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The Baku Research Institute (BRI) an independent think tank in Azerbaijan

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The Baku Research Institute (BRI): An Independent Think Tank in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

Azerbaijan is an authoritarian country, with major limitations on the exercise of basic liberties. Academia, media, think tanks, and NGOs are, for the most part, directly or indirectly under the influence and/or control of the state, which limits their independence and freedom of expression. Within this authoritarian context, the Baku Research Institute (BRI) stands out as one of the few independent organizations in the country. Through interviews with its founder and one of its members, this chapter discusses how BRI preserved its independence, withstanding repeated attempts by the Azerbaijani government to co-opt it and undermine its work. Finally, given how Azerbaijan is geopolitically positioned between the West and Russia, the chapter also discusses how BRI navigates East-West relations.

Keywords

Azerbaijan · Human rights · Independence · Think tanks

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1 Introduction

Azerbaijan's political landscape makes it difficult for think tanks to operate independently from state control or pressure. Indeed, the country ranks among the lowest in terms of political rights and civil rights.¹ Aside from rankings and indexes, which are not free from criticism (Boswell & Corbett, 2021), many scholars have discussed the issue of the lack of freedom of expression in the country, especially in the wake of the government's crackdown on civil society in 2013–2015 (Gahramanova, 2020; Ismayil & Remezaite, 2016; Goyushov & Huseynli, 2019a; Huseynli, 2019b, 2021, Ganz, 2021).

When it comes to East-West relations, Azerbaijan's situation is rather complicated. On the one hand, major energy deals were signed between Azerbaijan and various Western partners, tying the country's economic prosperity to the export of energy toward Europe. On the other hand, Azerbaijan continuously needs to balance its relations with Russia. Ties between the two countries have started becoming warmer after the 2013–2015 crackdown on civil society (Ismayilov, 2019; Ismayilov & Zasztowt, 2015), even as the second and third Nagorno-Karabakh Wars presented challenges to managing the relationship.

Civil society in general, and think tanks, in particular, find themselves affected by these East-West dynamics, especially when it comes to relations with the European Union (EU). Many pro-democracy and pro-civil liberty NGOs, societal movements, and think tanks benefited from external funding, including donations from Western institutions. However, most of this came to an end in 2013–2015, when government representatives accused Western institutions of “radicalizing youth,” and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev launched a crackdown on civil society (Geybullayeva, 2013).

With this socio-political context in mind, it may be intriguing to examine closer a post-crackdown independent think tank in Azerbaijan, namely, the Baku Research Institute (BRI). Founded in 2018 by historian Altay Goyushov, BRI identifies itself as an independent non-profit think tank with the aim to “provide a local and international audience with analysis, opinion, surveys, and research on a variety of issues in Azerbaijan, including social and religious issues, the economy, and history.”² It is one of the very few organizations in the country that are openly critical of the government. Thus, the Institute has become a point of reference for civil society and even for Western media outlets that often turn to Institute staff for comments on developments in Azerbaijan—including Goyushov himself. As to its political agenda, BRI does not occupy a clear position in terms of the left-right divide. Most prominently, its articles reflect a strongly pro-Western stance when it comes to promoting human rights, democracy, and liberties.

First, this chapter briefly discusses the defining external and internal elements of the Azeri socio-political context. Subsequently, a discussion of BRI's history

¹*Freedom in the World 2023, Azerbaijan*. Freedom House. At <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2023>

²*About*. The Baku Research Institute (BRI). <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/about-2/>

follows, also detailing the Institute's role in promoting human rights, democracy, and liberties. Finally, BRI's position in terms of East-West relations is examined. The chapter builds extensively on information obtained through a semi-structured in-depth interview conducted with BRI's founder, Altay Goyushov, in May 2023, and with BRI staff member, Ilkin Huseynli, in June 2023, both in Baku.

2 Azerbaijan's External Strategic Environment

Azerbaijan may be a particularly intriguing country when considering East-West relations. It is a post-Soviet country, which, back when it was a Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR, faced separatist demands by the Armenian populace in Nagorno-Karabakh in the late 1980s. This led to violence, escalation, and eventually a full-scale war, which left up to 25,000 casualties, around 350,000 Armenian refugees, and around 800,000 Azerbaijani internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Armenians were able to retain *de facto* control of most of Nagorno-Karabakh, while also occupying seven regions adjacent to it, for a total of around 14% of Azerbaijan's *de jure* territory (Broers, 2019; De Waal, 2003).

As a post-Soviet country facing conflict, newly independent Baku had to find a balance between Moscow and the new economic and political opportunities offered by the West. Hence, then Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev signed in 1994 the so-called "contract of the century," which allowed foreign oil companies, including from the UK and the USA, but also from Russia, to begin the exploration and development of Azerbaijan's oil and gas fields. Over the years, the connections in the energy sector between Azerbaijan and Western countries strengthened.

