

BULLETIN

HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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I. The Prague meeting might offer a gleam of hope for Azerbaijan-Armenia normalization process

On October 6, President Ilham Aliyev visited Prague at the invitation of European Union Council President Charles Michel and Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala to participate in the European Political Union summit. The European Political Community is a platform for political coordination and seeks to foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest, strengthen the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent. Leaders from 44 European countries gathered in Prague to launch a European Political Community aimed at boosting security and economic prosperity. At the sidelines of the summit, President Ilham Aliyev met with President of France Emmanuel Macron, President of the Council of the European Union Charles Michel and Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan.

The quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron and President Michel yielded some progress on the path toward normalization of relations and ending the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia and Azerbaijan formally agreed to recognize each other's territorial integrity, according to the identical statements put out by the European Council and France. "The President of Azerbaijan and the Prime Minister of Armenia met in Prague on 6 October 2022 in the margins of the first European Political Community at the invitation of the President of the French Republic and the President of the European Council. Armenia and Azerbaijan confirmed their commitment to the Charter of the United Nations and the Alma Ata 1991 Declaration through which both recognize each other's territorial integrity and

sovereignty. They confirmed it would be a basis for the work of the border delimitation commissions and that the next meeting of the border commissions would take place in Brussels by the end of October. There was an agreement by Armenia to facilitate a civilian EU mission alongside the border with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan agreed to cooperate with this mission as far as it is concerned. The mission will start in October for a maximum of two months. The aim of this mission is to build confidence and, through its reports, to contribute to the border commissions," the statement read. The former Soviet states (with the exception of Georgia and the Baltic states) created the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) through the Alma-Ata Declaration, which formalized the breakup of the Soviet Union and recognized each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The mutual recognition of territorial integrity agreement therefore creates a unique opportunity to accelerate the delimitation and demarcation process and settle the territorial disputes that have ignited these military clashes. However, a number of obstacles might gravely jeopardize these initiatives and destabilize the situation. The aims and purposes of the Armenian government are one significant area of doubt. By claiming that "constitutional documents" were adopted in Yerevan prior to the Alma-Ata Declaration and that those documents expressed the will of the Armenians in Karabakh to be united with the Republic of Armenia, Armenia may attempt to relieve itself of responsibility to recognize Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan even after the Prague agreements. Vasif Huseynov, a senior advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (Air Center), argues that "this would basically mean the persistence of former narratives promulgated by the Armenian leaders, who argued that

“Nagorno-Karabakh” declared independence before the Alma-Ata Declaration. For example, a document dated 2016, and still available on the website of the Armenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argues that “on December 10, 1991, the referendum for independence of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic was held in Nagorno-Karabakh in the presence of international observers [the referendum for Azerbaijani independence was not held until December 15]. On December 21, 1991, the leaders of 11 Soviet Republics dissolved the Soviet Union by the Alma-Ata Declaration. Thus, at the moment of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, two independent and legally equal subjects were formed on the territory of Soviet Azerbaijan—the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and the Republic of Azerbaijan”. Indeed, the present peace efforts will fail to deliver any tangible results if the Armenian government continues to manipulate these narratives and refuses to recognize Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan.”

Answering the questions from the media following the quadrilateral meeting in Prague, President Ilham Aliyev drew attention to the landmine threat in the liberated territories: “Armenians had planted at least 1,400 landmines since the end of the Second Karabakh War, another crime against us, another act of terrorism. More than 250 Azerbaijanis were killed or seriously injured after the war. In other words, Armenian terrorism against us continues and must be stopped.” The liberated territories of Azerbaijan’s are one of the most mine-contaminated in the world. 97,000 landmines were discovered in the liberated region of Aghdam alone. Aghdam was dubbed “Hiroshima of the Caucasus” due to Armenia’s extensive destruction of the area during the years of occupation. Armenia finally released minefield maps to Azerbaijan, despite initially

denying their existence, following repeated requests by Azerbaijan, with the mediation of international actors such as the OSCE, the USA, the Russian Federation, the EU, and Georgia, and in exchange for Azerbaijan returning Armenian detainees. But to the dismay of Azerbaijan, it was discovered that just 25% of the minefield maps were accurate. “Moreover, those maps certainly do not include the massive mining process conducted by some retreating units of the armed forces of Armenia, who have confessed to embarking on such activity near the Lachin and Kalbajar districts. Obviously, one cannot hope to have properly charted minefield maps in such instances of random and purposeful landmine contamination done in haste and for inflicting maximum damage,” Dr Esmira Jafarova noted.

Despite the intensity of the work done by Azerbaijan so far, the clearing of some zones might take up to 10 years, according to the Azerbaijani National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA). The demining process requires a lot of time and resources, but Azerbaijan is determined to clean the liberated territories as quickly as possible.

“Assistance from the international community in this regard is welcome and highly necessary. Some countries have extended a helping hand; for example, the UK contributed over AZN 1 million (£500,000) to Azerbaijan’s recovery efforts and demining activities; France also announced a donation of €400,000 for mine clearance; and the United States Marshall Legacy Institute donated dozens of mine detection dogs to Azerbaijan. In May 2022, the EU announced an assistance package to Azerbaijan for demining purposes amounting to €2.5 million, which should be allocated through the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Later, in July 2022, the EU declared that it would allocate an additional

€4.25 million for demining work in Azerbaijan. Moreover, in early August 2022, France gave Azerbaijan 130 mine detectors to further extend support to demining activity in the liberated lands,” Dr Esmira Jafarova points out, adding that “the burden and the associated dangers of the landmine contamination problem, unfortunately, lie entirely on Azerbaijan. Although specialists from Turkey are helping Azerbaijan in the physical clearance process, more assistance in this regard from the international community and relevant international organizations is certainly needed.”

The threat posed by landmines in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan has not abated and is still taking innocent lives. For example, more than 1,400 additional landmines were laid in the Lachin area alone in 2021, more than a year after the conflict was declared resolved, which regrettably demonstrates that Armenia’s covert war against Azerbaijan still continues in the most barbaric war.

