

## The War in Ukraine and Changing Perceptions of Russia in Azerbaijan

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Azerbaijan-Russia diplomatic relations have gone through many ups and downs in the 32 years since the two countries became independent. In the early years, Baku was rather cold toward Moscow, due mostly to Russian support of separatism in Karabakh and provision of arms to Armenia. Meanwhile, Baku's bold action to force Russia to withdraw troops from Azerbaijan in 1992 (long before Russian troops left Eastern Europe) angered the Kremlin. Following Putin's ascent to power, relations between the two countries improved, although Azerbaijan has remained cautious toward its northern neighbor, pursuing a policy of "silent diplomacy" and "non-irritation." This policy enabled Baku to secure Russian neutrality during the Second Karabakh War in September-November 2020.

The signing of the Russian-Azerbaijani Declaration on Allied Interaction in February 2022 raised relations between the two countries to a new level. In that context, the Russian invasion of Ukraine came as a shock to Azerbaijan's elite, to the public in general, and especially to young people. In the two years that have followed, Azerbaijan's elites have tried to tread cautiously, even while affirming their support for the principle of sovereignty and providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine. For its part, Azerbaijani society has been united in support of Ukraine, with many citizens attending rallies and some ethnic Azeris returning from Russia to their homeland. Unlike in other countries, even those who do not openly support the Ukrainian cause have remained silent rather than rallying behind Russia. Finally, young people have reoriented toward the West and Türkiye, even while continuing to recognize Russia's role as a major player in the region. At all levels, the main winner of the geopolitical rethink intensified by the war in Ukraine has been Türkiye, which is now seen as Azerbaijan's best ally and the most desirable destination for youth migration. Support for the US and the EU,

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meanwhile, remains limited, with the result that Azerbaijani public opinion on Russia is necessarily equivocal.

### **Elite Perceptions of Russia**

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan has tried to avoid making political statements that openly support either side. Indeed, to this day, the Aliyev administration has not made a single clear-cut statement about the war. However, certain moves by Baku make it possible to elucidate the country's position.

On April 29, 2022, President Ilham Aliyev strongly [supported](#) Ukraine, calling on it to reject the occupation of its territories, although without describing Moscow as the aggressor. Referring to the Western position of appeasement as wrong, he urged Ukrainians to rely on their own forces and not to depend on outside support. Moreover, his assistant Hikmet Hajiyev has [indicated](#) in various statements that the Ukraine war concerns Azerbaijan, stressing the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Baku continues to support Ukraine by providing humanitarian aid and cheap/free oil for powering emergency vehicles, as well as by participating actively in the restoration of infrastructure in Kyiv oblast.

That being said, the reality of having Russia as a neighbor, as well as the presence of peacekeeping forces in Karabakh, has forced Azerbaijan to balance between Russia and Ukraine/the West. To wit, despite providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine, Baku has declined to join any sanctions on Russia.

The invasion of Ukraine has fostered widespread uncertainty in the region and in some ways narrowed Baku's room for maneuver. However, Russia's focus on Ukraine has also brought some benefits for Azerbaijan when it comes to acting in its political and economic interests. The country is, for instance, in the process of diversifying its economic partners, taking advantage of the opportunities available as a "neutral" state. One example is the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy [signed](#) between Azerbaijan and the EU on July 18, 2022.

Geopolitically, the invasion has altered Azerbaijani elites' perceptions of Russia. As throughout the Eurasian region, the question on everyone's lips has been "Who's next?" Complete trust in Russia is impossible in the current context. Accordingly, a study conducted among Azerbaijani political experts [found](#) that equal influence of NATO, Türkiye, and Russia in the Black Sea region would be the ideal balance of military power for fostering regional stability and security. The perception of Türkiye as the best guarantor of stability and ally for Azerbaijan has been increasing in recent years. This, along with Ankara's support during the Second Karabakh War, has motivated Baku to prioritize security and military cooperation with Türkiye, which was less visible in the past.

### **Azerbaijani Society's Perceptions of Russia**

Given that Azerbaijan is a post-Soviet country that continues to host a number of Russian schools and Russian-speakers, as well as that Russians are the largest minority group within the country, society has displayed some degree of partiality toward Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, political events and shifts in the region have also affected societal perceptions. In contrast to many countries in Eurasia, the war in Ukraine has not led to divisions between political elites and society; instead, the country has [been](#) united in its attitude toward the Russian aggression.

