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I. Key takeaways from President Ilham Aliyev's recent interviews and speeches

In his address to the 76th session of the UN General Assembly on September 23, President Ilham Aliyev spoke about the 44-Day Patriotic War, the first anniversary of which was marked in Azerbaijan on September 27. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that during 44 days, armed forces of Armenia heavily shelled districts and cities situated both along and far away from the frontline. One of missiles was intercepted by Azerbaijani Air Defense Forces in Khizi, close to Baku, which shows that the capital city Baku was also target of Armenian missile attack. Armenia was using ballistic missiles, like Scud and Iskander-M, as well as forbidden white phosphorus and cluster munitions. These war crimes of Armenia resulted in more than 100 civilians, including 11 children being killed, more than 450 wounded.

President Ilham Aliyev reiterated that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was over and that there was no administrative territorial unit called Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan any more, calling for all the UN Member States and the UN Secretariat to avoid using that legally non-existing, politically biased and manipulative term while referring to territories of Azerbaijan. The president also noted that Armenia contaminated Karabakh with landmines, delaying Baku's reconstruction efforts, and called on the international community to exert pressure on Yerevan to renounce aggressive policy and embrace peaceful co-existence in the region by ending the conflict and turning a new page in the South Caucasus.

"As we have left the conflict behind, large-scale construction work is carried out in the liberated territories. Azerbaijan is building new

cities and towns from the scratch by applying the modern urban planning and utilizing the concepts of "smart city" and "smart village," the president said, adding that "all this work is being conducted with Azerbaijan's own financial resources. To that end, \$1.3 billion has been allocated from the state budget only this year."

President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that "the main challenge is the vast presence of landmines planted by Armenia in the liberated territories. Since the signing of the capitulation act by Armenia on 10 November 2020, around 30 Azerbaijani citizens, including 2 journalists were killed and around 130 citizens were wounded. Azerbaijan is among the most heavily mined countries in the world. It slows down the reconstruction process in the liberated territories and return of internally displaced persons to their homes," adding that "Armenia refuses to release accurate maps of minefields. The accuracy level of the maps for three regions which Armenia had to provide is only 25 percent. The international community must force Armenia to provide us with accurate mine maps of all liberated territories."

President Ilham Aliyev underscored that since the conflict is over, Azerbaijan is ready to launch the border delimitation and demarcation process between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and to start negotiations on peace agreement with Armenia, based on mutual recognition of sovereignty and territorial integrity of each other. Noting that "such an agreement would turn our region into the region of peace and cooperation," the president also emphasized that "we have not yet seen any positive reaction from Armenia regarding our proposal".

President Ilham Aliyev noted that Azerbaijan is actively involved in building regional

connectivity projects such as East-West, North-South, North-West transportation corridors, Baku International Trade Seaport with cargo handling capacity of 15 million tons per year, which can be increased up to 25 million tons per year if needed. The goal is to become one of Eurasia's primary and reliable transport and logistics hubs. In this context, the Zangazur corridor connecting mainland Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Turkey could create new opportunities for the South Caucasus.

The president also noted that Baku ratified the Paris Climate Agreement, with a voluntary commitment to achieve a 35 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. The target is to increase the share of the renewables in the total energy capacity of Azerbaijan from 17 percent to 30 percent by 2030. In the next 3-4 years, Azerbaijan is planning to build three wind and solar power plants with total capacity of over 700 megawatts. In order to achieve, investment agreements with three major international energy companies have already been signed. President Ilham Aliyev also noted that recently liberated Karabakh and Eastern Zangazur have been declared Green Energy Zone. The liberated territories of Azerbaijan have the proven potential of 7200 megawatts of solar energy and 2000 megawatts of wind energy.

“Azerbaijan has created a new reality in the Southern Caucasus region which has to be taken into account by all. Armenia has to make a choice between regional cooperation and illegal and baseless territorial claims against its neighbors. The international community should also play its positive role in this regard and urge Armenia to realize that peace has no alternative. Any acts directly or indirectly supporting revanchism and militarization in Armenia must be ceased,” President Ilham

Aliyev said in his address to the UN General Assembly.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice, accusing Armenia of abusing the rights of Azerbaijanis. Azerbaijan instituted proceedings against Armenia before the International Court of Justice concerning the interpretation and application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD). In its application, Azerbaijan said that “Armenia has engaged and is continuing to engage in a series of discriminatory acts against Azerbaijanis on the basis of their 'national or ethnic' origin within the meaning of CERD”.

On September 28, President Ilham Aliyev was interviewed by the French France 24 TV channel, in which the president made remarks ranging from Baku's readiness to sign a comprehensive peace deal with Yerevan after mutual recognition of the territorial integrity of the two countries to considering the Karabakh Armenians as fully-fledged citizens of Azerbaijan like all law-abiding Azerbaijanis.

Asked whether the first meeting between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenian in New York, on the sidelines of the UN GA session, after the 44-Day War meant that “dialogue is starting between both sides and that there is hope for peace”, President Ilham Aliyev said: “I want to hope that this is exactly the case, because Azerbaijan already on several occasions publicly expressed its readiness to establish dialogue with Armenia, not only establish dialogue, but actually start working on the future peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The war is over. The conflict has been resolved, so we need to engage in a new activity in the region, in order to make the region more predictable, stable and safe. The meeting of the foreign

ministers of both countries is a good indicator of these endeavors. I hope that it will not be the only one meeting, but it will be a beginning of the new process, process of normalization of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia and process which will give and can give a new dimension to a broad cooperation in the region of Southern Caucasus”.