The revenues from oil and gas exports allowed Baku to develop its military sector, which was used to retake control of Nagorno-Karabakh in two rounds of war—in September–November 2020 and September 2023, respectively. The fighting resulted in at least 8000 deaths and the almost complete displacement of the Armenian population of Karabakh (Landgraf & Seferian, 2024).

3 Azerbaijan's Internal Socio-Political Landscape

Against the backdrop outlined above, Azerbaijan progressively developed into a repressive autocracy. The country underwent a *de facto* generational power transfer when, in 2003, after presidential elections deemed neither free nor fair (HRW, 2004), Ilham Aliyev succeeded his father Heydar Aliyev in becoming the country's new president. The resulting political landscape makes it difficult for think tanks to operate independently from state control or pressure. Indeed, the country today ranks among the lowest in terms of political rights, civil liberties, or academic freedom (as measured by the V-Dem Institute).³

³ *Academic Freedom Index, 2023 Update*. Friedrich Alexander Universität & V-Dem Institute. <https://open.fau.de/bitstreams/608bfbbb-0ae5-424d-8348-0b0c12677cf8/download>

During the aforementioned 2013–2015 government crackdown, think tanks have been particular targets of repression (Gahramanova, 2020), and NGOs have been forced to close by arbitrary criminal prosecution (Ismayil & Remezaite, 2016). Political opposition has been hijacked and/or co-opted (Goyushov & Huseynli, 2019). More recently, in the aftermath of the 2020 war, political activists have expressed that they feel continuously monitored and subject to digital authoritarianism (Kamilsoy & Bedford, 2023). Anti-militarist civil society had become the target of both online harassment and coercive repression by the state (Samadov, 2023; Barberis & Mammadli, 2024). In this climate, anyone associated with independent think tanks risks harassment from the state as well as society, and the organizations concerned may be shut down under the pretext of arbitrary accusations. The Baku Research Institute has to operate under such circumstances.

4 History of BRI

The Baku Research Institute was founded in 2018 by Altay Goyushov, a historian and prominent critique of the government. As aforementioned, the Institute self-identifies as a “non-profit think tank launched by independent experts.” It is difficult to define what a think tank is, and there is no definition without its critics (McGann & Johnson, 2005). Think tanks are often considered non-governmental research organizations—although they may also function as autonomous or semi-autonomous government agencies—that are set up with the aim to influence policy-making (Pautz, 2011); in short, they are engaged in research-based policy advocacy. In identifying particular organizations as think tanks, one may have to come to an assessment with a view to the highly distinct institutional environments in which they may have to operate (Ruser, 2018). BRI is a special instance of a think tank in that it seeks to avoid contact with the government, yet it can influence public policy *indirectly* by generating debates about politics, the economy, and social issues, through which it can influence public sentiment and constrain the normative range of what may constitute legitimate policies for decision-makers (Campbell, 1998; Ruser, 2018). Therefore, considering the high level of repression exercised by the government in Azerbaijan, it is reasonable to classify BRI as a think tank.

The overview of the Institute’s history below will draw extensively on the interview conducted with Goyushov. In his account, by 2018, Goyushov had realized that, as a result of the government crackdown of 2013–2015, no free media remained in the country—and neither did any space for open societal discourse. This was in stark contrast with the growing number of young Azerbaijanis studying in the West, absorbing new ideas and perspectives while abroad and desiring to participate in a societal-building process, sharing their knowledge, once back home. Hence, there was a mismatch between the demand for dialogue and debate and the opportunity available for it. To address this, Goyushov decided to create an independent think tank that could open up such debates and offer a platform for newly educated Azerbaijani youth to express their ideas.

BRI creates space for debates by hosting research articles on its website and, since 2020, by inviting in-person open discussions around particular topics, including taboo topics (some of these are chosen based on suggestions from BRI's audience). The articles are peer-reviewed. The in-person debates and discussions are meant to gather a bigger audience and to try and generate direct engagement with people who are not part of BRI. They usually take place in a rented space and consist of a panel of three to four people discussing a topic and then holding a Q&A with the audience. The purpose here is to mobilize the audience to ask questions or make comments or even criticism. Video recordings of the debates are uploaded to the think tank's YouTube channel.

To operate successfully, it was essential, according to Goyushov, that BRI remains independent from the Azerbaijani state. According to Goyushov, directly repressing the think tank of a relatively well-known figure like himself would have been a step too far in 2018. After the crackdown of 2013–2015, it would have been, at the time, too early to make such a move. Hence, according to BRI staff member Huseynli, government repression took a more subtle form. The think tank's first open discussions were held at the Kappelhaus in Baku, a German cultural center, after which the government pressured the administration of the Kappelhaus to stop renting its space to BRI. The discussions thus had to be moved to the Caspian Plaza, a business center in Baku. Having organized a few of these events there, BRI was once again told that they were not welcome. Currently, the discussions are held in the Participation House of Jalal Plaza. Huseynli mentions that they do not know for how long the government will allow Participation House to host their events.

