

Stina Torjesen and Indra Øverland, Eds.

# **International Election Observers in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan**

Geopolitical Pawns or Agents of Change?

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# **INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVERS IN POST-SOVIET AZERBAIJAN**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Stina Torjesen & Indra Øverland*

Azerbaijan's parliamentary elections in November 2005 became an arena where domestic and – according to the contributors to this volume – international actors battled for influence and control, using both formal and informal means of contestation. This book highlights the role of international observer missions in the 2005 election processes, and presents in-depth assessments of the pre- and post-election situation in Azerbaijan.

The six articles presented in this volume have been produced by leading scholars and development practitioners in Azerbaijan. This is the second scholarly publication within the project 'Network for Election Observation and Exchange', which focuses on Moldova, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The key aims of the project have been to enhance the participation of observers from the region in international observation missions and to facilitate research on the role of election observation in democratic development. Further information on the project is presented at the end of this introduction.

The 2005 elections in Azerbaijan are interesting for several reasons. First, the conduct of elections sheds light on the level of democratisation in a country. In addition, assessments of oil-rich Azerbaijan offer interesting insight on the relationship between energy wealth and democratisation. Second, the elections in Azerbaijan received considerable international attention. They were seen as a test case of whether the wave of regime change that had affected Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan would spread to other countries in the region. International actors, regional and global powers and multilateral organisations, were thought to play important formal and informal roles before and after the elections. Third, the role of Russia in the election process was particularly interesting. For the first time, a large number of Russian observers served within the Office for Democratic Institution and Human Rights

(ODIHR) election observation mission; Russia's distinct involvement in the election process seemed to signal new trends in Russia's strategy towards observation and observation missions in the post-Soviet space. Fourth and finally, the case of Azerbaijan also highlights the methodological and technical aspects of election observation. Among other things, there was extensive – and arguably problematic – use of exit polls. Azerbaijan has also recently introduced a comprehensive election law, which significantly altered the administration and conduct of the elections.

This introduction briefly discusses some of the points mentioned above, indicating key questions and challenges for election observation that arise from a study of Azerbaijan's parliamentary elections. An outline of each of the six articles presented in this volume follows. The introduction ends by offering further information about the 'Network for Election Observation and Exchange'.

A common theme in assessments of the elections in Azerbaijan has been the relevance of international actors to domestic political processes in the country. Multilateral organisations such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe (CoE) – both of which list Azerbaijan among their member-states – have been particularly prominent. Considerable attention has also been devoted to the activities of key regional and global powers with an interest in the affairs of Azerbaijan, the most significant ones being Iran, Russia, Turkey and the USA. Analytical perspectives premised on geopolitics are often employed in order to make sense of the actions of multilateral organisations and foreign powers towards Azerbaijan. Arguably, however, the case of international rivalry over the election outcome in Azerbaijan highlights both strengths and weaknesses of a geopolitical analytical perspective.

Geopolitics is concerned with the impact on interstate relations of the spatial dispositions of continents and oceans and the distribution of natural and human resources (Agnew, 2003). States with the greatest material capabilities are most likely to survive in the international system. This triggers a competition for resources on a global scale by the most powerful states. Azerbaijan is seen as a country where there is a strong likelihood of strategic rivalry for control and influence by external states – due to its position as an energy producer and energy transmitter, as well its increasingly important military

strategic location, i.e. proximity to Iran and to military theatres in the Middle East and Central Asia and its location on Russia's southern border. A key premise of the geopolitical perspective is the assumption that states are unitary and coherent actors that express and implement one unified strategy. Nation states, rather than international organisations or other transnational actors, are given analytical priority.