Landmines are only part of the problem. Another problem is Armenia’s refusal to withdraw its troops from Azerbaijan. In his interview with the media on October 6 in Prague, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “the Armenian armed forces are yet to withdraw from our lands. We demand that. Some of them have indeed been removed, but they are still present in our lands, and I hope this will also stop. Because the entire international community clearly understands one thing now: Karabakh is Azerbaijan! We have been saying this every time – during the occupation, war and after the war. The world community understands this truth and openly states it today. The Armenians are living in Karabakh – I said this in Aghdam yesterday – are our citizens. We will not discuss their fate or future life with any country, including Armenia. This

is our internal matter, and Armenians will enjoy the same rights as citizens of Azerbaijan. In any case, they can rest assured that their lives integrated into Azerbaijani society will be much better than their present life.

Commenting on the prospects of the peace agreement, President Ilham Aliyev stated that “In principle, I said some time ago that if Armenia is interested, the peace agreement could be signed by the end of the year. As time passes, our initiatives do not progress easily at all. Although the first meeting of the foreign ministers did not produce specific results, I think it has been a positive step. I think that if a decision is made soon, the working groups of the two countries will start dealing with the text of the peace agreement, and we can reach an agreement by the end of the year. I must say that no one - neither the Armenian side nor the European Union – has questions about the five principles we have declared. Today, during the meeting with the President of France, I saw that these five principles are being accepted. This is natural because we did not invent anything new. These principles are based on relations between states interested in normalizing relations.”

On the integration of the Armenian residents of Karabakh, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “regarding our internal issues, of course, they cannot be discussed in the peace treaty. As for how to organize the life of the Armenian population of Karabakh, this is a separate issue. We plan to step up consultations within the framework of our foreign policy agenda and continue informal relations with representatives of the Armenian population of Karabakh. I must say that such interaction has been ongoing for some time now. I think this will lead to a complete understanding with the population still living in the area of responsibility of the Russian peacekeeping

contingent because there is simply no other option of integrating into Azerbaijani society. If people believe that they need to live as citizens of Azerbaijan, I think they will not regret that. But if this is not suitable for someone, they can choose another place of residence for themselves.”

“The five principles of the peace agreement should be initialed as soon as possible and work on the text of the peace agreement should begin based on these principles. I am sure that this can be achieved quickly. I don't think it should be a multi-volume document; it should be a reasonably compact document consisting of several articles defining the parameters within the framework of international law and international practice. This will close the page of war and enmity,” President Ilham Aliyev added.

On the unblocking of the regional communications, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “the opening of communications is not part of a possible peace agreement; it has more to do with the issue’s essence. Because this is the commitment that Armenia took upon itself on 10 November 2020 but did not fulfill. Today, when I again asked the Prime Minister of Armenia to finally give us a route for the highway, unfortunately, I still did not get an answer. It is not funny anymore because it is not that large of an area. Everyone knows where the railway and the road should pass. It is not understandable that we are not being voluntarily afforded a passage to Nakhchivan. Breaking one's commitment is, of course, an extremely shameful fact. However, we are still patient and restrained. I am sure we will achieve this sooner rather than later.”

II. President Ilham Aliyev meets with President of Russia and Prime Minister of Armenia in Sochi

On October 31, President Ilham Aliyev met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in the resort town of Sochi. The meeting was facilitated by the Russian side. Before the trilateral meeting, a bilateral meeting was held between President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin. Commenting on the upcoming trilateral meeting, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “Azerbaijan put forward five basic principles relatively recently, on the basis of which the relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia should be normalized. These are the fundamental principles of international law, and I think that normalization can be achieved on this basis. The Karabakh conflict has already been consigned to history. It was resolved two years ago, so there is practically nothing to discuss in this context. The normalization of Azerbaijani-Armenian relations is a format that, of course, requires very serious step.”

Following the trilateral meeting, Russian President noted that “In our common opinion, it was a very useful meeting. I believe it has created a very good atmosphere for possible future agreements on certain fundamental issues. We agreed on a joint statement today. I have to say quite frankly that not everything has been agreed upon. Some things had to be removed from the text previously worked out at the level of specialists. However, I do agree with the overall assessment that the meeting was useful and that it creates the conditions for further steps towards resolving the situation as a whole. Moreover, when I speak in general, I mean both the current events of the recent past and the events that took place

two years ago. We did manage to agree on fundamental issues then. And today's discussion suggests that we can also agree on the future of our all countries. When I refer to our countries, I mean Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and indeed all the countries of the region. Because all the peoples who live in this territory are interested in relations being normalized. Russia, for its part, will do everything to ensure that a final and comprehensive settlement is reached."

Since the November 26, 2021 meeting in Sochi, Russia's efforts to facilitate a peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia have failed to produce any outcomes, while the EU has assumed the key mediating role in the process. Russia was unable to push for the realization of the summit's proposals, which included opening up regional transit routes and demarcating the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The agreements on the commencement of the preparations for a peace treaty, the creation of a border commission, and the initiation of bilateral contacts between Azerbaijan and Armenia were reached through the mediation of the EU. Although Russian authorities occasionally denounced the EU's alleged moves to exclude Moscow from the peace talks, up until recently Russia did not object to these initiatives. Such muted reaction might also be attributed to the fact that the deals made in the European track of negotiations did not undermine Russia's own objectives.

However, the meetings in Brussels on August 31 and Prague on October 6, as well as the ministerial meetings facilitated by the US, showed that the parties were moving toward a peace agreement that would recognize Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the Karabakh region, which would be at odds with Russia's regional interests. The need for Russia's

peacekeeping mission in the region would be completely removed by an agreement (referred by Putin as the so-called "Washington plan") based on Armenia recognizing Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the Karabakh region. Hence, Russia believes that the peace treaty should only aim to normalize relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and should not include any arrangements for the future of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, leaving a resolution to "future generations."

Another worrisome development for Russia was the deployment of the EU's monitoring mission to the territory of Russia's ally Armenia while a CSTO mission was held up. The deployment of the EU mission consisting of several dozen unarmed monitors to the area infuriated the Moscow despite the fact that thousands of Russian military personnel were present in Armenia (about 4,500 border guards and nearly 5,000 troops in Gyumri). The Russian media's recent campaigns and President Putin's remarks at the Valdai Discussion Club on October 27 warned Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan against taking any anti-Russian action.

