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Azerbaijan's president is betting on his family

Aleksandra Jarosiewicz

On 21 February, Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, nominated his wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, for the newly created position of first vice-president. This position was introduced into Azerbaijan's political system in September 2016 under the constitutional amendments adopted as a result of a referendum. The most important prerogative linked to the function of the first vice-president is the power to act as the head of state in the case of the president's death or constant inability to perform his duties.

Commentary

- The nomination of Mehriban Aliyeva for the first vice-president is a step towards a further strengthening of the political role played by the Pashayev clan from which Mehriban hails. This will strengthen the marginalisation process of the other political and business clans in Azerbaijan, and will lead to increased significance for the 'Family' in the broad meaning of the term (the combined Aliyev and Pashayev clans). One sign of this has been the demotion of Ziya Mammadov who served as the Minister for Transport for many years but lost his office on 14 February. This ended the months-long process of diminishing his political and business position (as part of this process, his son Anar was deprived of the family's business assets). By promoting Mehriban, the president of Azerbaijan is simultaneously laying the foundation upon which he can further build up his dynasty. Ilham took power from his father in 2003, and the constitutional amendments pushed through last September lifted the limitations regarding the president's age, which theoretically opens up the way for Ilham's 20-year old son Heydarto take over this position in the future.
- The decision on the office of vice-president indicates that Aliyev is looking for a way to improve the efficiency of the governance system. The deteriorating economic situation of the country (low oil prices) is leading to falling state revenues. This in turn is producing socio-economic tension (the unprecedented wave of protests seen last year). Lower revenues also mean a reduction of income from graft – the main financial source for members of the political and business elite. This means that the clans linked to the government are competing more strongly with each other (over access to assets). From Aliyev's perspective, maintaining the existing system of co-dependence limits the possibility of effecting major reforms of the economic system, and these are becoming necessary for him (and his family) to remain in power. By promoting his wife, Aliyev shows that he is ready to revise the system of influence currently in place. This is proof

of his strength and at the same time of his limitations – he has no other people he can trust and on whom he can rely in a crisis.

- Despite criticism from opposition circles, the nomination of Mehriban, who is authentically popular among the Azerbaijani public, as Aliyev's *de facto* deputy may result in increasing public support for the president. Prior to her appointment she was a member of Azerbaijan's parliament and the head of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, engaged in a number of humanitarian projects and winning public support. In this context her nomination also needs to be viewed as a move to improve Aliyev's image and that will most likely be accompanied in the coming months by at least technical reforms of the system (for example, expanding the scope of public services provided within the e-government system).