President Ilham Aliyev said that he was ready to meet Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, if such a meeting was organized by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs. “If the Minsk Group co-chairs suggest such a meeting, of course, we will not be against it,” the president said. President Ilham Aliyev also reiterated that Azerbaijan will respond unequivocally if it sees any sign of revanchism or threat to Azerbaijan and its territorial integrity from Armenia, adding that it is time for Armenia to let go of revanchism and to look to the future.

President Ilham Aliyev also denied having any territorial claims to Armenia, explaining that his comments to this end were about the historical truth, adding that in 1920, the Soviet government separated integral part of Azerbaijan, Zangazur, and handed it over to Armenia. “In my statements you will never find any sign of territorial claims. What I was talking about, I was talking about historical truth and it’s a historical fact that in 1920 the Soviet government decided and did it actually, they separated integral part of Azerbaijan - Zangazur and adjusted it to Armenia. It was 1920, 101 years ago. Talking about our historical lands, I didn’t mean that we have territorial claims. You will never find in any of my speeches words like that. But at the same time we, as every other nation should know our history, our new generation should know its history, ancient history, and which territories we were living on and how to go back. And I am sure that we will go back but we will go back as I said many times not on tanks.

We will go back by cars, by trains, you know on foot. When situation normalizes, when peace agreement is achieved why shouldn’t we go back? It’s our legitimate right,” the president said.

President Ilham Aliyev added that “Armenia has territorial claims against Azerbaijan. They still claim that Nagorno-Karabakh, as they call it, do not belong to us. They still claim that either it belongs to Armenia, or it is kind of an independent entity. But there is no Nagorno-Karabakh on the political and geographic map of Azerbaijan. These kind of entity does not exist. Therefore, Armenia in the first place should withdraw any territorial claims against Azerbaijan, behave itself as a good neighbor and we will respond adequately.”

Responding to claims that the problem remains unresolved, the president advised the countries, who say it is not resolved, to think about how they can provide a place on their own territory to settle Armenians and to create a second Armenian state on their own territory. “Why should they think that there should be a second Armenian state on the territory of Azerbaijan without any legal, political, and historical grounds. When I say the conflict is resolved, that is my position, and I defend this position. The reality on the ground shows that this position is correct... But now, when the conflict is over, they start talking about autonomy, which is not on our agenda today. Armenians, who live in Karabakh, in the area now under the responsibility of Russian peacekeepers, are citizens of Azerbaijan like any other representatives of different ethnic groups, which live in our country,” President Ilham Aliyev said.

Responding to a question about France's role as a mediator, the president mentioned multifaceted relations with Paris and stressed

that “during the war, frankly speaking, France was not behaving as an honest broker. France took sides. It took the side of Armenia, openly accusing Azerbaijan and demonstrating a one-sided approach in its statements and actions,” adding that “we received positive signals from Paris about our future relations, and we positively respond to these signals. There have been contacts on different levels, including the contact recently between foreign ministers of both countries. Azerbaijan has always been open to cooperation. France is one of the leading countries in the world, and we want to have normal relations. After one year has passed since the beginning of the war, I think now it’s time to have a very realistic approach to the region. What we want to achieve? And I am sure France wants peace, stability, security in the region, as we want, as hopefully Armenia wants, and we need to work on that. We need to concentrate on that, and not to go back to what happened during one year. As far as we are concerned, we are not going to exploit these very unpleasant developments. We want to turn the page.”

In his interview with Turkish Anadolu Agency on September 28, President Ilham Aliyev stipulated once again that opening of “Zangazur corridor” is a condition for starting normalization of ties with Armenia. President Ilham Aliyev pointed out that Armenia assumed this obligation when it signed the November 10 Statement. “Armenia is flagrantly violating the provisions of the 10 November Statement. We are still showing restraint, but our patience is not infinite. The second Karabakh war showed exactly what happens when our patience runs out. Therefore, we are giving the Armenian leadership a chance to fulfill all the provisions of the Statement signed on 10 November and act responsibly,” the president added. President Ilham Aliyev said that Azerbaijan

would complete the construction of its part of the “Zangazur corridor” within the next two years, adding that the section of the transport link passing through Armenian territory was only 40 km. “This can be built in a year or a year and a half. So we are waiting for that,” the president added.

The president reiterated once again that the Nagorno-Karabakh problem was over and that the OSCE Minsk Group should be looking for new ways of working. The group should assist Armenia and Azerbaijan in confidence-building measures, opening of transport corridors, settling their relations and signing a peace treaty, the president said, adding that the Minsk Group had put forward no proposals over nearly one year since the end of the 44-Day War. The president reiterated that there could be no status for a nonexistent entity. The president also said that Baku was ready to involve Armenians living in Karabakh in Azerbaijan’s reconstruction projects in liberated areas. “There are no jobs there, they live in the environment of unemployment, poverty and hopelessness. We have a positive approach to this, but the legal side of this matter must be fully observed. As I said, and I want to repeat, that we consider the Armenians living there our citizens. They live and have always lived on Azerbaijani soil. Karabakh has always been Azerbaijan – both in Soviet times and before that. During the occupation, it was also Azerbaijan. We consider them citizens of Azerbaijan, they simply need to accept this and save their loved ones from Armenian propaganda. They should build their future, the future of their children. We will be ready to involve them in this work,” the president said. President Ilham Aliyev said that he hoped that Armenians living in Karabakh would understand that their future prosperity was tied up with Azerbaijan.