Following these developments, Pashinyan made it known that his government welcomes the Russian plan and is prepared to sign an agreement prolonging the mission of Russian peacekeepers in Azerbaijan's Karabakh. Prior to the trilateral summit, President Ilham Aliyev underscored in Sochi that Azerbaijan will not debate the future of Karabakh since Baku considers the conflict resolved. The future of Karabakh Armenians is an internal matter for Azerbaijan, which will not be negotiated with other states. There were no provisions addressing these issues in the text that was exchanged after the trilateral summit.

These developments indicate that the prospects for a peace agreement on the

parameters outlined in the Western-mediated platform are quite small. Largely due to its enduring sway over Armenia and the separatist entities in Azerbaijan's Karabakh, Russia appears for now to have been successful in keeping it from leaving the ground.

Largely due to its enduring sway over Armenia and the separatist entities in Azerbaijan's Karabakh, Russia appears for now to have been successful in keeping it from leaving the ground. Particularly on the subject of the future of Azerbaijan's Karabakh region, the negotiations will stall under this situation. "Both Armenia and Russia agree that this matter should not be addressed in the peace treaty but should instead be left for later. According to Vasif Huseynov, "This is different from the Western version in the sense that Russian version has no mechanism at this stage to regulate the contacts between Baku and the separatist groups in Karabakh, and does not acknowledge Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Karabakh, and on the other hand ensures the conditions for extension of the Russian peacekeeping mission."

After the 44-Day War, Armenia was vanquished, and a new reality has since taken hold. Azerbaijan maintains that it would not engage in negotiations with any country about the fate of the Armenians of Karabakh since it views the topic as an internal one. The position taken by Azerbaijan is supported by both international organization verdicts as well as legislation from the Soviet era.

The former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO), which received autonomy in 1923 and continued to be an autonomous region of Azerbaijan throughout the Soviet era, was not granted the right to secede in any Soviet constitution, and major decisions about the region were taken in Baku. The central

government of Azerbaijan was in charge of major political decisions involving the NKAO, according to constitutions adopted by the USSR and the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in the years 1924, 1927, 1936, 1937, 1977, and 1978. The Armenians of Karabakh and the Armenian parliament passed a series of secession-related motions between 1988 and 1991, however all of the decisions were illegal under the constitution of Azerbaijan, the Soviet legislation of the period, and international law.

The autonomy of the NKAO was revoked by the parliament of Azerbaijan on November 26, 1991, one month before the fall of the Soviet Union. Two of the four resolutions passed by the U.N. Security Council in 1993 (Resolution 853, Article 9 and Resolution 884, Article 2) in response to Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territory confirmed the Karabakh Armenians' status as Azerbaijani citizens.

After the 44-Day War. In place of the previous NKAO, which was abolished in 1991, the Karabakh economic zone was formed on July 7, 2021, by order of President Ilham Aliyev, and Baku assigned a special representative and governor to this region.

There was no provision about the granting of special status to Armenians residing in Karabakh during the post-war era in discussions that were initially handled by Russia and later by the European Union. Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, said that Karabakh is the internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan following the 2020 war, and in the agreement between Russia and Azerbaijan that was reached on February 22, 2022, Russia recognized the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan. The EU also recognized Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in accordance with the strategic cooperation agreement between the two parties that was

concluded in the sphere of energy in July 2022. Nikol Pashinyan, the prime minister of Armenia, stated in an interview with Public Television on September 30 that none of the aforementioned international organizations or states are prepared to recognize Karabakh's independence or include Karabakh as a part of Armenia. He made it clear that these countries had said that Karabakh was, in reality, a part of Azerbaijan from an international perspective.

Armenia accepted Azerbaijan's five-point proposal and acknowledged Karabakh as Azerbaijan's sovereign territory. In fact, on October 6, 2022, in a summit convened in Prague, Armenia recognized the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

Because Azerbaijan considers the Karabakh issue to be a domestic one, it is not addressed in the peace deal that the parties could sign. Following the Prague meeting, President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that the Armenians of Karabakh are citizens of Azerbaijan: "We decide when to talk to them. This is our internal matter. We will not discuss this with any country. Armenians living in Karabakh will have neither status nor independence. They will have the same rights as the citizens of Azerbaijan."

Azerbaijan has indeed been engaging with Armenians from Karabakh for some time. President Aliyev had previously confirmed that certain Azerbaijanis had met with Karabakh Armenians. "It is now known that there were discussions between Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijani representatives during three different periods in particular. During the evacuation of Lachin, a meeting was held with Karabakh Armenians without a mediator, and a further meeting was held concerning the use of the resources of the Sarsang dam. As President Aliyev mentioned, at the same time, Armenians living in Karabakh asked Azerbaijan

to build a 4-kilometer (2.4-mile) road in Azerbaijan to connect to the Armenian border. Some Armenian families wanted to pass from Khankendi to Shusha, but the Russian peacekeeping troops did not allow them. On the other hand, the separatist "government" of Karabakh started an investigation into those who wanted to integrate with Azerbaijan and announced that they would," Cavid Veliyev noted.

The constitution of Azerbaijan guarantees the rights and safety of Armenians residing in its territory. The state must ensure that everyone has equal rights and freedoms, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, language, sex, origin, property status, occupation, beliefs, or membership in political parties, trade unions, or other public associations, according to Article 25 of the Constitution of Azerbaijan. Rights and freedoms cannot be restricted because of someone's race, ethnicity, religion, language, sex, origin, views, or political or social affiliation.

Assistant to Azerbaijani President, Head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration Hikmat Hajiyev said: "Azerbaijan, in accordance with its international commitments, regularly submits various reports to the United Nations and other organizations. These reports reflect the Azerbaijani government's efforts aimed, for example, at ensuring the rights of ethnic minorities. In the future, these reports will include actions aimed at ensuring the rights of the Armenian residents of Karabakh."

