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**Securing Europe, Silencing Dissent: The
Southern Gas Corridor and External
Legitimation in Autocratic Azerbaijan**

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Thesis Summary

This thesis addresses one of the main tensions in contemporary European foreign policy, the discrepancy between the European Union's normative commitment to democratic values and its material necessity for energy security. As the international order changes, Western foreign policy has shifted away from demanding democratic reforms focusing on energy security and practical politics. This shift presents a fundamental problem for international relations: understanding how small, non-democratic states gain international respect and analyzing how authoritarian governments manage to get support and prestige from the very international organizations meant to watch over them.

Through the case study of the Republic of Azerbaijan and its diplomatic relationship with the European Union, this research investigates how the Azerbaijani regime uses three distinct mechanisms to build the discourse of a "reliable European partner". These mechanisms include energy diplomacy, which is operationalized through physical infrastructure like the Southern Gas Corridor and the 2022 EU Memorandum of Understanding. They also include institutional capture, developed within European human rights bodies, most notably the Council of Europe, through systematic lobbying and financial bribes documented as "Caviar Diplomacy". Finally, the regime uses performative nation-branding through international mega-events, such as hosting the UN COP29 climate summit and Formula 1 races, to project a modernized, progressive international facade. The thesis argues that international legitimacy is an actively manufactured social reality, and that the European Union is a willing partner in this dynamic. The resulting "reliable partner" discourse acts as a structural shield, protecting the regime's domestic consolidation of power and structural violence from international institutional consequences.

Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical foundation of the study, combining the political economy of the rentier state with international relations theories of legitimacy and normative power. A rentier state is defined by an economic architecture where the government derives most of its revenue from external rent, such as the export of natural resources, rather than from the internal taxation of its citizens. Because wealth flows straight to the government from external buyers, the traditional bond between taxation and representation is broken. The state is transformed from an entity dependent on the consent of the governed into a distributor of wealth, which reduces the domestic pressure for democratic governance. Applying Michael L. Ross's theory, the thesis highlights how resource wealth can fund police and military forces while simultaneously allowing the state to buy public loyalty through subsidies and public employment. Post-Soviet Azerbaijan serves as a clear example of this model, as the Aliyev regime monopolizes control over Caspian hydrocarbon reserves to maintain domestic stability.

Drawing on the work of Ian Hurd, the thesis notes that international relations are maintained through legitimacy, which functions as a socially constructed reality where states seek recognition from foreign actors to secure their international position. According to Thomas Risse, international politics involves a process of social engagement where regimes use communicative action and discursive justification to describe their actions in acceptable terms like stability and cooperation. Rodney Bruce Hall stresses that states spend energy to build a collective identity. Azerbaijan does this by labeling itself a "reliable European partner" whose gas exports contribute to continental security, augmented by nation-branding and mega-events that project a progressive facade.

This creates a paradox for the EU, which traditionally presents itself as a normative power that promotes democratic conditionality. However, Richard Youngs demonstrates that the EU's promotion of values is selective and often subordinated to primary security and economic interests when dealing with resource-rich autocracies.

As Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse note, the EU's power hits a wall when dealing with consolidated regimes that refuse democratic reforms. Following the energy shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU traded its demands for democracy for guaranteed energy flows, creating an authoritarian trade-off where European officials adopted the "reliable partner" language to justify its energy deals to domestic voters. The catalyst for this strategy was the conclusion of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict via the 2020 war and the military takeover in September 2023. Facing potential international tensions, the regime leveraged the February 2022 European energy crisis to become a supplier itself via the Southern Gas Corridor and be seen as an indispensable alternative for continental energy security.

Chapter 2 is about the single case study approach used to observe the relationship between the EU and Azerbaijan. While autocracies seek validation globally, this thesis focuses on the European Union because its executive institutions have chosen a path of energy pragmatism despite legal commitments to promote democracy abroad. Azerbaijan is a critical case because it is integrated into European institutional bodies like the Council of Europe, representing a case of institutional enmeshment.

Rather than using a full Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the methodology of this thesis is more accurately described as a close reading of selected texts inspired by discourse analytical approaches. To analyze the empirical material, the thesis introduces an evaluatory matrix that processes the data across four variables. First, it identifies the specific institutional actors, distinguishing between the EU's executive branches, which prioritize market stability, and legislative bodies, which focus on values. Second, it categorizes Baku's tactics into material leverage, institutional lobbying, and performative legitimation. Third, it measures the gap between diplomatic language and the actual daily reality of Azerbaijan's domestic governance. Fourth, it tracks the tangible policy shifts resulting from this rhetoric, such as the reduction of explicit human rights clauses in bilateral agreements.

Chapter 3 shows how energy infrastructure is converted into diplomatic leverage. The Southern Gas Corridor functions as the core of Azerbaijan's strategy. Unlike flexible Liquefied Natural Gas transit, fixed pipeline networks require massive upfront investments, creating a long-term physical dependency that gives Baku structural leverage. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU increased its reliance on Azerbaijan under the REPowerEU plan, with gas deliveries rising from approximately 8.1 to 8.2 billion cubic meters in 2021, alongside commitments to expand pipeline capacity to 20 billion cubic meters annually by 2027.

