things, the group’s manifesto.<sup>76</sup> The document affirmed that OL had no political affiliation and did not support any political parties, coalitions and individual political leaders.<sup>77</sup> It listed three key principles: tolerance, non-violence and modernity.

OL’s stated goal was to promote social change. One priority was education. Many young people in Azerbaijan were dissatisfied with the quality of the educational system, which was both underfunded and corrupt. (Paying bribes for good grades or entrance exams was commonplace.) In the words of OL member Ruslan Asadov, “Most universities in Azerbaijan are dysfunctional because of corruption and constant control by the government ... There is no liberal atmosphere where young people could talk about their ideas.”<sup>78</sup> OL’s aim, therefore, was to provide “alternative education.” In 2007 OL launched a series of weekly lectures in the office of the American Alumni Association in central Baku. Topics ranged from improving education to the role of the Ombudsman and the European Court of Human Rights. The events became quite popular, with each lecture attended by up to 100 participants. In 2008, OL organised seminars on various topics, from freedom of expression to the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008. In September 2009 OL launched the Free Thought University (FTU, Azad Fikir Universiteti).<sup>79</sup> (As a registered entity, the FTU could benefit from external funding.<sup>80</sup>) Between September 2009 and June 2010, the group organised around 100 interactive lectures, seminars, discussions and other events involving up to 1,000 people in total.<sup>81</sup>

Adnan Hajizade became the creative brain behind OL. (His friends called him “our locomotive.”) As head of OL’s media division, he took the lead in producing catchy videos with satirical and critical content. Some touched on philosophical themes, such as the clip “What do you believe in?”<sup>82</sup> (in Azerbaijani and Russian). Others satirised aspects of contemporary Azerbaijani culture. Entitled “Because I am Azerbaijani” (“Cunku men azerbaycanliyam”), these videos, each a few minutes long, portrayed everyday situations instantly recognisable to anyone living in Azerbaijan. One sketch shows an Azerbaijani who fatalistically accepts his house being demolished by the government. Another shows a man proudly carrying an expensive cell phone

<sup>75</sup> Websites for further reference: [www.antv.ws](http://www.antv.ws) and [www.youtube.com/user/olmedia](http://www.youtube.com/user/olmedia).

<sup>76</sup> The blog is at <http://ol-en.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>77</sup> OL! blog, <http://ol-az.blogspot.com/2009/01/frequently-asked-questions.html>.

<sup>78</sup> ESI interview with Ruslan Asadov, Baku, 18 November 2010.

<sup>79</sup> FTU’s website is at [www.azadfikir.org](http://www.azadfikir.org).

<sup>80</sup> National Endowment for Democracy and the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation.

<sup>81</sup> German Marshall Fund of the United States, “Success Stories: Free Thought University”, [http://www.gmfus.org/blacksea/success\\_stories](http://www.gmfus.org/blacksea/success_stories).

<sup>82</sup> FuserLimon, “What do you believe in? Azerbaijan – Baku – Siz Nəyə İnanırsınız?”, YouTube, posted on 29 November 2006, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99YcHcw899YcHcw8aiAaiA>. A cross-section of young people are asked this question and provide different answers (“God”; themselves; democracy, justice, freedom and love). Produced in 2006 it has been viewed more than 34,000 times on YouTube.

despite being unable to afford phone credits.<sup>83</sup> OL later also produced inspirational videos about democracy. OL's most-viewed video (128,233 views on YouTube as of 14 March 2011) was produced in 2009. "Esel Heinz" (German for "Donkey Heinz") marked a breakthrough in the visibility of OL's and Adnan's work in more than one way: Adnan was arrested a few weeks after it was put online.

#### **D. *Memories of a lost republic***

*"Democracy is a child of Europe, and it is now rolling over the world like a wave ... It is wholly natural that the first countries in the Soviet Union to be affected were those in the Baltics – those closest to democratic Europe. The last will be Central Asia. But Azerbaijan is a special case, partly because of geography, partly because of our history. We were a colony of a European power – and were thus kept in contact with European ideas while other neighbouring states were not. Also, we had an independent state for two years, starting in 1918 – the first secular republic in the Muslim World."*<sup>84</sup>

Azerbaijan's first elected president Abulfaz Elchibey to journalist Thomas Goltz, 1991

On 28 May 2008, groups of young Azerbaijanis gathered in Baku, Istanbul, Los Angeles, London and New York, wearing brightly-coloured T-shirts featuring the letters A, D and R. They posed before the Eiffel Tower, on the Caspian beach or in front of monuments in the centre of Baku. Some smiled proudly, others looked serious; one stood on his hands. The young men and women took pictures and recorded videos. Everywhere they lined themselves up to form the same message, consisting of three letters: ADR.

ADR is the abbreviation for Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. To these young Azerbaijanis, the ADR, the first independent Azerbaijani state – having been born in the midst of war and turmoil in 1918, and having collapsed after less than two years in 1920 – had become a symbol of a different, democratic future. The 28 May happening, held in more than 15 cities, commemorated the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ADR. Its motto was: "the ADR unites us."<sup>85</sup> During the Soviet era, commemorating the short-lived "bourgeois republic" was forbidden. These days, the authorities in Baku pay tribute to the ADR as a distant predecessor of the present Azerbaijani state. During the happenings held on the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, however, police intervened in a number of locations across Baku, detaining roughly 15 participants for several hours.<sup>86</sup>

It was Mehmet Emin Resulzade who headed the Azerbaijani National Council on 28 May 1918, the day it proclaimed the independence of the Azerbaijan Republic. Resulzade, also credited with setting up the first state university in Baku, remained an active member of parliament until the collapse of the ADR in May 1920.

In June 2008, OL and the Alumni Network organised a joint event in Tbilisi on "ADR: From the Past to the Future 1918-2008." A note posted on Facebook after the forum stated:

<sup>83</sup> See "Because I am Azerbaijani" videos (in Azeri) on the ESI website.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic*, M.E. Sharpe, 1998, pp. 59-60.

<sup>85</sup> Ali Novruzov, "Azerbaijan marks anniversary of its first republic", Frontline Club, 29 May 2009, <http://frontlineclub.com/blogs/alinovruzov/2009/05/azerbaijan-marks-anniversary-of-its-first-republic.html>.

<sup>86</sup> For a sample of some of the acts as well as an explanation of the purpose of these events (in Azeri), go to <http://ol-az.blogspot.com/2009/05/adr-bizi-birlsdirir-aksiyas.html>.

“It is our moral obligation and historical mission to make the dreams of ADR become a reality in our life and to promote those ideas and values today ... We believe that Azerbaijani citizens should be free to make political choices, free to express opinions and must not fear that anyone can be punished, imprisoned, or tortured for thinking and acting differently.”<sup>87</sup>

Emin Milli invited participants to come up with an “ADR Action Plan” to “bring the ADR idea and its values back to Azerbaijan.”<sup>88</sup> OL and AN members also collected signatures to persuade the Azerbaijani government to set aside oil revenues to finance scholarships for study abroad. The activists underlined that the ADR, despite its precarious financial situation, had actually sent 99 Azerbaijani students to study abroad in 1919.

At first glance, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic makes for an unlikely inspiration for young Azerbaijanis growing up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The ADR existed during one of the most turbulent periods in the history of the Caucasus: the Ottoman Empire was collapsing; Russia was in the midst of civil war between supporters of the Tsar and Bolshevik revolutionaries; while British troops in Baku were trying to safeguard Western investments in the Azerbaijani oil industry against the spread of war and revolution.<sup>89</sup> Against this background, the ADR survived only 23 months, from 28 May 1918, when it declared its independence, until 28 April 1920, when its government was overthrown by the advancing Red Army. Even at the outset of this brief period, Baku was successively occupied by three different armies: the Bolshevik, the Ottoman and the British, the latter leaving only in August 1919,<sup>90</sup> 8 months before the republic’s collapse.<sup>91</sup>

The short-lived ADR was not only the first independent Azerbaijani state, but a relatively modern one, something which has become a source of pride for pro-democracy activists. As a young blogger, Ali Novruzov, wrote in June 2008:

“... ADR maintained a true democracy: gave a suffrage to women (1919) and the young, long before the main European nations did; created a truly democratic parliament, with assigned quotas for almost all ethnic minorities. It even gave special representation to workers’ unions; and made preparation to summon the Constituent Assembly (alas, interrupted by the Russian Bolshevik invasion) ... Minorities and all political and social spectra of the Azerbaijani society were broadly represented in ADR’s parliament and councils of ministers, where there were many socialists and capitalists, conservatives and liberals, secular nationalists and [the] religious right ... The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic founded the first modern European-style institute of higher education in Azerbaijan – Baku State University (1919).”<sup>92</sup>

Describing it as a “lost republic”, Novruzov also saw the ADR and its heritage as a powerful symbol, the celebration of which has become a means of dissent among youth activists upset about the cult of the Aliyev dynasty:

<sup>87</sup> Facebook, “ADR: From Past To The Future – 1918-2018” (note), posted 29 October 2008, [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=94466645098](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=94466645098).