The state also tried to co-opt BRI and some of its staff members. The institute was repeatedly asked to collaborate with governmental organizations or with government-affiliated people. If accepted, some of these collaborations would have been financially compensated for BRI as professional consultancy services on their part, an activity not uncommon among think tanks. However, Goyushov believed that such collaboration with the state is, in his own words, a "slippery slope." Initially, the collaborations may come with no pressure attached to them, but gradually, the state may start to ask for government-aligned articles to be published or for certain critical articles *not* to be published. If one starts relying more and more on these financially paid collaborations, one's independence is inevitably undermined by that. The final step on this slippery slope is, thus, self-censorship. According to Goyushov, this was exactly the path that several other organizations had taken in the past. Some of them may be nominally independent, since they receive no funding from the state, but they still provide paid services to the state, which makes them *de facto* non-independent. In order for BRI to have truly open discussions and genuinely critical views, it was necessary to avoid this trajectory. Besides the attempts at coopting BRI directly, Huseynli also mentions how some staff members were offered better-paid jobs in state research centers, such as the Social Research Center. The term offered, however, would have required them to stop writing for BRI during the time of their employment there. He stresses that all of these co-optation attempts were rejected by BRI staff.

BRI also rejected receiving funds from the state through its agency for supporting NGOs. In April 2021, President Aliyev signed a decree setting up an “Agency for State Support to NGOs of the Republic of Azerbaijan.” Organizations seeking funding need to register themselves with this agency in order to be officially categorized as NGOs eligible for financial aid. BRI, according to Goyushov, was asked more than once to register. As with paid-for consultancy services, their fear was that state funds would eventually come with strings attached to them. Thus, so far, BRI has declined the opportunity and managed to keep its independence from the state—without self-censoring and without having been co-opted, unlike many other organizations in Azerbaijan.

5 Role in Promoting Discussions About Human Rights, Democracy, and Liberties

BRI openly promotes discussions about human rights, including those of discriminated minorities within Azerbaijan, e.g., the rights and situation of LGBT people—a taboo topic in Azerbaijan. For example, one of the most widely read, discussed, and strongly criticized articles of BRI was titled “Homosexuality is not a Disease” (Jalilova, 2019). The author started by pointing out the grave discriminations and stigma faced by the LGBT community in Azerbaijan that led LGBT activist Isa Shahmarli in 2014 to commit suicide, hanging himself with the LGBT flag (RFE, 2014). The author went on to explain to the readers what homosexuality is and the difference between sex and gender to then counter the widespread notion in Azerbaijan that homosexuality is associated with sexually transmitted diseases. Hence, the article has both an educational purpose and the aim of generating more discussion on its topic. The importance of this article should not be underestimated, as it truly was one of the few recent articles in Azerbaijan that openly discussed this topic. Also, pertaining to the human rights of LGBT people, BRI published an article titled “Azerbaijan’s \$15 Billion Education Policy has Failed LGBTI Individuals” (Nabiyev, 2019). It criticized costly education reforms for having failed to “ensure a safe, non-violent and inclusive learning environment” for LGBT individuals and stressed how the state “has failed and continues to fail to protect its LGBTI citizens by not taking into account their voice, ignoring their unique needs, and excluding them from social, economic and development policies.”

Meanwhile, following a broader human rights agenda, BRI has also published articles discussing feminism and women’s human rights (Jalil, 2021), domestic violence (Mahmudova, 2019), ethnic minority language rights (Mutnansky, 2023), the issue of forced apology videos in Azerbaijan (where people are made, by all indications under threat, to apologize for anything from minor breaches of rules to whatever authorities find offensive; see, e.g., JAM, 2020) and how these violate human rights (Gayibov, 2023), and the problems of applying the European Convention of Human Rights in Azerbaijan (Mammadbayli, 2023).

BRI has also sought to stimulate debates about democracy, e.g., in a piece titled “An Autocratic Middle-Class in Azerbaijan: Does State Dependency Lead to Authoritarian Resiliency?” (Nahmadova, 2021) in reference to the title of the book

by Rosenfeld (2020), which analyzed the link between the growth of the middle class and democratic transition, arguing that state-dependent middle classes tend to support the status quo, even if it is authoritarian. Another example of a pro-democracy article was authored by Huseynli (2023). It discussed what it means to be a *democrat*, listing three conditions to be classified as such and imploring the Azerbaijani opposition to observe these criteria. Meanwhile, BRI also published articles on academic freedom (Huseynli, 2019a), limits to the freedom of expression on the internet (Mammadbayli, 2021), interactions between government and civil society in Azerbaijan (Kamilsoy, 2022), the difference between positive and negative freedom (Huseynli, 2019b), and the issue of the underfinanced and powerless municipalities of Azerbaijan (Aghayev, 2019). It has also sought to promote the importance of participation in elections. There are some indications of the Institute's impact on public sentiment, e.g., in the increasing number of suggestions from the public received by the Institute to deal with particular topics.