Intimately familiar with the pain of unresolved territorial problems, as well as the sovereignty issues and instability occasioned thereby, society immediately expressed its support for Ukraine. The “grand rally” in front of the Ukrainian embassy in early March 2022 is a perfect example of the Azerbaijani people’s support for Ukraine. These street protests against Russian aggression also demonstrated the public’s dissatisfaction with Moscow’s support for separatism in Karabakh and elsewhere. The public actively supported Ukraine on social media and initiated several humanitarian campaigns to help Ukrainians.

Open anger toward Russia has grown. This has been fueled by the return of a number of ethnic Azerbaijanis to their historical motherland. Some have returned purely for economic reasons, but a significant proportion are opposed to the war, mobilization, and the Putin regime.

Finally, while some segments of Azerbaijani society may not actively support Ukraine, nor do they openly express support for Russia. Instead, they simply remain passive and do not indicate a position.

### **Azerbaijani Youth's Perceptions of Russia**

Young people aged 14 to 29 comprise 22.7 percent of Azerbaijan’s population. This makes it important to analyze this group’s perception of and position toward the ongoing geopolitical shifts in the region.

Even if just one-fifth of young people [indicate](#) being somewhat or very interested in politics, certain shared opinions on politics and foreign affairs can be identified among the country’s youth. Like the rest of the population, youth evaluate Russian aggression toward Ukraine negatively and support the country’s territorial integrity. For some, at least, the war in Ukraine harks back to the war in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s.

The concerns with sovereignty that the war has raised have in some ways changed young people’s perceptions of Russia. For example, when young people are given a choice between the “West” and “Russia,” a plurality (48 percent) now lean toward the “West,” although intermediate positions such as “no polarization is preferable” are also widespread (16 percent). Such distrust of Russia has been rising for the last decade but has been accentuated in recent years by the invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s maneuvering in Karabakh.

Moreover, the vast majority of young people (89 percent) state that Türkiye is the closest friend of Azerbaijan. This position is so dominant that the second- (Russia – five percent) and third-ranked (Pakistan – two percent) countries do not even exceed five percent. Taken together, the EU countries only [reach](#) one percent.

But even as Azerbaijani youth have been becoming more sympathetic to Türkiye and more skeptical of Russia, they have not come to ignore Russia’s influence in the region. While young people are inclined to believe that deeper integration with Türkiye is more likely (89 percent) to enable Azerbaijan to progress than integration with Russia (55 percent), significant proportions nevertheless [believe](#) that cooperation with Russia will contribute to Azerbaijan’s economic growth (44 percent), the protection of human rights in the country (27 percent), and Azerbaijan’s national security (17 percent). Table 1 compares Azerbaijani youth’s analysis of the value of cooperation with the EU, Russia, and Türkiye in these areas.

**Table 1. Azerbaijani Young People’s Perceptions of the Value of Cooperation with the EU, Russia, and Türkiye, by Settlement Type**

		Settlement Type		
		Capital	Urban	Rural
<b>EU Countries</b>				
Azerbaijan’s	economic	44%	34%	32%
Protection of	human	29%	32%	33%
Azerbaijan’s	national	15%	8%	11%
security				
<b>Russia</b>				
Azerbaijan’s	economic	84%	34%	32%
Protection of	human	59%	19%	18%
Azerbaijan’s	national	29%	14%	14%
security				
<b>Türkiye</b>				
Azerbaijan’s	economic	98%	78%	87%

growth			
Protection of human rights	96%	70%	79%
Azerbaijan's national security	97%	86%	90%

*Source:* Compiled by the authors on the basis of a 2023 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung [study](#) of Azerbaijani youth

Additionally, Russia remains among the top three actual destinations for youth migration from Azerbaijan, far ahead of the USA. The most desirable destinations [are](#) Türkiye (39 percent), Germany (16 percent), Russia (12 percent), and the US (seven percent).

At present, young people do not see Russia as representing a major threat to Azerbaijan due to Russia's weakness. The withdrawal of the Russian peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh only strengthened this perception.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, Azerbaijani public opinion is ambivalent in its assessment of the war in Ukraine. To be sure, the public, elites, and youth do not support – and even condemn – the Russian invasion. Nevertheless, growing anti-Russian sentiment has not resulted in a rise in support for the US or the EU. Indeed, Western countries have come in for criticism from the Azerbaijani public due to what the latter perceives as their insufficient military support for Ukraine and lack of a unified front against Russia. Moreover, the public is infuriated by the seeming hypocrisy of the EU and the US in condemning Russian separatism in eastern Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea, even as they gave little support to the Azerbaijani cause in the face of Armenian separatism in Karabakh. With support for the West limited, Azerbaijan's position on Russia remains necessarily equivocal.

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