<sup>88</sup> Profile of the Alumni Network on Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/wall.php?id=6006082842&page=2&hash=f4a7842d802d07596fa05936646cc1ca>.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 64.

<sup>90</sup> Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom. A History of the Caucasus*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 166-168.

<sup>91</sup> Audrey L. Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule*, Hoover Institution Press Publication 410, April 1992, pp. 89-90.

<sup>92</sup> Ali Novruzov, “Azerbaijan Democratic Republic – the 90th anniversary of a Muslim Democracy”, *In Mutatione Fortitudo* blog, 6 June 2008, <http://blog.novruzov.az/2008/06/azerbaijan-democratic-republic-90th.html>.

“ADR leaders have left a brilliant model of how to build a democratic and modern state in the Muslim East, a striking example that should be followed not only by Azerbaijan, but also by many others.”<sup>93</sup>

As Emin’s friend Rashad Shirin told ESI, the experience of the ADR proved that “Western-style” democracy was and remains possible in Azerbaijan:

“[The ADR] is a milestone which is being used by the present pro-democracy elite as an argument against those who claim that democratic rule is impossible in Azerbaijan ... an effort to build a better future by referring to a good past.”<sup>94</sup>

### **E. *Rights for donkeys***

*“Social changes follow above all from a confrontation of different moralities and visions of social order.”*

Adam Michnik, Letter from the Gdansk Prison, July 1985

In November 2008, during an event organised by the Forum of Azerbaijani Students in Europe (FASE) at the House of Lords in London, Emin Milli, a youth activist and friend of Adnan, outlined what he called a “Manifesto for Change”.<sup>95</sup>

“Change has still not come to Azerbaijan. But the more you stop the change, the stronger is the will of change to come to you and to get you. Change is marching towards Azerbaijan from inside and from outside, from the left and from the right, from heaven and from hell. And it is important for our generation to shape now a strong vision, which would clearly define what kind of change we need in the value structures of our society and state not to end up in hell, but to make our way to heaven.

Emin insisted that Azerbaijan’s oil wealth would only be useful if the country made use of its human potential:

“It will bring us nothing if we talk about turning black gold into human gold while we are ignoring and wasting the human gold we already have.”<sup>96</sup>

Emin advocated bringing back the ADR’s democratic heritage and reforming the Azerbaijani education system. He also spoke passionately about the need to instil in Azerbaijan’s children the values of a free society from an early age.<sup>97</sup> Emin’s speech was put up on Youtube. His vision of change, vague though it still was, made some of the young Azerbaijanis present quite uncomfortable. As one pro-government activist present in Brussels later told ESI, “It did bother some people when Emin criticised Azerbaijan in the House of Lords. It was demoralising.”<sup>98</sup> For

<sup>93</sup> Ali Novruzov, “Azerbaijan Democratic Republic – the 90th anniversary of a Muslim Democracy”, *In Mutatione Fortitudo* blog, 6 June 2008, <http://blog.novruzov.az/2008/06/azerbaijan-democratic-republic-90th.html>.

<sup>94</sup> ESI interview with Rashad Shirin, 11 March 2009.

<sup>95</sup> Emin Milli was born in 1979 in Baku to Natella and Pasha Abdullayev as the youngest of three children. His father was a civil engineer. By the time Emin became involved in youth activism, both of his parents had already retired. His father was to pass away in 2010 after prolonged illness.

<sup>96</sup> Emin Milli, “The Manifesto for change” (full version), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIZT7yP4IM0>.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> ESI interview, Baku, December 2009.

Emin, however, it was liberating to speak his mind. As it became clear that authoritarianism in Azerbaijan was hardening, Emin's stance towards the government became increasingly critical.<sup>99</sup>

Emin quickly became one of the most outspoken members of Baku's foreign-educated Facebook Generation. After graduating from Baku State University's International Law School in 1999 and working several months for the US-based International Republican Institute (IRI), he went to Germany and graduated in law from the University of Saarbrücken in 2002. He then worked with various international organisations, assisting the OSCE's election observation mission in 2005 and advising the Council of Europe on more than 40 cases involving political prisoners in Azerbaijan.<sup>100</sup> Emin felt that young Western-educated Azerbaijanis, with their direct experience of liberal democracy abroad, could play an important role in their country's development. With that in mind, in 2005 he and some friends set up the Alumni Network (AN).<sup>101</sup> AN was not a real organisation; it had no office, budget or official membership, but was open to everyone who wanted to participate. In the first six months, more than 1,500 people joined its mailing list. One of AN's first events was a party held at the office of the American Alumni Association. As Rashad Shirin, a co-founder, described it,

“We wanted to generate a sense of participation. There were 100 people there, many of whom did not know each other. This was the first time that such an event had taken place in Baku.”<sup>102</sup>

Many similar events followed. According to Emin, one of the biggest AN parties (in 2006) was attended by as many as 1,000 people.<sup>103</sup> In May 2005 AN also organised its first lecture. Thereafter, lectures were held almost every Sunday. As Emin later recalled,

“Our first lecture was about possibilities to study abroad because we thought this would attract people. Then it became more philosophical – with deconstructivism, Habermas and other issues.”<sup>104</sup>

Interest in the German philosopher was hardly coincidental. Habermas had explored the concept of a “public sphere” as a place of open critical discussion. In his emancipatory vision, a public sphere of independent debate would serve as a check on arbitrary state power.<sup>105</sup> AN also organised movie screenings.<sup>106</sup> One of the first movies shown was *The Lives of Others* (2006), the story of a Stasi agent in East Germany who grows increasingly reluctant to carry out his orders. Another was *Land of the Blind* (2006),<sup>107</sup> a political satire describing the overthrow of a tyrannical regime in a fictitious country and its replacement by a regime just as ruthless and oppressive as the previous.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Emin Milli, “Manifesto for Change in Azerbaijan”, a Facebook note posted on 24 January 2011, [http://ru-ru.connect.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=135447193184885](http://ru-ru.connect.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=135447193184885).

<sup>100</sup> Website with information on Adnan and Emin during their time in prison, <http://adnanemin.wordpress.com/>, set up by Azeri bloggers.

<sup>101</sup> ESI interview with Rashad Shirin, a co-founder of the Alumni Network, Baku, 21 October 2009.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> ESI interview with Emin Milli, Baku, December 2010.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962, translated into English in 1989.

<sup>106</sup> Nigar Fataliyeva, “CinemAN teper v Azerbaijan” (CinemAN, Now in Azerbaijan), 20 February 2009, <http://stop-it-please.livejournal.com/62158.html>.

<sup>107</sup> See *Land of the Blind* at IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0433405/>.

<sup>108</sup> To learn more about CinemAN, see its dedicated blog (in English): <http://cinemanen.wordpress.com/>.

The turning point, for Emin as for many others, was the March 2009 package of constitutional changes, which, following a referendum, did away with presidential term limits in Azerbaijan.<sup>109</sup> On 15 April 2009, Emin delivered another critical speech – on “Dynasty and Democracy in Azerbaijan” – at Columbia University in New York. He criticised the personality cult created around the Aliyevs. Azerbaijan, he said, was now ruled by a “political dynasty”, the first of its kind in the former Soviet Union:

“The recent referendum held on 18th of March was a culmination of the power consolidation of the ruling regime. In my opinion, the whole referendum was not legitimate and it was neither fair, nor legal. Azerbaijan’s authorities decided to follow the path of Chad, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Algeria, Belarus, Uzbekistan and Venezuela in terms of opening the constitutional doors for lifelong presidency.”<sup>110</sup>

Emin reserved his harshest words for the rampant corruption permeating all spheres of public life in Azerbaijan:

“The monopolisation of the economy and one of the highest corruption levels in the world prevent the possibility of building up any kind of diversified and sustainable economic system. The regime is using the system of corruption (allowing corruption, not punishing corruption) to buy the loyalty of clans supporting the regime and to bind the majority of citizens, who are forced to be corrupt in order to survive in such an environment where corruption is the basis of the system and the rule of the game.”

