

BULLETIN

HIGHLIGHT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN

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I. Terrorist attack on the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Iran

On January 27, a terrorist attacked the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Iran. As a result of the terrorist attack, Orkhan Asgarov, head of the security service of the Embassy, was killed, and two people were injured. The Iranian police stationed in front of the embassy witnessed the incident but failed to take any action against the aggressor. The attacker proceeded to enter the embassy, where he opened fire and claimed the life of one security guard, while injuring another. The third security guard was able to subdue the attacker and forcibly remove him from the building. The attacker was ultimately apprehended outside the embassy. Following the attack, the Government of Azerbaijan evacuated the embassy and suspended diplomatic activities in Tehran. "Suspension of diplomatic mission's operations in any country is a serious matter. We let the Iranian side know that we do not trust Iran with respect to ensuring security of our embassy's employees," deputy foreign minister of Azerbaijan Khalaf Khalafov noted. "We informed the Iranian side many times about the threats for the diplomatic mission of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Iran. We demanded tightening security measures to this end. The incident occurred showed once more that Iran's reaction to our demand was irresponsible," Khalafov underscored.

"I strongly condemn a terrorist act committed today against our embassy in Tehran. I express deep condolences to the family and relatives of senior lieutenant Askarov Orkhan Rizvan oğlu killed while ensuring the security of the embassy and its employees. We demand the soonest investigation into the terrorist act and punishment of the terrorists. The terrorist

attack on the diplomatic mission is unacceptable!" said a twitter post shared by the official account of President Ilham Aliyev.

Shortly after the attack, the Iranian Ambassador, Seyed Abbas Mousavi, was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan following a terrorist attack on the country's embassy in Tehran. During the meeting, the terrorist attack was strongly condemned and the ambassador was told that attacks on diplomatic missions are not acceptable. The host country's responsibility to protect diplomatic missions and ensure the safety of their staff, as outlined in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, was emphasized. The Iranian authorities were urged to promptly bring the perpetrator of the attack to justice, thoroughly investigate the crime, and identify and punish all individuals involved in its planning and execution. The recent anti-Azerbaijani campaign carried out in Iran was also a source of regret, as it further complicates already strained relations.

"We strongly condemn the treacherous Terror Attack against the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the Islamic Republic of Iran. As the country where the embassy is located, the Iranian side had to fulfill its obligations under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations to ensure the security of the embassy and safety of its employees. Previously, there have been attempts to threaten our diplomatic mission in Iran, and it was constantly raised before Iran to take measures to prevent such cases, and to ensure the safety of our diplomatic missions. Unfortunately, the last bloody terror attack demonstrates the serious consequences of not showing proper sensitivity to our urgent appeals in this direction. We are of the opinion that the recent anti-Azerbaijani campaign

against our country in Iran led to such attack against our diplomatic mission. We strongly demand Iran to identify and punish the perpetrators of the mentioned terrorist attack, as well as the instigators of this bloody act as soon as possible in the most severe manner. The Azerbaijani side will use all the opportunities given by the relevant international mechanisms in order to identify the perpetrators and ensure a corresponding punishment. It is planned to take appropriate measures to evacuate the employees of the Embassy, and their family members, in current situation resulted from the terrorist attack," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan said in a press statement.

On January 28, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi made a phone call to President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. During the phone call, President Ilham Aliyev expressed his strong condemnation of the terrorist act committed against the embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Tehran and voiced his hope that this violent act of terror would be thoroughly investigated and the criminals would be punished with the utmost rigor of law. President Ilham Aliyev also emphasized the importance of conducting the investigation in a transparent manner.

"No measures were undertaken by the Iranian police to neutralize the terrorist and prevent an armed attack on Azerbaijan's embassy in Tehran. Despite the repeated attempts by terrorist to enter the embassy, the Iranian police has not prevented the attack," head of the Press Service Department of Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry Aykhan Hajizada said in a media briefing. Hajizada pointed that the terrorist, armed with the automatic rifle, pistol and "Molotov cocktail", tried to shoot at the

windows of the apartments, where family members of embassy employees were residing. "The terrorist also tried to set the car belonging to Azerbaijan's embassy on fire. All these factors prove once again that this was a deliberate act of terror," Hajizada added.

The incident, which sparked a diplomatic crisis between the two nations and tarnished Iran's image, was expected to be thoroughly investigated. However, instead of acknowledging it as a terrorist attack, the Iranian police and prosecutors attempted to portray it as just a murder arising from personal conflicts. The Iranian authorities swiftly downplayed the situation, claiming that it was not a matter that needed to be escalated and that the attacker's motive was rooted in "personal issues and family problems", as stated in their initial investigation. A spokesperson from the Foreign Ministry "confirmed" these findings based on the attacker's statements.

The Tehran police issued a statement shortly after the incident, claiming that it was a "family matter" and that the attacker had arrived "with his children." However, footage from the scene showed that the attacker was alone, contradicting the police's account. The Tehran prosecutor later stated that the attacker had been searching for his wife for eight months, who was believed to have visited the Azerbaijani Embassy and vanished. These explanations by Iranian officials, whose credibility has been called into question in similar developments, were met with skepticism in Azerbaijan and seen as an attempt to deflect from the real events and conceal the true motive.

The fact that the Iranian police displayed a lax attitude towards the attacker, despite their known tough stance on recent demonstrators

in Iran, raised questions about their interest in investigating the attack. Additionally, the attacker's subsequent interviews on Iranian television, in which he tried to justify his actions, further cast doubt on the official investigation. The Iranian press quickly pointed fingers at external states, such as Armenia and Israel, and claimed that they were behind the attack in an attempt to harm Iranian-Azerbaijani relations. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani press accused the Iranian government of orchestrating the incident as a message to Azerbaijan, citing Iran's history of supporting terrorism and the existing tensions between the two nations. These tensions have been escalating, with Iran issuing increasing threats against Azerbaijan. The country had recently taken action against Iran's proxy supporters, reducing Iran's influence in Azerbaijan, and has been protecting citizens seeking regime change in Azerbaijan.

