

## **COP29 in Azerbaijan: A Compromised Climate Conference**

**Article by Raluca Besliu**

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The world's biggest climate summit should provide a space for ambitious, open, and constructive dialogue on the climate crisis. But the selection of yet another country with a robust fossil fuel industry and a poor human rights record as the COP host casts serious doubts on the conference's potential for driving real change.

Every year, governments, policymakers, scientists, and other stakeholders from around the globe come together at the Conference of the Parties (COP) to discuss the climate crisis. This year's event will be held in November in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Dubbed the "finance COP", the conference promises negotiations on mobilising public and private capital for climate action.

Yet the selection of Azerbaijan as the host nation by the Group of Eastern European States (EEG) has caused significant concerns due to the country's authoritarian regime and economic dependence on oil and gas exports.

Azerbaijan's proposed initiatives further amplify these worries: Baku has only encouraged participating countries to sign 14 non-binding pledges and partnerships, making no mention of phasing out fossil fuels.

Alarmingly, COP29 marks the third consecutive year an authoritarian regime has hosted this crucial climate gathering, following Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Both previous COPs faced criticism for their disappointing outcomes, as they failed to convert commitments into actionable policies and address wider issues like human rights and environmental justice. In 2023, COP28 in the UAE saw record fossil fuel industry attendance, while COP27 in Egypt faced criticism for limited civil society participation.

The troubling pattern of hosting COPs in authoritarian and fossil fuel-dependent countries undermines the very foundation of open dialogue and collaboration needed to address the climate crisis, and raises questions about the integrity of the world's biggest climate summit. But the implications extend beyond symbolic concerns: as the latest UN Emissions Gap Report starkly warns, current policies put us on track for 3.1°C of warming – more than double the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C target.

With scientists stressing that global emissions must peak before 2025 and fall by half before 2030 to maintain any hope of meeting that target, we cannot afford another year of compromised climate diplomacy. Yet COP29 in Azerbaijan marks a dangerous concession to fossil fuel interests and authoritarian control as we stand at the edge of climate catastrophe.

### **Big fossil fuel ambitions**

Azerbaijan's climate commitments and actions paint a bleak picture of a government unwilling to lead in efforts to solve the climate crisis. The country's emissions are projected to rise by around 20 per cent through 2030, with no commitment to a net-zero target. Azerbaijan is also one of the few countries to have weakened its climate goals, flying in the face of the Paris Agreement's call for increasingly

ambitious targets. The [Climate Action Tracker](#) has deemed the South Caucasus country's efforts "critically insufficient" – a damning indictment for a COP host.

What is more, Azerbaijan is expanding its fossil fuel production. Gas output is set to increase by over 30 per cent in the coming decade, while the Azeri government also aims to ramp up mining operations, including for [copper and gold](#). This growing extractivism stands in sharp contrast with the urgent need to transition away from fossil fuels to keep global warming below 1.5°C, and raises suspicions about the country using COP for greenwashing purposes.

Ironically, the European Union, a self-proclaimed climate leader, is complicit in this expansion. In a rush to diversify its energy sources away from Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the EU has increased its imports of Azeri gas from [2 per cent to 3 per cent](#) and also signed deals to double them by 2027. This encourages Azerbaijan to further exploit its fossil fuel resources to bring more funds into its coffers.

The appointment of Elnur Soltanov as chief COP executive further exposes the conflict of interest at play. Soltanov, both Deputy Minister of Energy and a board member of Azerbaijan's state oil company, has already made alarming statements. He has suggested that [keeping global warming](#) below 1.5°C doesn't necessarily require reducing fossil fuel production, and that countries can realise their climate plans while continuing to expand the extraction of oil, gas, and coal. This goes against the scientific consensus but closely aligns with the vision of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC, of which Azerbaijan is not a member but with which it cooperates). Indeed, during a high-level meeting in May 2024 at OPEC's Vienna headquarters, the organisation's president emphasised to the president of COP29 that OPEC [does not believe](#) in a one-size-fits-all solution to climate change, insisting that "diverse pathways are needed" moving forward.