To Emin, it had become clear that, instead of a more democratic future, Azerbaijan was facing the consolidation of an authoritarian regime that had never intended to allow genuine political competition. “The regime expands and strengthens its repressive apparatus to intimidate opposition forces and to prevent the formation of independent social groups.”<sup>111</sup>

The transcript and the video of Emin’s presentation were posted online. Several people, including Azerbaijani diplomats and Europeans working for international organisations in Baku, warned Emin that he was taking a risk – as he himself knew. As he said during his Columbia speech,

“In January when I organised and participated in protests against this referendum in front of the UN, one of the closest members of my family was fired from his job. He was told that he is a relative of an enemy of the state. This is the mildest form of punishment if you refuse to sign an act of loyalty to this regime or express your disagreement with their policies. I hope that nobody who participates at our event will have to face any kind of punishment and that their relatives will not lose their jobs for listening to alternative voices.”<sup>112</sup>

Neither Emin nor his friend Adnan were easily intimidated, however. Upon Adnan’s request, Emin brought a donkey costume from his visit to the US for the next project of OL, a satirical video posted on Youtube one month after Flower Day in 2009.<sup>113</sup> It was an ironic take on a rumour that had been making the rounds in the opposition press: notably, that Azerbaijan’s

<sup>109</sup> “Azerbaijanis Pass Controversial Proposal To Scrap Presidential Term Limits”, *RFE/RL*, 18 March 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijanis\\_Vote\\_On\\_Controversial\\_Proposal\\_To\\_Scrap\\_Presidential\\_Term\\_Limits/1512634.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijanis_Vote_On_Controversial_Proposal_To_Scrap_Presidential_Term_Limits/1512634.html).

<sup>110</sup> “Dynasty and Democracy in Azerbaijan”, 4 May 2009, <http://emajidli.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/dynasty/>.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> BBC, “The ‘donkey bloggers’”, 25 November 2010, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/2010/11/101125\\_outlook\\_azerbaijan\\_donkey\\_bloggers.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/2010/11/101125_outlook_azerbaijan_donkey_bloggers.shtml).

government was to purchase a donkey from Germany for US\$41,000.<sup>114</sup> The “donkey video” stars Adnan in the donkey costume. The animal gives a press briefing to a group of young people posing as journalists:

“If I were to be reincarnated in Azerbaijan, I would like to come back as a donkey. Unlike in Europe, here the more donkey you are, the more opportunities you have ... Why was I so expensive? Because I am a Category A Donkey – I speak three languages and play the violin ... I had planned to work as a member of the Liberal Donkeys’ Association protecting other donkeys’ rights. However, given the proposed amendments to the NGO law, this does not seem possible. If they don’t even let donkeys do such work, how could normal humans possibly do it?”<sup>115</sup>

After treating the journalists to a violin solo, the donkey prepares to leave the conference room. As he does so, applauded by the journalists, the frame freezes and a question appears on the screen:

“There are those that look after donkey rights. But who will look after human rights?”

### 3. REPRESSION

#### A. *How Emin and Adnan ended up in jail*

On the evening of 8 July 2009, Emin, Adnan and five of their friends were dining at Livan, a Lebanese restaurant in central Baku, discussing, as Adnan put it, “the future of Azerbaijani youth.”<sup>116</sup> Emin and Adnan had become friends after meeting in early 2006 at an event in the German Cultural Centre. According to their friends, the only other customers in the restaurant were two men sitting at a far-away table. At one point, the two men, later identified as Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov, both in their mid-20s, both well built, approached Emin to ask what he and his friends were talking about.<sup>117</sup> One of them suddenly head butted Emin. Adnan intervened and was knocked to the floor. The men began to kick Emin and Adnan, breaking Adnan’s nose and injuring Emin’s leg. The incident lasted a few minutes before restaurant staff intervened.

Emin, Adnan and one of their friends, Orkhan Gafarli, immediately went to the nearest police station, the 39<sup>th</sup> Division of the Sabayel District Police Department. Adnan called his girlfriend, Parvana Persiani, whom he had planned to meet, to tell her about the incident. Parvana informed a few other friends and headed to the police station. When Emin, Adnan and Orkhan arrived at the station, they were told that it did not have jurisdiction over the area where the incident had occurred. The police drove the three young men to the 9<sup>th</sup> Division of the Sabayel District Police Department, which did have jurisdiction.

<sup>114</sup> The media that reported the news about the donkey purchase include: “Azərbaycan hökuməti 41 min dollara bir eşşək alıb” (Azerbaijan’s government will get a donkey for 41 thousand dollars). Reporter Information Agency, 7 June 2009, <http://ria.az/iqtisadiyyat/10503.html>; Famil CƏFƏRLİ, FUTBOL VƏ EŞŞƏK BİZNESİ (*Futbol and Donkey Business*), Musavat newspaper, [http://www.musavat.com/new/yazar/54617-FUTBOL\\_VƏ\\_EŞŞƏK\\_BİZNESİ](http://www.musavat.com/new/yazar/54617-FUTBOL_VƏ_EŞŞƏK_BİZNESİ).

<sup>115</sup> Donkey video on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aaecvg7xCiK> (in Azeri with English subtitles), viewed 126,138 times at this URL by 24 January 2011.

<sup>116</sup> ESI interview with Adnan Hajizade, 12 January 2011.

<sup>117</sup> 1984-born Vusal Mammadov, a refugee from Agdam, and 1983-born Babek Huseynov, a refugee from Fizuli region, according to the information from Ministry of Internal Affairs, [http://www.mediaforum.az/articles.php?article\\_id=20090709070651220&lang=az&page=00](http://www.mediaforum.az/articles.php?article_id=20090709070651220&lang=az&page=00).

The four friends who had remained at the restaurant had meanwhile called the police themselves. Policemen arrived on the scene and took Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov to the 9<sup>th</sup> Division for questioning. The four friends followed the police car in a taxi all the way to the police station, where a small crowd of friends and relatives had already begun to gather. The police tried to disperse the group, but they refused to leave. Adnan, Emin and Orkhan were moved once again, this time to the headquarters of the Sabayel District Police Department. Once again, friends and relatives followed. It was around 9 pm.

Adnan's girlfriend, Parvana, was able to enter the building and give Adnan ice for his injuries. Adnan told Parvana that Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov had both apologised and had asked him and Emin to withdraw their complaint. After she exited the station, Parvana spoke to two friends who were waiting outside: Khadija Ismayilova, an experienced journalist working for RFE/RL, and Erkin Gadirli, a legal expert who had co-founded the Alumni Network (AN) with Emin. Ismayilova and Gadirli recommended that Emin and Adnan not withdraw their complaint. They recalled a similar case from November 2007, when Ganimat Zahid, the editor-in-chief of the opposition newspaper *Azadliq*, was arrested on charges of hooliganism. Zahid had been attacked in the street by an unknown man who claimed that he had insulted a woman. Despite his injuries, Zahid did not press charges. His attacker, however, filed a complaint the following day, accusing the journalist of hooliganism. Zahid was eventually sentenced to four years in prison. He was released on 17 March 2010 thanks to a presidential pardon.

Adnan and Emin followed Ismayilova's and Gadirli's advice. All the same, their case quickly began to mirror Ganimat Zahid's. Later that same evening Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov were allowed to leave the police station. Adnan and Emin had turned from victims to suspects. (At around 1 am, Adnan sent a mobile text message to his friends saying that he was being detained as a suspect.) Even though Adnan asked for his lawyer, the lawyer, who was in the crowd just outside the police station, was not allowed to see him. At 2 am the police announced that Emin and Adnan would be detained for 48 hours for hooliganism. Shortly after the announcement the two young men were transferred to the Temporary Detention Centre of the 37<sup>th</sup> Division of the Khatai District Police Department.

On 10 July, two days after the fateful event, Emin and Adnan were questioned. Later that day, a preliminary closed-door hearing was held at the Sabayil Court. No witnesses were called to testify. Emin and Adnan were charged with hooliganism and sentenced to two months of pre-trial detention, the maximum allowed under Azerbaijani law.<sup>118</sup> Human rights activists were later to identify several violations of the law committed by the police during the first 48 hours, including the failure to provide Emin and Adnan with medical assistance and the investigators' refusal to allow both men to see the lawyers of their choice.<sup>119</sup> The detention protocols contained false information, including the claim that both Emin and Adnan had criminal records.<sup>120</sup> (Copies of these protocols were not presented to Emin and Adnan.) On 9 July, Elmira Suleymanova, the

<sup>118</sup> Summary of the Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli case, 19 September, 2009, <http://supportadnanandemin.rsfblog.org/archive/2009/09/22/summary-of-the-adnan-hajizadeh-emin-milli-case.html>.