Assessments of Azerbaijan and the elections that have used geopolitics as the analytical frame have highlighted the competition between Russia, the USA and powers as a central aspect of the 'battle for Azerbaijan' during the 2005 election period. It is certainly true that both the USA and Russia proactively engaged with actors in Azerbaijan before and after the elections. However, there are significant weaknesses in explaining the actions undertaken by these and other actors solely in a geopolitical perspective. Azerbaijan had been a problem for Russia since 1993. The country had refused to be part of Russian-sponsored (hegemonic) multilateral organisations like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and had used other powers (Turkey and the USA) to counterbalance Russia's influence. In other words, Azerbaijan under presidents Heidar and Ilham Aliiev had not been a loyal ally. Russia had been unable to realise many of its strategic interests towards the country, such as control over production and transport of oil and gas. Why, then, should Russia decide to give active and substantial support to Ilham Aliiev's factions in the parliamentary elections of 2005? Why not support factions that could guarantee better future terms for Russian interests? Why back a political leadership with proven past and present links with what is generally regarded as a key adversary of Russia in the region – the USA?

Geopolitical assessments do not provide adequate answers to these questions. Moreover, geopolitical frameworks tend to underplay the role of actors from within the country when accounting for why events unfold as they do. There is little tangible evidence available, which could prove that the USA or Russia played roles beyond being important advisors, facilitators and endorsers of various political actors in Azerbaijan, including the opposition and the political leadership. The central players in the events during the elections were the local and central levels of government as well as the various factions of the opposition movement and other political parties. A geopolitical perspective, however, diverts attention and explanatory focus away from local

dynamics and the formal and informal strategies employed by domestic actors – and as such may be ill-suited to further our understanding of Azerbaijani politics.

A geopolitical assessment would not expect US and Russian interests to coincide in Azerbaijan in the way they did – both offered support (in the form of overall recognition of the election result) to Ilham Aliiev and the political factions loyal to him. In contrast, an assessment of regime type offers greater insights into the specific international constellations associated with the election process in Azerbaijan. Arguably, the key driving force in the international game for Azerbaijan (as well as other areas of post-Soviet space) is not primarily geo-strategic competition. Rather, the ‘fault lines’ of the international relations of the region run, between, on the one hand, conservative local powers and outside forces that stress continuity and status quo in governing techniques and leadership, and on the other hand local powers, local forces and outside powers that seek reform in governing techniques and renewal in leadership.<sup>1</sup> The first group includes Russia and many CIS countries; the latter includes Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan (only partly) and the countries of Europe and North America. This, arguably, has been one of the central dynamics of the international relations of the region over the past two years. Such an analytical approach can explain why Russia chose to back previously disloyal segments of the political elite. The importance of regime similarities seems to have trumped strategic concerns.

An additional problematic feature of a geopolitical perspective on international relations of the region is the tendency to overlook the extent to which the OSCE itself as an institution has become a battleground for the frictions between status quo and reformist states in the region. The political manoeuvring that has taken place within this organisation is, however, a key event in the international relations of the post soviet area – which deserves greater attention and assessment.

Increasing scrutiny of the work OSCE came with a joint Russia–Belarus proposal for OSCE reform at the year-end conference in Sofia 6–7 December

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1 Jennifer Welsh (1999) argues for attention to differing regime dynamics in how international relations are assessed. She discusses the international dynamics of revolutionary versus status-quo states in the context of English approaches to the French Revolution in 1789.

2004. Russia raised the spectre of blocking the adoption of the 2005 budget if moves towards reform were not endorsed. Since then, Russia has developed plans to enhance the security co-operation of the organisation and limit the OSCE's work in the sphere of democracy promotion – including election observation.<sup>2</sup>

The problematic role of the OSCE for a country like Russia that supports “status quo” regimes was highlighted during the overthrow of President Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan after the parliamentary elections in February and March 2005. Immediately after these events, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed that those who tried to destabilise the situation in Kyrgyzstan had used the OSCE's monitoring assessments; he added: ‘they [those trying to destabilise Kyrgyzstan] have appealed to these assessments of the OSCE. Russia cannot but note that such a thing was allowed’.<sup>3</sup>

The Russian reform drive in relation to the OSCE has in some ways created greater participation in election monitoring by Russia. Russia and other CIS states have increased substantially the number of CIS observers that serve in CIS-organised observation missions. Russia has also advocated for including a greater share of Russian speakers in ODIHR missions. For the ODIHR election observation mission in Azerbaijan Russia deployed an unprecedented 81 short-term observers (out of 617 short-term observers). However, the Russian observers expressed immediate disagreement with the overall ODIHR assessment. One month later, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov drew the following conclusions from the Azerbaijani experience:

There definitely are double standards in OSCE's activities, especially in the human rights sphere. This is a fact that cannot be avoided. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights proves that with its work on observing elections. At the beginning of November Russia sent a large group of its observers to join the ODIHR mission at the Azerbaijan parliamentary elections. Our observers saw that the ODIHR's work was non-transparent, closed and basically completely alienated from the joint OSCE leadership bodies and from the individual member states as well. This results in biased political opinions made in the OSCE's name although they are not co-ordinated

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2 Eurasia Daily Monitor, 1 (148), 16 December 2004, ‘OSCE “reform” – or a new lease on life?’

3 Itar-Tass news agency, 30 March 2005, ‘Kyrgyzstan Trouble-makers used OSCE’; article made available through Lexis-Nexis.

with all member states. Such ways of OSCE's work have to change as soon as possible.<sup>4</sup>

Russia's behaviour and statements raises the question of what its reform drive will imply for the organisation. Will there be a strengthening and prioritisation of the security dimension of the OSCE's work over its activities in the sphere of democracy promotion and election observation? Are these efforts initiated so as to weaken the OSCE prior to the Russian presidential elections in 2008 and to lessen the significance of the OSCE during elections elsewhere in the region? What significance will this have for international election observation missions, including ODIHR?

These new developments also raise direct challenges for ODIHR and other international observation missions. Are there ways in which international observation missions can protect themselves from being caught up in rivalries between reformist and status quo oriented powers in the region? Can further consolidation and awareness on 'objective methodologies' as well as more diverse composition of observation teams strengthen the role and status of observation missions? What should be the relationship between CIS observer missions and ODIHR missions? Are there synergies between the two, with a potential for developing co-operation? Is the increasing attention, and challenge, towards the activities of some observer groups an indication that the international norms of election observation and adherence to democratic procedures may in fact have become more consolidated – more effective, but also more controversial?

These are questions urgently in need of debate – but unfortunately a detailed examination lies beyond the scope of the present volume. Here in this brief introduction the aim is merely to highlight the ongoing challenges facing election observation, and to encourage further research on these issues.

Several of the contributions in this volume touch on some of the questions raised above. The contributions provide for great diversity of views, and it should be noted that the editors do not share all the views of the contributors

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4 *Financial Times Information*, 7 December 2005, 'OSCE needs reforms, Russia's Lavrov says for Slovene daily', BBC Monitoring, from Lexis-Nexis.

to this volume, but that we do nonetheless believe that they deserve attention.

*Leila Alieva* in her article 'International observation missions: assessments of the 2005 parliamentary elections' argues that there is a connection between some of the conclusions of the international observer missions and the strategies of some countries have towards Azerbaijan. She outlines the various observation missions and highlights the divergent nature of the reports issued by these missions. Alieva also presents findings related to the conduct of exit polls, and raises serious concern over their use and effect. Her article also discusses the extent to which foreign powers can influence the government and opposition groups in Azerbaijan, and draws attention to the special geopolitical context of Azerbaijan.

In *Ulvi Amirbekov's* article the focus shifts from international observation to the domestic institutional structures for election observation. 'Frameworks for election observation in Azerbaijan: institutional improvements but little impact?' assesses key past and present features of Azerbaijan's election legislations and describes the evolution of election observation in Azerbaijan since 1991. Amirbekov argues that election observation has become increasingly important in Azerbaijan, but that it nevertheless faces several serious constraints.

*Zafar Guliev* in his article 'Parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan: democratic expectations versus imitated realities'. He provides a comprehensive outline of the elections held in Azerbaijan since 1995 and compares the recent parliamentary elections to past ones. Guliev identifies key patterns in the strategies of the political leadership during the 2005 elections, and assesses the activities of other domestic and international political actors. He argues that the elections failed to meet important democratic standards and that many features of the elections were poor imitations of a democratic process rather than a real one. Using a geopolitical framework, he assesses the activities of international actors with the use of a geopolitical framework, arguing that Moscow and Washington had common interests in supporting Heidar and Ilham Aliev.

