

PROBLEMATIC
INTERNATIONAL
OBSERVATION
OF THE
**Azerbaijani
2020
Parliamentary
Elections**

Anton
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Executive summary

- Western experts consider the regime of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to be authoritarian, but Azerbaijan regularly invites international observers to monitor parliamentary and presidential elections in the country. While organisations such as the OSCE ODIHR and OSCE PA tend to criticise the elections in Azerbaijan for their lack of genuine political competitiveness, limitations on freedoms, and restrictive media environment, Aliyev's regime often manages to find Western observers who are willing to praise Azerbaijani elections as free, fair, and democratic.
- On 9 February 2020, Azerbaijan held early parliamentary elections. According to the Azerbaijani Central Election Committee, the elections were observed by 883 international monitors representing 59 international organisations and 58 countries. The two largest monitoring missions were the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), formed by the OSCE ODIHR, OSCE PA, and PACE, and the observation mission of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The other monitors were either individual international observers or represented countries or organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation or the GUAM Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development.
- According to the IEOM, restrictive legislation and the political environment prevented genuine competition in the Azerbaijani parliamentary elections. However, the overwhelming majority of other international organisations and individual monitors endorsed the parliamentary elections. Evidence suggests that the Azerbaijani authorities carefully selected international monitoring missions that would praise the elections to relativise the findings of the IEOM.
- All the European observers who represented groups for interparliamentary relations with Azerbaijan commended the elections, as did European

observers – politicians, officials, academics, journalists, and public figures – invited by the Azerbaijani parliament on an individual basis.

- An election observation mission organised by the European Council on Democracy and Human Rights and featuring 18 European politicians and experts was coordinated by a Polish far-right politician with a history of providing services of politically biased international observation to Russian politicians.
- Azerbaijani media deliberately misrepresented and misquoted critical voices of the independent election observers who formed a monitoring mission through the networks of the European Liberal Youth, a youth wing of the pan-European party Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.
- After the IEOM publicised the preliminary results of its work, Azerbaijani media attempted to relativise and discredit those results with the help of loyal international observers, representatives of the ruling party led by Aliyev, and Russian officials and politicians.

Introduction

On 5 December 2019, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who had been in office since 2003, signed a decree to dissolve the Azerbaijani parliament and hold early parliamentary elections on 9 February 2020, instead of November 2020.¹ Aliyev's decree followed a vote by a parliament dominated by Aliyev's New Azerbaijan Party, which approved a proposal to dissolve parliament and ask Aliyev to call snap polls. The leadership of the ruling party explained the move by the need to modernise the country's legislative branch and "speed the course of economic reforms".² Many opposition parties agreed to take part in the early election, while the National Council of Democratic Forces decided to boycott them.³

The Freedom House identifies Azerbaijan under Aliyev's rule as "not free", while the Economist Intelligence Unit considers his regime as authoritarian. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan regularly invites international observers, including those representing established Western organisations, to monitor elections in the country.

At the same time, Aliyev's regime is notorious for buying influence in the West. In 2012, the European Stability Initiative published a report titled "Caviar Diplomacy: How Azerbaijan Silenced the Council of Europe" that described "how an authoritarian regime in Baku [had] managed to sidestep its commitments to the Council of Europe, silenced its critics and turned international election monitoring into political theatre".⁴

- 1 "Beşinci çağırış Azərbaycan Respublikası Milli Məclisinin buraxılması və Azərbaycan Respublikasının Milli Məclisinə növbədənkənar seçkilərin təyin edilməsi haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Sərəncamı", *Azərbaycan Respublikasının Prezidenti*, 5 December (2019), <https://president.az/articles/35112>.
- 2 "Azerbaijan's Parliament Approves Proposal to Dissolve, Setting Path for Snap Polls", *RFE/RL*, 2 December (2019), <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-s-parliament-approves-proposal-to-dissolve-setting-path-for-snap-polls/30303209.html>.
- 3 "Azerbaijan's Opposition Split over Snap Election", *OC Media*, 13 December (2019), <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-s-opposition-split-over-snap-election/>.
- 4 "Caviar Diplomacy – How Azerbaijan Silenced the Council of Europe", *European Stability Initiative*, 24 May (2012), <http://www.esiweb.org/newsletter/caviar-diplomacy-how-azerbaijan-silenced-council-europe>.

After the 2013 presidential election, when Aliyev was elected president for the third time, international election observation faced a crisis of credibility: the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) condemned the election, while the European Parliament (EP) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) praised the election, saying that they observed a "free, fair and transparent" process around the election day.⁵ Commenting on the situation, Ulrike Lunacek, who was vice president of the Greens group in the European Parliament at that time, said: "The findings and report of the EP mission to Azerbaijan are a sham and in sharp contrast with those of the OSCE/ODIHR mission and numerous domestic election observers. The EP report failed to acknowledge the stifling environment of these elections, which included well-documented human rights violations, harassment of the political opposition and restriction of fundamental democratic principles".⁶ The Greens foreign affairs spokesperson Werner Schulz added: "The shortcomings of EP's own election observation mission to Azerbaijan call into question the existence of such short term missions in general. The European Parliament loses credibility with statements ignoring the reality of the situation in the country. A handful of MEPs are endangering the European Parliament's reputation in fighting for human rights, democracy and rule of law".⁷

