

Azerbaijan–France: a chance for a reset

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On 23 September, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev pardoned French national Martin Ryan, who had been sentenced in March this year to 10 years in prison on espionage charges that included activities related to Azerbaijan's arms production. The release of Ryan and another French national serving a prison sentence in Azerbaijan was the 'price' Paris expected in return for removing Uzbek-Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov from the EU sanctions list, a move Aliyev had repeatedly advocated. According to media reports, France had made its consent to extending EU sanctions on more than 3,000 individuals and entities imposed in connection with Russia's invasion of Ukraine conditional on such a step by Baku. On 22 September, the sanctions were extended for three years.

Ryan's pardon – especially if it is followed by the release of the second French national – may pave the way for a normalisation of relations between Baku and Paris. A restoration of Azerbaijani-French ties would, in turn, remove an obstacle to broader cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU and NATO. A continuing challenge, however, is likely to be Baku's assertive position on domestic affairs. Azerbaijan is unlikely to change its approach to criticism from Western countries concerning its internal political order and human rights, which it regards as unacceptable interference in its domestic affairs.

Commentary

- **Azerbaijani-French relations have been marked by serious tensions for several years, with Baku accusing Paris of supporting Armenian separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh.** Relations deteriorated further over the cases of Martin Ryan, director of the Baku-based company Merkorama LLC, and Anas Derras, who was alleged to have accepted a bribe in return for securing the removal of another oligarch, Farhad Akhmedov, from the EU sanctions list. In December 2023, Azerbaijan expelled two French diplomats, and France took a reciprocal step. In January 2024, the French Senate adopted an almost unanimous resolution calling for sanctions on Azerbaijan. In response, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Azerbaijani parliament recommended retaliatory measures against France and instructed the foreign ministry to take steps towards recognising the independence of several French territories. In mid-May 2024, Paris accused Baku of contributing to unrest in New Caledonia, where separatist Kanaks displayed Azerbaijani flags during the disturbances.
- **Efforts to improve French-Azerbaijani relations have been under way since 2025.** *Paris supported the Washington Agreement* and encouraged Azerbaijan and Armenia to complete the peace process. In October 2025, the two presidents met on the sidelines of

the European Political Community summit in Copenhagen. In April 2026, Azerbaijan reportedly helped evacuate French citizens accused of espionage from Iran. Against this backdrop, a likely Usmanov–Ryan exchange can be seen as another step towards normalising bilateral relations.

- **The release of Derras will be key to a broader improvement in relations between Azerbaijan and France.** The deputy head of SAUR company remains in prison, although his sentence was reduced from 12 to nine years in June this year following a telephone conversation between the French and Azerbaijani presidents. It is unclear why Baku chose not to release both French nationals at the same time. This may, however, reflect a negotiating tactic aimed at signalling Azerbaijan's assertive approach towards France and the EU. The Azerbaijani authorities have repeatedly called on European states to respect the country's sovereignty and its freedom to determine its domestic policies. This stance is likely to persist even if the second French national is released. As a result, relations may remain difficult, with Baku continuing to react strongly to criticism and to insist on non-interference in its internal affairs.
- **Normalisation of French-Azerbaijani relations could pave the way for closer cooperation between Baku and both the EU and NATO.** It would help ease diplomatic tensions that have delayed the conclusion of a strategic energy partnership between the EU and Azerbaijan. A memorandum on the agreement, aimed in part at diversifying gas supplies to the EU market, was signed in July 2022. Better relations could also improve the prospects for increased EU investment in regional infrastructure, including the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity and, more broadly, the Middle Corridor. In relations with NATO, normalisation could help unblock an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP), which would allow the Alliance to expand cooperation with Azerbaijan in areas such as defence planning, training and countering hybrid threats. Concluding the ITPP with Azerbaijan, alongside the launch of a similar framework with Armenia, would also expand NATO's engagement in the South Caucasus.