President Ilham Aliyev also said that Azerbaijan was positive about prospects of normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia. But the president said that Armenia had rejected the 3+3 platform (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia plus Iran, Turkey, Russia) suggested by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. “While opposing this, Armenia declares that it wants the normalization of relations with Turkey. If you are interested in normalization, you should, first of all, respond to this proposal positively. Otherwise, a contradiction arises here again, it is unclear. If Armenia’s official statements are consistent with its policies for once, then, of course, it will become easier to analyze. Besides, you are well aware that there is a territorial claim against Turkey in the Constitution of Armenia. They should abandon that. They need to revise and re-adopt their constitution,” the president noted.

II. Azerbaijan is upbeat about Russian peacekeepers despite issues

In his interview with Turkish Anadolu Agency on September 27, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “the activities of the Russian peacekeeping forces can be assessed positively,” adding that “of course, we do have certain dissatisfaction and claims – first of all, in connection with the illegal presence of foreign citizens in our territory. We have repeatedly raised this issue because Karabakh is our territory, and not a single foreign citizen or a vehicle can enter those areas without our permission. They should seek authorization. I can say that this has not yet been fully resolved, although I can also add that cases of illegal entry of foreign citizens into Karabakh are extremely insignificant. I must note that thanks to our policy and persistence, this process is already being stopped. At the same

time, of course, we would like to see respect for our sovereignty and territorial integrity on a full scale, in full. If Russian officials, high-ranking officials say that Karabakh is Azerbaijani land, then the servicemen on the ground should also discharge their duties in line with those statements.” On the recent news that Russia is starting to arm Armenia again, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “we were told that this statement in the Armenian media did not reflect reality. In other words, the Russian Defense Minister did not make such remarks. That is yet another sordid effort by the Armenian propaganda, because nothing of the kind was said. We were officially informed about the absence of such plans. We received a rather detailed response from the Russian side in connection with the further free arming of the Armenian army. Therefore, such item was removed from the agenda. This testifies to the fact that Armenia does not abandon its dirty deeds. This lie being circulated is first of all a major miscalculation, because if you disseminate words that were not spoken by the Minister of Defense of Russia, it is irresponsible and provocative to say the least. Secondly, we have seen many times during the occupation and afterwards, the Armenian lobby operating in Armenia and Russia constantly tries to do everything to drive a wedge in Russia-Azerbaijan relations. They are engaged in slandering Azerbaijan on a daily basis, trying to create a negative image of Azerbaijan in the Russian media and cast a shadow on Russia-Azerbaijan ties. They believe that in this case some revanchist forces may once again raise their head and start a new war against us. But they are wrong. First, Russia-Azerbaijan relations are at a fairly high level. We openly discuss all issues - at the level of presidents, defense and foreign ministers. We immediately come into contact regarding any matter of concern and solve problems. I can say that there is no topic related to some

pressing issues in Russia-Azerbaijan relations today because these relations are quite positive. Such attempts by the Armenian propaganda will not bring them any success. The Russian side received our concerns over the re-arming of Armenia with understanding.”

In an interview with the Spanish EFE news agency, President Ilham also pointed out that “Russia and Turkey have a joint monitoring center in the district of Aghdam in the Karabakh region. At the same time, Russian peacekeepers are providing peacekeeping operations in the area which is inhabited by the Armenian population. So, new realities already are in place, every country has to take into account these realities. The balance of powers between Azerbaijan and Armenia have been changed many years ago. We knew our potential, we knew Armenian potential. Probably, the Armenian government could not realistically evaluate that they have no chances in front of Azerbaijan, and if they do not liberate the territories peacefully they will have serious complications. Today I think about Turkey and Russia as two neighbors of Azerbaijan, and one of them is a neighbor of Armenia, plays a very important role in the stability, security, and future development. As you probably know, there was recently a meeting between presidents of two countries. Among other issues, they discussed the situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We consider the role of both countries as a very positive stabilizing role and I think this is the bulk of the new regional cooperation configuration.” At the same time, in his recent interview, President Ilham Aliyev said that Armenia continues to send weapons and servicemen to the territories of Azerbaijan where Russian peacekeeping forces are temporarily stationed, pointing out that this cannot continue because it contradicts the

November 10 Trilateral Statement and warning that Azerbaijan will “take preventive measures”.

As Vasif Huseynov, a senior advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (Air Center), pointed out “one major bone of contention between Baku and Moscow stems from the latter’s failure to stop the transfer of Armenian military forces to the Karabakh region, which is partially under temporary control of Russian peacekeepers. Although the trilateral ceasefire deal of November 10, 2020, signed by the leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, envisaged the withdrawal of Armenian troops from the Karabakh region in parallel with the deployment of Russian peacekeepers, Moscow has yet to ensure its implementation,” adding that “another source of tensions between Russia’s peacekeeping mission and Azerbaijan is related to the disguised travels of Iranian vehicles (mainly trucks) to the Karabakh region without the express permission of the Azerbaijani government”.