Karabakh Armenians are citizens of Azerbaijan. The security and rights of the Armenians residing in Karabakh are guaranteed by Azerbaijan's constitution and its international commitments. However, the Armenian people who have spent years being influenced by the extreme ideology and propaganda of

Armenian organizations and the junta regime in Karabakh need to be legally, politically, and economically integrated into Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan will not sign a peace treaty based on these conditions. It was stated very clearly in Azerbaijan's proposals for such a treaty presented to the Armenian side in March that Azerbaijan expects Armenia to recognize the country's territorial integrity and inviolability of internationally recognized borders. The idea that Baku and Yerevan would completely reject the Western version of the peace deal does not seem plausible. Most likely, the two countries will carry on talks on terms labeled by Russia as "the Washington plan", which principally calls for the mutual recognition of territorial integrity. Two significant factors also lend credence to this notion. First, the Sochi document affirms mutual recognition of each other's territorial integrity, citing the UN Charter and the Alma Ata statement of 1991, in a manner similar to the conclusions of the Prague summit. Second, in the lead-up to the summit in Sochi, the Armenian prime minister recently hinted that he might sign a document recognizing Karabakh as a part of Azerbaijan. "If there is a country in the world that doesn't consider Karabakh a part of Azerbaijan, then it must say so publicly, and no one must create the impression that the situation is different", Pashinyan noted. But, as Vasif Huseynov notes, "it is likely that Yerevan, playing Russian game will try to keep the issue of Karabakh in the international agenda through third countries."

III. Azerbaijan sets to shape the energy map of Europe

On October 1, President Ilham Aliyev attended the inauguration ceremony of the Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB) in Sofia,

which will deliver gas from the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline and Greece to Bulgaria and neighboring countries. The total length of the Greece-Bulgaria Gas Interconnector (IGB) is 182 kilometers. The total cost of the interconnector is more than 240 million euros. The IGB will deliver natural gas produced from Azerbaijan's "Shah Deniz-2" field to Bulgaria. For this purpose, Bulgarian state company "Bulgargaz EAD" has signed an agreement with the "Shah Deniz" consortium. The annual throughput capacity of the pipeline will be 3 billion cubic meters. In the future, this indicator can be increased to 5 billion cubic meters per year. Thus, Azerbaijan's natural gas will meet 25-30 percent of Bulgaria's demand.

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony of the IGB, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen noted that this gas interconnector was a "game changer" that will bring "freedom from Russia" to the region: "[T]oday a new era for Bulgaria and for South-East Europe begins. Bulgaria used to receive 80% of its gas from Russia. That was before Russia decided to launch an atrocious war against Ukraine and an energy war against Europe. This pipeline is a game changer. It is a game changer for Bulgaria and for Europe's energy security. And it means freedom. It means freedom from dependency on Russian gas." Speaking at the opening ceremony, the Commissioner for Energy, Kadri Simson also noted that "The IGB can provide much-needed alternatives and flexibility for Bulgaria and the whole region. This new route will help to strengthen security of supply to the region, including the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. I would like to congratulate the Greek and Bulgarian governments and the project company IGB for opening the pipeline today. It is a remarkable milestone of regional cooperation."

Speaking about the project, Caretaker Prime Minister of Bulgaria Galab Donev noted that the launch of interconnector is of great importance for the partner countries. "Bulgaria welcomes the EU-Azerbaijan memorandum of understanding of strategic energy partnership and the possibility of increasing natural gas supplies from Azerbaijan. This will contribute to the diversification objectives in the Repower Europe plan." Executive officer of the ICGB AD, Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria, Teodora Georgieva said: "This is the first project in Bulgaria that brings real diversification of sources and leads to energy independence, the 1st fully automated gas pipeline in the country and to build it. I would also like to emphasize the importance of the support of our partners and friends from Azerbaijan. Today they are here once again with the high-level participation of President Ilham Aliyev. Azerbaijani gas volumes to Bulgaria provide the backbone of the project and fill a third of its pipeline capacity with potential for additional volumes." Another Executive Officer of the ICGB AD Gas Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria, George Satlas said: "We honestly believed that five years ago this project will become the reality that it is today. Together, all involved parties united under a common goal, a paradigm on the strength of unity."

Describing the commissioning of the Greece-Bulgaria Gas Interconnector as a special event not only for the parties involved in the project but also for the whole of Europe, Prime Minister of Greece Kyriakos Mitsotakis said: "As President Aliyev has said, Azerbaijani gas will be transported to Bulgaria through this pipeline. Of course, this will contribute to the development of the natural gas network together with other infrastructure projects being implemented in the region."

Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae-Ionel Ciucă said that all opportunities should be used to diversify gas supplies. This project will also contribute to improving supplies.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said in his speech: "I congratulate our Bulgarian and Greek friends on the successful completion of this interconnector. The project is also important for Serbia. I must say that without the presence of our friend Ilham Aliyev, it would not be easy for any of us to hope for the diversification of gas and electricity supplies. Dear friend, I see that you are very popular in Europe now. I want to keep in touch with you. We have talked many times. He has become very popular in Europe. In the meantime, I don't know what he did, but I have to admit that I would like to know this secret too."

President of North Macedonia Stevo Pendarovski also stated that the project was of tremendous importance not only for host countries but also for Southeast Europe as a whole. "Speaking of the most popular person in Europe, the President of Azerbaijan, we do not know his new number. He may have changed his phone number."

Concluding the ceremony, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev emphasized that the Greece-Bulgaria Gas Interconnector has already significantly changed the energy map of Europe. The President said: "Finally, we have real gas flow from Azerbaijan, which in the face of President Ilham Aliyev proved to be a reliable partner keeping to the agreement with President Parvanov more than a decade ago. Yesterday I received a very important proposal. In fact, I was authorized by the gas transmission companies and providers of four countries – Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. And they ask me to propose to submit to the President of the European Commission jointly signed letter and they

propose to transmit the additional quantities of gas from Azerbaijan along with the agreement between the President of European Commission and President Ilham Aliyev signed in July.”