A close reading of the Memorandum of Understanding signed on July 18, 2022, highlights how the EU's executive branch accommodated the regime. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's public declaration, labeling the Aliyev regime a "crucial, reliable, and trustworthy partner", demonstrates a much more accepting and welcoming narrative than the EU uses with other countries in the neighborhood, such as Georgia, which are less autocratic. In this context, the term "reliability" was framed in a commercial sense. Furthermore, the 2022 agreement shows structural omission by excluding conditional language regarding human rights, reflecting an institutional tension within the EU between the executive Commission focused on resource survival and the legislative European Parliament focused on values. Baku scaled this consensus into a "Savior" narrative, reframing the pipeline expansion as an act of strategic solidarity to rescue Europe from energy shortages. Having publicly elevated the Aliyev regime to a trustworthy partner during a material crisis, European officials found it difficult to enforce strict human rights critiques without weakening their own public declarations of strategic partnership.

The final chapters of the thesis highlight the remaining pillars of the regime's strategy and calculate the broader institutional impact of this relationship. Chapter 4 analyzes the structure of "Caviar Diplomacy", examining the lobbying networks used within European human rights monitoring bodies like the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, highlighted by the rejection of the 2013 Strässer report on political

prisoners. It further analyzes the "COP29 Paradox," detailing how the regime used the global climate summit to practice high-level environmental branding while simultaneously pursuing an economic strategy based on expanding fossil fuel extraction.

Chapter 5 contrasts these international legitimization strategies with domestic realities, showing the pressure placed on independent media, the 2025 judicial measures against independent journalists, the criminalization of academic dissent, as seen in the case of Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, and the growth of political prisoners. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the operation of the authoritarian trade-off, demonstrating how a resource-dependent state converts material wealth into a functional linguistic and institutional shield, securing external legitimacy and domestic survival in a changing global order at the expense of the European Union's normative commitments.

Introduction

On July 18, 2022, in the capital city of Baku, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen shook hands with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Seeking an urgent alternative to Russian energy following the invasion of Ukraine, von der Leyen signed a Memorandum of Understanding to double gas imports, publicly declaring the European Union was pivoting to "more reliable, trustworthy partners". At that precise moment, Azerbaijan remained a consolidated autocracy, characterized by the systemic repression of civil society, independent media, and political opposition. This stark juxtaposition encapsulates the central tension of contemporary European foreign policy, the collision between a normative commitment to democratic values and the material desperation for energy security.

As the liberal international order fractured, Western foreign policy has visibly shifted away from demanding democratic conditionalities in favor of prioritizing resource stability and geopolitical pragmatism. This shift presents a fundamental intellectual problem for international relations: What are the sources of external legitimacy for non-democratic small states under conditions of a weakening international order? Furthermore, how do autocratic regimes not only survive in this environment but extract diplomatic immunity and prestige from the very international institutions originally designed to scrutinize them?

Very high hopes and it's gone now. Eu normative demo power which wants to make the world a better place.

This thesis explores these questions through a comprehensive case study of the Republic of Azerbaijan and its diplomatic relationship with the European Union. Operating as a classic rentier state, the Azerbaijani regime relies entirely on externally generated rent, through oil and gas, for its survival, therefor eliminating the need for

domestic taxation or democratic representation. However, raw material wealth alone is insufficient to guarantee long-term international security. In order to navigate the European political landscape, the Azerbaijani state has engineered a sophisticated system of external legitimation.

This research investigates how the regime weaponizes three distinct mechanisms to construct the discourse of a "reliable European partner". The first is the physical and geopolitical leverage of energy diplomacy, operationalized through the Southern Gas Corridor and the 2022 EU Memorandum. The second is the institutional capture of European human rights bodies, most notably the systematic lobbying and financial inducements within the Council of Europe, widely documented as "Caviar Diplomacy". The third is the discursive power of nation-branding, using international mega-events, such as the hosting of the UN COP29 climate summit, to project a modernized, progressive, and indispensable international facade.

Portraying theories of legitimacy as a construct of social recognition and communicative action, this thesis argues that international legitimacy is not a passive byproduct of trade, but an actively manufactured social reality. Furthermore, this research argues that the European Union is not a deceived actor in this dynamic, rather, the prioritization of non-Russian gas has facilitated complicity.

The resulting "reliable partner" discourse is not simply diplomatic rhetoric. It acts as a structural shield, actively protecting the regime's domestic consolidation of power and structural violence from international institutional consequence. To evaluate this dynamic, the thesis uses a structured analysis to look closely at selected texts and political statements. By applying an evaluatory matrix, it systematically indicates the key actors, their true intentions, and the final outcomes of these strategies, tracking exactly how they shaped European institutional behavior.

This thesis is driven not only by theoretical curiosity but by a profound disappointment with the contemporary performance of European foreign policy. I chose to undertake

this research at a moment when my initial expectations of the European Union as a normative, democratic force, capable of and committed to promoting a more just international order, have been dismantled. The realities of the EU-Azerbaijan relationship expose a strong system of double standards. This thesis is a direct look at these contradictions. It aims to show the European Union's biggest mistake: continuing to claim it is a champion of democracy and human rights while making a deal that gives political power to an authoritarian government.

The research is structured in the following way. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical framework, defining the paradoxes of the rentier state and the mechanics of external legitimation in world politics. Chapter 2 details the methodological approach used to evaluate the EU-Azerbaijan relationship. The subsequent chapters dissect the three pillars of the state's strategy: the energy agreements, the institutional lobbying, and the strategic "greenwashing" of the regime. By contrasting the externally projected facade with the domestic realities of the state, this thesis demonstrates how mutually reinforcing interests allow a small autocracy to secure high-level external legitimacy, exposing the true mechanisms of survival in a shifting international order.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how the Azerbaijani regime promoted the image of a “reliable partner” in Europe, it is first necessary to comprehend the theoretical dynamics that govern both the autocracy's survival and the European Union's foreign policy.