In a statement on August 11, the Ministry of Defence of Azerbaijan underlined that “the complete withdrawal of the remnants of the Armenian armed forces from the territory of Azerbaijan, where the Russian peacekeeping forces are temporarily deployed, was not ensured, as it is provided for by the trilateral statement signed on November 10, 2020, by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the President of the Russian Federation and the prime minister of Armenia,” adding that “in recent days, Armenia having violated the trilateral statement by moving its armed forces to the territory of Azerbaijan, where Russian peacekeepers are temporarily deployed, is setting up its new posts near Mukhtarkend and Shushakend, as well as in the territories to the east of the administrative boundaries of the Kalbajar and Lachin regions.” The Ministry of

Defence of Azerbaijan also called upon the Russian peacekeepers to “put an end to the deployment of the Armenian armed forces in the territories of the Azerbaijan Republic, where they are temporarily deployed.” The Ministry of Defence underscored that, contrary to the November 10 trilateral statement, Armenian troops continued to remain in the part of Azerbaijan's territories to which Russian peacekeepers are deployed. The statement went on say that the Azerbaijani army is taking adequate measures, and these kinds of cases are not allowed. However, Armenia is purposefully resorting to these kinds of provocations to aggravate the situation. The statement said that this all was taking place against a backdrop of an irresponsible and provocative order by the new Armenian defence minister, Arshak Karapetyan, for the Armenian army to use force against Azerbaijani troops. “All this is happening against the background of irresponsible and provocative order of the new defense minister of Armenia Arshak Karapetyan to the Armenian armed forces to use force by any means. We would like to remind that the Armenian former minister of defense David Tonoyan also spoke out with a provocative military doctrine that he used to call "new wars, new territories." His shameful destiny is well-known,” the statement read. Vasif Huseynov noted that just a day after this statement, on August 12, Russia for the first time blamed Azerbaijan for allegedly violating the ceasefire and carrying out strikes against the Armenian Armed Forces in Karabakh.

On September 12, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan sent letters to the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation and the Command of Peacekeeping Forces concerning the illegal entry of vehicles belonging to other countries into the territories of Azerbaijan, where Russian peacekeepers are temporarily

stationed. The letters pointed out that “it was noted in the letters that such cases contradict the Joint Statement signed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the President of the Russian Federation and the prime minister of Armenia on November 10, 2020, and asked to prevent them. No individual or legal entities of other countries and their vehicles can enter the territory of Azerbaijan without the agreement of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and such cases are considered to be violation of the law of the Republic of Azerbaijan.”

At the same time, a document published on the Russian government purchases website in early September said that the Russian Defence Ministry had applied for the purchase of services for its military compounds “situated in the Nagorno-Karabakh republic”. The tender announcement is related to the provision of Russian peacekeepers temporarily stationed in the territories of Azerbaijan. On September 4, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan said that it had immediately expressed its protest to the Russian side through diplomatic channels. The ministry said that it had noted that such incorrect information ran counter to the spirit of friendly and cooperation relations between the two countries. “We would like to note that the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry immediately conveyed its protest to Russia through diplomatic channels. It was brought to the attention of the opposite side that such false information does not correspond to the spirit of friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries,” the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Leyla Abdullayeva Abdullayeva said, adding that the Russian side noted that “the issue is a technical error” and “appropriate steps will be taken to eliminate it and such issues will be addressed in the future”.

On September 18, in its news bulletin on the activities of the Russian peacekeeping force,

the Russian Defence Ministry said that on September 17, 2021, in the area of the city of Shusha, “three attacks on the positions of the armed formations of Nagorno-Karabakh” were registered, adding that “according to the Armenian side, fire was opened from the positions of the armed forces of the Azerbaijani Republic. As a result of the fire, two servicemen of the Nagorno-Karabakh armed formations were wounded. The command of the peacekeeping contingent is carrying out an investigation with the participation of representatives of both parties.” Commenting on this statement, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan said the Russian Defence Ministry’s report was “surprising and regrettable”. “The statement made by the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation with reference to the Armenian side that two Armenian armed men were wounded in the direction of Shusha on September 17, allegedly as a result of shelling of the Azerbaijan Army Units, is surprising and regrettable,” said Deputy Chief of the Press Service of the Ministry of Defense, Lieutenant Colonel Anar Eyvazov. The Representative of the Ministry of Defense said that Azerbaijani representatives and Russian peacekeepers had investigated the incident. “As a result, it was established that the Azerbaijan Army units did not open fire on the indicated date in this direction. It is not certain that the information studied with the participation of both parties was subsequently presented in a completely different way. The Azerbaijani side continues its efforts to ensure stability in the region and prevent possible provocations in accordance with the legislation of our country, strictly adhering to the provisions of the Joint Statement,” Anar Eyvazov underscored.

In the meantime, Assistant to the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Head of the Department of Foreign Policy Affairs of the Presidential Administration Hikmat Hajiyev

has said that discussions have been going on between Baku and Moscow on “additional legal mechanisms regarding the Russian peacekeepers’ mandate”. Speaking to the BBC on September 5, Hikmat Hajiyev said that so far the trilateral declaration signed on November 10 has defined the political and to some extent legal framework for the activity of Russian peacekeepers. “As for additional agreements and additional legal mechanisms on the mandate of peacekeepers, the parties have had initial contacts and some discussions are still ongoing,” Hikmat Hajiyev said. Hikmat Hajiyev also underlined that the whole of Karabakh was Azerbaijan’s sovereign territory and that peacekeeping forces had been deployed temporarily to a certain part of the region. “All of Karabakh is the sovereign territory of Azerbaijan, the international community recognizes Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, and in accordance with the November 10 statement, peacekeeping forces have been temporarily deployed in a certain part of Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region,” Assistant to the President underscored.