As it faced harsh criticism, the EP decided against sending observers to monitor the 2015 parliamentary elections or the 2018 presidential election in Azerbaijan.⁸ In 2020, Azerbaijani authorities decided not to invite the EP to observe the elections, explaining that they invited mainly those organisations of which Azerbaijan was a member or participant.⁹ Echoing its press release from 2018, the EP declared: "None of the members of the European Parliament or of its structures are authorized to observe or comment on the election process on behalf of the European Parliament. If any member of the European Parliament

5 Holly Ruthrauff, "MEPs' Shameful Support for the Azerbaijan Election", *EUObserver*, 16 October (2013), <https://euobserver.com/opinion/121803> See also Anaïs Marin, "Election Monitoring Faces Credibility Crisis", *The Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, November (2013), https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiia_comment_16_2013.pdf.

6 "Azerbaijan Elections", *The Greens/EFA*, 16 October (2013), <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/press/azerbaijan-elections/>.

7 Ibid. See also "Disgraced. Azerbaijan and the End of Election Monitoring as We Know It", *European Stability Initiative*, 5 November (2013), <https://www.esiweb.org/publications/disgraced-azerbaijan-and-end-election-monitoring-we-know-it>.

8 Naja Bentzen, Miro Guzzini, "Azerbaijan ahead of the Parliamentary Elections", *European Parliament*, 6 February (2020), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/646165/EPRS_ATA\(2020\)646165_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/646165/EPRS_ATA(2020)646165_EN.pdf).

9 "MFA Talks European Parliament's Statement Regarding Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan", *Azernews*, 10 January (2020), <https://www.azernews.az/nation/160500.html>.

decides to observe these elections, they will do so on their own, and under no circumstances will they represent the point of view or position of the European Parliament”.¹⁰

10 “European Parliament will not observe elections in Azerbaijan”, *JAM News*, 9 January (2020), <https://jam-news.net/european-parliament-will-not-observe-elections-in-azerbaijan/>.

Evaluation of the 2020 Azerbaijani parliamentary elections by international and regional organisations

According to the official statement of the Azerbaijani Central Election Committee (CEC), the parliamentary elections were observed by 883 international monitors representing 59 international organisations and 58 countries.¹¹ However, the CEC revealed neither the names of the international organisations nor of the individual monitors. An analysis of media reports and websites of international organisations suggests that the two largest monitoring missions were the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), which was formed by the OSCE ODIHR, OSCE PA, and PACE (358 observers)¹², and the observation mission of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (252 observers).¹³ The other 273 monitors were either individual international

- 11 “Central Election Commission Finalized Elections to Milli Majlis”, *Central Election Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 25 February (2020), <http://www.msk.gov.az/en/newsmsk/1156/>.
- 12 “Despite Large Number of Candidates, Azerbaijan Elections Lacked Genuine Competition and Choice, International Observers Say”, *OSCE*, 10 February (2020), <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/445762>.
- 13 “Missiya nablyudateley ot SNG podvela itogi monitoringa parlamentskikh vyborov v Azerbaydzhanskoj Respublike”, *Interparliamentary Assembly of Member Nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States*, 10 February (2020), https://iacis.ru/pressroom/news/mezhdunarodnyj_institut_monitoringa_razvitiya_demokratii/missiya_nablyudateley_ot_sng_podvela_itogi_monitoringa_parlamentskikh_vyborov_v_azerbaydzhanskoj_respublike/.

observers or represented countries or organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries (TURKPA), Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC), the GUAM Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova), and others.

In its “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions”, the IEOM indicated: “The restrictive legislation and political environment prevented genuine competition in the 9 February 2020 early parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan, despite a high number of candidates. Some prospective candidates were denied the right to stand, but candidate registration process was otherwise inclusive. Voters were not provided with a meaningful choice due to a lack of real political discussion”.¹⁴

However, the overwhelming majority of other international organisations endorsed the parliamentary elections. This was not surprising, as it seems that the Azerbaijani authorities had selected loyal international organisations and individual monitors to relativise the prospective findings of the IEOM and, especially, the OSCE ODIHR.

The CIS observation mission headed by Viktor Guminskiy declared that the Azerbaijani parliamentary elections were “competitive, open, free and met the norms of conducting democratic elections”.¹⁵ The CIS is an organisation dominated by Russia that maintains good relations with Aliyev’s regime, while election observation conducted by the CIS, or, rather, its Interparliamentary Assembly (IPA), is often described as politically biased and aiming only to water down criticisms coming from the OSCE ODIHR. For example, Professor Susan D. Hyde, a leading expert on international election observation and election fraud, argues that the CIS “has earned a reputation for praising blatantly fraudulent elections in former Soviet states and issuing reports that are in direct opposition to the conclusions of the OSCE/ODIHR missions”.¹⁶ At the same time, Professor Judith Kelley, an expert on emerging democracies and international relations, writes that the monitoring activity of the CIS “is widely discredited

14 “Azerbaijan, Early Parliamentary Elections, 9 February 2020: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions”, OSCE, 10 February (2020), <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/445759>.