Modern dictatorships rarely survive by only using force at home. In our highly connected world, a government's long-term survival depends just as much on getting approval from other countries as it does on pumping natural resources out of the ground. To fully understand the business-like relationship between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the European Union, we must first look at how Baku locks down control over its own people and how it chases validation on the world stage.

The root of these dynamics lies in the rentier state model. When a government funds itself almost entirely through hydrocarbon exports rather than domestic taxation, it essentially buys its way out of public accountability. However, financial security alone is not enough for long-term stability. To truly maintain power, the ruling elite must project a carefully curated image internationally. They do this through strategic diplomacy, state branding, and targeted rhetoric, to gain social recognition and shield itself from international pressure, helping them to stay in power.

This external legitimation strategy requires a willing partner. This is where the European Union's own structural contradictions become the fundamental problem. The EU faces constantly the tension between its self-proclaimed identity as a promoter of human rights and its need for energy security. By examining this clash between European ideals and geopolitical realities, the exact conditions of the "authoritarian trade-off" become clear. It is exactly within this weakness of EU foreign policy that Baku's strategy succeeds.

1.1. The Rentier State and Autocratic Survival

To understand the political survival and diplomatic strategies of regimes that operate largely independent of their own societies, one must first understand the structural mechanics of the rentier state. In classic political economy, a rentier state is defined by a highly centralized economic architecture. It is a system where the government derives most of its revenue from external rent, more exactly, the export of natural resources to foreign markets, rather than from the internal taxation of a productive domestic economy (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987). Unlike a traditional industrial or service-based economy, the wealth in a rentier state is generated by a specific sector. The extraction and export of hydrocarbons typically employ only a tiny fraction of the domestic workforce and rely heavily on foreign capital and technology. As a result, wealth flows straight to the government, leaving the people with nothing. Because this money comes from outside sources rather than taxes, the state becomes incredibly powerful while the citizens remain financially weak and disconnected.

Michael L. Ross explains the political consequences of this system through his 'oil curse' theory (Ross, 2012). For decades during the mid-twentieth century, traditional modernization theory, championed by scholars like Seymour Martin Lipset, assumed that an increase in a nation's per capita wealth would naturally pave the way for democratic reform, the expansion of the middle class, and the strengthening of civil liberties. Ross used both data and real-world examples to prove that for many countries, oil wealth is a trap. He showed that in developing nations, having too much petroleum doesn't lead to freedom, it does the opposite. This wealth gives ruling elites enough money to tighten their grip on power and ignore the needs or demands of their citizens.

Ross identifies several specific mechanisms through which this authoritarian consolidation occurs, two of which are vital for understanding post-Soviet petro-states. The first is the "repression effect". Since the government has access to substantial amounts of oil money, it can afford to build police and military forces to crush any

opposition before it even starts. But there is a second, even sneakier method called the "rentier effect". This is when the government uses oil cash to "buy" the public's loyalty. By providing government jobs, cheap subsidies, and special favors, the regime keeps people comfortable enough that they stop demanding democratic rights or holding the government accountable.

At the heart of this issue is a broken link between taxes and voting. Historically, Western democracy grew because governments needed their citizens' money to survive and fight wars. Because the state was desperate for cash, it had to negotiate with the people. Eventually, the state traded legal rights and a seat in parliament for the right to collect taxes. This created the famous rule of "no taxation without representation".

The rentier state, on the other hand, doesn't have the need for this social contract. Because the ruling elite gets its immense wealth from selling gas and oil to foreign actors, it does not need to tax its citizens to balance the state budget. Because the regime does not require the financial contribution of the population, it is under no obligation to listen to their demands, grant them a voice in governance, or protect their civil liberties. The state is transformed from a political entity dependent on the consent of the governed into an autonomous distributor of wealth. In this environment, the citizen is reduced from a political stakeholder to a simple beneficiary or, in the case of political dissidents, a victim of the state's distributional power. Therefore, the domestic impunity of the autocracy is not merely a result of ideological cruelty, but a direct structural consequence of its integration into the global energy market.

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan serves as a textbook empirical example of this consolidated rentier model. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ruling elite systematically monopolized control over the nation's vast Caspian hydrocarbon reserves, transforming the state into an entity almost entirely dependent on external capital. As analyzed by Gubad Ibadoghlu in his assessment of the "authoritarian trade-off", the Azerbaijani state's economic architecture is defined by energy exports,

particularly those directed toward the European market via infrastructure such as the Southern Gas Corridor. This heavy reliance on energy exports is a textbook example of Michael Ross's resource curse theories in action. Because a steady stream of foreign cash directly fuels the national budget, the Aliyev regime can crush political rivals, silence the media, and dismantle independent groups without worrying about local resistance. Because this state "paycheck" comes from global oil and gas buyers rather than domestic taxpayers, the traditional bond between taxation and representation is broken. As a result, everyday citizens lose their financial leverage, leaving the government entirely unaccountable to its own people.

However, the reliance on external rent creates a critical structural vulnerability for the regime. While the rentier economy eliminates the need for domestic consent, it makes the regime's survival dependent on global energy markets. An international outcast cannot secure the massive, long-term foreign investments or transit treaties required to keep these networks running. This creates a striking paradox. While the Aliyev government is completely free from seeking approval at home, it must work twice as hard to maintain a clean reputation abroad, carefully engineering an external image of a stable, modern, and indispensable partner.