III. Azerbaijan moves to halt illegal cargo deliveries from Iran to Karabakh

On September 15, the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that it detained two Iranian truck drivers illegally crossing into Azerbaijan. This move came after multiple warnings by Azerbaijan about the need to stop unauthorized cargo deliveries to the parts of Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region where Russian peacekeepers are temporarily stationed. On September 12, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan sent letters to the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation and the Command of Peacekeeping Forces concerning

the illegal entry of vehicles belonging to other countries into the territories of Azerbaijan, pointed out that such cases directly contradict the Trilateral Statement signed on November 10, 2020. Between July 11 and August 8, 35 Iranian vehicles (4 trucks and 31 fuel trucks) 70 times entered and exited through the Lachin corridor. Despite multiple warnings by Azerbaijan, the illegal transport of goods from Iran to Karabakh did not stop. In fact, between August 11 and September 10, 58 trucks, for various purposes, entered Khankendi, in particular, with fuels and lubricants.

Touching upon the issue of illegal cargo deliveries from Iran to Karabakh in his interview with Anadolu Agency, President Ilham Aliyev noted that “this is not the first time that Iranian trucks have entered the Karabakh region. It has happened several times during the occupation. These trucks went there on a regular basis, and we are aware of that. But, of course, there was no exact information, as accurate as the latest report. Taking this into account, we expressed our dissatisfaction to the Iranian side through various channels. But this process continued. After the war, the Lachin corridor is being monitored, and the distance from our military positions to the road leading to Khankendi is probably 5-6 meters. We have sufficient technical capabilities along the Lachin corridor, including the vicinity of Shusha and other places. We have cameras and we also use our satellite and UAVs. We saw that trucks keep traveling there even after the war. So I instructed our Presidential Administration to speak to the Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan. We did not want to give this an official coloring, let them talk in a friendly way and explain that this should be stopped. It is disrespectful, it is disrespect for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Therefore it must be stopped. If I am not mistaken, this

conversation took place in July. Then, of course, we began to monitor the situation and by the beginning of each month we collected information on how many trucks have entered and how many have left, what they brought in and took out. We have all the information, including their license plates, and they have been published in the media. But what happened after that? They tried to attach Armenian license plates to Iranian trucks. They committed this falsification in an attempt to deceive us. An extremely incompetent step was taken – a tank truck with a Persian sign but Armenian license plate. I should also note that they attached the same license plates to different cars. So what does such sloppy work testify to? They wanted to continue this business and just disguise themselves. Under such circumstances, of course, at the end of the month we handed in a diplomatic note in an official manner. The Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan was invited to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where a protest was expressed to him and a request made to put an end to this. This took place in mid-August. We hoped this would be stopped. However, from 11 August to 11 September, about 60 trucks from Iran illegally entered Karabakh again. To prevent this, we took action. In other words, our conduct and actions are responsible and based on friendly ties. The first time, we gave a verbal warning, the second time we handed in an official note, and the third time we installed checkpoints – customs, border, and police. Thus, we began to control the road leading to Armenia through the territory of Azerbaijan, after which the entry of trucks into Karabakh was stopped. But it begs the question: was it worth it to bring matters to this point? Today, only 25,000 people live there, in the Karabakh region under the responsibility of the Russian peacekeeping forces. Is this market really so important? Is this trade really so significant that you display

such blatant disrespect for a country you consider friendly and fraternal? Of course, we have used all the means enshrined in international conventions and international law. Some are saying that a duty is being levied now on Iranian trucks now, but this is not the case. Georgian cars and trucks also travel along this road from Iran to Georgia. They also have to pay a duty. Don't we pay a duty when we travel to a foreign country? We do. They are using the territory of Azerbaijan, so aren't they supposed to pay?"

President Ilham Aliyev also described the latest military drills held by Iran in the vicinity of Azerbaijan's borders as "a surprise". Underscoring the fact that every country has a sovereign right to hold military exercise on its own territory, President Ilham Aliyev noted that the question was "why now? why exactly on our border?" "Why no exercises were carried out in this region during the years of occupation? Why weren't any exercises held when the Armenians were in Jabrayil, Zangilan and Fuzuli? Why are they being held after we have liberated our lands and put an end to 30 years of oppression and occupation?" President Ilham Aliyev wondered.

On September 30, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian in his meeting with Azerbaijan's newly appointed Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Iran Ali Alizade emphasized the importance of mutual cooperation between Iran and Azerbaijan. At the same time, according to the official website of the Iranian government, Iranian Foreign Minister expressed "dissatisfaction over the recent inappropriate treatment of the Azeri border guards against Iranian trucks drivers and arresting and offered regret over recent negative remarks by Azerbaijan," adding that "Iran does not tolerate the presence and activities of the Zionist regime

against its national security and will take any necessary action in this regard."