<sup>119</sup> World Movement for Democracy Website, "Appeal of the participants of the Civil Society Forum of 9 July 2009 connected to the pressure exercised on young activists to the president of the Azerbaijan Republic Ilham Aliiev Copy to Minister of Interior Affairs Ramil Usubov", <http://www.wmd.org/documents/Appeal0709.pdf>.

<sup>120</sup> Blog of Ali Novruzov, *In Nutatione Fortitudo*, 5 September 2009, <http://blog.novruzov.az/2009/09/bloggers-trial-report-from-outside-of.html>.

Ombudsman of Azerbaijan, addressed a letter to the Minister of Internal Affairs Ramil Usubov and State Prosecutor Zahid Garalov, proposing a mutual agreement between the parties.<sup>121</sup>

On 11 July 2009, before the case had even gone to trial, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Prosecutor's Office issued an official statement that pinned the blame for the incident on Adnan and Emin. The statement was full of incorrect information:

“On 8 July 2009 Adnan Hajizada and Emin Abdullayev (Milli), being drunk together with five friends of theirs, used loud inappropriate language in the ‘Lebanese’ restaurant. Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov were physically attacked by them for asking them to stop using bad language. When the police officers arrived at the scene of the incident, four men had already escaped [*ESI: These were the four friends who had called the police*]. The police detained three [men] and took them to the 9th police station [*ESI: Adnan, Emin and Orkhan had gone to the police station on their own*]. The other four men, Ulvi Hasanli, Nureddin Babayev, Parviz and Bahram, are wanted.”

The document also sounded a defensive note:

“We protest against the international reaction to an ordinary case of hooliganism. We view this as pressure on the investigation process and call on the international community to stop interfering in the internal affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan.”<sup>122</sup>

Shortly after the statement was published, the four “wanted” men held a press conference. They pointed out that had not fled the scene of the incident but had instead tried, in vain, to testify to the police.<sup>123</sup>

Ten days later, a statement by Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov about the events of 8 July set the stage for the trial that was to follow:

“we proceeded to Livan restaurant in order to eat something. We chose a place to sit, and ordered our food. There were 7-8 people eating and drinking at the next table. After a while, we heard them curse [loudly]. We felt very uncomfortable and warned them. But they ignored our requests to be quiet and continued. We asked them not to swear because we wanted to rest quietly. Some of them retorted that, ‘We will do whatever we want to. Do not dare preach to us!’ Then this turned into a heated debate. Although we did not want to start a fight, they attacked us. We tried to protect ourselves. Two of them were beating us ruthlessly. As a result, we suffered multiple injuries. We are still being treated in a hospital up until this day. We heard from our friends that there is a campaign going on against us by some newspapers.”<sup>124</sup>

<sup>121</sup> “Ombudsman addressed a letter on detained youth”, *Media Forum Azerbaijan*, 9 July 2009, [http://mediaforum.az/articles.php?lang=az&page=00&article\\_id=20090709060525977](http://mediaforum.az/articles.php?lang=az&page=00&article_id=20090709060525977). This piece of news was also reported by the opposition paper Azadliq, at <http://www.azadliqradiosu.az/articleprintview/1773346.html>.

<sup>122</sup> Official web site of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Joint statement by the Ministry and the State Prosecutor's Office, 14 July, 2009, <http://www.mia.gov.az/?/az/news/view/239/>.

<sup>123</sup> “Wanted youth: ‘We didn’t escape anywhere’”, *Radio Liberty*, 13 July 2009, <http://www.azadliq.org/content/article/1775852.html>.

<sup>124</sup> “Aggrieved persons in Adnan Hajizadeh and Emin Milli’s criminal case appeal mass media”, *APA*, 20 July 2009, <http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=105248>.

## B. *A show trial*

The trial opened on 4 September 2009. There were 12 court hearings in total. Recording equipment and cameras were not allowed inside the courtroom and the minutes of the hearings were not made public. Vafa Jafarova, a youth activist and a friend of Adnan and Emin's, attended most of the hearings. Until 2008, Vafa Jafarova had been the head of Dalga (Wave), a pro-democracy youth movement established in February 2005. Her husband, a protest musician, wrote lyrics about Emin and Adnan after their arrest.<sup>125</sup> Throughout the trial, she would use her mobile phone to enter information about the proceedings onto her Facebook account. Other people would then forward it. "Phones were not actually allowed – only pencils and paper were – but we would keep them, sometimes by arriving with two phones and only handing in one of them at the entrance," she explained.<sup>126</sup>

During the hearings, Vusal Mammadov again alleged that the incident took place because of Emin's use of bad language towards women in the restaurant. Likewise, Babek Huseynov claimed that Emin had been cursing, and that he had told him to speak in a more civil manner. "Emin then came and hit Vusal, and Adnan joined in." Huseynov said. Emin and Adnan maintained that there were no other customers in the restaurant and that Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov were not sitting close enough to overhear their conversation. Huseynov and Mammadov were evasive in answering the defence lawyers' questions. Asked about the content of his and Huseynov's written complaint, Mammadov said he wrote whatever "they told him to". Huseynov repeated several times that he could not remember what he wrote. A waitress from the restaurant told the court that the only people inside the restaurant were Emin, Adnan, their five friends, Babek Huseynov and Vusal Mammadov, as well as restaurant staff. The waitress also testified that she did not hear any cursing or loud conversation at the table where Adnan, Emin and their friends were seated. Two police officers later testified that the only injuries they had seen were those sustained by Emin and Adnan. The prosecutor later reminded one of the police officers, Zahid Dashdemirov, that he had earlier written that he saw Babek Huseynov holding his stomach after the incident. Dashdemirov backtracked, replying that this may indeed have been the case; the event, he said, was much fresher in his mind when he was writing his report.<sup>127</sup>

Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov, graduates of the sports academy, are well built, athletic men. Some people in the courtroom laughed when the two talked about being beaten up by Emin and Adnan. As Emin pointed out, there was an obvious difference in physical stature and strength between him and Adnan on the one hand, and Vusal Mammadov and Babek Huseynov on the other.<sup>128</sup>

As the trial evolved, the international spotlight on the case began to grow. Media outlets, from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to the *New York Times* and the BBC, reported on Emin and Adnan's arrest and indictment. On 4 September 2009, a group of human rights organisations, including Article 19, Global Campaign for Free Expression, Human Rights Watch and International PEN, addressed an open letter to President Ilham Aliyev, noting "with concern that freedom of expression has recently been under direct threat in Azerbaijan, as a variety of

<sup>125</sup> Onnik Krikorian, "Rapping for Freedom and Democracy in Azerbaijan", 30 August 2009, <http://frontlineclub.com/blogs/onnikkrikorian/2009/08/rocking-and-rapping-for-freedom-and-democracy-in-azerbaijan.html>. Song about Emin and Adnan: "Divar", written by Azer Cirttan, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEfMu\\_4\\_IIE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEfMu_4_IIE).

<sup>126</sup> ESI interview with Vafa Jafarova, January 2011.

<sup>127</sup> ESI interview with Vafa Jafarova, January 2011.

<sup>128</sup> Eurasianet, "Azerbaijan: Contradictions Emerge During Blogger Trial Testimony", 17 September 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav091809c.shtml>.

methods have been employed to silence persons and media outlets that voice dissenting opinions.”<sup>129</sup> The international pressure proved to be of no avail. On 11 November 2009, after two months of court hearings, Emin and Adnan were sentenced to 30 and 24 months in jail, respectively, for “hooliganism” and “infliction of intentional physical violence.” Adnan later said that he did not believe that any piece of evidence could have swayed the court. As far as he could tell, “even if there had been a video taping the whole incident, we still would have gone to prison.”<sup>130</sup>

Condemnations of the verdicts poured in. The Council of Europe’s Secretary-General stated that the events “will have an inevitable chilling effect on freedom of expression in Azerbaijan” and that “freedom and well-being of all people in Azerbaijan” were at stake.<sup>131</sup> The EU regretted that “the trial proceedings did not reflect due process” and “that the court decision may further undermine the freedom of expression in Azerbaijan.”<sup>132</sup> The US State Department qualified the verdict as a “step backwards for Azerbaijan’s progress towards democratic reform.”<sup>133</sup> Freedom House deemed the sentencing “deeply disturbing.”<sup>134</sup> Reporters Without Borders termed the trial “a sham from beginning to end” and the sentences “outrageous and unjust.”<sup>135</sup> Amnesty International deemed the two young men as prisoners of conscience.<sup>136</sup> Attempts to appeal the verdict before higher-instance courts failed. In March 2010, the Baku Appeals Court upheld Emin and Adnan’s conviction.<sup>137</sup> When the Supreme Court confirmed the prison sentences in August 2010, the defence lawyers decided to go to the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>138</sup>

One year into his two-year sentence, Adnan Hajizade became eligible for early release. In Azerbaijan, if a prisoner has demonstrated good conduct, he or she can be released on parole halfway into their sentencing period. This was not to apply to Adnan. On 26 July 2010 the Baku District Court ruled that Adnan would not be released as he had not admitted his guilt and had not shown good behaviour in prison. According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,

“Prison officials Natig Hajiyev and Ali Nabiyevev argued in court that Hajizade did not admit his guilt and although he spent most of his time reading and organising intellectual activities in prison, he refused to paint some walls and clean the prison yard ... Hajizade said the

<sup>129</sup> Article 19, Global Campaign for Free Expression, Human Rights Watch and International PEN, Letter to the President of Azerbaijan regarding the Trial of Two Youth Activists, 4 September 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/09/04/letter-president-azerbaijan-regarding-trial-two-youth-activists>.