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony, President Ilham Aliyev noted that the IGB project will play a major role in boosting energy security of Europe and diversification of gas supplies. “Energy security is part of national security of every country and the current geopolitical situation in the world proves it once again. For almost two years, Azerbaijani gas is on the European market and now in Bulgaria. The Southern Gas Corridor is one of the biggest infrastructure projects in the continent, which changed the energy map of Europe. Azerbaijan is proud to be the initiator of the Southern Gas Corridor. The Southern Gas Corridor transports gas to consumers by a new route, but also from a new source. So far, the only source is the Shah Daniz gas field situated in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea, but several other new gas fields of Azerbaijan will start production soon and will contribute to increasing the volumes of our supply,” President Ilham Aliyev noted, adding that “Azerbaijan is, for many years, a reliable oil supplier to international, primarily European markets, and now became a reliable gas supplier.”

President Ilham Aliyev also noted that soon “Azerbaijan will become a reliable electricity supplier to Europe and the proven reserves of our wind potential only in the Caspian Sea is 157 gigawatts and now we are already discussing with our European partners how to bring this energy to the European continent.”

“Last year, our gas export was around 19 billion cubic meters, out of which 8.2 billion to Europe, and that was an increase of 40% in

comparison with the previous year. This year, we will increase our export up to more than 22 billion cubic meters and 11.5 billion cubic meters will go to European consumers. As I already said, this July we signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the European Commission during the visit of Madam Ursula von der Leyen to Azerbaijan, which is a very substantial document. Based on that by 2027 we are planning to increase, to double our supply of natural gas to Europe, at least to double, and we have all the potential to do it,” President Ilham Aliyev noted, adding that “we started already consultations with our partners with respect to the expansion of TANAP from 16 to 32 billion cubic meters and TAP from 10 to 20 billion cubic meters, because without that it will be difficult to provide additional supplies.”

As part of the opening ceremony of the Greece-Bulgaria Gas Interconnector (IGB), President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev also met with Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic Kyriakos Mitsotakis in Sofia, Bulgaria. The issues of cooperation in the field of energy was pointed out at the meeting, and the importance of the TAP project was emphasized in this regard. The importance of the natural gas interconnector to be commissioned between Greece and Bulgaria, was also mentioned. The sides also hailed the importance of the Memorandum of Understanding on Strategic Partnership signed between Azerbaijan and the European Union in the field of energy.

President Ilham Aliyev also met with Prime Minister of Romania Nicolae-Ionel Ciucă in Sofia. The head of state emphasized the development of relations between Azerbaijan and Romania on the basis of strategic partnership. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out traditional friendly relations and extensive

cooperation between the two countries. Prime Minister Nicolae-Ionel Ciucă hailed the development of relations between Azerbaijan and Romania at the level of strategic partnership. The Prime Minister pointed out great opportunities for further development of relations on a broad agenda in various fields, and emphasized the important role of Azerbaijan in Europe's energy security. The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between Azerbaijan and the European Union on Strategic Partnership in the field of energy, and a particular role of Azerbaijan in terms of implementation of the issues arising from this was pointed out during the conversation. The sides also touched upon the issues of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Romania in agriculture, petrochemical, energy, including electricity export, transport and logistics and other fields.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that Azerbaijan will be able to meet its commitment on doubling gas exports to Europe if new investment in the pipelines and long-term purchase contracts are guaranteed. "Whoever is interested in investing, whether it's public or private, they [must] put their money on the table in order for us to be able to increase their capacities," Elnur Mammadov, Deputy Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan said in an interview, adding that "I wouldn't say that there is a disagreement [with the EU], but this is . . . an important part of this puzzle." "Currently there's a desperate need for Europe to find alternative suppliers," Deputy Foreign Minister Elnur Mammadov said. "We need to be sure that this . . . is not a sort of spontaneous demand in light of the war in Ukraine, which one day will end and then all of a sudden you start buying back from Russia and say, 'hey, well we don't now need the gas'," Elnur Mammadov pointed out.

In a joint statement to the press with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen after signing a Memorandum of Understanding on Strategic Partnership in the field of energy between Azerbaijan and the EU in July, President Ilham Aliyev underscored that "energy projects initiated by Azerbaijan and supported by European Union and supported by our partners completely changed the energy map of Europe."

IV. Azerbaijan and Georgia plan to export electricity to the EU

On October 24, President Ilham Aliyev paid a working visit to Georgia. During the visit, President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili held a one-on-one meeting at Château Mukhrani in Mtskheta. After viewing the "Heritage of Karabakh Khanate" exhibition at Château Mukhrani in Mtskheta Municipality, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili made press statements. In his statement, President Ilham Aliyev underscored that today strategic partnership relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia "have almost risen to the level of alliance."

"We actively cooperate in many fields. We always support each other within the framework of international organizations and in a bilateral format. Many projects are of special importance not only for our countries, but also for the region and Europe as a whole," President Ilham Aliyev underscored, adding that "the new project to be implemented is related to electricity. Azerbaijan is trying to export its electricity to world markets. Of course, our export direction passes through Georgia. Ten Gigawatts of renewable energy can be used on liberated lands alone. In the

Caspian Sea, this number reaches 157 Gigawatts. So this is a figure confirmed by international experts, and it is a very large figure. Of course, producing and exporting this energy is on our agenda in the coming years.”

“I have informed the Prime Minister about the situation after the second Karabakh war and the progress of peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We believe that after the Karabakh conflict, the time has come for Azerbaijan and Armenia to sign a peace treaty. At least this is our intention. We have laid down our proposals consisting of five main principles to the Armenian side. I do hope that the Armenian side will also show political will and sign the peace treaty with Azerbaijan on the basis of these fundamental principles recognized by the international community. If this happens, peace will come to the South Caucasus and, at the same time, opportunities for cooperation will emerge. Today, during the conversation, we also exchanged views on the start of Georgia-Azerbaijan-Armenia consultations. If the Armenian side is ready for them, we are ready too,” President Ilham Aliyev noted.