Azerbaijan has never allowed itself to interfere in domestic affairs of other states, including Iran. Commenting on the relations with Iran, Head of the Press Service Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan Leyla Abdullayeva said that "we would like to emphasize that, as Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said in an interview with a local television channel, relations between our peoples are at the highest level. Relations between Azerbaijan and Iran are based on strong historical ties, friendship and cooperation." At the same time, Leyla Abdullayeva emphasized that "we do not accept the allegations about the presence of any third forces near the Azerbaijan-Iran border, as well as the provocative attempts of these forces, because these views have no basis. In general, the existence of any forces in the territory of Azerbaijan, including terrorist elements, that could pose a threat to our state or neighboring countries, cannot even be a subject of discussion. Unfortunately, during the 44-day war, some parties made such completely baseless claims. We stated then, and we reiterate now, that such allegations are baseless and no evidence has been presented to the Azerbaijani side so far." Touching upon the issue of Armenian occupation and the violation of Azerbaijan's international borders for three decades, the Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed out that "more than 130 km of our border with Iran has been under Armenian occupation for many years. Unfortunately, over the years, we have not heard such a strong reaction from the friendly Iranian state to the occupation of part of our border."

"In general, Azerbaijan supports the establishment of relations with all countries on

the basis of respect for each other's international borders, which is the firm position of our country. It is known that we, in particular, have stated our readiness to normalize relations with Armenia on the basis of this fundamental principle of international law and to begin negotiations on the delimitation of borders. The process of delimitation of the Azerbaijan-Armenia border is a bilateral issue, and the recent positive signals from the other side give hope for the constructive development of the process," Leyla Abdullayeva added. The Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs underscored that "the Republic of Azerbaijan has always pursued an independent foreign policy based on national interests and has repeatedly proved it with concrete steps over the past 30 years. The development of friendly and good-neighborly relations with neighboring countries is one of the main priorities of our foreign policy, and we are taking continuous steps in this direction." In the end, Leyla Abdullayeva pointed out that "ending the occupation of Azerbaijani territories, the cessation of illegal actions of Armenia in the region, including large-scale stockpiling of weapons, illegal economic and other activities, drug smuggling, training of terrorists, insult and destruction of Islamic religious and cultural monuments and the return of Azerbaijani IDPs to their ancestral lands after 30 years of longing, ensuring stability and security in the region must be in the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

IV. Azerbaijan holds joint military drills with Turkey and Pakistan

Since the outset of 2021, the armed forces of Turkey and Azerbaijan have been conducting regular joint military exercises to facilitate the transformation of the Armed Forces of

Azerbaijan into the Turkish Army model. After the war, President Ilham Aliyev has underscored the government's determination to keep the army's combat readiness high and supply it with the advanced weapon systems to guarantee the country's territorial integrity against all potential challenges. The growing pace of various military drills between the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan and Turkey serves exactly this purpose. President Ilham Aliyev previously noted that the goal of the government is to build a small model of the Turkish army in Azerbaijan, which is one of the strongest armies in the world and second strongest in NATO, adding that "our army should become stronger and more modern, and the model of the Turkish army is the most acceptable model to us, and we will continue working jointly in this direction". At the same time, large-scale modernization and procurement programs is being carried out, including the expansion of the domestic defence sector in the longer run. Azerbaijan will spend 15.5% of its state budget for 2022 on defence and national security matters. On September 30, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan launched a new Command and Control Center of the Land Forces Command which interacts with the Central Command Post of the Ministry of Defense. In its statement, the Ministry of Defense said that the Command and Control Center will ensure "the stable control of the forces and equipment directly subordinated to the Land Forces Command, interoperability with other types of troops, analysis of information received from troops and headquarters and its submission to the higher command," adding that "the operational conditions in each direction are constantly controlled by means of optical-electronic surveillance, interoperability with the forces and equipment of the types of troops is carried out without interruption".

In parallel with acquiring advanced military technologies and building more capable and innovative military, Azerbaijan continues to conduct military exercises with its partners to boost combat capabilities and combat readiness of the troops. In early September, two MiG-29 and two Su-25 fighter jets of the Air Force of Azerbaijan arrived in Turkey's Konya to attend TurAz Falcon - 2021 joint tactical flight exercises. The drills were part of an annual military cooperation plan between Azerbaijan and Turkey which lasted till September 17. On September 6-10, Azerbaijani and Turkish troops also carried out joint tactical live-fire exercises in Azerbaijan's Lachin District, marking the first time Turkish troops carried out military operations in the Azerbaijani territories liberated as a result of the 44-Day War. The main objective of the exercises was to improve interoperability and combat coordination during combat operations, as well as to develop the commanders' military decision-making and unit controlling skills. During the exercises, special attention was paid to improving skills in using modern military equipment in difficult terrain, the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan said. In addition, the "Indestructible Brotherhood-2021" joint live fire tactical exercises were launched in Nakhchivan on September 20. "According to the agreement on military cooperation signed between Azerbaijan and Turkey, the "Indestructible Brotherhood-2021" joint live fire tactical exercises with the participation of motorized infantry, special forces commandos, and various types of troops of both countries has started in Nakhchivan. In accordance with the tradition, a ceremony of exchanging the state flags of the two fraternal countries was held during the exercises, which involved formations and units of the Nakhchivan Garrison Troops and the units of the Turkish Armed Forces," the Ministry of Defense said in

its statement. At the same time, on September 12-20, a joint exercise of commando troops of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Pakistan, codenamed "Three Brothers – 2021", was held for the first time in Azerbaijan. According to the Ministry of Defense, the key objective of the joint drills was to boost "the interoperability of the Special Forces Units of friendly and partner countries during combat operations, prepare for operations in peacetime and wartime, exchange knowledge and experience".