15 “Glava Missii nablyudateley ot SNG Viktor Guminskiy: Vyborny v Azerbaydzhanе sootvetstvovali demokraticeskim normam”, CIS, 10 February (2020), http://cis.minsk.by/news/13057/glava_missii_nabljudatelej_ot_sng_viktor_guminskij_vybory_v_azerbajdzhanе_sootvetstvovali_demokraticeskim_normam.

16 Susan D. Hyde, *The Pseudo-Democrat’s Dilemma: Why Election Monitoring Became an International Norm* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 159.

and regarded as having been created merely to counter the criticisms of the OSCE in the former Soviet region”.¹⁷

The SCO mission headed by Sherali Saidamir Jonon stated that the elections “met the requirements of the country’s electoral law and assumed international obligation”, and recognised the elections as “legitimate, transparent, valid and democratic”.¹⁸ As Professor Thomas Ambrosio, an expert in international relations and international law, argues, the SCO seeks “to delegitimise anti-regime activities and democracy promotion” in the Eurasian region: “The norms and values of the SCO are based upon preserving the non-democratic status quo in the region against domestic opponents and external critics. As such, the SCO represents an additional strategy of authoritarian resistance to regional and global democratic trends”.¹⁹ Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the SCO praised the problematic Azerbaijani elections.

Neither was it unexpected that the TURKPA’s mission “concluded that the parliamentary elections in the Republic of Azerbaijan of 9 February 2020 were held in compliance with the national legislation of Azerbaijan and international election standards”.²⁰ The TURKPA is an international organisation comprising several Turkic countries, and is supportive of Aliyev’s rule in Azerbaijan, a Turkic state. Moreover, the current chair of the TURKPA is Sahiba Gafarova, a prominent member of the New Azerbaijan Party led by Aliyev and one of Azerbaijan’s representatives in the PACE. The political aspect of the TURKPA’s evaluation of the Azerbaijani parliamentary elections was also evident in the statement of the head of the election observation mission, Turkish MP İsmet Uçma, who said that Azerbaijan was “still suffering from Armenian occupation”,²¹ apparently referring to the Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed territory internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but a de facto independent state with Armenian ethnic majority.

17 Judith G. Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works, and Why It Often Fails* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 52.

18 “Zayavlenie Missii nablyudateley ot Shankhayskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva po itogam vneocherednykh vyborov v Milli Medzhlis Azerbaydzhanskoj Respubliki”, *Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat*, 10 February (2020), <http://rus.sectso.org/news/20200210/626372.html>.

19 Thomas Ambrosio, “Catching the ‘Shanghai Spirit’: How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 8 (2008), pp. 1321-1344 (1341).

20 “TURKPA Observers Presented Conclusions at Press Conference”, *Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries*, 10 February (2020), https://turk-pa.org/en/content/news/turkpa_news/2502_turkpa_observers_presented_conclusions_at_press_conference_.

21 “TURKPA: Elections in Azerbaijan Comply with Int’l Standards”, “Seçki-2020” *Independent Media Center*, 10 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3830/turkpa-elections-in-azerbaijan-comply-with-int-039-l-standards>.

Ali Asghar Muhammadi Sijani, speaking on behalf of the observation mission formed by the OIC, of which Azerbaijan is a member, reported that his team had not noticed “any breaches at the polling stations during the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan”, and declared that the country had held “the parliamentary elections democratically and transparently”.²² At the same time, Sijani implied that his organisation’s position on Azerbaijan might be the reason for his positive assessment on the elections: “Azerbaijan is a fraternal and friendly country for us. Our voice is with you. The OIC always supports the right cause of Azerbaijan”.²³

The reasons for the positive assessment of the elections by yet another international organisation, namely the GUAM, are also dubious. The GUAM’s mission declared that the elections had been “organized and conducted in compliance with international obligations and standards of democratic elections, including the obligations and the standards of the OSCE and the Council of Europe”, adding that the elections had been “held in a calm atmosphere, in the spirit of competition and, in general, [could] be evaluated as free and fair”.²⁴ The credibility of this assessment is compromised by the fact that it was concluded by an election observation mission consisting of representatives of the countries that are considered to be democratising (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), and their reference to the “standards of the OSCE and the Council of Europe” is highly questionable, considering that the OSCE ODIHR, OSCE PA, and PACE have criticised the conduct of the 2020 elections and political developments around them. The GUAM’s assessment of the Azerbaijani elections can only be explained by political bias: Azerbaijan is the fourth member of GUAM, while GUAM’s current Secretary General Altay Efendiyev – despite being an Azerbaijani citizen – was an official member of the observation mission.²⁵

Yet another Azerbaijani citizen, namely Asaf Hajiyev, was a member of the PABSEC monitoring mission (and also Secretary-General of the PABSEC). Hajiyev’s connections to Aliyev’s New Azerbaijan Party (he was the head of its international relations department in 2013-2015) may be the reason why the PABSEC declared that the elections had been held “in full compliance with the standards

22 “OIC Hails Democratic Elections in Azerbaijan”, “*Seçki-2020*” *Independent Media Center*, 10 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3855/oic-hails-democratic-elections-in-azerbaijan>.