President Ilham Aliyev also pointed out that “In nine months of this year, the turnover has approached one billion dollars. Of course, projects implemented with the investment of Azerbaijan further strengthen our cooperation. Azerbaijan has invested more than 3 billion dollars in Georgia. This investment is mutually beneficial because it meets the interests of both parties. Of course, today we had a broad exchange of views on our future energy policy. As the Prime Minister has also noted, the implemented projects are already successfully operating. We are thinking about new projects. We intend to increase gas exports to world markets. This year we will export 22 billion cubic meters and

next year this figure will increase even more. The Memorandum on strategic partnership in the field of energy, signed between the European Commission and Azerbaijan in July of this year, indicates that Azerbaijan will double gas exports to Europe in the next five years. At least this is our intention and we have sufficient capabilities to do that. So we plan that Azerbaijan's gas export to Europe alone will reach 20 billion cubic meters in 2027. Of course, the work to be done in this regard was discussed in a bilateral format, and there is a need for further discussions. At the same time, exports will be increased through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline next year. We also want to use the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline, which is currently not in operation. We have also talked about this. I informed the Prime Minister about our plans. There is a great need and great potential for this.”

President Ilham Aliyev also noted that “the volume of cargo transportation between Georgia and Azerbaijan has increased by 75 percent this year. I want to inform you that we intend to increase the carrying capacity of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway to 5 million tons. For this purpose, Azerbaijan will make additional investment in this project this year and next year. All investment is ready and we have started the process because there is a great need for transport routes across the Caspian Sea through Azerbaijan, Georgia and neighboring countries. The new transport routes meet the interests of all the countries located along the route, both in relation to the geopolitical situation and as a whole. Therefore, increasing the throughput capacity of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway to 5 million tons and increasing the volume of cargo transferred from Central Asia and Asia as a whole to the West and back using Georgian ports creates a new reality. We have to be ready for that. I must state that we want to

increase the capacity of Baku International Sea Trade Port from 15 million to 25 million tons. All the instructions have already been given and the funds will be allocated. Therefore, there should be close coordination between Georgia and Azerbaijan in the field of transport. Our joint projects must be completed at the same time. To be a transit country, you must have good relations with your neighbors. Because without good relations with neighbors, no country can become a reliable transit state. Our friendly, brotherly and partnership relations with Georgia create these opportunities. Currently, as there is a great demand for energy resources in the whole world and in Europe, Georgia and Azerbaijan will act in a coordinated manner in this matter and ensure their national interests by focusing on one point. Notice how important the relations between two brotherly countries are for the region, for Europe and for the world.”

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili noted that “Today we had a very important meeting, discussed various issues and once again emphasized the close partnership between our countries. We discussed the processes currently taking place in the world and agreed that the events taking place in Ukraine should be resolved through negotiations. We also consider that the events unfolding in the world should be resolved only through peace and stability. This is important both for our region and our peoples. In addition, we have reviewed the regional situation, contacts between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the peace process between the two countries. Our government and myself are hopeful that we will do our best to implement the policy of peace. Good neighborly relations in our region are not against any format of cooperation, we will only strengthen it, and I am sure that we can do a lot together.” Prime Minister

Garibashvili also underscored that Georgia supports President Ilham Aliyev’s initiative that he put forward in Prague on creating a cooperation format in the South Caucasus.

“We have also reviewed economic, energy and transport issues. Georgia is an important country for Azerbaijan. At the same time, Azerbaijan is a strategic partner of Georgia. We have reviewed the important projects we have already implemented. These are historic projects – the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and Middle Corridor. The projects we have implemented will continue to be carried forward and we are determined to speed them up even more,” Prime Minister Garibashvili concluded.

Both Baku and Tbilisi are interested in establishing this new route to supply the EU with electricity. “A new, far-reaching energy cooperation project is taking shape – one in which we Hungarians have a special interest,” Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban noted on October 27 at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Garibashvili in Budapest. “We want to create a huge new electricity supply system, the essence of which would be to bring energy from Azerbaijan to Hungary via Georgia and Romania. This would allow us to replace a large amount of natural gas, natural gas that today we use to generate electricity in Hungary.”

V. Iran holds military drills on border with Azerbaijan

On October 17, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran launched extensive military drills near its borders with Azerbaijan. Although the precise site of the "Mighty Iran" drills was not made public, the area that the

Iranian media referred to as the exercise area borders the Nakhchivan exclave and the mainland regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The drills examined integrated operations, including security and defensive strategies used by IRGC ground troops and, for the first time, the deployment of pontoon temporary bridges to train personnel and military equipment to get across water barriers.

Given that the Aras River serves as a natural boundary between Iran and Azerbaijan in several places, the installation of temporary pontoon bridges drew criticism from Azerbaijanis. The Azerbaijani media said that, in contrast to other drills, this one featured more soldiers and equipment and covered the whole interstate border with Azerbaijan. The Iranian Embassy in Azerbaijan released a statement claiming that Tehran had informed Baku in advance of the exercises and that military officials from both nations had spoken about them.

These military drills come amid escalating hostilities between Baku and Tehran and the latter's efforts to form an alliance with Armenia. Officials from various levels of the Iranian government, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei opposed the Zangezur corridor project since the 44-Day War. On July 19, Khamenei tweeted, "Of course, if there is a policy intended to block the Iran-Armenia border, the Islamic Republic will oppose it, for this border is a 1000s-year-old connecting route" – after saying that "We are pleased to see Karabakh return to Azerbaijan." Furthermore, two days after the start of military exercises, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said that "Iran will not permit the blockage of its connection route with Armenia, and in order to secure

that objective, the Islamic Republic of Iran also launched a wargame in that region."

In spite of assurances from the governments of Russia and Azerbaijan, Iran continues to make these accusations. For instance, the Russian side has stated many times that extraterritoriality would not be applied to the proposed transit routes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. "The principle is sovereignty over the road is exercised by the country through whose territory the road passes. This means that if the road passes through Armenian territory, then this is an Armenian road, if along Azerbaijani territory, then it is Azerbaijani," Russian deputy prime minister Alexei Overchuk underscored in an interview on September 30. In another assurance, President Ilham Aliyev declared on October 14 that Azerbaijan "had no intention of occupying the territory of Armenia, as some may assume." Iran, however, continues to instigate tensions in the region by throwing baseless accusations about the situation on the ground.