<sup>130</sup> ESI interview with Adnan Hajizade, Baku, December 2010.

<sup>131</sup> Secretary General of the Council of Europe Thorbjørn Jagland, “Freedom of expression under pressure in Azerbaijan”, Statement, 12 November 2009, [https://wcd.coe.int/wcd/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=PR838\(2009\)&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&Site=DC&BackColorInternet=F5CA75&BackColorIntranet=F5CA75&BackColorLogged=A9BACE](https://wcd.coe.int/wcd/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=PR838(2009)&Language=lanEnglish&Ver=original&Site=DC&BackColorInternet=F5CA75&BackColorIntranet=F5CA75&BackColorLogged=A9BACE).

<sup>132</sup> Swedish EU Presidency, “Presidency Statement on Azerbaijan”, 12 November 2009, [http://www.se2009.eu/en/meetings\\_news/2009/11/12/presidency\\_statement\\_on\\_azerbaijan](http://www.se2009.eu/en/meetings_news/2009/11/12/presidency_statement_on_azerbaijan).

<sup>133</sup> US Department of State, “Verdict in the Court Case of Imprisoned Youth Activists Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade”, Press Statement, 11 November 2009, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/nov/131798.htm>.

<sup>134</sup> Freedom House, “Bloggers’ Jailing Threatens New Media’s Emergence in Azerbaijan”, 12 November 2009, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=1095>.

<sup>135</sup> Reporters without Borders, “Prison sentences for two bloggers condemned as ‘outrageous and unjust’”, 12 November 2009, [http://en.rsf.org/azerbaijan-prison-sentences-for-two-bloggers-12-11-2009\\_34972.html](http://en.rsf.org/azerbaijan-prison-sentences-for-two-bloggers-12-11-2009_34972.html).

<sup>136</sup> Amnesty International, “Jailed Azerbaijani bloggers adopted as prisoners of conscience”, 12 November 2009, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/jailed-azerbaijani-bloggers-adopted-prisoners-conscience-20091112>.

<sup>137</sup> RFE/RL, “Jailed Azerbaijani Bloggers’ Appeal Rejected”, 10 March 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Jailed\\_Azerbaijani\\_Bloggers\\_Appeal\\_Rejected/1980103.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Jailed_Azerbaijani_Bloggers_Appeal_Rejected/1980103.html).

<sup>138</sup> RFE/RL, “Azerbaijan Supreme Court Upholds Bloggers’ Sentences”, 20 August 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijan\\_Supreme\\_Court\\_Upholds\\_Bloggers\\_Sentences\\_/2132682.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijan_Supreme_Court_Upholds_Bloggers_Sentences_/2132682.html).

claims by the prison officials were untrue and he did not believe the judge would release him, regardless of how good his behaviour was in jail.”<sup>139</sup>

During the hearing, prison officials also complained that Adnan Hajizade met with his lawyer “too often”.

Further appeals, protests and condemnations followed. US President Barack Obama asked President Ilham Aliyev to free the two prisoners during a 24 September 2010 meeting on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York.<sup>140</sup> The Azerbaijani authorities appeared unmoved, but the case clearly became an international embarrassment. Less than two months after the meeting with Obama, a breakthrough finally took place. Unexpectedly, Adnan’s appeal for a suspension of his remaining sentence was granted. He was set free on 18 November 2010. The next day, having served half of his sentence (15 out of 30 months), Emin Milli was also released.<sup>141</sup> Their prison sentences were suspended on condition that neither of the two would leave Baku.

“To be honest, I still don’t know why exactly I was arrested,” Emin explained in an interview after his release. “But I assume I was arrested just for telling the truth, for free thinking, for free expression, and this donkey video was part of it.”<sup>142</sup> “I missed freedom,” he added. “Not spiritual freedom, because I had this even in jail. I missed freedom of movement, freedom of using the Internet. I think Internet deprivation is a new form of torture for people of our generation.”<sup>143</sup> A few weeks after their release, both Adnan and Emin underlined their desire to continue their activism. Emin said he wanted to advocate on behalf of people who were unjustly imprisoned. Adnan stated that while he did not intend to get involved in politics, he would continue to speak out against injustice.<sup>144</sup> On 12 December 2010, Emin and Adnan posted a 6-minute video on YouTube, in which they thanked all the people and organisations that had stood up for them:

“To the end of our lives we will be thankful to each of you for every word you said, every click you made, every video and petition you made.”<sup>145</sup>

<sup>139</sup> “Jailed Azerbaijani Blogger’s Appeal Rejected”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 27 July 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Jailed\\_Azerbaijani\\_Bloggers\\_Appeal\\_Rejected/2111055.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Jailed_Azerbaijani_Bloggers_Appeal_Rejected/2111055.html).

<sup>140</sup> The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Read-out of President Obama’s meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev”, 24 September 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/24/read-out-president-obamas-meeting-with-azerbaijani-president-ilham-aliyev>.

<sup>141</sup> Maarif Akberli, Claire Bigg, “Court Orders Release Of Azerbaijani ‘Donkey Bloggers’”, RFE/RL, 19 November 2010, [www.rferl.org/content/Court\\_Orders\\_Release\\_Of\\_Azerbaijani\\_Donkey\\_Blogger/2223427.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Court_Orders_Release_Of_Azerbaijani_Donkey_Blogger/2223427.html).

<sup>142</sup> “Freed Azerbaijani Blogger Says Year Without Internet Was ‘Torture’”, RFE/RL, 19 November 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Freed\\_Azerbaijani\\_Blogger\\_Says\\_Year\\_Without\\_Internet\\_Was\\_Torture/2224983.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Freed_Azerbaijani_Blogger_Says_Year_Without_Internet_Was_Torture/2224983.html).

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> ESI interview with Adnan and Emin, Baku, December 2010.

<sup>145</sup> “Emin and Adnan: We Are Back and Thank You”, YouTube, 12 December 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEI6ASpRWTA>.

#### 4. THE FUTURE OF DISSENT

*“We are not in favour of external meddling either, we only want the holders of power to abide by what they themselves have solemnly promised and signed.”*

Jiri Hayek and Zdenke Mlynar, dissidents in communist Czechoslovakia, 1975

##### A. *Authoritarian stability and the Council of Europe*

On 25 January 2001, on the occasion of Azerbaijan’s accession to the Council of Europe, President Heydar Aliyev addressed the Council’s Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg. Aliyev underlined the efforts Azerbaijan had made to harmonise its legislation with the Council’s standards. “Today, the process of democratic development of Azerbaijan has become irreversible,” he claimed.

“Firm guarantees for freedom and supremacy of law have been ensured. The acceptance of Azerbaijan into the Council of Europe is not simply a recognition of an independent, sovereign, democratic, and secular state but it is also the beginning of a new stage in development of the Azerbaijani state as an equal member of the European family.”<sup>146</sup>

A decade after the speech, Aliyev’s words ring hollow. Not a single election held since then has met international standards. The 2004 Freedom in the World report downgraded Azerbaijan’s ranking from “partly free” to “not free” due to “seriously flawed presidential elections in October [2003] and a subsequent government crackdown on opposition supporters”.<sup>147</sup> Ever since, Azerbaijan’s has remained “not free”, with intensifying limitations on media freedom, as well as an “increasing monopolization of power by President Ilham Aliyev and the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party.”<sup>148</sup>

Every year since 2007, the independent watchdog organisation Reporters without Borders has placed Ilham Aliyev on their list of 40 “Predators of the Press” – that is, of state leaders and organisations around the world that are known for their suppression of media freedom.<sup>149</sup> In 2007, the Committee to Project Journalists identified Azerbaijan as one of the two “worst backsliders on media freedom” in the OSCE region, the other being Russia.<sup>150</sup> Amnesty International identified a number of jailed Azerbaijani journalists as prisoners of conscience.<sup>151</sup> The Freedom House “Nations in Transit” report of 2010 gives Azerbaijan a 6.75 mark in the

<sup>146</sup> “Address by His Excellency Mr. Heydar Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan at the session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe”, Strasbourg, 25 January 2001, <http://www.azerbembassy.org.cn/eng/statements5.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2004” (Azerbaijan Country Report), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2004&country=2884>.