1.2. Constructing External Legitimacy

As I've already explained in the previous subchapter, the regime's financial independence from its own people creates a high-stakes dependency on the outside world. Its survival is entirely tied to its standing in the global economy. Yet, simply owning important oil and gas reserves isn't enough to ensure long-term safety or a steady paycheck from Western democracies. In the world of international politics, raw resources or "business deals" are rarely enough to maintain a lasting partnership, especially when those partners are Western institutions that publicly promote human rights. This is where the work of Ian Hurd becomes essential. Hurd argues that stability

in the international system isn't just maintained through force or greed, but through legitimacy.

For Hurd, legitimacy isn't about being "good" in a moral sense, instead, it is a "socially constructed reality". It is the belief held by other countries that a specific government or leader is someone who should be respected and dealt with. When we apply this to a country's behavior, external legitimacy acts as a letter of approval from the international community, labeling a state as a responsible and acceptable partner. For a hardened autocracy like Azerbaijan, winning this social recognition from European institutions is about much more than just looking good on the global stage. It is a vital survival strategy. By appearing legitimate, the ruling elite can protect their wealth from the very real dangers of international sanctions, geopolitical isolation, or unwanted meddling into their internal affairs.

However, this external legitimacy isn't a natural trait that automatically comes with having oil. It is something that must be actively, carefully, and constantly manufactured by the state. Thomas Risse offers a fundamental framework for understanding this process through what he calls "communicative action" and "discursive justification". Risse argues that international politics isn't just a series of cold business deals over material goods, it is also a theater of intense social and verbal engagement. In this space, regimes are forced to participate in international forums where they must constantly describe their actions in ways that sound morally and politically acceptable to their partners. Even the most authoritarian leaders are required to use the specific vocabulary of global norms, words like "stability", "cooperation", and "reliability", to convince the world that they belong in the global system.

Building on this idea, Rodney Bruce Hall points out that this kind of "talk" is actually aimed at building a "collective identity". Hall explains that countries spend enormous amounts of energy and money to be recognized not just as a piece of land with a border, but as a legitimate member of a prestigious political club. For Azerbaijan, this means

using its diplomatic voice to build an identity that perfectly matches the fears and needs of Europe. By constantly calling itself a "reliable European partner" and describing its gas exports as a "contribution to continental security", the regime creates the exact identity Hall describes. In doing so, it wins the social recognition that Ian Hurd identified, building a diplomatic wall of protection that keeps the regime safe from international pressure.

To implement this communicative action, modern autocracies turn to the complex practice of nation branding and the hosting of international mega-events. While traditional diplomacy relies heavily on closed-door institutional negotiations, the cultivation of social recognition requires a highly visible, performative dimension. By hosting globally renowned shows, ranging from Formula 1 races and the Eurovision Song Contest to the UN COP29 climate summit, the Azerbaijani state constructs a physical and intensely mediated environment designed to project stability, technological progress, and normative convergence with the West. These events serve as the material manifestation of Risse's discursive justification. They allow the regime to temporarily hide its authoritarian reality, replacing it with a carefully curated, polished image of an indispensable global player. In this context, nation branding is not just a superficial public relations exercise, it is a vital tool of governance. By hiring Western consultancy firms and lobbying groups to disseminate this image, the rentier state purchases the vocabulary of liberal internationalism, weaponizing concepts like "green energy transition" and "intercultural dialogue" to create a discursive shield against human rights critiques.

Yet, the successful construction of external legitimacy requires a receptive audience. The identity of a "reliable European partner" only works as a protective shield if Western institutions willingly accept and validate this narrative. This dynamic brings the analysis to the other side of the diplomatic equation. The Azerbaijani regime's strategy for proving its "legitimacy" didn't succeed by accident. It was carefully designed to exploit a major weakness in how Europe handles its foreign policy. This

situation creates a classic conflict. When a dictatorship that controls vital energy pipelines meets a group of democratic nations desperate for fuel, the high-minded talk of "democratic values" often hits a brick wall.

To truly understand why European institutions choose to buy into this manufactured image rather than call out the regime's internal violence, we must look closer at the European Union itself. There is a deep, internal contradiction in how the EU presents itself to the world. On one hand, it wants to be a "normative power" that promotes human rights and the rule of law. On the other hand, it has immediate, cold-blooded strategic needs, like keeping the lights on and staying warm. This creates a theoretical clash between the EU's moral ambitions and its harsh geopolitical realities.

1.3. The European Paradox: Normative Power vs. Strategic Calculation

To fully comprehend the European Union's receptivity to Azerbaijan's legitimization strategies, it is necessary to examine the structural contradictions inherent in the EU's own external identity. Traditionally, the European Union has positioned itself in the international arena not as a conventional military or hegemonic superpower, but as a "Normative Power". As foundationally theorized by Ian Manners, Normative Power Europe is defined by its ideational ability to shape conceptions of "normal" in international relations. According to this theoretical framework, the EU's foreign policy is basically driven by the diffusion of its core foundational value such as democracy, the rule of law, and universal human rights. In its institutional neighborhood policies, this normative power is historically operationalized through the mechanism of democratic conditionality, theoretically making economic integration, financial assistance, and diplomatic partnership strictly reliant upon a third country's demonstrable commitment to domestic democratic reform.

However, this perfect image the EU has of itself often crashes directly into the harsh realities of global politics. Richard Youngs offers a necessary reality check to the idea that Europe is purely a "normative power". He argues that scholars often get so caught up in the EU's talk of "shared values" that they ignore the strategic and selfish calculations happening behind the scenes. Youngs shows that the EU doesn't promote its values equally everywhere, instead, it is highly selective and consistently subordinated to primary security and economic interests. However, democracy and human rights are almost always pushed aside when they clash with Europe's primary security or economic needs. When dealing with powerful dictatorships that control vital resources, the EU's actions stop following a "logic of values" and start looking like old-school realpolitik. The goal of promoting human rights isn't always thrown out the window, but it is deeply compromised. This creates a double standard where the EU quietly suspends its "moral requirements" the moment they threaten essential interests, like energy security or regional stability.