23 *Ibid.*

24 “Statement of the Group of Observers of the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly on the Extraordinary Elections of the Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan”, *GUAM*, 9 February (2020), <https://guam-organization.org/en/statement-of-the-group-of-observers-of-the-guam-parliamentary-assembly-on-the-extraordinary-elections-of-the-milli-majlis-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan/>.

25 “GUAM Secretary General Observing Elections – FOTO”, *Report*, 9 February (2020), <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/guam-secretary-general-observing-elections-foto/>.

of democratic elections and the national legislation”, and that “minor violations during the election process” had not affected the outcome of the elections.²⁶ The PABSEC also featured representatives of the Russian and Turkish ruling classes that are supportive of Aliyev’s regime.

26 “Participation of the PABSEC Delegation in the monitoring of the Early Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Baku, 8-10 February 2020”, Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, <http://www.pabsec.org/news-details.asp?id=602&hl=en>.

Western observers of the Azerbaijani parliamentary elections

Apart from regional organisations that included Western representatives, the Azerbaijani CEC also accredited dozens of international observers from Europe and the Americas who were invited either on an individual basis or as representatives of smaller international organisations.

Some of these observers represented groups for interparliamentary relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan (see Table 1).

Table 1. Western members of groups for interparliamentary relations with Azerbaijan

| Name | Country | Position, party affiliation |
|-----------------------|-----------|--|
| Antônio Anastasia | Brazil | MP, Social Democratic Party |
| Cláudio Cajado | Brazil | MP, Progressistas |
| Rossana Boldi | Italy | MP, League |
| Maria Rizzotti | Italy | MP, "Forward, Italy" |
| Valerijus Simulik | Lithuania | MP, Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union |
| Gintaras Vaičekauskas | Lithuania | MP, Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania |
| Peter Marček | Slovakia | (now former) MP, "We Are Family" |
| Robert John Blackman | UK | MP, Conservative Party |

Commenting on the elections, Antônio Anastasia, the first vice-president of the Brazilian Senate and head of the Azerbaijan-Brazil friendship group in the Senate, said that he was happy to observe the elections in Azerbaijan and that he was pleased "to see democracy" in the election process. In his turn, Cláudio Cajado, the head of the Azerbaijan-Brazil friendship group at the National



(Left to right) Lithuanian observers Gintaras Vaičekas and Valerijus Simulik

Source: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Valerijus_Simulik_High_number_of_candidates_for_deputy_created_competitive_environment-1410159

Congress of Brazil, said that he “was satisfied with the conditions created” in Azerbaijan and that “the elections were held in a very democratic manner”.²⁷

At a press conference, the chair of the Italy-Azerbaijan interparliamentary friendship group Rossana Boldi, and a member of this group, Maria Rizzotti, said that they were satisfied with the observation of all requirements of the electoral law at the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan.²⁸

Valerijus Simulik, the head of the Lithuanian group for interparliamentary relations with Azerbaijan, congratulated Azerbaijan on passing the exam of democratic elections. He monitored the elections in the regions and concluded that

27 Firuz Vahid, “Brazil Observation Mission: ‘The Elections Were Extremely Democratic’”, APA, 9 February (2020), <https://apa.az/en/foreign-news/Brazil-Observation-Mission:-%22The-elections-were-extremely-democratic%22-312438>.

28 Eldar Dzhannashvili, “Nablyudateli iz Italii udovletvoreny soblyudeniem vsekh trebovaniy izbiratel'nogo zakonodatel'stva na proshedshikh parlament'skikh vyborakh v Azerbaydzhane”, *Trend*, 10 February (2020), <https://www.trend.az/azerbajjan/politics/3189515.html>.



Slovak observer Peter Marček

Source: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/161591.html>

the elections had been held in a transparent manner and that voters had a broad choice of candidates.²⁹

Peter Marček, the chair of the Slovakia-Azerbaijan interparliamentary friendship group, said that the elections had been held in a very democratic atmosphere, adding that the organisation of the elections was “top notch”.³⁰ Robert John Blackman, the head of the UK-Azerbaijan interparliamentary friendship group, also praised the organisation of the elections.³¹

Many European politicians, officials, academics, journalists, and public figures (see Table 2) were invited to observe the Azerbaijani elections on an individual basis, and, as one might have expected, also praised the elections and their various aspects.

29 “Valerijus Simulik: High Number of Candidates for Deputy Created Competitive Environment”, *AZERTAG*, 10 February (2020), https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Valerijus_Simulik_High_number_of_candidates_for_deputy_created_competitive_environment-1410159.

30 “Slovak MP Notes Top Notch Organization of Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan”, *Azernews*, 10 February (2020), <https://www.azernews.az/nation/161591.html>.

31 “Nablyuidateli iz Velikobritanii: vybory proshli na vysokom urovne”, *Media*, 10 February (2020), <https://media.az/politics/1067764464/nablyuidateli-iz-velikobritanii-vybory-proshli-na-vysokom-urovne/>.