In 'The 2005 parliamentary elections as a mirror of politics and society in Azerbaijan', *Zardusht Alizade* identifies the key actors of the election process and shows how these players interacted. Alizade argues that the political

process associated with the election period highlights core structural features of Azerbaijani society, and, with reference to these, offers explanations for central developments in the political life of the country.

*Rustam Seyidov* complements Alizade's work with a detailed account of various segments in the ruling elite in 'The post-election situation: who rules Azerbaijan?' Seyidov assesses the behaviour of the leadership during the elections and debates the significance of the role of the opposition politician Rasul Guliev. He also analyses the wave of arrests of top government officials that came just prior to the elections, and offers insights on the political affiliations of certain criminal elements in the country. He concludes with reflections on the present and possible future role of Islam in the politics of Azerbaijan.

In their article 'Economic implications of the parliamentary elections: symbiosis of politics and economics', *Torgrul Juvarly and Ali Abasov* present insights on how the economic condition of Azerbaijan impacts on politics and governing institutions. Despite frequent reference to oil and its political effects, few studies have examined this central issue in detail. Juvarly and Abasov present original material that sheds new light on the political life of Azerbaijan. They contend that there is a symbiosis between politics and economy in Azerbaijan, and highlight the interaction between the private sector and the state-controlled part of the economy. They also assess the degree to which institutions designed to regulate the economy operate in a sound manner. As long as the symbiosis of politics and the economy continues, they argue, it will be difficult to ensure a healthy development of Azerbaijan's economy.

### **Network for election observation and exchange**

The present volume is the second publication produced within the project 'Network for Election Observation and Exchange'. This initiative is funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented jointly by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. It has both a research and a practical component. The research part seeks to facilitate research on election observation and democratic develop-

ments in Moldova, the Caucasus and Central Asia. A key aim is to enable and facilitate research by scholars from the region.

Increasingly, international election observers are playing a prominent role in political developments in the former Soviet states. Some election observation missions have been criticised for being too heavily influenced by Western ideas and for unjustly propagating Western standards and practices on these newly independent countries. A core idea behind the project is that election observation should not create a top–down relationship between Western and non-Western countries, but that all countries should have the chance to participate in the international community and be involved in ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic and human rights norms. It was against this backdrop that the Norwegian Helsinki Committee in the first phase of the project invited 24 participants to observe the parliamentary elections in Norway on 12 September 2005. This mission wanted to stress that election observation is not meant solely to reflect power discrepancies between rich and poor countries: it concerns universal standards applicable to all countries, and for which all countries should agree to be put under outside scrutiny.

The project has aimed to facilitate participation in international election observation missions by observers from Moldova, the Caucasus and Central Asia; to strengthen capacity and networking in Moldova, Central Asia and the Caucasus on election observation; and to facilitate research and analysis on the role of election observation in Moldova, Central Asia and the Caucasus for democratic developments in the region.

Key project outcomes from the first phase include:

- 27 observers from Moldova, the Caucasus and Central Asia monitored the Norwegian parliamentary elections on 12 September 2005. A report detailing their findings and suggesting improvements has been submitted by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee to the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.
- 24 observers from Moldova, the Caucasus and Central Asia monitored the local elections in Kyrgyzstan on 18 December 2005. Their report,

with findings and suggestions for improvements, has been submitted to the Central Committee for Elections and Referenda.

- Networking between election experts, researchers and civil society enhanced in the sphere of election observation in the region.
- A web page with election observation resources and news has been launched, <http://www.cac-elections.net>
- Two publications comprising nine articles by scholars from the region are being produced – one of which is the present volume. The other report offers in-depth analyses of the role of international election observation missions in Kyrgyzstan in 2005
- A seminar has been conducted at the OSCE Academy Bishkek: 'Role, Effect and Status of Election Observation in Central Asia and the Caucasus'.

The first phase is now completed, but the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs will continue to include analytical attention to analytical issues associated with election observation in the period ahead – including facilitating research and publishing relevant analysis.