The growing anti-Azerbaijani sentiment in Iran in recent years has significantly contributed to the attack. The Iranian press, under the new government, has been publishing materials that perpetuate this negative view of Azerbaijan. State officials, politicians, and diplomats have made statements that further fuel this hostility towards Azerbaijan. This rising anti-Azerbaijani rhetoric and targeting has fueled the aggression of radical groups. Iran has sought to demonize and isolate Azerbaijan in the eyes of its society by accusing Azerbaijan of collaborating with outside parties and labeling it as pro-NATO, pro-Israeli, and anti-Iranian. This has made acts of aggression towards Azerbaijan appear justified to Iranian society.

The anti-Azerbaijani sentiment in Iran, which has existed for the past 30 years, has reached new heights under the current government.

The anti-Azerbaijani stance in the media and among politicians has intensified, with Azerbaijan being demonized and marginalized in the eyes of Iranian society. The Iranian state must take responsibility for the recent terrorist attack on the Azerbaijani Embassy, as it failed to fulfill its duty to secure foreign missions on its territory under the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Additionally, the opposition towards Azerbaijan in the Iranian press and the targeting of the country by politicians and state officials created an atmosphere that encouraged the attacker. The Iranian media's decision to give the attacker a platform to justify his actions further legitimized the attack on a social level. The Iranian government's restriction of Azerbaijani demonstrations, while allowing anti-Azerbaijani demonstrations, and its failure to allow Azerbaijani citizens to voice their concerns also contribute to the problematic situation.

II. Eco-protest on the Lachin road enters its second month

Throughout January, eco-activists and environmentalists in Azerbaijan continued their peaceful protest on the Lachin-Khankandi road against illegal exploitation of Azerbaijan's natural resources (particularly the Gizilbulag and Damirli mines) and the use of the Lachin road by the Armenian side in order to sneak military supplies in to Azerbaijani territories. Eco-activists have called for an end to ecocide against Azerbaijan and demanded the monitoring of the Azerbaijan's mineral deposits in the areas where the Russian peacekeeping contingent had been temporarily deployed. Against the backdrop of Armenia's baseless accusations about the "humanitarian crisis" and the road "blockade",

the protestors have ensured the unimpeded passage of various types of vehicles, including ambulances and humanitarian convoys.

In a phone call with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on January 23, President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that there was no blockade of the Lachin-Khankendi road and that over 980 vehicles had passed through it since December 12, 2022, with the majority being Russian peacekeepers and others being from the International Committee of the Red Cross. President Ilham Aliyev also highlighted that the International Committee of the Red Cross had transferred 90 individuals in need of medical attention to Armenia. The President emphasized the need to halt illegal mining operations in areas where Russian peacekeepers are temporarily stationed and for permanent monitoring conditions to be established by Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev drew Blinken's attention to Armenia's illegal shipment of landmines through the Lachin road. These land mines were manufactured in 2021. President Ilham Aliyev expressed Azerbaijan's commitment to the peace process and normalizing relations with Armenia, and stated that the peace deal should only be based on international law and Azerbaijan's proposed five principles. The President also stressed that Azerbaijan would ensure the rights and security of the Armenian civilian population living in the Karabakh economic zone in accordance with the Constitution and laws of Azerbaijan.

Over the last two years, Armenia refused to comply with the obligations derived from the Trilateral Statement of November 10, 2020. Armenia did not withdraw its troops from the territories of Azerbaijan, continued illegal activities on the territory of Azerbaijan, carried out the rotation of military personnel by

abusing Lachin road, continued planting landmines in Azerbaijan, illegally exploited Azerbaijan's natural resources, created conditions for the illegal passage of citizens of third countries into the territory of Azerbaijan, among other things. In this vein, the illegal transfer of military supplies to the Karabakh region by Armenia is particularly worrisome and poses a significant threat to Azerbaijan's national security. Azerbaijan has started expressing its concern over the transfer of military equipment, personnel, and landmines to the region via the Lachin road following the 44-Day War in 2020. This threat escalated in December 2022, when reports emerged that 14 people from Iran entered the Karabakh region through the Lachin road to conduct sabotage and terrorist activities against Azerbaijan. Baku is alarmed by this development and Iran's military support to Armenia, as there is a growing concern that Armenia and Iran may form a military alignment against Azerbaijan and use the Karabakh region for their purposes.

Speaking at the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs on January 24, Ararat Mirzoyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, made provocative statements about the situation around the Lachin road, saying that the situation may be resolved militarily. "Let me put it straight: there are two theoretical options for lifting the blockade of the Lachin corridor: military or diplomatic," Ararat Mirzoyan threatened Azerbaijan at the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Commenting on Mirzoyan's provocative speech at the EU Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan warned that "the proposal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia to resolve the situation around the

Lachin road through war is a serious threat,” adding that “the warmongering by Armenian leaders is not new. Back in 2019, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that “Karabakh is Armenia,” and former Defense Minister Tonoyan announced the idea of “new war for new lands.” Foreign Minister Mirzoyan’s proposal for a military solution shows that Armenia has not learned from the history and still does not realize the consequences of the occupation of Azerbaijan’s territories for 30 years. It is necessary to prevent adventurism of the Armenian side.” It is evident that the Armenian Foreign Minister was emboldened by various international entities, the statements of which regarding the situation surrounding the Lachin road only serve to incite violence, encourage revanchism, and undermine peace.

The claims by made by Mirzoyan that Azerbaijan is seeking an “extraterritorial corridor” are also baseless. It should be noted that, according to the Trilateral Statement, Armenia is obligated to establish transportation links between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic for the purpose of facilitating the free movement of people, goods, and vehicles in both directions. Armenia has agreed to this obligation and must fulfill it. As President Ilham Aliyev pointed out before the first summit of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in Brussels on December 14, 2021, “In [the] trilateral statement [dated November 10, 2020] it clearly says that Azerbaijan provides security and unimpeded access for [the] connection between Karabakh and Armenia, and Armenia should provide the same unimpeded access and security for connections between Azerbaijan and [the] Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic.” Furthermore, it is surprising that

Armenia has accused Azerbaijan of not being committed to the delimitation process, given that it is Armenia that continues to occupy 8 villages and dozens of square kilometers of Azerbaijani territory.