On October 13, a few days after Iran's military drills, President Ilham Aliyev and Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi met on the margins of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Astana, Kazakhstan. The official website of President Ilham Aliyev reported that President Ilham Aliyev said that Azerbaijan was continuing efforts to ensure peace and security in the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus region. Emphasizing that Azerbaijan was pursuing an independent foreign policy, President Ilham Aliyev drew attention to the fact that on 12-13 September this year, Armenia had committed provocations and deteriorated the regional situation. Stating that peace building processes were currently underway in the South Caucasus, the head of state said that Azerbaijan had proposed to sign a peace treaty

with Armenia based on five principles. President Ilham Aliyev said he believed in the possibility of achieving progress in this direction if Armenia displayed political resolve.

Vasif Huseynov noted that “according to some media reports, the meeting between the two leaders was not as friendly as official sources reported. Some reports suggest that Aliyev criticized his Iranian counterpart for the military build-up on the Azerbaijani border and for arming and providing military assistance to Armenia to confront Azerbaijan, describing it as a threat to his country. In response, Raisi reportedly denied these accusations and criticized Aliyev for obeying the “Zionists,” by which he seemingly implied Israel, and also for the Israeli defense minister’s recent visit to Baku. A fact shared by the Azerbaijani media indicates that these leaks from the meeting might be true. According to various Azerbaijani media agencies, Iran turned out to be the only country at the October 13 CICA summit that opposed Azerbaijan’s chairmanship for the upcoming period, while all other member states supported it.”

Vasif Huseynov also adds that “in a step that seemed to be a message to Azerbaijan against any alleged plans to change borders and cut off Iran from Armenia, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian paid a three-day visit to Armenia on October 20 and inaugurated a consulate in Kapan, the capital of Armenia’s southern Syunik Province. The media reported that the renovation works of the consulate building had not been finished, and as such, it was opened in haste.”

In his speech at the inauguration ceremony of the consulate office, Amir-Abdollahian noted that “we have clearly stated our opposition to any geopolitical change of borders in the Caucasus region ... We consider the security of

Armenia as the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the security of the region.”

“Both sides are clearly building up their cooperation in various spheres, including the military and economy. Apart from aiming to boost bilateral trade turnover from \$700 million to \$3 billion, Iran is also discussing supplying combat drones to Armenia,” Vasif Huseynov underscores.

VI. Azerbaijan continues to boost its ties with Kyrgyzstan

On October 11, President Ilham Aliyev arrived in Kyrgyzstan for a state visit. During the visit, President Ilham Aliyev visited the Ata-Beyit National Historical and Memorial Complex in Bishkek, and also visited the grave of famous Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov and put flowers at his monument. During the visit, the First Interstate Council of Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan in a limited format was held with the participation of President Ilham Aliyev and President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Japarov. During the meeting, President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov noted that “the dynamically strengthening and expanding ties have led to active interaction between the parliaments, governments and sectoral departments of our countries. A number of our April agreements have been implemented through a joint intergovernmental commission, a Business Council has been created, we will jointly open schools named after Heydar Aliyev, Nizami Ganjavi and the Friendship Park of Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan. I am sure that your visit and the meeting of the Interstate Council will give a new impetus to bilateral relations. This will be a clear indicator of the active development of our cooperation in the political, trade and investment, cultural and humanitarian spheres. I specifically want

to emphasize that Kyrgyzstan is committed to systematic and long-term cooperation with fraternal Azerbaijan and is ready for serious cooperation in strategic sectors.”

Following the expanded meeting of the First Interstate Council of Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek, a ceremony of signing Azerbaijan-Kyrgyzstan documents was held in the presence of President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Japarov.

The “Decision of the meeting of the First Interstate Council between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Kyrgyz Republic” was signed by President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Japarov.

“The Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation between the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Kyrgyz Republic” was signed by Minister of Economy of the Republic of Azerbaijan Mikayil Jabbarov and President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Kyrgyz Republic Marat Sharshekeyev.

“The Memorandum of Understanding between the Small and Medium Business Development Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Kyrgyz Republic” was signed by the Chairman of the Board of the Small and Medium Business Development Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan Orkhan Mammadov and President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Kyrgyz Republic Marat Sharshekeyev.

“The Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of a sister city relationship between the city of Baku of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the city of Bishkek of the Kyrgyz

Republic” was signed by the head of the Baku City Executive Authority Eldar Azizov and Mayor of Bishkek Emilbek Abdykadyrov.

“The Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation in the field of environmental protection between the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Natural Resources, Ecology and Technical Supervision of the Kyrgyz Republic” was signed by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov and Minister of Natural Resources, Ecology and Technical Supervision of the Kyrgyz Republic Dinara Kutmanova.

“The Protocol on Cooperation between the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Social Fund under the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic” was signed by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov and Chairman of the Social Fund of the Kyrgyz Republic Bakhtiyar Aliyev.

“The Cooperation Program between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2023-2025” was signed by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic Jeenbek Kulubaev.

“The Agreement on cooperation in the field of plant quarantine between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic” was signed by the Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Azerbaijan Inam Karimov, and Minister of Agriculture of the Kyrgyz Republic Askarbek Dzhanybekov.

“The Agreement on the establishment of the Azerbaijan-Kyrgyz Development Fund between the Government of the Republic of

Azerbaijan and the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic” was signed by Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ali Ahmadov and Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic Bakyt Torobayev.

Following a ceremony of signing the Azerbaijani-Kyrgyz documents in Bishkek, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Japarov have made press statements. President Sadyr Japarov noted that “In the spirit of strategic partnership, we have held meaningful talks on topical issues of bilateral and multilateral cooperation between our states and exchanged views on international and regional issues of mutual interest. The talks were held in an atmosphere of complete mutual understanding, openness and trust, which characterize the fraternal relations between our states. We have confirmed the invariability of the course towards the activation and expansion of the strategic partnership. I note with satisfaction that the launch of the Interstate Council and the agreements signed today are clear indicators of the active development of our cooperation in the political, trade and investment spheres. In the cultural and humanitarian sphere, I would like to highlight the joint opening of two general education schools named after Heydar Aliyev and Nizami Ganjavi, which have already become a symbol of unbreakable friendship between our fraternal peoples. In this context, I would like to emphasize with particular satisfaction the importance of implementing these landmark projects that contribute to the deepening of mutual understanding, friendship and cooperation between our countries and peoples. It is gratifying that our youth, the future of Kyrgyzstan, will receive education in these excellent schools. I am sure that our boys and girls will become a bridge of

friendship and cooperation between fraternal Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan.”