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Azerbaijan's proposed initiatives for COP29 reflect this problematic vision. In fact, one of Baku's key plans, the [Climate Finance Action Fund](#), appears more like a greenwashing opportunity and a PR stunt than a meaningful solution.

The initiative asks fossil fuel-producing countries and companies to contribute an aggregate total of just 1 billion dollars to global climate action – a minor sum compared to the astronomical profits that these industries generate. Just for comparison, in 2023, TotalEnergies had a net profit of [21.4 billion](#) dollars (a 4 per cent increase since 2022), while Saudi Arabia's national oil company, Aramco, saw a net income of [121 billion](#) dollars. To genuinely affect fossil fuel producers' practices, the amounts that they are requested to pay should be large enough to impact their profits noticeably.

## **Is there room for open dialogue?**

Beyond its questionable climate credentials, Azerbaijan's dismal human rights record casts a long

shadow over the upcoming conference. As the event approaches, the country has intensified its crackdown on freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. This oppressive environment is hardly conducive to the open, potentially uncomfortable discussions needed to make progress on climate action.

Around 300 individuals, including journalists and environmental activists, remain detained in Azerbaijan on politically motivated charges and often on fabricated accusations. Among those now jailed is human rights defender Anar Mammadli, who, in the weeks before his arrest in April 2024, had started a climate justice initiative advocating for civil freedoms and environmental justice ahead of COP29. He was accused of smuggling in conspiracy with other people.

Also imprisoned under questionable circumstances in July 2023 was economist Gubad Ibadoghlu, who exposed the country's lack of revenue transparency in the oil and gas sector – work that could have brought about changes and increased accountability. He is now standing trial for alleged counterfeit currency production and extremism and faces 17 years in jail if convicted.

This crackdown occurs in a broader context of expanding authoritarianism. In 2024, Freedom House gave Azerbaijan a score of just seven out of 100 for freedom – a two-point decrease from 2022. The watchdog's low score is due to the heavy concentration of power in the hands of Azeri President Ilham Aliyev and his extended family, rampant corruption and a weakening of formal political opposition, among other issues.

## **An ongoing conflict**

Azerbaijan's unwillingness to resolve tensions with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, previously inhabited predominantly by ethnic Armenians, also raises questions about its commitment to peace and constructive dialogue – qualities essential for hosting COPs.

In September 2023, following a months-long blockade, Azerbaijan launched an "anti-terrorist" operation in Nagorno-Karabakh. This brief but deadly two-day military campaign resulted in Azerbaijan gaining full control over the flashpoint region and prompted a mass exodus of ethnic Armenians.

*How can a country talk about global cooperation on climate change when it cannot resolve conflicts at home?*

Since then, Azerbaijan and Armenia have been engaged in peace talks with limited progress. Baku has dropped, at least for now, the demands for a Russian-controlled land corridor passing through Southern Armenia, connecting Azerbaijan to the Nakhchivan exclave. This project would have posed a dangerous development for the peace agreement, threatening Armenia's sovereignty and isolating the country.

Still, tensions remain high between the two neighbours. Yerevan seeks provisions for a peace deal before COP29, but Azerbaijan's President has dismissed Armenia's proposals as "unrealistic," insisting that Armenia must amend its constitution to eliminate references to Nagorno-Karabakh's independence. Armenia has announced plans for a constitutional referendum in 2027, but convincing the Armenian public to vote for this change will be extremely difficult.

Recently, Azerbaijan called for a global ceasefire during COP29, including the week before and after.

However, Baku's approach to the negotiations with Armenia has not helped it to establish a credible image as a "peacemaker".

Critics have slammed Baku's call for peace as hypocritical: how can a country talk about global cooperation on climate change when it cannot resolve conflicts at home?