The recent attempts by Armenia to prevent the signing of a peace treaty and create confusion about the negotiation process by highlighting certain elements while ignoring others, failing to respond to Azerbaijan's proposal to sign a peace agreement for over eight months, and proposing the creation of a demilitarized zone in an undefined border region, are concerning and require reconsideration by Armenia.

In response to the repeated claims made by Armenia, including in Mirzoyan’s speech at the European Parliament regarding the situation around the Lachin road, it should be stated that the peaceful protests by Azerbaijanis demanding the prevention of illegal exploitation of their country's natural resources and the transportation of these resources from Azerbaijan to Armenia, as well as opposing the misuse of the Lachin road, which is a sovereign territory of Azerbaijan intended solely for humanitarian purposes, are a legitimate right of Azerbaijanis. Illegal activities in territories of Azerbaijan where Armenian residents live pose a threat to Azerbaijan's national security and must be brought to an end.

Accusations of “ethnic cleansing” repeatedly made by the Armenian side are unfounded, especially considering Armenia's history of practicing state-sponsored policies of occupation and preventing the return of hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani IDPs to their homes and properties in the formerly occupied territories of Azerbaijan. It is unacceptable for a country that has based its

national policy on hatred towards Azerbaijanis and Turks, and has demonstrated this through its actions such as the extermination and deportation of ethnic groups living within its borders, to now accuse Azerbaijan of harboring hatred towards Armenians. Regarding the false allegations that Azerbaijan is seeking to carry out “ethnic cleansing” and “deportation” of Armenian residents, it is important to note that the Armenian side, which has committed ethnic cleansing and mass killings against hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis, has no moral authority to comment on the rights of peoples. Azerbaijan is committed to granting equal rights and freedoms to all citizens, as outlined in its Constitution.

Armenia is making false claims of a “humanitarian disaster” in an effort to garner international support and maintain control of the Lachin road. This would enable Armenia to continue its illegal transportation of military supplies and profit from the illicit sale of natural resources. However, the Trilateral Statement clearly states that the Lachin corridor is part of Azerbaijan's recognized territory and grants security guarantees to Azerbaijan. As such, Azerbaijan has a duty to ensure the safety of all its citizens, including Armenians living in the Karabakh region. If the use of the Lachin road constitutes a threat to Azerbaijan's national security, Azerbaijan is not bound by law to allow it.

The government of Azerbaijan has repeatedly cautioned Armenia against the illegal transfer of landmines, military personnel, and weapons, which contravenes the Trilateral Statement. This has raised fears among Armenian nationalist groups that the Lachin road may come under complete Azerbaijani control. The revanchist forces in Armenia have

become increasingly dissatisfied with the current situation on the ground and started to resort to all kinds of provocations to increase the tensions in the region. The sudden appearance of shady Russian oligarch Ruben Vardanyan in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan was a major part of these provocations. Vardanyan, who was appointed as “state minister” disrupted efforts to begin a dialogue between local Armenians and the central authorities in Baku. After Azerbaijan's victory in the 44-Day War, some meetings were held between Azerbaijani officials and Karabakh residents. For example, during the construction of a new road bypassing the city of Lachin, there were contacts between the Azerbaijani side and local Armenian residents, and a large part of the construction process was carried out without the observation of the temporarily deployed Russian peacekeeping contingent. Additionally, direct contacts were established when Azerbaijani specialists visited and conducted technical monitoring of the Sarsang water reservoir in August 2022. These discussions have sparked hope for the integration of Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev viewed these advancements positively and stated that there is no need for a mediator in the ongoing talks between Azerbaijan and Karabakh Armenians. President Ilham Aliyev emphasized that the government of Azerbaijan is responsible for guaranteeing the security and rights of the Karabakh residents within Azerbaijan.

However, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, the normalization of Azerbaijan-Armenia-Türkiye relations, and regional stabilization were not in line with the interests of some states that had a stake in the region. In this scenario, Ruben Vardanyan, a Russian billionaire of Armenian descent who lived in

Russia for many years and had no connection to Karabakh, arrived unexpectedly in the region. He passed through the checkpoint of Russian peacekeeping forces and quickly took control of all the authorities in the area.

Vardanyan, born in Yerevan in 1968, became Russia's 103rd billionaire in 2020. According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Research Project (OCCRP) Troika Laundromat Report from 2019, he smuggled \$4.6 billion out of the country through offshore accounts. Upon Vardanyan's arrival in the region, the process that had begun between Azerbaijan and the Karabakh Armenians started to reverse. The Karabakh Armenians, who did not object to a previous visit by Azerbaijani authorities to the Sarsang dam, blocked a similar visit to the mines after Vardanyan's arrival.

Vardanyan spoke to the Karabakh Armenians and announced that he had chosen to fight against Azerbaijan after being presented with the options of either integrating with Azerbaijan, leaving the region, or fighting against Azerbaijan. He attempted to organize the Karabakh Armenians against Azerbaijan using his financial resources, while trying to obstruct the reintegration process and incite radicalism through his rhetoric. To achieve this, the new team created by Vardanyan replaced those who had negotiated integration with Azerbaijan with radicals. This highlights the existence of parties that wish to undermine the peace process with Azerbaijan and destabilize the region. It is well known that the residents of Karabakh cannot be decisive or influential players without outside support.

In Azerbaijan, it is widely believed that Vardanyan was sent to Karabakh from Russia. Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister, Jeyhun Bayramov, stated after meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on

December 27 that "A positive process had begun with the Karabakh Armenians and the arrival of someone with a dark past damaged the process. Even though a peace agreement was signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russia proposes to leave the solution of the Karabakh issue to the next generations." Azerbaijan's position, regarding the Karabakh issue as an internal matter, is clear to all parties involved.

It is evident that Vardanyan is playing a disruptive role in the ongoing normalization process in the region. For instance, he is known to have financially supported Nancy Pelosi's visit to Armenia, which severely impacted the peace process. Pro-Armenian members of Congress, such as Bob Menendez, the Chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and others, have openly supported Russian oligarch Vardanyan. Vardanyan and his backers aim to: obstruct the integration of Karabakh residents with Azerbaijan; maintain the influence of radical ideologies on Karabakh residents; arm Karabakh residents; allow the Lachin road to be used for smuggling purposes; illegally exploit Azerbaijan's underground and above-ground assets in Karabakh; and most importantly, hinder the implementation of the Trilateral Statement.

As Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan noted, "in response to a number of unfounded allegations regarding the situation around the Lachin road, we remind once again that according to paragraph 6 of the Trilateral Statement, the Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee the safety of citizens, vehicles, and goods traveling along the Lachin road in both directions. Safety also includes the prevention of misuse of Lachin road. Armenia, instead of preventing the abuse of the Lachin road,

contrary to the Trilateral Statement, brings newly manufactured landmines to Azerbaijan using the Lachin road, continues the supply and rotation of the Armenian forces that have not yet been withdrawn from the territory of Azerbaijan as confirmed by the leaders of Armenia, and arranges the transfer of illegally extracted natural resources of Azerbaijan to Armenia, once again proving that Armenia is not interested in fulfilling its obligations, and continues its policy of aggression against Azerbaijan and activities contrary to international law. The latest assessment by the Minister [Mirzoyan], who initially claimed that the Lachin road is closed and the Armenian residents are deprived of humanitarian aid, that filming of teenagers returning from Armenia using the Lachin road is an act of intimidation, is generally a product of unhealthy imagination. It is well known to the Armenian side how the Armenian residents, who approached the Azerbaijani side for support and assistance, treated positively." Commenting on the baseless accusations of "blockade" and "humanitarian crisis", the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out that "regarding "crisis" claims in the region, and the call for humanitarian intervention by the UN, OSCE, and other international actors, we would like to note that such a call by Armenia, as a country occupied our territories for 30 years and has not implemented four resolutions of the UN Security Council, is absurd. As for the humanitarian situation, it is impossible to deny the fact that the needs of the Armenian residents, who refrained from Azerbaijan's support and from the use of the Lachin road under the pressure of those who present themselves as leaders of the Armenian residents, were met with products transported by dozens of vehicles during the day by the Russian peacekeeping contingent and the

International Committee of the Red Cross. All these prove that the area, where Armenian residents live, is not under the blockade."

In conclusion, over the past two months, the protesters have not posed any hindrance to the movement of vehicles and residents on the Lachin road, and the claims of protests causing a "humanitarian crisis" in the region are unfounded. Around 2,000 vehicles have traveled the road and supplied residents with essential goods, medical supplies, and necessary medical services since the beginning of the protests. The Government of Azerbaijan has consistently stated its readiness to promptly address any humanitarian needs of Armenian residents. Despite this, the individuals presenting themselves as "leaders" of the Armenian residents are continuing to use the local population as a shield and restrict their mobility, in order to carry out illegal activities.

In an expanded interview with local TV channels on January 10, President Ilham Aliyev said that Azerbaijan offered Armenia peace despite destruction, suffering and damages the latter inflicted upon Azerbaijan for the last 30 years. "However, since we understand that it is in the long-term interests of Azerbaijan, we propose it. But it will be on the table just for a while. Then, we will not be particularly forcing this issue. If they are not interested, we do not need it either. We do not need it if they are not interested in delimitation. This means that the border will pass where we believe it should," President Ilham Aliyev underscored. "I think this year will be the last chance for them. Because then comes 2024, and then in 2025, Russia's peacekeeping mission ends. They need to see slightly farther than their noses," President Ilham Aliyev added.

III. Azerbaijan states its position on newly launched EU civilian mission in Armenia

On January 23, the Council of the European Union announced that it is launching a civilian mission in Armenia. According to the statement published by the Council, the objective of the mission is “to contribute to stability in the border areas of Armenia, building confidence on the ground, and ensuring an environment conducive to normalisation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan supported by the EU.” Commenting on the establishment of the EU civilian mission in Armenia (EUMA), Josep Borrell, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, noted that “the establishment of an EU Mission in Armenia launches a new phase in the EU’s engagement in the South Caucasus. The EU will continue to support de-escalation efforts and is committed to work closely with both sides towards the ultimate goal of sustainable peace in the region.”

Azerbaijan’s expectations regarding the EU mission in Armenia is that it must not be used to derail the normalization process and should take place in such a manner that does not undermine mutual trust and confidence between Azerbaijan and the EU. “We remain of the firm position that such an engagement must not be exploited for derailing the normalization process between Azerbaijan and Armenia, including in the context of border delimitation process that should be carried out exclusively on a bilateral basis. It must be ensured that deployment of an EU mission in Armenia duly takes into account the legitimate interests of Azerbaijan, and such an undertaking by the EU takes place in a manner that does not undermine mutual trust and

confidence. Azerbaijani side expects that in the process of deliberations on EU mission, utmost care will be exercised to draw necessary lessons from the past experience,” the statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan noted. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that “EU’s engagement in the territory of Armenia started with the deployment of a civilian monitoring capacity following the agreement reached at Prague meeting on October 6 2022 among the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, France, and the President of the EU Council. Azerbaijan agreed to such an undertaking with the understanding that it will help the normalization process,” adding that “Despite clearly defined parameters and purposes of two-months long period mission agreed at the highest level, the actual deployment of the monitoring capacity was accompanied by serious deviations from the agreements reached in Prague, following biased approaches taken by some EU member-states. This, in turn, affected the overall trust as regards to the credibility and transparency of the decision-making within the EU.”

“The presence of EU monitoring capacity in Armenia coincided with increased attempts by Armenia to derail the normalization process in all its three tracks, including torpedoing the trilateral meeting of the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and the EU Council, with groundless conditioning. As such, initial expectations that EU mission would contribute to taking normalization agenda forward were undermined. Following the end of two-month long civilian EU mission in Armenia and given the interest of the EU to continue its presence, Azerbaijan has engaged in good faith in consultations with the EU and conveyed its assessment, expectations and concerns clearly and in a transparent manner. In a series of consultations held at various levels with EU

representatives, it has been communicated by Azerbaijan that engagement of EU in Armenia through a mission must not serve as a pretext for Armenia to evade from fulfilment of undertaken commitments. Exploitation of such a presence of the EU against the already existing dialogue mechanisms is detrimental, and must be avoided,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan concluded.