This collision between normative ambition and strategic necessity is most acutely visible in the field of energy security, producing a dynamic that functions as an "authoritarian trade-off". As Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse point out, the EU's power to change other countries hit a wall when dealing with "consolidated" regimes, governments whose entire existence depends on refusing democratic reforms. These leaders know that if they open up their systems, they might lose their grip on power, so they simply won't do it.

The situation changes even more when a sudden crisis hits. For example, when Europe stopped importing Russian oil and gas after the invasion of Ukraine, the continent faced a energy shock. In that moment of desperation, the balance of power shifted. Suddenly, the EU wasn't the one setting the rules for its neighbors anymore, instead, it was the one asking for help. The usual rules connecting trade to human rights completely fell apart. In a rush to keep the lights on, the EU essentially traded away its demands for democracy in exchange for guaranteed energy flows. In this new reality, the oil-rich

autocracy holds all the cards. They know that for Europe, getting through the winter has become far more important than the rights of the people living inside the dictatorship.

To handle this contradiction without destroying its own reputation, the European Union plays a clever game of political pretend. If the EU were to openly admit that it was simply a "business only" deal with a dictatorship, it would ruin its image as a promoter of human rights. To avoid this, European institutions choose to adopt the same language that the oil-rich state created in the first place. By officially labeling an autocratic supplier as a "trustworthy and reliable partner", the EU manages to close the gap between its high morals and its desperate need for energy. This shows that the European Union isn't victim being tricked by a clever PR campaign, it is a willing partner in the process. This narrative serves both sides. It allows EU leaders to justify their energy deals to their own voters back home, while giving Azerbaijan the scrutiny protection it needs to keep crushing dissent without facing global.

1.4. Transit, Security, and the Armenian Conflict

While the structural dynamics of the rentier state and the internal contradictions of European foreign policy explain the bases of EU-Azerbaijan relations, the recent acceleration of Baku's external legitimation strategies cannot be fully understood outside of its immediate geopolitical context. The real spark for this diplomatic campaign was the violent end to the long-standing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Through the 2020 war and the final, decisive military takeover in September 2023, Azerbaijan achieved its main goal which was seizing full control over the disputed territory. However, winning on the battlefield came with a big political price. Using military force, especially operations that led to the mass displacement of ethnic Armenians, created a huge risk of international pushback. The regime faced the threat of economic sanctions, being cut off diplomatically, or even being kicked out of

European organizations. In the moments right after these military victories, the government was more vulnerable on the world stage than ever before. To stop Western leaders from condemning the violence and to get the world to accept its new borders, the autocracy desperately needed to protect its image from the international context.

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent European energy crisis was the perfect opportunity for the Aliyev regime to try to cleanse its image. As the European Union struggled to rapidly detach its economies from Russian hydrocarbons, Azerbaijan systematically leveraged its position at the eastern end of the Southern Gas Corridor. The regime in Baku recognized that its energy infrastructure was no longer a mechanism for only generating domestic financial rent, but it had transformed into a geopolitical deterrent. By insistently marketing itself as the indispensable, non-Russian "alternative" for continental energy security, Azerbaijan capitalized on Europe's strategic desperation. The timing of the July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding between the EU and Azerbaijan was therefore not a coincidence, but a calculated diplomatic maneuver. It represented the ultimate crystallization of the "authoritarian trade-off". Azerbaijan stepped in to solve Europe's energy crisis, and in exchange, the European Union looked the other way while Baku used military force and crushed human rights at home.

The image of the "reliable European partner" worked exactly as planned. While the European Parliament occasionally passed resolutions criticizing the human rights situation and the wars in the South Caucasus, these were mostly symbolic. Meanwhile, the actual power centers of the EU, specifically the European Commission, chose to maintain and even strengthen their relationship with the Aliyev regime. As a result, the dictatorship managed a very dangerous moment in history. By using its control over gas pipelines and its PR tactics as weapons, the state achieved two important goals. It retook its lost territory and tightened its grip on power at home. Most importantly, it did all of this with almost no consequences from the international community.

Chapter 2: Research Design and Analytical Framework

While we understand that rentier states need legitimacy and that energy-hungry democracies are often willing to trade for it, these dynamics don't happen in an instant. They are built through years of shifting policy, specific diplomatic encounters, and a carefully crafted language that masks the nature of the partnership. To move from abstract concepts to a concrete analysis of this "authoritarian trade-off" we need a structured way to observe it in action.

Chapter 2 serves as the bridge between the theoretical framework of this study and the raw data of the real world. It begins by looking at the Republic of Azerbaijan not just as a state, but as a critical case. In many ways, Baku is the ultimate testing ground for European values. It is where the EU's normative identity most visibly collides with its geopolitical needs. To understand how we reached this point, the chapter also traces the history of the relationship. We will see a clear, decades-long shift. Moving away from an era where the EU strictly demanded democratic reforms, and toward a contemporary reality where discursive façades, rhetorical shields that look like progress but hide stagnation, have become the new standard for cooperation.

