

Mehriban Aliyeva: The many faces of Azerbaijan's First Lady and new Vice President

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On 21 February, Mehriban Aliyeva was appointed as the Vice President of Azerbaijan, a post that was created via a constitutional referendum in September 2016. But her appointment has generated controversy, not least because she was appointed by her husband, the current President, Ilham Aliyev. [Arzu Geybullayeva](#) writes that with the country's economy badly hit by the recent fall in oil prices, the creation of the Vice President position is intended to ensure the President can engineer a friendly transition of power should he come under pressure.



Mehriban Aliyeva – First Lady of Azerbaijan, recently appointed the country's first Vice President. Credits: [Vugaramrullayev](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Like the many faced god in the TV adaptation of the book, *Game of Thrones*, Azerbaijan's new Vice President, Mehriban Aliyeva, has many faces – albeit she lacks the assassin followers of *Game of Thrones*, at least for now. She [lists herself](#) as the Head of the Azerbaijan Culture Foundation; founder of Azerbaijan's Irs magazine; the President of the Gymnastics Federation of Azerbaijan; a member of the Executive Committee of the National Olympic Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan; Chairperson of the Organising Committee of the First European Games (which Azerbaijan hosted in 2015); President of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation; member and Deputy Chairperson of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party; and a member of parliament. She has also been UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador since 2004.

As of 21 February, by order of the country's President and her husband Ilham Aliyev, she was able to add to this list of achievements the title of Vice President of Azerbaijan. The position was created despite opposition and criticism from international observers following a referendum in September 2016. The Central Election Commission (CEC), the government body responsible for elections in Azerbaijan, approved the results, calling the vote successful. Other observers were less positive, however, with the international watchdog organisation Freedom House, for instance,

stating that “Azerbaijan’s election commission ignored its own requirements by accepting the results of the September 26 referendum despite well-documented ballot stuffing, the detention of people protesting the procedures, and other serious irregularities”.

Freedom House was not alone in voicing criticism of the referendum. The Venice Commission voiced “concern”, noting that “given the already very strong position of the President, the new powers foreseen by this reform are at odds with European constitutional heritage.” And just as Baku was quick to brush off international criticism, it also had to dismiss local opposition groups who called for the result to be declared void. Granted, this response was unsurprising given the country’s recent electoral history.

Business as usual

Aliyeva’s appointment comes at a time when Azerbaijan’s human rights and democratic record has severely deteriorated while the country’s economy has also taken a sharp fall following the global decline in oil prices. The national currency has been devalued twice, and independent economists predict a third devaluation unless the ruling regime starts addressing economic issues more rapidly.

Legal action against democracy advocates [remains commonplace](#) in the country, with a series of what might be termed ‘revolving door’ arrests taking place: activists being detained, released, then detained again. The campaign organisation Index on Censorship has [tracked these arrests](#) since 2003, and in 2016, there were a total of [38 threats](#) identified against press freedom in Azerbaijan, with the authorities accused of arresting and even torturing journalists critical of the government, while access to independent and opposition websites has been restricted. Harassment of the family members of dissidents at home or abroad has also [been raised](#) as a concern.

Coupled with sporadic bouts of [civil disorder](#), this situation goes some way toward explaining why Aliyev pushed for creating the position of the vice presidency and subsequently appointing his wife. The [suggestion](#) here is that the country’s economic problems following the oil price drop could ultimately challenge Azerbaijan’s political stability and that the President has therefore been motivated to guarantee a friendly transition of power to his wife if needed. Since taking on her new role, Aliyeva has become the second highest ranking government official after the President and she will become acting President if her husband steps down. Previously, these responsibilities rested with the Prime Minister. During her term as Vice President, Aliyeva also has full immunity from prosecution.

Immunity is important for President Aliyev. In 2012, the Azerbaijan Parliament passed a bill that [granted immunity](#) from arrest and prosecution to Aliyev and his wife for any crime committed during his presidency or while acting in his capacity as President. A second bill introduced at the same time “bars government officials from distributing information about companies if doing so ‘contradicts the national interests of Azerbaijan in political, economic, and monetary policy, the defense of public order, the health and moral values of the people, or harms the commercial or other interests of individuals.’” Both bills were introduced following a spate of investigative stories exposing the business interests of Aliyev’s family. Much of the information for these stories was produced using corporate records so limiting access was one of many ways to stall journalists from investigating any further.

Keeping information from journalists is just one of many strategies available to the government in this context. One of the top investigative journalists in Azerbaijan, Khadija Ismayilova, who was among the first journalists to expose information about illegal businesses and offshore accounts held by the ruling family, was detained in December 2014 and [sentenced](#) to over 7 years in jail. Prior to this she was reportedly blackmailed with tapes of a personal nature. While Ismayilova was released in May of last year, she is facing a travel ban and authorities have allegedly continued to prevent her from doing her work.

In a country where the ruling regime is desperate enough to resort to this kind of approach, any discussion of a real transition of power remains unlikely. And the appointment of Mehriban Aliyeva simply underlines that the government is intent on a further consolidation of its power.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

Arzu Geybullayeva

Arzu Geybullayeva is a writer, researcher and analyst/consultant based in Istanbul. She tweets
[@arzugeybulla](https://twitter.com/arzugeybulla)



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