Baku is concerned by the deployment of a new mission in the region without prior consultation and consent. The previous mission, agreed upon during the EU-mediated Armenian-Azerbaijani summit in Prague on October 6, 2022, was deployed for two months (October 20 – December 19, 2022) and Baku committed to cooperating with it. However, the mission was replaced without agreement with a larger and longer mission, causing frustration in Baku. Baku sees this as manipulation, especially by Paris, and warns it could harm the peace process. Moreover, the previous EU mission was also criticized by Azerbaijan for deviating from agreements reached in Prague and biased approaches taken by some EU member states. This raises concerns for Baku that the new mission may also pose complications.

There is a legitimate reason to be skeptical of the nature of this mission, as the EU remained silent and indifferent during the thirty years of Armenian occupation and violation of Azerbaijani borders. The EU was unwilling to address the dire humanitarian situation of hundreds of thousands of displaced Azerbaijanis after the first Karabakh war, or criticize Armenia for the war crimes in violation of international law. Even after the 44-Day War, the EU did not react to the use of 2021 Armenia-made landmines along the Lachin road which has resulted in 282 Azerbaijani

casualties from landmine explosions. All of this raises concerns about double standards and a biased approach when it comes to how the EU views Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Besides, while the declared goal of the mission is to create a peaceful atmosphere for normalization efforts, the decision-making process excluded Azerbaijan, which is one of the main stakeholders in the process. This could have a detrimental effect on the EU facilitated track of Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations, which have already been hindered by Russian involvement. It is clear that this contradiction could have serious consequences.

In general, it is absurd for Armenia to rely on international law and rules, or to seek intervention from international organizations, after Azerbaijan regained control of its territories following occupation. This is because it was the Armenian side that violated international law by engaging in military aggression against the internationally recognized territories of Azerbaijan, resulting in mass killings, destruction of cities and villages, ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijanis, forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, and non-compliance with four United Nations Security Council resolutions. Armenia's claim that about its good faith participation in negotiations on three tracks – reopening of all communications, delimitation, and signing of a peace treaty) – initiated by Azerbaijan, is also false. After Azerbaijan presented its proposals for peace, the Armenian side failed to respond for several months, made no progress, and constantly obstructed the process with various excuses.

Baku is concerned that the EU monitoring mission may be used by Armenia to evade its responsibilities under the trilateral statement

of November 10, 2020. Armenia has failed to implement several agreements made in this statement, including the reopening of transportation routes, providing a land passage between western Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, and withdrawing armed forces from Azerbaijani territories. Armenia may benefit from the mission, given the protection it receives from some EU countries, such as France, even when it violates international law. Armenia believes that no matter what it does France and other EU countries will always have Yerevan's back. In this vein, the civilian mission approved by the Council might be seen by Yerevan as a tacit approval of and a show of support by the EU of Armenia's refusal to fulfil its obligations and stall the normalization process.

The EU's growing presence in the South Caucasus is a significant development for the region, as it allows the countries to confidently counter threats to their national security. The deployment of the EU mission in the region, following Georgia, demonstrates the EU's growing engagement with the South Caucasus. However, the EU must consider its impact on the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. Positive outcomes can only be achieved through meaningful negotiations and the implementation of previously reached agreements, including those on transportation routes.

Resuming EU-mediated talks between Baku and Yerevan and reactivating efforts to sign a peace treaty would help reduce tensions in the region and create a more favorable environment for peace and reconciliation. However, without settling the current crisis in Karabakh created by the installation of a Russian oligarch as the de-facto leader of the separatist regime, complete de-escalation is

unlikely. The EU has limited instruments and leverage to address this crisis, even after the deployment of a long-term monitoring mission to the Armenia-Azerbaijan border.

IV. Azerbaijan and Hungary work to deepen strategic partnership

Azerbaijan and Hungary have raised the cooperation between the two countries to the level of a "priority strategic partnership", Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban announced in Budapest on January 30, after the meeting with President Ilham Aliyev, as the latter arrived in Hungary for an official visit. Following the expanded meeting, President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Viktor Orban, signed a Joint Declaration on enhanced strategic partnership between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Hungary. Azerbaijan and Hungary also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on natural gas cooperation. This MoU was signed by Mikayil Jabbarov, Minister of Economy of Azerbaijan and Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has also held a one-on-one and expanded meetings with President of Hungary Katalin Novák in Budapest. "All the members of delegation have my instructions to be permanently in touch with their colleagues in order to address important issues of bilateral agenda," President Ilham Aliyev said in an expanded meeting with President Novák in Budapest. "Of course, energy is on top of our agenda. And today we will sign an important MoU, which, I think, is a very important step, because this is the first document which will be signed in order to start operation in the area of gas supply," the president underlined.

Moreover, Azerbaijan and Hungary signed other documents designed to broaden cooperation and enhance strategic partnership between the two countries. Aydin Karimov, President's special representative in the Shusha district and Gyula Porga, Mayor of the city of Veszprém have signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on establishment of friendly ties between the city of Shusha of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the city of Veszprém of Hungary, and cooperation in culture, tourism, urban development, science, economy and other fields of public life". Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan and Péter Sziijártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary have signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in plant quarantine and plant protection between the Food Safety Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Ministry of Agriculture of Hungary". Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan and Péter Sziijártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary have signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of migration between the State Migration Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan and National Directorate-General for Aliens Policing of Hungary". Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan and Péter Sziijártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary have signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in space studies and space activities for peaceful purposes between the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary". Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan and Péter Sziijártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary have signed a "Protocol on

cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary".

"The meetings held between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Hungary are always of exceptional importance. Mr. President and I have been working together for more than ten years. However, this is not just a meeting of friends. Today, discussions were held on strategic issues. Our strategic cooperation has been raised to the next level, and this cooperation has been expanded. It is because both countries are well aware and clearly see that not only Europe but other regions of the world are facing threats." Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in a joint press statement with President İlham Aliyev in Budapest.

"The current environment in international relations is more dangerous than it was before. The war in our neighborhood and the sanctions imposed by Brussels have created a perilous situation for Hungary, our energy security, and the energy security of Europe has entered a sensitive period. These new conditions have immediately enhanced Azerbaijan's importance, and this country's significance has leaped forward. Azerbaijan has always been our friend, and now it is a strategic partner for the whole of Europe," Prime Minister Orbán underscored.