V. Armenian officials continue to stoke up separatism in the territories of Azerbaijan

On September 2, the Armenian Prime Minister, its Foreign Ministry and other senior officials issued statements that serve to promote separatism in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Armenian officials issued "congratulatory messages" to the wannabe separatists on the so-called "independence day", marked on September 2. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan strongly condemned these statements and pointed out that Armenia has been openly making territorial claims against Azerbaijan since the late 1980s. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan pledged to decisively prevent any future attempts to lay territorial claims to Azerbaijan and instigate aggressive separatist trends in the territories of Azerbaijan. In its statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan pointed out that unilateral separation without Azerbaijan's permission was against Soviet laws, which was confirmed at the highest constitutional level at that time. Armenian officials conveniently omit the fact that "independence referendum" held by separatists in Karabakh on December 10, 1991, took place without the participation of the Azerbaijani population of the region and

without the consent of Azerbaijan. Armenian officials also like to ignore the fact of occupation when Karabakh region of Azerbaijan was under Armenian military occupation for almost three decades, during which fundamental rights of about one million Azerbaijanis were violated. In its statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan went on to note that “over the years, we have repeatedly voiced these and other facts, the baseless and destructive position of Armenia, and the decisions of international organizations in our official statements. We have shown strategic patience for decades trying to resolve the conflict through negotiations. As a result of 44-day Patriotic War, which began in response to another military provocation of Armenia, we restored international justice and the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan”. Emphasizing Azerbaijan's restoration of its territorial integrity, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs added that “from now on, attempts to make any territorial claims against Azerbaijan and inflame aggressive separatist tendencies in our territories will be resolutely suppressed and an adequate response will be given to them”. Revanchist statements by the Armenian foreign minister testify that Yerevan does not abandon its policy of aggression against Azerbaijan. By artificially stoking up tensions, Armenia tries to prove that the conflict is not over. Armenia should accept the new reality on the ground and stop deliberately whipping up tensions and increasing provocations in the region.

Azerbaijan has repeatedly declared its commitment to normalizing relations based on the principles of international law, but the revanchist statements and actions of the Armenian side show that Armenia is not yet ready for this. For the past few months, Azerbaijan has been consistently emphasizing

the need for a comprehensive peace treaty with Armenia. “If we do not have a peace agreement with Armenia, it means that there is no peace. There is no peace not only between the two countries but also in the South Caucasus. We need peace and sustainable development, forecasting, zero war risk, we do not need war. We did not need a war before,” President Ilham Aliyev said on June 25 at a meeting with the Romanian, Austrian, Lithuanian foreign ministers and an EU delegation, adding that “I have repeatedly said that we want to move from a post-conflict situation to peaceful development and cooperation in the South Caucasus. Unfortunately, we have never heard anything like this from the Armenian government.” Azerbaijan's position on this issue has been very clear. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been resolved and Baku is ready to move forward in its relations with Armenia by signing a comprehensive peace treaty recognizing territorial integrity of both countries. In his letter to US President Joe Biden on the occasion of US Independence Day in July, President Ilham Aliyev urged the US to facilitate the peace process between Azerbaijan and Armenia, noting that “I think the United States may contribute significantly to forging lasting peace and atmosphere of trust between Azerbaijan and Armenia, based on mutual respect to the territorial integrity, sovereignty and inviolability of borders.” While Azerbaijan is urging the US to play a constructive role in the region, the US Ambassador to Armenia is doing exactly the opposite of what it should do in order to contribute to the peacebuilding process in the region. On September 11, the US Ambassador to Armenia Lynne Tracy told reporters in Yerevan that “the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is not resolved”. “Thirty years of war and tension cannot be resolved overnight. But we understand that there are issues which should

be resolved, and one of them, as I said before, is that we do not consider the status of Nagorno-Karabakh resolved, and therefore we will continue to keep the issue on the agenda of the Minsk Group," the ambassador was quoted as saying. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan called the he ambassador's remarks "unacceptable". "The conflict is a thing of the past, Azerbaijan ensured its territorial integrity and the economic regions of East Zangezur and Karabakh were created by the decree of the President of Azerbaijan dated July 7, 2021. These territories are an integral part of Azerbaijan, and there can be no question of any status," Leyla Abdullayeva, the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said on September 11, adding that "while the further activities of the OSCE Minsk Group are being discussed, such a statement by the representative of the co-chair country undermines the future activities of the Minsk Group".

VI. Azerbaijan sets to make Karabakh an engine of economic growth in the South Caucasus

The Armenian occupation of Karabakh has resulted in a destruction of enormous scale in the region, with most cities and villages razed to the ground and most infrastructure completely dismantled. Aghdam faced the most extreme destruction by Armenian occupiers and was dubbed the "Hiroshima of the Caucasus." After the 44-Day War, Azerbaijan is striving to fully rebuild the liberated territories. Despite the fact that the scale of the devastation makes the economic recovery process extremely difficult, Azerbaijan aims to transform the liberated territories into highly developed and technologically advanced regions within a

short space of time. Immediately after the war, the plan for socio-economic development of the liberated territories was prepared and the reconstruction process was launched. In this vein, the first passenger and cargo test flights were carried out on September 5 to Azerbaijan's newly-built Fuzuli International Airport, which was described by President Ilham Aliyev as "the air gates of Karabakh". The construction of the airport started in January 2021 in the Fuzuli District that Azerbaijan had liberated in the 44-Day War of September-November 2020. Around 1,000 people and 12 Turkish companies have been involved in the construction work which was finished by the end of September. The passenger flight was carried out by state-owned Azerbaijani Airline's largest "Karabakh" Airbus A340-500 plane and delivered journalists to Fuzuli. In addition, one of the largest cargo planes, Boeing 747-400, belonging to the Azerbaijani Silk Road company, also landed at Fuzuli airport today, carrying cargoes to Karabakh by air for the first time. Azerbaijan has also started the construction of an airport in Zangilan District and is planning to build yet another airport in Lachin. At the same time, in September, the Aghdam executive authorities said in a statement that the territory of Aghdam has been completely cleared of mines and unexploded ordnances. "The territory of the city has been completely cleared of mines and improvement work is continuing. Power lines and water supply lines are being laid, roads are being built. Currently, the process of demining is continuing in villages of the district," the statement said.