Czech far-right observer Jaroslav Holík

Source: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-news/International-observer:-%22I-have-observed-4-differences-between-elections-held-in-Azerbaijan-and-Czech-Republic%22-312461>

Table 2. Identified European individual observers of the Azerbaijani 2020 elections

| Name | Country | Position, party affiliation (if known) |
|-----------------------|----------------|--|
| Hamid Bari Hamid | Bulgaria | MP, Movement for Rights and Freedoms |
| Jaroslav Holík | Czech Republic | MP, Freedom and Direct Democracy |
| Joël Guerriau | France | Senator for Loire-Atlantique, Union of Democrats and Independents |
| Yves Metaireau | France | Mayor of La Baule-Escoublac, Republicans |
| Wolf-Ruthart Born | Germany | Former State secretary of the German Foreign Ministry |
| Matthias Dornfeldt | Germany | Political analyst at the Berlin Centre for Caspian Region Studies at the Free University of Berlin |
| Steffen-Claudio Lemme | Germany | Ex-MP, Social-Democratic Party of Germany |
| Birgit Wetzel | Germany | Independent journalist |
| Urs Unkauf | Germany | Independent journalist |
| Armands Krauze | Latvia | MP, Latvian Farmers' Union |



German observers (left to right) Urs Unkauf, Birgit Wetzels, an interpreter, Wolf-Ruthart Born, Steffen-Claudio Lemme

Source: <https://aqreqator.az/ru/politika/556684>

| Name | Country | Position, party affiliation (if known) |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|---|
| Miguel Álvarez de Eulate y Moreno | Spain | Director of the Foundation for Strategic and International Studies |
| Nabil Ayad | UK | Professor at the Glasgow Caledonian University |
| David Evans | UK | Member of the House of Lords, Labour Party |
| Jonathan Fryer | UK | Chair of the Liberal Democrats' Federal International Relations Committee |
| Shahid Qureshi | UK | Editor of <i>The London Post</i> |
| Barry Anthony Tomalin | UK | Lecturer at the Academy of Diplomacy and International Governance |

The case of the European Council on Democracy and Human Rights

One of the international observation missions that featured many European politicians was coordinated by the European Council on Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR), headed by Janusz Niedźwiecki, a member of a Polish fringe far-right party “Change”, led by Mateusz Piskorski. The latter was engaged in coordinating politically biased election observation missions since



Janusz Niedźwiecki, the head of the European Council on Democracy and Human Rights

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLV7zSX_YPw

at least 2006. However, in 2016, Piskorski was arrested in Poland and later charged with espionage for Russia and China.³² As Piskorski could no longer coordinate fake observation missions, Niedźwiecki took over the process and registered, in March 2017, his own electoral observation organisation, called European Council on Democracy and Human Rights, the name of which mimicked – in order to appear respectable – the name of the ODIHR: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

In September 2017, when the Russian authorities held regional elections, Niedźwiecki's ECDHR made its first appearance as a coordinator of foreign electoral observers. At the moment, it is confirmed that at least one foreign observer, namely Pavel Gamov, then a member of the far-right Sweden Democrats party, was invited to observe the elections by the ECDHR. Gamov's trip to Russia was funded by the Russian Peace Foundation, directed by Leonid Slutsky, the chair of the Russian parliament's Committee on International Affairs and a

32 "Poland Detains Pro-Kremlin Party Leader for 'Spying'", *The Guardian*, 19 May (2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/19/poland-detains-pro-kremlin-party-leader-mateusz-piskorski-spying>.

member of the far-right Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia.³³ Gamov said that the ECDHR sent invitations to monitor the Russian elections to all members of the European parliamentary group “Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy”, known for its Euroscepticism, and of which the Sweden Democrats were also a member.³⁴

In the beginning of 2018, Niedźwiecki invited at least five Finnish MPs from different parties to observe the Russian 2018 presidential elections on behalf of both the ECDHR and Slutsky’s Russian Peace Foundation, which Niedźwiecki described as “our Russian partner and official host of this electoral monitoring mission”.³⁵

In January 2020, Niedźwiecki invited – on behalf of the ECDHR and the Azerbaijani parliament – several European politicians and experts to join his observation mission to Azerbaijan to monitor the 2020 parliamentary elections, and at least 17 persons agreed (see Table 3).

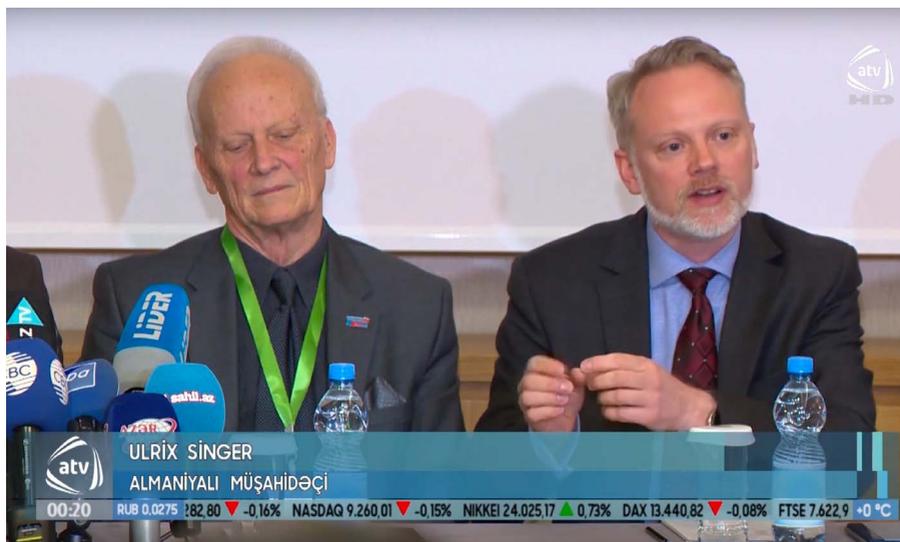
Table 3. The mission of the European Council on Democracy and Human Rights at the Azerbaijani 2020 parliamentary elections