"Hungary made a very important decision in 2010. We looked around the world to determine where we could find strategic partners. We were looking for a strong friendship, not just financial interests. Because NATO, the European Union – these are wonderful things. But they have already lost their beauty," said Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán at an official dinner, which was hosted in honor of President of Azerbaijan

Ilham Aliyev in Budapest. “We said in 2010 that we could not rely on ourselves alone. We made this decision to go towards Azerbaijan. My friendship with President Aliyev and the First Lady coincides with that time, and I sincerely want to greet the First Lady too. According to Hungarian historians, during our long journey from the eastern side of the European mountains, we spent some time in the territory of contemporary Azerbaijan. That is why we are grateful to President Aliyev for supporting Hungary's accession to the Organization of Turkic States as an observer member. Because there is a cultural proximity between our two countries. It is not so obvious because we became Christians at a certain time, but Azerbaijan was able to preserve its Muslim identity,” PM Viktor Orban emphasized.

“Azerbaijan borders on Iran in the south and on Russia in the north. Hungary borders on Germany to the west and on Russia to the east. We are past that. We are aware of the situation. We know how difficult it is to manage people in such a complicated situation. This has helped us a lot in strengthening our friendship,” said Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban at an official dinner. “We understand each other in foreign policy. I have learned so much from President Aliyev in the last 10 years in how to lead the country so well in a very complex environment. Unfortunately, I couldn't learn everything he knows. Because we are on the radical side, whereas he is a politician known for his more moderate views. I need to learn from him how to become more successful in the international arena in a moderate way,” PM Viktor Orban pointed out.

“The friendly relations between our countries are of great importance both for our countries

and, at the same time, for the Eurasian continent. The Joint Declaration on the Deepening of Strategic Partnership, signed today, is further evidence of our strategic partnership. It is the second signed document on strategic partnership, showing again that Hungary and Azerbaijan are true friends and strategic partners,” President Ilham Aliyev noted in a joint press statement with Prime Minister Orban.

“Our successful policies and joint steps in recent years have created a strong foundation for cooperation in the energy field today. The Prime Minister has recalled that significant work was done on the NABUCCO project. However, the NABUCCO project was not implemented because the financial sources had yet to be identified. Still, Azerbaijan worked hard to get its gas resources to European markets, and the Southern Gas Corridor was commissioned two years ago. It is a modern energy infrastructure, its length is 3,500 kilometers, and Azerbaijan has been delivering its natural gas resources to the European Union for two years. According to the document we signed with the European Commission last year, we plan to double our gas supply, perhaps even more than double. The resources to do that are available, as are the political will and contacts with our partners. I am delighted that we have revived the NABUCCO project, which was once consigned to history. Through interconnectors, Azerbaijani gas will be delivered to Bulgaria, then to Romania, then to Hungary, and after Hungary to other European countries. We have also discussed this. Hungary is not only a consumer of Azerbaijani gas but will also act as a transit country for Azerbaijani gas to other European countries,” President Ilham Aliyev added.

“The recently discovered tremendous green energy potential has also enhanced the importance of Azerbaijan. Of course, projects related to green energy and the already implemented ones will bring us closer to Europe. As my dear friend has mentioned, according to the agreement signed last month, Azerbaijan will deliver its green energy to Europe, and these issues were discussed again today. The countries involved in this project – Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary and Romania – will gather for the first steering committee meeting in Baku in a few days and start working on the concept of future activities. This is a project that requires a lot of investment. The generation of green energy, its transmission and delivery to the market, and also the laying of a cable under the Black Sea – all these projects require major financial resources. At the same time, they require very strict coordination. Therefore, we will take the first step at the meeting to be held in Baku on February 3. So the energy security of the European continent will be ensured in a more complete and comprehensive manner,” President Ilham Aliyev underscored.

President Ilham Aliyev noted that “although much of our cooperation is focused on energy issues, it is not limited to that. At the same time, we are implementing major plans in the field of transport. I can say that we have already started transferring goods from Hungary to Azerbaijan and from Azerbaijan to Hungary through railways. This project has great potential as well. Because after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the volume of goods passing through the territory of Azerbaijan has dramatically increased. Last year alone, the volume of transit cargo increased by 75 percent. The modern transport infrastructure existing in Azerbaijan – be it tankers, ships, a large trade seaport,

railways – all of them are modern and meet all the necessary requirements. Therefore, although Azerbaijan is a landlocked country, I think it can become one of the important transport and logistical centers of Eurasia. There are very good opportunities for cooperation with European countries, especially with Hungary, which is one of our closest partners in the European Union.”

President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that “there are very good results in the field of education. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Prime Minister for the fact that 200 young Azerbaijanis are studying in Hungary with the support of the Hungarian government. This is, of course, a very important event in the direction of personnel capacity building in Azerbaijan. At the same time, it will greatly strengthen our friendship.”

“Another important area for cooperation is demining. In the period since the end of the second Karabakh war, Azerbaijan has been faced with great problems in this field. More than a million mines have to be cleared. In two years after the war, about 300 Azerbaijani citizens have been either killed or seriously injured by mines. Therefore, taking into account Hungary's experience in this field, we are seeing good opportunities for cooperation,” President Ilham Aliyev noted.

“In parallel with this, opinions were also exchanged regarding the activities of Hungarian companies in the liberated lands of Karabakh and Zangezur. In the near future, maybe in a week from now, we will start discussing specific projects. We are very interested in working together in the field of urban development, which Hungary has a great experience in. Because nothing has been left standing in liberated lands on an area of 10,000 square kilometers. All buildings and the

entire infrastructure were destroyed during the occupation, and we will certainly revive these regions. Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur have already been declared green energy zones,” President Ilham Aliyev added.

In conclusion, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “the multifaceted nature of our cooperation is clearly visible. Of course, the energy sector plays a key role now, as it tops the global and European agenda. However, there are other areas of our cooperation. The key thing is that Hungary and Azerbaijan as two friendly and partner countries will continue to deepen bilateral cooperation and will provide each other with support within the framework of the international organizations we are represented in.”