Finally, this chapter introduces the tool used to uncover this reality. Analyzing diplomatic language is a long and complicated process. To keep the study objective, we need more than just general observations. This is why the latter half of the chapter is dedicated to building an Evaluatory Matrix based on a close reading, inspired by Critical Discourse Analysis which is a method that examines how language is used to exercise, maintain, or hide political power and social inequality. By applying this approach to key political texts, institutional reports, and official agreements, and setting clear variables for who is speaking, what they are trying to achieve, and what the actual

material results are, we create a lens that can filter through treaties, speeches, and PR campaigns. This framework allows us to look at a document like the 2022 Energy Memorandum and see it for what it truly is, a roadmap for the trade-off between gas and governance.

2.1. Research Design and Case Selection

To understand how a dictatorship buys global approval and how an organization like the EU becomes a part of that process, this thesis uses a qualitative, single case study approach. International legitimacy isn't something you can easily measure with a ruler or a calculator. It is a social reality built out of language, secret negotiations, and institutional behavior. If we only looked at raw numbers, like the cubic meters of gas flowing through a pipeline or the millions spent on a PR campaign, we would miss the most important part of the story. Numbers can't explain the political trade-offs or the compromises that happen behind the scenes. This is why a single-case study is the right tool. It allows us to look deep into the details and understand the exact process of how the regime's survival strategy works. By focusing on this one specific relationship, we can understand how energy is transformed into diplomatic talk and later into a shield that protects the regime from international consequences.

In making the parameters clear of this single case study, it is necessary to establish explicit boundaries regarding the actors involved, especially concerning the external democratic counterpart. While autocratic regimes globally seek legitimation from various Western powers, including the United States, I will restrict this thesis focus exclusively to the European Union. U.S. foreign policy has always been quite open about its "realist" side. The world knows that Washington often puts national security and strategy ahead of human rights. The European Union, however, is a much more interesting "paradox". Bound by the Treaty of Lisbon (specifically Article 21 of the TEU), the EU is legally required to promote democracy and the rule of law in

everything it does abroad. Because the EU officially brands itself as a "Normative Power" that only helps those who follow democratic rules, its sudden shift to "energy first" politics is a much more dramatic move. By focusing only on the EU, we can see the specific ways a democratic group justifies betraying its own legal and moral identity to keep the gas flowing.

To justify the focus of this research, we need to explain why the Republic of Azerbaijan is what experts call a "critical case" (Flyvbjerg, 2006). While many resource-rich dictatorships use similar tricks to get Western approval, Azerbaijan is unique. For example, a state like Qatar is very successful at "sportswashing", using global events like the 2022 World Cup and its natural gas wealth to win favor (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). But Azerbaijan's relationship with Europe goes much deeper. Unlike the Gulf states, Azerbaijan is actually part of the European institutional family. It is a member of the Council of Europe and falls under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. This means Baku's strategy isn't just a standard PR campaign from the outside, it is also a process of "institutional capture" (ESI, 2012). The regime isn't just trying to look good from afar, it is working to weaken and subvert the very European human rights systems that are supposed to monitor it, a phenomenon scholars describe as "authoritarian enmeshment" (Tansey, 2016). Because the regime is operating inside the system it is trying to bypass, Azerbaijan serves as the ultimate case study for how modern autocracies survive, resist pressure, and even thrive within the European order (Knaus, 2017, Muižnieks, 2014).

To make this research functional, the final part of this chapter introduces a structured tool called the Evaluatory Matrix. Instead of just making general guesses about political language, this matrix gives us a clear way to analyze official agreements, speeches, and institutional reports. It works by breaking every text down to look at who is speaking, what they are trying to achieve, and what the actual real-world results are. By focusing on these specific elements, we create a clear lens that can easily filter through treaties and public relations campaigns. This framework lets us look directly at a major

document like the 2022 Energy Memorandum and clearly see the underlying trade-off between securing gas and protecting human rights.

Applying this analytical method to the EU-Azerbaijan relationship allows this study to go beyond the surface-level text of agreements and look at the broader tactics at play. When European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen publicly labels Azerbaijan a "crucial partner" during an energy deal, we are obliged to analyze more than just the economic logic of the statement. It forces the researcher to ask "How does this specific vocabulary give an autocracy the stamp of legitimacy? How does making "energy security" the highest value in the conversation automatically silence any talk of human rights?". This research will decode the official communications of both the European institutions and the Azerbaijani state and will reveal how the linguistic facade of a "modern, reliable partnership" is carefully engineered to hide, and therefore protect, the underlying reality of state violence and authoritarian control.

2.2. The Shift in European Foreign Policy: From Conditionality to Discourse

To understand why the European Union's current move toward energy-driven politics is important, we must look at how it used to handle the post-Soviet world. Right after the Cold War, the EU wasn't just a big marketplace, it acted as a "moral leader". During the 1990s and 2000s, often called the "golden age" of European influence, the EU tried to push its values onto its neighbors. It used its economic power as leverage to try and reshape the politics of the countries on its borders. This goal was built into the main policies like the European Neighborhood Policy in 2004 and the Eastern Partnership in 2009. The logic back then was simple and was guided by the "more for more" principle. If a country wanted more money, better trade deals, or easier travel for its citizens, it had to show more progress in becoming a democracy. Brussels made it very clear that access to European markets and financial aid was strictly tied to things like protecting

human rights, fighting corruption, and following the rule of law. In this era, the EU's opinion was straightforward. You couldn't have economic ties without democratic reforms. This created a strict "moral gate" that any partner had to walk through before they could do business with Europe.