| Name | Country | Position, party affiliation |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---|
| Osvaldo Napoli | Italy | MP, “Forward, Italy” |
| Ettore Licheri | Italy | MP, Five Star Movement |
| Angela Crovetti | Italy | Lawyer |
| Ulrich Singer | Germany | Deputy of the Bavarian Landtag, Alternative for Germany |
| Uli Henkel | Germany | Deputy of the Bavarian Landtag, Alternative for Germany |
| Jean-Luc Reitzer | France | MP, Republicans |
| Grégory Elie Albert Jullien | France | President of the Eurasian Strategic Council |
| Rumen Vasilev Gechev | Bulgaria | MP, Bulgarian Socialist Party |
| Manol Trifonov Genov | Bulgaria | MP, Bulgarian Socialist Party |
| Anton Konstantinov Kutev | Bulgaria | MP, Bulgarian Socialist Party |
| Katarzyna Ueberhan | Poland | MP, Democratic Left Alliance |

33 Daniel Wiklander, “Sverigedemokraterna kräver Gamovs avgång”, *Expo*, 9 November (2017), <https://expo.se/2017/11/sverigedemokraterna-kr%C3%A4ver-gamovs-avg%C3%A5ng>.

34 Patrik Dahlin, “Pavel Gamov (SD): Jag är inte Putinist”, *Uppsala Nya Tidning*, 13 September (2017), <https://unt.se/nyheter/uppsala/pavel-gamov-sd-jag-ar-inte-putinist-4754655.aspx>.

35 “Suomalaisia kansanedustajia yritetään naruttaa vaalitarkkailijoiksi Venäjälle – hämäärän kutsun taustalla puolalaisjärjestö”, *Yle*, 25 January (2018), <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10039429>.



(Left to right) German far-right observers Uli Henkel and Ulrich Singer

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLV7zSX_YPw

| Name | Country | Position, party affiliation |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|--|
| Janusz Niedźwiecki | Poland | President of the ECDHR, "Change" |
| Věra Procházková | Czech Republic | MP, ANO 2011 |
| Jaroslav Doubrava | Czech Republic | MP, Severočeši.cz |
| Rania Younisova | Czech Republic | Political Expert, Freedom and Direct Democracy |
| Lazaros Tsavdaridis ³⁶ | Greece | MP, New Democracy |
| Katerina Monogiou | Greece | MP, New Democracy |
| Stella Biziou | Greece | MP, New Democracy |

Members of the ECDHR's observation mission started to praise the elections even before the voting process officially ended. For example, Uli Henkel of the far-right Alternative for Germany party declared that the Azerbaijani government manifested openness and transparency in the organisation and conduct of the early parliamentary elections.³⁷ His fellow party member Ulrich Singer said

36 "German and Greek Observers: 'Elections Were Democratic'", "Seçki-2020" Independent Media Center, 9 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3764/german-and-greek-observers-elections-were-democratic>.

37 A. Mamedov, B. Rustambekov, "Vlasti Azerbaydzhana organizovali otkrytye dosrochnye parlamentskie vybory – deputat Landtaga", *Interfax Azerbaijan*, 9 February (2020), <http://interfax.az/view/791827>.

that he had heard of no complaints about the elections at the polling stations they visited.³⁸ (Interestingly, Henkel and Singer were criticised by some other fellow party members for praising the Azerbaijani elections.³⁹) Věra Procházková, a Czech MP from the populist ANO 2011 party, and Manol Genov, an MP from the Bulgarian Socialist Party, who, in 2017, was charged with vote-buying,⁴⁰ spoke highly about the organisation of the elections, too.⁴¹

Two days after the elections, the ECDHR published a report concluding that the mission had not registered any violation of the electoral legislation that could affect the results of the elections, and that the elections had been held in compliance with the electoral laws of Azerbaijan and universally recognised democratic norms.⁴²

The case of the European Liberal Youth

One of the observation missions monitoring the elections in Azerbaijan predominantly featured members of European organisations affiliated with the European Liberal Youth (abbreviated as LYMEC), a youth wing of the pan-European party Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. LYMEC claims that it did not organise the observation mission, but simply distributed a call for participation through a LYMEC newsletter.⁴³

On 9 February, as members of the mission observed the voting process, a Lithuanian observer, Julius Lajtha, noted to the Azerbaijani media that it seemed