Finally, BRI has also taken on arguably the biggest taboo in Azerbaijani society: giving voice in a think tank to an Armenian author, in spite of the institutionalized Armenophobia in the country (Ghazaryan & Huseynli, 2022; Hakobyan, 2016; Tokluoglu, 2011; Sahakyan, 2022; Makaryan, 2023; Huseynli, 2020). Armenians are seen as the historical enemies of Azerbaijanis—yet BRI decided to publish in 2021 an opinion piece written by an Armenian titled “Is the Political Status of Nagorno-Karabakh That Important?” (Cheterian, 2021a; see also: Cheterian, 2021b). The author of the piece in question argued that the 2020 war significantly altered the geopolitical situation of the Caucasus and that other issues were by then more important than the political status to be given to Nagorno-Karabakh. A few weeks after the publication of this piece, the most renowned university in Baku, ADA University, invited the same Armenian author for a webinar. ADA University is known to be close to the government, as Founding Rector Hafiz Pashayev is the uncle of Azerbaijan's current First Lady, Mehriban Aliyev, and its board of trustees includes Mehriban Aliyeva herself and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ceyhun Bayramov. Therefore, the fact that BRI influenced a government-affiliated university to invite an Armenian for a webinar is remarkable. Goyushov strongly believed that Cheterian's article prompted state authorities to open up to the idea of having some form of dialogue with Armenians. Following up on this, BRI even organized an open discussion on Azerbaijan's blockade of Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022.

In conclusion, BRI provided key space for open discussions of a new generation of young educated Azerbaijanis to let them share their ideas and participate in building Azerbaijani society. It did so while also promoting the protection of human rights, democracy, and freedoms—even breaking the taboo of giving voice to an Armenian.

6 BRI Between East and West

As aforementioned, BRI had a pro-Western orientation since its foundation. It aimed at promoting the very liberal-democratic values championed by Western states and gave voice to Azerbaijanis who received their higher education in Western countries.

Most of the funding of the think tank comes from Western organizations. The Baku Research Institute is even registered in Springfield, Virginia (U.S.A.) as a tax-exempt non-profit organization.⁴ Goyushov preferred not to reveal the funding entities involved. He stressed, nonetheless, that BRI receives no funding from the Open Society Foundations (OSF), for fear of the stigma that this might bring, given the agenda that some people associate with OSF. However, Goyushov also claimed that Western donors have never tried to influence the research output of the think tank nor has the think tank resorted to self-censoring for fear of displeasing the donors in his account. The only exception he admitted is as concerns the gender balance of the authorship of BRI's pieces, which is sought in conformity with donor expectations. Yet he stressed that the openly pro-Western stance of the institute is by its own choice, not by pressure.

As to relations with the Russian Federation, BRI's position may be described as orienting away from Russia, per Goyushov's own conception, informed by his personal background. In his own account, most of the elite in Baku during the Soviet Union spoke Russian and sent their kids to schools in Russia (the Russian SFSR at the time). This led to Russian being perceived as a language more prestigious than Azerbaijani. Goyushov, whose father was also a renowned historian, was the only child in his family to be sent to an Azerbaijani school. Goyushov is thus committed to making BRI's pieces available only in Azerbaijani and English, whereas other organizations typically also publish in Russian by default.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, BRI plays an important role in providing a platform for young educated Azerbaijanis to let them share their ideas and participate in building Azerbaijani society and its future. Moreover, it fosters wider societal debate by organizing open discussions, often addressing taboo topics. To this end, it combines academic-style articles with broader debates involving a mixed audience. It also promotes respect for human rights, freedom, and democracy.

All of this has to take place in an authoritarian context, where the state tries to repress or co-opt alternative sources of information and analysis. Goyushov's focus on independence has so far allowed the think tank to operate independently, notwithstanding the government's efforts to undermine its autonomy.

Importantly, BRI firmly situates itself as a pro-Western organization and refuses to adopt what it regards as the "post-colonial" use of the Russian language. Further research on the organization might consider examining the constraint and opportunity structure that holds Azerbaijani authorities back from putting more pressure on BRI (as they have done with other organizations). As a working hypothesis, it may be proposed that the Institute's Western connections may provide a degree of protection, given Baku's interest in maintaining a working relationship with the Western democracies whose energy needs are a key source of its state revenues.

⁴See at: <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/834422990>

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