## **Dual loyalties**

Beyond the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, concerns about Azerbaijan's geopolitical role extend to the country's efforts to cultivate its relationships with both Russia and the West, often walking a fine line between competing interests.

In early 2022, Azerbaijan and Russia signed an alliance agreement, aiming to deepen their diplomatic and military ties. This deal, reached just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, includes promises of mutual military aid and a commitment to avoid actions that could harm the two sides' partnership.

Despite this agreement, Azerbaijan has maintained a relatively neutral stance on the war between Russia and Ukraine, refraining from making statements openly in favour of either side.

On the other hand, Baku has provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine and enhanced its collaboration with the EU, while also enabling Russian oil to enter the bloc through its STAR refinery in Western Turkey.

In the first quarter of 2024, the EU imported over 1.2 million tonnes of oil products from STAR – more than 75 per cent of the refinery's exports and a significant increase from 40 per cent in the same period in 2022. According to anti-corruption NGO Global Witness, over 90 per cent of this processed crude had Russian origins.

Azerbaijan's surging fossil fuel revenues have bolstered Aliyev's authoritarian hold on power. Since 2021, oil and natural gas have brought around 90 per cent of Azerbaijan's export revenues, accounting for around 60 per cent of the government's budget. The new deal with the European Union, which will double Azeri gas exports to the bloc by 2027, can significantly push this share. Already in the first year of Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU increased its gas imports from Azerbaijan by 56 per cent.

The funds from Azerbaijan's growing fossil fuel exports are funnelled to the middle class through state employment, thus securing their loyalty to the regime by creating a population economically dependent on extraction. These revenues have also contributed to a significant rise in living standards for Azeris since the late 1990s.

The EU's role in bolstering Aliyev's power, both at home and abroad, should not be underestimated. As the bloc increases gas imports from Azerbaijan and other authoritarian countries like Algeria, Egypt, and Qatar, it appears to have learned little from its past experience of energy dependence on another authoritarian state – Vladimir Putin's Russia.

## **A vital shift**

Just as Azerbaijan must confront its dependence on fossil fuels, so too must the EU and other Western nations. With the climate crisis reaching a critical point, continued funding of fossil fuels is a dire threat to our collective future.

While there are signs of progress – such as an 18-per cent reduction in natural gas consumption in the EU in 2023 compared to the previous year, with a continuing decline into early 2024 – the bloc is still

projected to fall short of its emissions reduction targets by 2030. Similarly, the US is expected to miss its 2030 goals by 23-37 per cent.

At the same time, as opportunities to make real progress become scarcer, every chance for global dialogue is invaluable and must not be squandered. As we approach COP29, Azerbaijan's selection as host country raises immediate concerns about the potential for meaningful progress from the outset.

The controversy around Azerbaijan's hosting of COP29 highlights a critical flaw in the current selection process for UN climate conferences: the lack of *sine qua non* climate action and human rights requirements for potential host countries.

Currently, countries from the UN's five regional groups offer to host on behalf of the group. Once agreed, the chair of the group sends an expression of interest to the UN Secretariat, which subsequently makes a decision. There are no expectations of certain climate aspirations or human rights standards being upheld in the candidate country.

However, countries should be required to show genuine progress towards climate goals, phasing out fossil fuels, and respecting human rights before being considered as COP hosts. While perfect climate achievements should not be a necessary condition for hosting, the conference should be a reward for nations that display serious efforts towards sustainability and genuine engagement in the fight against the climate crisis.

The stakes are too high to allow countries with conflicting interests hijack these crucial climate negotiations. With each passing year, our window for averting catastrophic warming narrows. We cannot afford to let nations with vested interests in fossil fuels control the very forums meant to end their dominance.

While reforming the host selection process alone won't solve the climate crisis, it represents an essential step toward ensuring the integrity of global climate action. The future of our planet depends on honest, ambitious, and uncompromising climate efforts. It is time for the UN to raise the bar and ensure that COP host nations truly embody the spirit and urgency of the climate fight.



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