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- 38 “Nemetskiy deputat: ‘Nikakikh zhalob na vybory k nam ne postupalo’”, *Haqqin*, 9 February (2020), <https://haqqin.az/news/169667>.
- 39 Silvia Stöber, “Lob für eine demokratische Farce”, *Tagesschau*, 11 February (2020), <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/aserbajdschan-wahlbeobachter-afd-101.html>; “Wahlbeobachter in Aserbajdschan: AfD-Politiker in der Kritik”, *BR24*, 13 February (2020), <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/wahlbeobachter-in-aserbajdschan-afd-politiker-kontern-kritik-RqOPGKy>.
- 40 “Bulgaria: Bulgarian Anti-Corruption Unit Charges MP Manol Genov with Vote-buying”, *Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative*, 13 July (2017), <http://www.rai-see.org/bulgaria-bulgarian-anti-corruption-unit-charges-mp-manol-genov-with-vote-buying/>.
- 41 Mamedov, Rustambekov, “Vlasti Azerbaydzhana organizovali”; A. Mamedov, B. Rustambekov, “Vybory v Azerbaydzhanе prokhodyat spokojno – mezhdunarodnyе nablyudateli”, *Interfax Azerbaijan*, 9 February (2020), <https://interfax.az/view/791851>.
- 42 “Observers: Elections Were Held with No Violations”, *Axar*, 11 February (2020), <https://en.axar.az/news/politics/444200.html>.
- 43 “Elections in Azerbaijan Did Not Live up to International Standards – LYMEC Condemns Intentional Misquoting of International Observers”, *LYMEC*, 16 February (2020), <https://www.lymec.eu/2020/02/16/elections-in-azerbaijan-did-not-live-up-to-international-standards-lymec-condemns-intentional-misquoting-of-international-observers/>.

to them that all rules were being followed.⁴⁴ In the following days, Azerbaijani media published several reports quoting members of the above-mentioned mission. In his comments, Danish observer Niklas Milthers said that the “the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan were held at a high level”.⁴⁵ In his turn, a British monitor, Peter Douglas Banks, said at a press conference that the elections had been held in compliance with “OSCE norms and standards, as well as the national legislation of Azerbaijan”.⁴⁶ A French observer, Valentin Escudé, stated that “all the conditions for conducting the elections in accordance with the international standards had been created”.⁴⁷ A Ukrainian monitor, Christine Khomyk, said that the elections had been held in accordance with the law;⁴⁸ and a German monitor, Onur Oğuz Dellal, expressed the same opinion, adding that, while observing the elections, he had not heard of any violations reported either by the members of the election commissions or voters.⁴⁹

However, several days after the publication of these reports, LYMEC issued a statement in which it argued that “the electoral process in Azerbaijan [had] demonstrated several discrepancies with international standards and expectations”, and claimed that “the participants’ interviews in local media as well as the press conference by the mission [had] been used to depict a false picture of the elections as free and fair”.⁵⁰ LYMEC condemned “the misrepresentation and intentional misquoting of statements from the participants [of the mission] by the Azeri media” (without giving examples of the allegedly problematic reports), and concluded that the organisation believed “that the legitimacy of the Azeri elections on 9 February [was] at best questionable”.⁵¹

44 “We Have Not Found Any Problem So Far – International Observers”, “Seçki-2020” *Independent Media Center*, 9 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3659/we-have-not-found-any-problem-so-far-international-observers>.

45 Fidan Babayeva, Sadraddin Agjaye, “Danish Observer: Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan Held in Line with Electoral Code”, *Trend*, 10 February (2020), <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3189626.html>.

46 “British Observer: Elections in Azerbaijan Held in Accordance with Int’l Standards”, *Azernews*, 10 February (2020), <https://www.azernews.az/nation/161606.html>.

47 “Nablyudatel’ iz Frantsii: Parlamentskie vybory v Azerbaydzhanе proshli v sootvetstviі s mezhdunarodnymi standartami”, “Seçki-2020” *Independent Media Center*, 11 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/ru/news/view/3902/nablyudatel-iz-francii-parlamentskie-vybory-v-azerbaydzhanе-proshli-v-sootvetstviі-s-mezhdunarodnymi-standartami>.

48 Fidan Babayeva, “Ukrainian Observer: Elections to Azerbaijani Parliament Held in Accordance with Law”, *MENA FN*, 10 February (2020), <https://menafn.com/1099681665/Ukrainian-observer-Elections-to-Azerbaijani-Parliament-held-in-accordance-with-law>.

49 Fidan Babayeva, Sadraddin Agjaye, “Observer from Germany: Azerbaijan Holds Parliamentary Elections in Line with Int’l Standards”, *Trend*, 10 February (2020), <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3189652.html>.

50 “Elections in Azerbaijan Did Not Live up to International Standards”.

51 *Ibid.*

Attempts to manipulate and discredit the International Election Observation Mission

On the election day, 9 February, Azerbaijani media sought comments from international observers even before the voting process ended at 7pm, although such comments would go against the rules of international election observation. As mentioned above, a number of international monitors, indeed, gave comments to the Azerbaijani media before 7pm. However, these monitors also included members of the IEOM, formed by the OSCE ODIHR, OSCE PA, and PACE.⁵² Some members of the IEOM were careful with their comments. For example, Nat Parry, a representative of the OSCE PA, when asked to share his views on the elections, said that it was “premature to comment on the election itself”, explaining that his mission was collecting and analysing data to

52 “OSCE Observer: ‘No Negative Case Has Been Recorded’”, “*Seçki-2020*” *Independent Media Center*, 9 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3607/osce-observer-quot-no-negative-case-has-been-recorded-quot>; “OSCE PA Observer: No Violations of Elections Legislation Detected”, “*Seçki-2020*” *Independent Media Center*, 9 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3682/osce-pa-observer-no-violations-of-elections-legislation-detected>; “OSCE Observer Says No Violations So Far at Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan”, “*Seçki-2020*” *Independent Media Center*, 9 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3721/osce-observer-says-no-violations-so-far-at-parliamentary-elections-in-azerbaijan>.