V. Azerbaijan and UAE set to expand bilateral ties

On January 15, President Ilham Aliyev traveled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for a working visit at the invitation of President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Within the framework of President Ilham Aliyev’s working visit to the UAE, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) and the UAE’s Masdar company have signed Agreements on the joint development of offshore wind energy and hydrogen projects with a capacity of 2 GW, as well as joint development of 1 GW solar photovoltaic (PV) and 1 GW onshore wind energy projects.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Azerbaijan have developed a strong partnership over the past 30 years since the establishment of their diplomatic relations. Their cooperation spans across various fields and has been rapidly growing. The bilateral economic ties are thriving, with the trade

turnover between the two countries exhibiting a constant upward trend. In 2021, the trade turnover between Azerbaijan and the UAE was \$50.42 million. However, in the first 11 months of 2022, the trade turnover between the two nations amounted to \$94.62 million, resulting in a foreign trade surplus of \$36.6 million. Tourism links between the two countries are also expanding. In 2021, around 17,000 UAE citizens visited Azerbaijan, and the number has more than doubled in 2022.

The Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Economic, Trade, and Technical Cooperation, established by the governments of Azerbaijan and the UAE, plays a crucial role in strengthening their collaboration. To date, eight meetings have taken place, with the most recent one being held in Dubai in November 2021. The final protocol signed at the end of the eighth meeting outlines further cooperation in areas such as bilateral economic relations, trade, green energy, tourism, healthcare, innovation, and investment, among others. It also calls for the creation of a Business Council and working groups to promote mutual investment and business ties between small and medium-sized enterprises. In 2017, a Trade Representative Office of Azerbaijan was established in Dubai, and in 2019, the Azerbaijan Trading House was set up to organize the sales of local products in the UAE and the Persian Gulf countries and promote the "Made in Azerbaijan" brand. Currently, 360 commercial organizations with UAE investments are registered in Azerbaijan, operating in various sectors including agriculture, construction, industry, services, trade, and transportation.

One of the most notable projects between Azerbaijan and the UAE is the construction of a 230 MW Garadagh solar power plant by

Masdar. The investment Agreement, Energy Purchase Agreement, and Contract for connection to the transmission network were signed between the relevant structures of Azerbaijan and the Arab company in April 2021. The plant is estimated to produce 500 million kWh of electricity annually, saving 110 million cubic meters of natural gas, preventing more than 200,000 tons of CO2 emissions, and providing electricity to 110,000 homes. The total cost of the project is estimated at \$200 million, and it will be entirely funded by foreign investments. The foundation stone of the Garadagh solar power plant was laid on March 15, 2022, in Baku.

During the visit, President Ilham Aliyev met with the President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in Abu Dhabi. President Aliyev expressed his gratitude for the invitation and praised the UAE's support for Azerbaijan in the discussions on the South Caucasus region at the UN Security Council, describing it as a demonstration of friendship and brotherhood. The Head of States emphasized that both Azerbaijan and the UAE are peace-loving nations, underscoring their commitment to promoting peace, stability, and security in the region. During the meeting, the leaders noted the close cooperation between Azerbaijan and the UAE in various fields such as politics, economics, security, and others, and emphasized the significance of strengthening these relationships. They also highlighted the importance of reciprocal visits of delegations from both countries at various levels, as per the political guidance set forth by the heads of state. President Ilham Aliyev praised the UAE's achievements and technological advancements under the leadership of President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and extended his congratulations. In

return, President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan congratulated Azerbaijan on its successes and victories under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev. President Ilham Aliyev extended an invitation to President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to visit Azerbaijan.

President Ilham Aliyev also attended the official opening ceremony of Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week. Addressing the opening ceremony, President Ilham Aliyev noted that "MASDAR and Azerbaijan's national energy company SOCAR signed an agreement to develop four gigawatts of wind and solar power plants in Azerbaijan. It is only a short-term project, and mid-term projects will increase the volume to 10 gigawatts. And this is absolutely doable, and we have a roadmap for that. This project alone, in cooperation with MASDAR, will transform Azerbaijan into a significant source of green energy exports," adding that "in total, MoUs and agreements signed by Azerbaijan with international energy companies will allow us to produce up to 22 gigawatts of wind and solar energy. And, of course, for that purpose, we need export routes, as I already mentioned. And just last month, 17th of December, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary and Romania signed an agreement to build a Black Sea sea-belt electric cable from the Black Sea coast of Georgia to the Black Sea coast of Romania. And this agreement was witnessed by the President of the European Commission. We plan to build a cable that will transport green energy from Azerbaijan at the level of four gigawatts. But that will not be enough. That is only what has already been agreed upon. Our plans are much broader. The investment climate in Azerbaijan is very positive, and we accumulated considerable investments in the oil and gas sector. But now our target is renewables."

Azerbaijan's Energy Minister, Parviz Shahbazov, expressed his gratitude for the partnership with the Masdar Company of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as he met with UAE Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, Suhail Mohamed Al Mazrouei, during the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week. Suhail Mohamed Al Mazroui stressed the importance of international cooperation in the green energy sector and expressed his country's commitment to its energy partnership with Azerbaijan within the framework of brotherhood. He expressed support for joint mega projects in the field. Minister Shahbazov highlighted the strong relationship between Azerbaijan and the UAE, with President Ilham Aliyev's participation in the sustainability week and meeting with the UAE President serving as testament to their high-level ties. Energy is a crucial aspect of the collaboration between the two nations, with Azerbaijan prioritizing the production of renewable energy, its integration into the national energy network, and transportation to new European markets. The minister emphasized that Masdar is a key and reliable partner in these endeavors. "Currently, the main priority of Azerbaijan is to produce electricity and hydrogen from renewable energy sources, integrate them into the country's energy network, transport them to new European markets, and create the necessary infrastructure. Masdar is our important and reliable partner in implementing this multifaceted activity," Minister Shahbazov underscored.

VI. Azerbaijan takes Armenia to the International Court of Justice

On January 23, the Government of Azerbaijan filed its Memorial with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in connection with its legal

proceedings against Armenia under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The Memorial is based on extensive evidence, spanning thousands of pages, documenting the injustices faced by Azerbaijanis over nearly three decades. It provides a comprehensive account of the Azerbaijani citizens who were killed, displaced, and harmed as a result of Armenia's campaign of ethnic cleansing. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, "Armenia's invasion and illegal occupation of territories internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan was accompanied by a conscious and deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing. This practice, which continued until 2020, aimed to create an ethnically pure Armenian settlement on Azerbaijan's territory through destruction, looting and exploitation of Azerbaijani districts." Azerbaijan conducted an extensive investigation in the newly-liberated territories following the 44-Day War. The findings reveal the catastrophic consequences of Armenia's actions, including the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, displacement of communities, destruction of cultural heritage, and severe damage to the environment.