<sup>148</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2009” (Azerbaijan Country Report), <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2009&country=7560>.

<sup>149</sup> Reporters without Borders for Press Freedom, “Predators: Ilham Aliev, President, Azerbaijan”, <http://en.rsf.org/predator-ilham-aliev,37258.html>.

<sup>150</sup> CPJ, “Testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe” at a commission hearing, “Freedom of the Media in the OSCE Region”, 2 August 2007, [http://www.cpij.org/regions\\_07/europe\\_07/testimony\\_russia\\_internet\\_02aug07.html#backslide](http://www.cpij.org/regions_07/europe_07/testimony_russia_internet_02aug07.html#backslide).

<sup>151</sup> Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: Mixed Messages on Freedom of Expression”, 2008, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR55/002/2008/en/b6e7e186-e5ea-11dc-a281-c950ca3e72a9/eur550022008eng.pdf>.

“independent media” category, with 7 being the lowest possible rating.<sup>152</sup> Human Rights Watch’s most recent report also paints a gloomy picture:

“The government of Azerbaijan is engaged in concerted efforts to limit the space for freedom of expression in the country. Senior government officials frequently pursue criminal defamation and other cases against journalists and human rights defenders criticizing the government. Dozens of journalists have been prosecuted and imprisoned or fined.”<sup>153</sup>

Faced with criticism, the Azerbaijani government and its supporters have adopted two lines of defence. The first is that the country is still in transition, and although it might take a little longer until full democratic standards are realised, the overall trend is positive. In July 1997, on his first official visit to the United States, Heydar Aliyev had this to say on the subject:

“Some people think we should be able to establish democracy in a short time, but that’s impossible. Azerbaijan is a young nation and democracy is a new concept. The U.S. has been advancing on the path of democracy for a long time – more than 200 years. You have achieved a lot, but you are still working on it. Democracy is not an apple you buy at the market and bring back home.”<sup>154</sup>

One decade later similar arguments were made by Azerbaijani representatives in the Council of Europe. During a debate in the parliamentary assembly in April 2007, Gultekin Hajiyeva, a member of the Azerbaijani delegation, stated:

“We are not so naive as to pretend that we are a European democracy in the full sense of the notion. Much more remains to be done to meet the standards of real democracy ... democracy is an evolutionary and not a revolutionary process ... We have European aspirations and consider ourselves part of Europe, but we need your love, support and understanding.”<sup>155</sup>

The second argument is that whatever democratic shortcomings might persist are due to Azerbaijan’s particular geopolitical situation. Given its neighbourhood and its conflict with Armenia, proponents of this view argue, Azerbaijan cannot afford the luxury of fully democratic rule. In 2010, the European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS), a London-based NGO supportive of the Azerbaijani government, published a brief under the title “Azerbaijan & Human Rights: the West’s Double Standards?” It complained that

“Azerbaijan’s human rights record has attracted unfair criticism in the west. The focus has been directed at dissident journalists and the alleged curtailing of opposition political activities, despite the fact that there are over 25 mainstream political parties that participate in elections ... Azerbaijan is an embryonic democracy and Baku has often been forced to prioritise order and stability during this transitional stage. This is especially the case as the country remains in a permanent state of readiness for war over Armenia’s illegal occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh.”<sup>156</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Freedom House, “Nations in Transit: Azerbaijan 2010”, <http://www.freedomhouse.eu/images/Reports/NIT-2010-Azerbaijan-final.pdf>.

<sup>153</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Beaten, Blacklisted and Behind Bars: The Vanishing Space for Freedom of Expression in Azerbaijan*, October 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2010/10/26/beaten-blacklisted-and-behind-bars>.

<sup>154</sup> Aliyev – Quotes. “Democracy – Not an Apple”, *Azerbaijan International*, 5.3, Autumn 1997 [http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/topics/Quotes/quote\\_aliyev.heydar.html](http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/topics/Quotes/quote_aliyev.heydar.html).

<sup>155</sup> PACE, “Report: Ordinary Session (Second part), Eleventh sitting”, 16 April 2007, <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Records/2007/E/0704161500E.htm>.

<sup>156</sup> The European Azerbaijan Society, “Azerbaijan & Human Rights: the West’s Double Standards?”, pp. 1-2, <https://teas.eu/sites/default/files/HR.pdf>.

The notion of a gradual transition has also been accepted by some outsiders. During a visit to Baku in July 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton compared the Azerbaijani experience to the American one. Democracy-building takes time, she said, and even the United States has not yet arrived at the “final destination.”<sup>157</sup> She also stated that:

“We believe that there has been a tremendous amount of progress in Azerbaijan. But as with any country, particularly a young country – young, independent country like this one – there is a lot of room for improvement.”<sup>158</sup>

Even the European Union has on occasion bought into this narrative: the 2007-2013 Azerbaijan country assistance strategy paper notes that “Azerbaijan is pursuing an ‘evolutionary’ reform strategy to develop democracy.”<sup>159</sup>

The Council of Europe, Europe’s oldest club of democracies, has also lowered its expectations over time. In 2002 the Council’s first rapporteur on Azerbaijan, Andreas Gross, had warned that when member states “do not follow the commitments and values, their membership in the Council is always at stake. We have been open-minded and liberal by admitting (Azerbaijan) and we will be correct and hard in pursuing its commitments.” That has not happened, however. The Council of Europe and PACE routinely declare each new election in Azerbaijan as a “decisive test” for the country’s democratic progress. Yet, although every single election thus far has failed to live up to democratic standards, no sanctions have ever been applied.

The language of empty promises and failed expectations is evident from PACE resolutions and transcripts of its debates. Following the 2003 elections, a resolution issued by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) cited “intimidation of voters,” “arbitrary arrests” of opposition supporters, “clear bias” on the part of the press, and “excessive use of force” by security forces. “In a member state of the Council of Europe, which has been independent for more than ten years, such practice is unacceptable,” read the PACE resolution.<sup>160</sup>

In 2005, PACE adopted Resolution 1456, which stated that the November 2005 parliamentary elections would be regarded “as a decisive test for the democratic credibility of the country.”<sup>161</sup> When the elections turned out to be marred by numerous abuses and violence, PACE briefly debated whether to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation. In the end, however, no action was taken.

In 2007 PACE rapporteur on Azerbaijan Andreas Herkel admitted in a debate in Strasbourg that no significant progress had taken place in Azerbaijan since the 2005 elections. In the same debate, Herkel’s fellow rapporteur on Azerbaijan, Tony Lloyd, stated that the presidential elections in 2008 should become the next test: “The 2008 elections will be a very serious matter in deciding whether Azerbaijan really belongs here in the family of the Council of Europe

<sup>157</sup> US Department of State, Hilary Rodham Clinton, Joint Press Availability with Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Mammadyarov, 4 July 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/143961.htm>.

<sup>158</sup> US Department of State, Hilary Rodham Clinton, “Joint Press Availability with Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Mammadyarov”, 4 July 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/143961.htm>.

<sup>159</sup> European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, *Azerbaijan: Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013*, p. 6, [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi\\_csp\\_azerbaijan\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi_csp_azerbaijan_en.pdf).

<sup>160</sup> Council of Europe Parliamentary Resolution 1358, 2004 <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta04/ERES1358.htm>.

<sup>161</sup> PACE, Resolution 1456 (2005), “Functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan”, 22 June 2005. <http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta05/eres1456.htm>.