On July 7, President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on the new division of economic regions in Azerbaijan. According to the decree, the number of economic regions increased from 11 to 14, and the new Karabakh and East Zangazur regions were created. The Karabakh

economic region covers Khankandi city, Aghjabadi, Aghdam, Barda, Fuzuli, Khojali, Khojavand, Susha and Tartar regions. The other, newly created, Eastern Zangazur region includes the liberated Jabrayil, Kalbajar, Gubadli, Lachin, and Zangilan regions. Districts of this new region are located in the eastern part of the Zangezur plateau, surrounded by the Zangezur mountain range and covering a vast territory from Lachin and Kalbajar to Nakhchivan. In the past, they were part of the Zangezur district, created in 1861, and were connected by traditional socio-economic, historical, and cultural ties, which necessitated the need to combine them into one single economic region. The Ministry of Finance of Azerbaijan said that reconstruction and restoration work in lands which Azerbaijan liberated as a result of the 44-Day War would be a priority in state budget spending in the next four years.

According to the UN estimates, the total economic damage of the occupation is around \$53.5 billion. Moreover, because of the occupation, nearly 7000 establishments in Karabakh were closed, which were providing 24% of the grain revenues, 41% of liqueur production, 46% of the potato growth, 18% of the meat production and 34% of the milk production of the economy of Azerbaijan. The previously occupied lands also possess various rich deposits of mineral resources such as gold, copper, mercury, chromite, and lead-zinc, which were illegally exploited by Armenia during the occupation. As Orkhan Baghirov, a leading advisor at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (Air Center), put it, “the creation of the new economic zones will provide an impetus for the restoration and development of the liberated territories following the 44 Day War. Therefore, the new division of economic regions can be considered as an important step in creating a

unified plan for the development of the liberated territories. It is also important in terms of the reintegration of the liberated territories into the Azerbaijani economy, which requires increasing the efficiency of the work on planning the development of economic regions, ensuring efficiency in economic management, and revising the structure of these economic regions”.

A new division of economic regions in Azerbaijan will ensure economic specialization, implementation of effective investment policies and flexible regional management. According to preliminary estimates, the newly created East Zangezur economic region alone will be able to form about 4% of the Azerbaijani economy in the coming years as it has great opportunities in sectors such as industry, agriculture, livestock, and tourism. Although during the occupation, the region’s share of the total GDP of Azerbaijan fell to 0.1%, in the near future it will be possible to produce about \$1.76 billion of agricultural and industrial products in the Jabrayil, Kalbajar, Gubadli, Lachin, and Zangilan districts.

Economic potential of the liberated territories in agriculture, energy, transport, and other sectors demonstrate that their realization and effective management through the new division of the economic regions will significantly contribute to the economic development of Karabakh and the economy of Azerbaijan. Hence, one of the main goals of the restoration of Karabakh is to bring its share in the economy of the country back to pre-occupation levels.

Liberated territories also have a substantial renewable, especially hydro energy potential. About 2,56 billion cubic meters of water, or 25% of Azerbaijan’s local water resources, are formed in Karabakh, which creates

opportunities for the establishment of hydro power plants (HPP). During the 44-Day Patriotic War, Azerbaijan gained control over the 30 HPPs which were operated using the mentioned water resources and destroyed by Armenian occupiers. Many of these power plants have been restored, and restoration work is continuing on others. Karabakh also has a considerable solar and wind energy potential. According to the preliminary estimates of the International Renewable Energy Agency, the liberated areas have more than 4,000 megawatts of solar and up to 500 megawatts of wind energy potential. The Kalbajar and Lachin regions have large wind energy potential, whereas the Zangilan, Jabrayil, and Fizuli regions are rich with solar energy potential.

For the realization of the economic potential of liberated territories, it is also necessary to have a sustainable transport infrastructure. Therefore, one of the main directions of the restoration program for the liberated territories is the establishment of a comprehensive transport infrastructure. The Fuzuli International Airport, the first airport in

Karabakh, has already been built and test flights have been carried out. The runway of this airport spans 3,000 meters in length and 60 meters in width. Foundations for the other two international airports in the Zengilan and Lachin districts of Karabakh were also laid. Along with airports, Azerbaijan has also commenced work on restoring and expanding the network of local highways and railroads in liberated territories. Some highways have already been put into operation. These roads will enable access to Karabakh from the northern, eastern, and southern directions, transforming it into the transportation hub in the region. According to Orkhan Baghirov, “the economic development of the Karabakh and East Zangazur economic regions and their access to the international north-south and east-west transport corridors, as well as the Zangezur corridor, will also transform Karabakh into the economic driver of the entire South Caucasus. As an economic driver, it will become the symbol of regional cooperation instead of the region of the conflict as it was during the Armenian occupation”.