"Armenia's ethnic discrimination policy and practice, as well as illegal occupation for almost thirty years, prevented all Azerbaijani citizens to return to their homes in Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. To this day, hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani IDPs still cannot return to their former homes. Entire towns, such as Fuzuli, Aghdam, Jabrayil, Gubadli, Zangilan, Kalbajar were destroyed as part of Armenia's occupation and "scorched earth" policy when it retreated from the then-occupied territories following the war in 2020. 95% of all buildings located in Azerbaijan's Karabakh region were razed to the ground

since Armenia's occupation in 1991," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted.

Armenia's discriminatory policy involved the indiscriminate targeting of civilian populations and settlements with explosive devices and landmines. This has resulted in 282 Azerbaijanis losing their lives or suffering serious injuries from mine explosions since the conclusion of the 44-day Patriotic War. Landmines continue to pose a major obstacle to the return of Azerbaijani refugees and symbolize the lasting impact of Armenia's disregard for human life and well-being.

"Based on the extensive evidence presented, Azerbaijan has requested that the Court declare Armenia responsible for wholesale violations of the human rights of Azerbaijanis, including ethnic cleansing through unlawful killing, torture, destruction, dispossession, cultural erasure, the promotion of hatred against Azerbaijanis, failure to promote tolerance of Azerbaijanis among the Armenian population, and state sponsorship of armed hate groups in Armenia," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan noted.

Additionally, Azerbaijan has asked the Court to urge Armenia to disclose all information about missing Azerbaijanis, restore all illegally taken property and land to Azerbaijanis, cease the promotion of hatred and state support for armed hate groups, and ultimately apologize and take responsibility for thirty years of human rights abuses.

In response to Armenia's ongoing and intentional violations of Azerbaijanis' human rights, Azerbaijan has also submitted a second request to the International Court of Justice, to take urgent measures in the framework of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

Azerbaijan requested that the ICJ "order Armenia to immediately take all necessary steps to enable the prompt, safe, and effective demining of regions to which Azerbaijani civilians will return, and cease its efforts to target civilian areas with landmines and other explosives, as well as the use of the Lachin road for this purpose."

Armenia has been committing serious violations of the Trilateral Statement by engaging in continued military provocations. Since August 2022, over 2,700 landmines produced in Armenia in 2021 have been discovered in Azerbaijan, evidence shows that these landmines were planted after Armenia agreed to cease hostilities, withdraw its forces from Azerbaijan, and allow the return of Azerbaijani displaced persons to the liberated territories as per the Trilateral Statement. A significant number of these landmines were found in civilian areas where Azerbaijanis are expected to return. Furthermore, Armenia has been openly using the humanitarian Lachin road to transport these landmines and other weaponry.

The use of landmines in civilian areas is a provocative act that puts the lives of innocent civilians at risk and undermines the peace agreement that Azerbaijan is determined to maintain. Just recently, seven Azerbaijanis, including four civilians engaged in reconstruction work, were injured in a landmine blast in the Kalbajar District, and tragically, one Azerbaijani was killed.

"New evidences exist on Armenia's continuing planting of landmines and placing booby-traps in the houses on the territory of Azerbaijan since 2021. These landmines and booby traps that have been planted in or near civilian settlements from which Azerbaijanis were forced to flee over 30 years ago as a result of

Armenia's illegal occupation prevent displaced families and communities from returning to their homes," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan noted in its press release.

Azerbaijan launches a landmark case against Armenia for environmental destruction

On January 18, Azerbaijan initiated the first inter-state arbitration under the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats. This landmark case seeks to hold Armenia accountable for the significant damage it has inflicted on Azerbaijan's environment and biodiversity during its illegal occupation of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories for nearly thirty years. After liberating its territories in 2020, Azerbaijan gathered evidence of Armenia's destruction of the environment during its illegal occupation. These activities caused significant harm to the region's natural habitats, species, depleted its natural resources, and led to a loss of biodiversity. "Armenia's widespread deforestation, unsustainable logging, and pollution through significant construction and mining in areas that were protected nature reserves prior to occupation has put over 500 wildlife species at risk in Azerbaijan," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan noted in its press release.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) reported in 2022 that "special and valuable forests" in the areas of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenia were not spared from destruction. Visual evidence reveals the devastating scale of deforestation, including the destruction of habitats for the construction of the Damirli-1 mine, the Galacha hydropower plant in Lachin, and the Chardaghli mine. Armenia's actions have resulted in excessive levels of river pollution,

including transboundary rivers that flow from Armenia into Azerbaijan. The UNEP also reported in 2022 that Armenia's mining activities in the region led to "chemical pollution of water, soil, and biota" in river habitats, resulting in hundreds of fish found dead in the Okhchuchay River and endangering several protected fish and amphibian species.

Azerbaijan's interstate legal action notes that "Armenia has violated its legal obligations under the Bern Convention to maintain populations of all wild flora and fauna, especially in the area of ensuring conservation, restoration and improvements to the habitats of wild flora and fauna, among others," adding that "[i]n keeping with the United Nations' Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, Azerbaijan calls on the international community to condemn Armenia's appalling destruction during the occupation of one of the world's most rich and biodiverse ecologies. Within the framework of arbitration, Azerbaijan demands to order Armenia to cease all ongoing violations of the Bern Convention, and pay full reparation for its environmental destruction in the formerly occupied territories."

The legal action taken by Azerbaijan against Armenia under the Bern Convention is a significant development. Azerbaijan argues that Armenia violated its legal obligations under the Convention by causing harm to the habitats of wild flora and fauna and by not ensuring their conservation, restoration, and improvement. Azerbaijan is calling for the international community to hold Armenia accountable for its destruction of one of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems during the occupation of Azerbaijan's territories. Through the arbitration process, Azerbaijan is seeking to have Armenia cease all ongoing violations of

the Bern Convention and pay full reparation for the environmental destruction in the former occupied territories.