British observers Shahid Qureshi, Robert John Blackman and David Evans

Source: <https://media.az/politics/1067764464/nabiyudateli-iz-velikobritanii-vybory-proshli-na-vysokom-urovne/>

give a statement at a press conference later.⁵³ In a similar situation, an ODIHR long-term observer, Ingo Buettner, said that the information on the election process and data he collected on the election day would be sent to the IEOM for analysis.⁵⁴ Nonetheless the Azerbaijani media tried to present their comments as commending the elections.

On 10 February, the IEOM presented its “Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions”, which was critical of the Azerbaijani parliamentary elections.⁵⁵ The same day, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan issued its own statement, in which it said that the Ministry did not agree “with some of the points presented as shortcomings in the [IEOM’s] statement”, but noted that they were “mainly of procedural and organizational matter”.⁵⁶

- 53 “OSCE PA Observer: No Obstacles So Far in Observing Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan”, “Seçki-2020” Independent Media Center, 9 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3666/osce-pa-observer-no-obstacles-so-far-in-observing-parliamentary-elections-in-azerbaijan>,
- 54 “Long-term OSCE Observer: Conditions Created Polling Stations in Azerbaijan Meet the Electoral Code”, “Seçki-2020” Independent Media Center, 9 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3628/long-term-osce-observer-conditions-created-polling-stations-in-azerbaijan-meet-the-electoral-code>.
- 55 “Azerbaijan, Early Parliamentary Elections, 9 February 2020”.
- 56 “No:031/20, Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Early Elections to Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan Held on 9 February 2020”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 10 February (2020), <http://www.mfa.gov.az/en/news/6564/pno03120-statement-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-on-the-early-elections-to-milli-majlis-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-held-on-9-february-2020p>.

At the same time, Azerbaijani media started publishing reports aiming to relativise and discredit the preliminary results of the IEOM's work. For example, the "Seçki-2020" Independent Media Center published an article that quoted Shahid Qureshi saying that there had been no violations of the democratic norms mentioned at IEOM's press conference.⁵⁷ In its turn, *Trend* conveyed the opinion of Tahir Rzayev, an MP from Aliyev's ruling New Azerbaijan Party, according to whom organisations such as the OSCE – with its critical statement on the conduct of the elections – simply wanted to exert pressure on his country and "hinder the strategic course of Azerbaijan's development".⁵⁸

Azerbaijani media also actively re-published views of Russian officials, politicians, and experts who praised the elections and criticised the preliminary conclusions of the IEOM. Referring to the SCO and CIS missions, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed that the Azerbaijani elections had been held "in compliance with the requirements of the national legislation" and "regretfully noted" that the IEOM's observers voiced "biased and judgmental evaluations [of the elections] that did not reflect the real picture".⁵⁹ Leonid Slutsky was "struck by the biased approaches and double standards" of the OSCE ODIHR, saying that assertions about the non-transparency and non-democratic nature of the elections were "far-fetched".⁶⁰ *Trend* also quoted a Russian expert, Vitaliy Arkov, who argued that the "anti-Azerbaijani rhetoric" of the OSCE ODIHR aimed at punishing Azerbaijan for its "truly independent foreign policy and refusal to take part in the Western campaign against its major historical allies and fraternal nations – Russia, Turkey and Iran".⁶¹

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- 57 "Democratic Norms Weren't Violated in Parliamentary Elections in Azerbaijan – UK Observer", "Seçki-2020" Independent Media Center, 11 February (2020), <http://www.secki-2020.az/en/news/view/3895/democratic-norms-weren-039-t-violated-in-parliamentary-elections-in-azerbaijan-uk-observer>.
- 58 İlham İsmayılova, "MP: OSCE Reps Come to Observe Elections in Azerbaijan to Exert Pressure Every Time", *Trend*, 10 February (2020), <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3189748.html>.
- 59 "Kommentariy Departamenta informatsii i pechati MID Rossii po itogam vneochederneykh vyborov v Milli Medzhlis (parlament) Azerbaydzhana", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 10 February (2020), https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4032637.
- 60 "Leonid Slutsky: 'Po parlamentskim vyboram v Azerbaydzhanе: snova porazhayut predvzyatye podkhody i dvoynye standarty evropeyskikh nablyudateley'", *Committee on International Affairs of the State Duma*, 10 February (2020), <https://interkomitet.ru/blog/2020/02/10/leonid-slutskij-po-parlamentskim-vyboram-v-azerbaydzhanе-snova-porazhayut-predvzyatye-podhody-i-dvoynye-standarty-evropeyskikh-nablyudatelej/>.
- 61 Guseyn Safarov, "BDIPCh OBSE lish' otrabatyvayut postavlennuyu zadachu – politolog", *Trend*, 11 February (2020), <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3189921.html>.



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