However, the effectiveness of these moral rules depended on an unequal power dynamic between Brussels and its neighbors. This was an imbalance that completely fell apart when the EU tried to apply it to a wealthy state like Azerbaijan. During the early years of the Eastern Partnership, the EU's leverage was based on the idea that its neighbors were economically weak and struggling to change. The assumption was that these countries were desperate for European money, technical help, and trade that they would do whatever the EU asked just to survive. When it came to Azerbaijan, this assumption was totally wrong. As we discussed in the first chapter, the regime's massive oil and gas wealth gave it total financial independence. They didn't need to rely on their own citizens for taxes, and they certainly didn't need to rely on international banks or the EU for money. Other post-Soviet neighbors, like Moldova, Georgia, or Ukraine, chose to follow European reforms because they genuinely needed the financial packages and trade access to stay afloat. In contrast, Baku had no structural reason to care about the EU's conditional aid.

As a result, the EU's famous "more for more" rule ran into a brick wall when it met the Aliyev regime. From the viewpoint of the autocracy, the democratic reforms the EU wanted weren't a path to progress, they were a roadmap for political suicide. The Aliyev administration understood perfectly that if they actually did what the EU asked, like opening up civil society, allowing real elections, and breaking up the corrupt networks that keep the elite in power, the regime would likely collapse. Because the money and deals offered by Brussels were nothing compared to the billions of euros Azerbaijan made on its own through oil and gas, the EU realized it had almost no way to force its agenda. They couldn't use the threat of taking away money to make the regime change, because the regime didn't need their money in the first place.

This structural difference eventually forced a major split within the Eastern Partnership itself, showing just how flexible European moral standards could be (Delcour, 2017). While neighboring countries without natural resources signed strict agreements in 2014, deals that legally bound them to follow European human rights laws, Azerbaijan absolutely rejected that path (Alieva, 2016). Knowing it held a strong hand, Baku refused to sign any treaty that required political freedom or allowed international observers to investigate how it ran the country (Paul, 2015). Instead, the regime pressured the European Union to throw out its usual rulebook. It demanded a "bespoke" or custom-made deal that focused only on trade and energy, leaving out the parts about democracy (European Commission, 2015; Remler, 2016). This was a turning point. It proved that when an autocracy has enough oil and gas wealth to bypass the usual rules, the European Union is willing to change its own diplomatic structure to make it work. This paved the way for "energy pragmatism", where gas supplies became more important than democratic values (Huseynov, 2019).

The European Union's decision to drop its democratic demands was not an isolated event. It was pushed forward by a series of global shocks that forced Europe to rethink its priorities. Starting in the mid-2000s, a slow but steady shift toward "energy pragmatism" began to take hold. This was driven by the sudden and alarming realization that Europe was dangerously dependent on Russian gas monopolies. The gas disputes between Russia and Ukraine during the winters of 2006 and 2009 were the sparks that turned this concern into a full-blown systemic panic. When Moscow suddenly cut off gas flows through Ukraine, millions of Europeans were left facing freezing winters and major industrial shutdowns. This destroyed the long-standing belief that Russia was just a business partner that would always keep the heat on regardless of politics. In response, European leaders quickly moved "energy diversification" from a minor economic goal to a fundamental issue of continental security. It was in this atmosphere of strategic anxiety that the Southern Gas Corridor was born. This multi-billion-euro pipeline network was designed to bring Caspian gas

straight to Europe while intentionally avoiding Russian territory, turning it into a major geopolitical priority for the EU.

The urgency surrounding the SGC was amplified following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbas region in 2014. As the geopolitical fracture between Brussels and Moscow deepened into an obvious crisis, the European Union's desperation to secure alternative, non-Russian energy sources reached a critical threshold. This strategic desperation needed a profound reevaluation of the EU's relationship with Baku. Since the success of the Southern Gas Corridor depended entirely on the Aliyev regime's cooperation, European institutions started to split their diplomacy into two separate tracks. The moral goals, which were supposed to be the heart of the Eastern Partnership, were quietly pushed into the background. Issues like human rights violations, fake elections, and the suppression on activists in Azerbaijan were no longer seen as deal-breakers. Instead, European leaders began to view them as minor annoyances that shouldn't be allowed to get in the way of the main goal: ending the reliance on Russian pipelines. As a result, between 2006 and 2014, the idea of "democracy first" was slowly pushed out. It was replaced by a business-like approach where Azerbaijan was no longer treated as a neighbor that needed to change. Instead, it was courted as an essential partner that held the keys to Europe's energy independence.

The structural collapse of European normative goals in the Caspian region ended in February 2022. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine transformed significantly the continental security, its most immediate institutional impact was the violent reprioritization of EU foreign policy. As Brussels struggled to replace Russian hydrocarbons, the power dynamic with Baku inverted completely. The European Union could no longer dictate terms as it was soliciting supply. This institutional realignment occurred in July 2022, when Commission President Ursula von der Leyen arrived in Baku to secure a considerable expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor.

By publicly labeling the Aliyev regime a "crucial, reliable, and trustworthy partner", the Commission went beyond diplomatic politeness, highlighting a major shift in how it talks about Azerbaijan. When you compare this to how the EU talks to neighboring countries like Georgia, where the EU demands strict democratic reforms before offering close partnerships, this polite language stands out. It shows that the EU created a much more accepting narrative for Baku. This choice shows that European leaders chose to prioritize energy security, building a close partnership at the exact moment the Azerbaijani government was tightening control at home and preparing for military action in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Despite this evident prioritization of gas over governance, the EU cannot legally or politically admit to its realist turn. Acknowledging that human rights conditionalities have been permanently traded for energy security would directly violate Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union. Such a concession would dismantle the bloc's foundational self-conception as a "Normative Power" and ignite a severe internal crisis, explicitly pitting the pragmatic executives in the Commission against the ideologically vocal, though practically powerless, European Parliament.