Assembly, committed to democracy, and respect for the democracy of the people.”<sup>162</sup> In a June 2008 report on the “Functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan”, PACE employed an even stronger warning:

“the October 2008 presidential elections will be a major test for the Azerbaijani authorities to prove their will to transform the country into a genuine democracy respectful of law and human rights. Azerbaijan cannot afford to fall short in meeting Council of Europe commitment and standards for democratic elections again.”<sup>163</sup>

Predictably, the 2008 elections were not democratic either. The European Union’s progress report on Azerbaijan noted that the elections “failed to meet other OSCE standards, including freedom of assembly, candidates’ access to media, correct vote counting and tabulation of results ... overall the pre-election process was characterised by a worsened political climate, not conducive to real pluralism.”<sup>164</sup> In the run-up to the 2010 parliamentary elections, Human Rights Watch warned that “with the vanishing space for free expression, the upcoming elections risk the same fate as the fraud-tainted elections here in 2003, 2005 and 2008.” Such fears were again to prove well founded. As the official ODHIR report on the 2010 elections concluded:

“Certain conditions necessary for a meaningful and competitive election were lacking in these elections. The fundamental freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression were limited and a vibrant political discourse facilitated by free and independent media was almost impossible.”<sup>165</sup>

After January 2006, despite the persistent shortcomings of Azerbaijani democracy, the Council’s parliamentary assembly has not even debated whether to take the symbolic step of refusing to seat Azerbaijani delegates elected in a series of clearly fraudulent elections. This prompted Kenan Aliyev and Khadija Ismayilova of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty to pose a pointed question in a June 2008 article:

“Given Azerbaijan’s protracted poor performance on advancing basic freedoms, human rights, and democracy, the question naturally arises: what is the Council of Europe doing, and what does membership in the organisation mean?”<sup>166</sup>

Meanwhile, leaders in Baku have become ever more assertive in challenging external criticism. On 23 July 2010, President Aliyev tweeted from his recently launched Twitter account PresidentAz: “Freedom of speech, democratic development and establishment of law-based state are among key issues in Azerbaijan.” The same month, during the opening of the new headquarters of the state-sponsored Press Council, Aliyev stressed that, since Azerbaijan was technically at war since the early 1990s, all of its journalists had a moral obligation to foster the spirit of patriotism. Criticism was dangerous, Aliyev noted, as it undermined the image Azerbaijan communicated to the outside world and gave “an additional argument” to the country’s opponents:

<sup>162</sup> PACE, “Report: Ordinary Session (Second part), Eleventh sitting”, 16 April 2007, <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Records/2007/E/0704161500E.htm>.

<sup>163</sup> PACE, “The functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan: Report”, Doc. 11627, 6 June 2008, <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc08/EDOC11627.htm>.

<sup>164</sup> European Commission, “Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2008: Progress Report Azerbaijan”, p. 3, [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/progress2009/sec09\\_512\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/progress2009/sec09_512_en.pdf).

<sup>165</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, “Republic of Azerbaijan, Parliamentary Elections, 7 November 2010 – OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report”, Warsaw, 25 January 2011, p. 1.

<sup>166</sup> “Does Council Of Europe Matter In Azerbaijan?”, *RFE/RL*, 24 June 2008, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Commentary\\_Does\\_Council\\_Of\\_Europe\\_Matter\\_In\\_Azerbaijan/1145037.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Commentary_Does_Council_Of_Europe_Matter_In_Azerbaijan/1145037.html).

“Dissemination of false information in the media is unacceptable. In former times it was [a] very widespread approach. Issue false information to create a sensation, and then begin the discussion around these lies ... then pass the lie to the foreign media, then return it back as accurate information.”<sup>167</sup>

Recently, Azerbaijan has appeared to openly mock the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights. The context has been one of the most publicised cases of state-sanctioned persecution of a journalist in Azerbaijan – the case of Eynulla Fatullayev. The journalist, who had written many articles containing sharp criticism of high-ranking government officials, was repeatedly slapped with sizeable monetary fines for “libel” and “defamation” throughout his career. On one occasion his father was kidnapped in an attempt to prevent him from publishing his paper. In April 2007, Fatullayev was arrested on charges of “defamation of the Azerbaijani people” over a posting on an internet forum attributed to him, which he denied. Later, charges of terrorism and tax evasion were added. Fatullayev received a combined sentence of 8.5 years.

The case provoked an international outcry, with numerous international organizations and human rights groups calling for Fatullayev’s release. In 2008, PACE’s monitoring committee demanded “the immediate release” of Fatullayev.<sup>168</sup> Fatullayev’s lawyers took the case to the European Court of Human Rights. However, just as the ECHR was deliberating Fatullayev’s case in December 2009, the imprisoned journalist was charged again, this time with drug possession (the police claimed they found heroin on him in prison). On 22 April 2010, the European Court of Human Rights issued a decision stating that Eynulla Fatullayev should be released immediately and paid €27,822 in compensation by the Azerbaijani government.<sup>169</sup> Yet, instead of being released in accordance with the ECHR’s ruling, on 6 July 2010 Fatullayev was found guilty of drug possession and sentenced to an additional 2 years and 6 months. The court’s decision was announced directly after US State Secretary Hilary Clinton’s visit to Baku. The same month, the Azerbaijani government appealed the ECHR’s decision.<sup>170</sup> In October 2010, the ECHR upheld the first ruling, thus rejecting the Azerbaijani government’s appeal. While the government did eventually transfer the amount required, it did so to Fatullayev’s account which was frozen after his arrest, making it impossible for Fatullayev’s family to access the money.<sup>171</sup> He remains in jail.

In September 2010, the International Crisis Group published a critical report on Azerbaijan entitled “Vulnerable Stability”. It described a regime that, for all its internal contradictions, looked set to rule without any foreseeable challenge: “given the regime’s strengths and the opposition’s weaknesses, most Azerbaijanis consider that immediate deep change is impossible.”<sup>172</sup> At the end of 2010 the regime of Ilham Aliyev looked unassailable. There was the oil. There was the impression that society was passive. There was the sense that powerful

<sup>167</sup> APA, “Azerbaijani President: We will protect and defend freedom of speech”, 23 July 2010, <http://www.en.apa.az/news.php?id=126688>.

<sup>168</sup> PACE, “Resolution 1614 (2008), The functioning of democratic institutions in Azerbaijan”, 24 June 2008, <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta08/ERES1614.htm>.

<sup>169</sup> ECHR, “Case of Fatullayev v. Azerbaijan (Application no. 40984/07)”, Judgment, 22 April 2010, pp. 52-53, [http://www.icj.org/img/CASE\\_OF\\_FATULLAYEV\\_v\\_AZERBAIJAN.pdf](http://www.icj.org/img/CASE_OF_FATULLAYEV_v_AZERBAIJAN.pdf).

<sup>170</sup> APA, “The Government of Azerbaijan appeals ECHR decision on Eynulla Fatullayev before the Grand Chamber of the European Court”, 16 July 2010, <http://www.en.apa.az/news.php?id=126315>.

<sup>171</sup> IRFS, “Eynulla Fatullayev’s Compensation Funds Transferred to His Suspended Account”, 10 January 2011, <http://www.irfs.az/content/view/5514/1/lang.eng/>.

<sup>172</sup> International Crisis Group, *Azerbaijan - Vulnerable Stability*, Europe Report N°207, 3 September 2010, p. 20, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/caucasus/azerbaijan/207%20Azerbaijan%20-%20Vulnerable%20Stability.ashx>.

outsiders, such as the US and Russia, have accepted the regime. The European Union has looked the other way when it came to democracy and human rights in Baku, focusing on energy issues instead.<sup>173</sup> Aliyev also reached out to Israel to become its key regional ally in the Caucasus and to position itself in the context of possible future confrontations with Iran. This seemed to be a winning combination: with the US, Russia, the EU and Israel on its side and the Council of Europe tamed, what was there to fear?

In the case of repression in Belarus, rulers in Minsk had at least international criticism to contend with. The regime in Baku seemed to enjoy the best of all worlds: authoritarian rule and international acquiescence. To whom, then, could Azerbaijani dissidents appeal?

### **B. Cracks in the ice**

Writing in the early 1980s, Timothy Garton Ash described communist Czechoslovakia as a “lake permanently covered by a thick layer of ice. On the surface nothing moves. But under the ice, among the philosopher-labourers, the window-cleaning journalists, and nightwatchman-monks – here things are on the move.”<sup>174</sup> The dissident movement which Garton Ash was writing about was known as Charter 77, whose original declaration in 1977 described it as “a free, informal, open community of people of different convictions, different faiths, and different professions” standing up for the respect of human rights. “Responsibly for the observance of civil rights in the country naturally falls, in the first place, on the political and state power. But not on it alone,” wrote the Charter’s authors, including Vaclav Havel, Zdenek Mlynar and Jan Patocka. “Each and every one of us has a share of responsibility for the general situation and thus, too, for the observance of the pacts which have been enacted and are binding not only for the government but for all citizens.”<sup>175</sup>

The medium has changed. Today’s dissidents no longer type samizdat literature in copies of 12 on typewriters. Instead, they write blogs and communicate via Facebook. The fundamental dynamic has remained the same, however, with the same norms and values at its core. In 1978 Vaclav Havel wrote in his essay “The Power of the Powerless”:

“‘dissent’ ... is a natural and inevitable consequence of the present historical phase of the system it is haunting. It was born at a time when this system, for a thousand reasons, can no longer base itself on the unadulterated, brutal, and arbitrary application of power, eliminating all expressions of nonconformity ... the system has become so ossified politically that there is practically no way for such nonconformity to be implemented within its official structures.”