President Sadyr Japarov also noted that “much remains to be done in the transport and logistical sector, information and communication technologies, education, tourism and sports. Today, we once again confirmed the strategic nature of our relations and raised them to the highest level, which is the historical testament of our ancestors.”

President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that “I should note with satisfaction that a part of what we outlined during our Baku meeting has already been implemented. First of all, I would like to mention the decision to establish a joint Kyrgyz-Azerbaijani Development Fund, which will serve the cause of development, the cause of attracting investments, creating jobs and even more prerequisites for building up cooperation in the trade and economic sphere.”

“Six months ago, we signed the Declaration on Strategic Partnership, which raised our relations to a qualitatively new level. Today we note with satisfaction how this Declaration is being implemented. Much of what we identified six months ago is already being transformed into the sphere of real politics today. We discussed in detail a wide range of issues, from cultural and humanitarian cooperation, economic interaction, and transport interaction to issues related to education and high technologies. I must say that two Azerbaijani satellites, Azersky and Azerspace-1, have been providing services to Kyrgyz partners for some time now. We have identified additional ways to develop cooperation in this area. In the transport and transit sector, with the start of construction and commissioning of the new China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Caspian railway, there will be opportunities to increase trade and

reduce transportation costs. We congratulate fraternal Kyrgyzstan, as well as other partner countries, on the launch of this important project. Thus, having transport links, implementing an investment policy in the areas of priority for the government of Kyrgyzstan, and also having such a solid foundation of international legal nature, namely, as I have already noted, the Declaration on Strategic Partnership, the documents signed here in Bishkek today and those signed in Baku half a year ago, we are, in fact, somewhat making up for what was missed for some reason in previous years. I think that one of the main directions of our future cooperation will be precisely the fact that we should be focused on concrete results,” President Ilham Aliyev noted.

VII. Azerbaijan discovers new mass graves in the liberated territories

In October, another mass grave with the remnants of 12 people of Azerbaijanis killed and buried by Armenian soldiers during the first Karabakh war in the village of Edilli in Khojavand district was found. The skeletons, which were discovered with their items, had their legs tied with wire and rope. So far three sites have been discovered in the village of Edilli of Khojavand district. A total of 6 skeletons were discovered in the first and second sites and 12 skeletons were found in the third site. The bodies show signs of torture and execution. Edilli discoveries highlight the importance of holding Armenia accountable for war crimes. “Edilli was used as concentration camp for Azerbaijani hostages by Armenia,” Assistant to the Azerbaijani President, Head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration Hikmat Hajiyev said on Twitter. “Mass grave of tortured and killed Azerbaijani militaries by

Armenia during the 1st Karabakh war identified in Edilli village. Edilli was used as concentration camp for Azerbaijani hostages by Armenia. 4000 Azerbaijani militaries/civilians remain missing. Armenia refuses to provide mass grave locations,” Hikmet Hajiyev tweeted.

In March, when the first mass graves in Edilli were discovered, Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan Jeyhun Bayramov sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, which reads: “With reference to my previous letter of 4 May 2021, in the light of new evidence acquired by the relevant authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan, I am writing to once again draw your attention to the issue of bringing clarity to the whereabouts of close to 4,000 missing Azerbaijani persons. As a result of search operation and investigative measures, new mass graves have been identified in the Edilli village of the Khojavand district of Azerbaijan and in the territory of Fuzuli city on the basis of the testimonies by the eyewitnesses. The remains, which presumably belong to six or seven Azerbaijanis missing since the early 1990s, have been exhumed and collected by the investigation team for the purpose of subsequent medical examination and genetic tests. The Azerbaijani civilians and servicemen who managed to survive Armenian captivity confirmed in their testimonies that the bodies of dozens of Azerbaijanis had been transferred in military trucks and buried in mass graves in the mentioned areas after being subjected to torture, degrading, and other inhumane treatment, and subsequent arbitrary and extrajudicial killings. On the basis of eyewitness testimonies and other investigative materials, the relevant authorities presume that the found remains represent only a small portion of those who had been buried in the said areas, and

consequently, search operations are currently underway to locate the other burial places.”

“The fact that Azerbaijani prisoners of war and civilian captives have themselves been forced to the transfer and mass burial of the bodies itself speaks of the gravity and brutality of crimes committed by the armed forces of Armenia, its agents, and subordinates. Along with cruel treatment and torture leading to the death of dozens of prisoners of war and civilian hostages, the perpetrators also committed other serious war crimes by not ensuring that the dead were interred honorably, their graves respected and properly maintained, and marked as stipulated by international humanitarian law. Amid such growing evidence, the perpetrators continue to enjoy impunity as Armenia has thus far failed to take any step towards the investigation of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by its agents and subordinates. It is equally disturbing that despite the consistent calls of Azerbaijan and series of discussions with the Armenian side, including at the highest level, this country tries to escape from cooperation in providing information about the locations of burial sites, mass graves, or any similar information that would help bring clarity to the whereabouts of the missing Azerbaijani persons. Given the extreme importance of addressing the issue of missing persons for the rule of law, justice, as well as

post-conflict normalization and reconciliation, the strong engagement of the international community is therefore vital. Bringing clarity to the whereabouts of all missing persons and full accountability for the grave international humanitarian law violations committed against them are essential elements for achieving lasting reconciliation after a bloody conflict,” the letter notes.

“Ensuring justice is not only retributive but also preventive, serving to the non-repetition of similar wrongdoings and helping both countries and their people live in a peaceful and stable neighborhood. With the end of the conflict, it is high time for Armenia to honor its obligations under international humanitarian law and take practical steps to shed light on the dark pages of its armed aggression against Azerbaijan and cooperate with a view to eliminating its harsh consequences. Proceeding from this understanding, I appeal to you once again with the request of urging Armenia to share all information at its disposal necessary for bringing clarity to the fates of thousands of persons missing since the early 1990s. Consistent steps in this direction are necessary not only in terms of the shared responsibility for the rule of law and justice but also for taking forward the agenda of post-conflict normalization in the region,” the letter concludes.