Havel described the power of individuals under such conditions in his 1984 essay “Politics and Conscience”. “What is called ‘dissent’ in the Soviet bloc is a specific modern experience, the experience of life at the very ramparts of dehumanized power,” he wrote. Its effect

“is of a wholly different nature from what the West considers political success. It is hidden, indirect, long term and hard to measure ... It is, however, becoming evident—and I think that is an experience of an essential and universal importance—that a single, seemingly powerless person who dares to cry out the word of truth and to stand behind it with all his person and

<sup>173</sup> Delegation of the European Union to Azerbaijan, “Visit of President Barroso”, [http://ec.europa.eu/delegations/azerbaijan/eu\\_azerbaijan/president\\_barosso\\_visit\\_to\\_azerbaijan/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/delegations/azerbaijan/eu_azerbaijan/president_barosso_visit_to_azerbaijan/index_en.htm).

<sup>174</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*, Granta, 1989, p. 57.

<sup>175</sup> Charter 77, signed 1 January 1977, p. 3, [http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration\\_of\\_charter\\_77.pdf](http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration_of_charter_77.pdf).

all his life, ready to pay a high price, has, surprisingly, greater power, though formally disfranchised, than do thousands of anonymous voters.”<sup>176</sup>

In the end it was a normative revolution that brought down Soviet communism in Eastern Europe. East European dissidents regularly referred to the human rights principles in the Helsinki Final Act, which their own governments had signed in 1975. One of the demands of Polish strikers in 1980 was that the government hand out and distribute 50,000 copies of the Helsinki Final Act.<sup>177</sup> There were no bloggers then, no Facebook and no Twitter, but the struggle for freedom of expression was as central then as now. As Lech Walesa put it later: “One of the central freedoms at stake was freedom of expression (a direct corollary of the Helsinki Agreement). Without this basic freedom, human life becomes meaningless; and once the truth of this hit me, it became part of my whole way of thinking.”<sup>178</sup>

This normative revolution and the efforts of critical and courageous thinkers also managed to sway parts of the ruling elite. As one analyst noted, many of the party leadership in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe had “quietly digested a lot of dissident thinking.”<sup>179</sup> As Georgi Arbatov, later a close advisor of Gorbachev, put it in 1983, “How can one be against human rights nowadays? It is the same as to be against motherhood.”<sup>180</sup>

There are many traits that today’s Azerbaijan shares with the Eastern Europe of the 1970s and 1980s: severely curtailed media freedom, one party rule, corruption, and – on the part of the young – resistance to non-conformity. Like the Eastern European dissidents of the past, young Azerbaijani activists find it impossible to channel a desire for change into party politics or traditional journalism. They do not believe in elections under the current political regime. As Adnan recently told ESI, change in Azerbaijan is more likely to come in the form of broader human rights movements than through a formal political struggle.<sup>181</sup> This view is shared by many other youth activists in Azerbaijan who believe that “the era of political parties is over” and that the opposition, too, has lost people’s trust.<sup>182</sup> It is here that the search for other forms of dissent begins.

Baku’s Facebook generation is aware of its historic predecessors. In December 2010 Emin told ESI that his activism was initially intuitive but “now that I have read books, I see that this very much resembles the way it has been done in many other places.”<sup>183</sup> In an e-mail sent to friends soon after his release, Emin listed the books he had read in prison and which had most impressed him: top of the list was Vaclav Havel’s *Power of the Powerless*, which he described as “a must-read.” He drew attention to one quote in particular: “In the post-totalitarian system the line of conflict runs de facto through EACH PERSON, for everyone in his own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system.”<sup>184</sup>

<sup>176</sup> Excerpt can be accessed online at: <http://www.fragmentsweb.org/stuff/10havel.html>.

<sup>177</sup> Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 220.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>179</sup> Crouch quoted in *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, p. 229.

<sup>180</sup> Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>181</sup> ESI interview with Adnan Hajizade, Baku, December 2010.

<sup>182</sup> ESI interview with Vafa Jafarova, Istanbul, January 2011.

<sup>183</sup> ESI Interview with Emin Milli, Baku, December 2010.

<sup>184</sup> ESI electronic correspondence with Emin Milli, January 2011.

The prospect of peaceful and successful democratic change at any moment in the future also depends on the inherited culture of dissent. As Adam Michnik, one of Poland's leading dissidents in the communist era, wrote in one of his letters from prison,

“Here, on a spring morning, one may wake up in a totally changed country ... Historical experience shows that communists were sometimes forced by circumstance to behave rationally and to agree to compromises. ... our minds should be clear about this: the continuing conflict may transform itself into a dialogue or an explosion.”<sup>185</sup>

In December 1989, following the assurances that peaceful abdication would not be followed by criminal prosecution or vendettas, communist governments handed over power in a process dominated by former dissidents. Today, Poland and the Czech Republic are among the most successful transition democracies in Europe. It was (also) dissidents who were able to ensure this kind of soft landing.

For anyone familiar with the current situation in Azerbaijan, Garton Ash's “frozen lake” analogy should ring a bell. Unlike Czechoslovakia or Poland, however, where social realities remained obscured by a grey, monolithic façade, Azerbaijan has received just the necessary share of democratic window dressing, courtesy of the Aliyevs. As Marina Ottaway noted back in 2003,

“[Heydar] Aliyev has mastered the language of democracy with great ease – his performances before Western audiences are impeccable – but he does not practice what he preaches ... Aliyev's goal appears to be an institutionalized semi-authoritarian regime such as Egypt's, perpetuated through the succession to the presidency of his son Ilham.”<sup>186</sup>

For Ilham, the comparison with Egypt has become a worrying one, especially as of late. Like Egypt's, Azerbaijan's population is young, with 43 percent of the population under the age of 25.<sup>187</sup> The prospect, following the 2009 referendum, of an eternal Aliyev presidency has removed any real hope of political change from above. Recent parliamentary elections have seen low turnout rates – only 42.2 percent in 2005<sup>188</sup> and 49.56 percent in 2010.<sup>189</sup> As Vafa Jafarova put it, referring to the low turnout and addressing Aliyev directly,

“Doesn't this tell you anything? Read carefully: No one believes you! They don't like you! They are only afraid of you! ... No dictatorship is forever.”<sup>190</sup>

The revolutions that have shaken the Arab world in 2011 have reminded both rulers and dissidents in Baku that the Aliyev government is unlikely to escape the fate of authoritarian regimes the world over. The colonels in Greece, Suharto in Indonesia, Marcos in the Philippines, Milosevic in Serbia, Pinochet in Chile, and Ben Ali in Tunisia: strongmen who appeared invincible for long periods are now history.

Observing the events in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Middle East as a whole suggests that the hold on power of the Azerbaijani elite might also not be as firm as they like to believe. Beneath the

<sup>185</sup> Adam Michnik, “Letter from the Gdansk Prison”, *New York Review of Books*, 18 July 1985, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1985/jul/18/letter-from-the-gdansk-prison/?pagination=false>.

<sup>186</sup> Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003, p. 52.

<sup>187</sup> Data for 2010. Source: The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, “Population”, <http://www.azstat.org/publications/azfigures/2010/en/004.shtml>.

<sup>188</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, “Final Report – Azerbaijan Parliamentary Elections, 6 November 2005”, p. 20.

<sup>189</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, “Final Report – Azerbaijan Parliamentary Elections, 7 November 2010”, p. 28.

<sup>190</sup> Vafa Jafarova's blog, —Society, elections, dishonesty – YAPistan, <http://vafajafarova.wordpress.com>

glossy exterior that they have created lives a generation that has learned to expect more from its leaders than handouts at the expense of rights and stability at the expense of democracy. It is a generation that has not given up on the promise of Azerbaijan turning, one day in the near future, into a genuine European democracy. In their endeavours they deserve support, particularly from organisations such as the Council of Europe, whose whole *raison d'être* is to preserve democratic standards among its members. In the end it would also be in the interest of Azerbaijan's rulers to respect the rules to which they have themselves committed their country.

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