To survive this contradiction without fracturing its own legal architecture, the EU, in tacit cooperation with the Azerbaijani regime, has constructed a robust "discursive façade". The reality of the relationship involves executing massive fossil fuel contracts, supporting state-sponsored mega-events, and actively protecting the autocracy from international sanctions. However, the public-facing diplomatic language tells a completely different story. Rather than addressing structural violence, official bilateral communications rely on a technocratic vocabulary. Terms like "strategic connectivity", "modernization", "intercultural dialogue", and the paradoxical "green energy transition" purposely cut out any mention of human rights. This linguistic strategy is very functional. It allows EU executives to project an image of progressive cooperation to their domestic audiences while maintaining unrestricted, transactional ties with a consolidated dictatorship.

As a result, the nature of Western conditionality has deeply changed. The EU no longer demands actual democratic reform from Baku. It is satisfied as long as the regime is willing to use the vocabulary of liberal internationalism. Because this relationship is hidden so well under layers of friendly, cooperative language, simple numbers don't tell the whole story. You can't see how this trade-off works just by looking at the amount of gas exported or by counting how many times diplomats visit each other. Those metrics only show that a relationship exists, they don't show the moral and political price of that relationship.

To expose what is happening, we need a different approach. We have to take apart the specific words and public performances used by both the EU and Azerbaijan. The next phase of the research is very important because it involves building a specific collection of primary data. This data, made up of the actual speeches, treaties, and official statements, will serve as the foundation for the analysis in the following sections.

2.3. Corpus Construction and Data Collection

Setting clear boundaries for the data is essential. You can't just look at everything. Unlike quantitative research, which might use a computer to scan thousands of emails just to count how many times a word appears, this analysis requires a deep, careful reading of the text to understand its context and hidden meanings. Because this procedure is so detailed, it isn't possible or even useful to try and read every single piece of paper exchanged between the EU and Azerbaijan. Instead, the documents chosen for this study were selected very strategically. They aren't just random examples of daily office work at an embassy. They were picked because they represent "critical intersections". These are specific moments and places where the regime's actual power, its oil wealth and money, runs directly into its need to look legitimate on the world stage.

The documents in this study serve two opposite purposes at the same time. They are the tools used to make business-like energy deals, and they are the rhetorical shields used to make those deals look acceptable to the European public that expects moral leadership. By focusing on these specific documents, the research identifies the exact moments where the compromise between energy security and democratic values is put into writing and cleaned up for the public. To truly understand how Baku's strategy works, the evidence needs to be diverse. If we only looked at energy treaties, we would miss the human rights side of the story. If we only looked at human rights reports, we would ignore the economic reasons why the relationship exists in the first place. Because of this, the data is gathered from three different but connected areas: high-level energy deals, the way Azerbaijan influences European human rights organizations, and the "PR diplomacy" of hosting global events. This three-way approach makes sure the analysis covers the entire system, showing how Brussels and Baku work together to maintain a specific public image.

The first part of the evidence base will be the highest level of government-to-government interaction which is the Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy, signed on July 18, 2022. This document isn't just a standard business contract or a routine trade agreement. It represents the official record of how the "authoritarian trade-off" was solidified after the invasion of Ukraine fundamentally changed European politics and forced the EU to find immediate alternatives to Russian gas.

By adding this Memorandum to the study, the goal is to look at the topic in two parts. First, the research will closely analyze the formal, legal language used in the agreement. A major part of this involves looking at deliberate omissions, essentially, tracking what was purposely left out of the document. By studying the actual clauses and business terms of the deal, this analysis indicates how the EU uses strictly technical and corporate language to portray a fossil fuel transaction as a routine commercial agreement.

The second part of this evidence base is perhaps even more important for showing how the public image of this relationship is created. It moves past the dry, legal text of the Memorandum to focus on the performative diplomacy that happened during the signing ceremony. This part of the data includes official European Commission press releases, joint statements, and the actual transcripts of the speeches given by President Ursula von der Leyen and President Ilham Aliyev in Baku. These documents are essential because they are the main tools European leaders use to "sell" a cold, business-like deal to a European public that expects its government to care about human rights. The analysis will take a close look at how Von der Leyen used her platform to officially promote the Aliyev regime, specifically her choice to label them a "crucial, reliable, and trustworthy partner".

Furthermore, this part of the evidence will include official European Commission statements that managed to frame the expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor as a step toward a "green energy transition" and long-term climate goals. This is a strange contradiction, as the deal is about increasing fossil fuel imports. By analyzing these specific speeches and press materials, the research will identify the exact linguistic tactics the EU uses to borrow progressive, liberal terms, like environmental sustainability and mutual partnership, to give a modern, respectable face to a wealthy autocracy. Finally, selecting this specific group of documents allows the thesis to show how the European Commission builds a protective narrative. This approach helps the EU secure its energy needs while minimizing criticism from those who believe European foreign policy should strictly defend moral and democratic values.

The second part of the evidence base moves away from the executive world of energy deals and into the legislative world of institutional capture. Here, the focus is on how Azerbaijan interacts with the Council of Europe. This is an essential shift in the research. While we can explain why the European Commission gave in to Baku by looking at the desperate need for energy security, the behavior of the Parliamentary

Assembly of the Council of Europe is much harder to justify. It presents a more "insidious" puzzle for us to solve. Unlike the branches of the EU that handle the economy, PACE has no power to sign trade deals or build gas pipelines. Its entire reason for existing is the rigid defense of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Because Azerbaijan is a full member of the CoE and must follow the rules of the European Court of Human Rights, this relationship is the final test of whether Europe's values can survive pressure. By building a collection of data from this arena, the thesis shifts its focus. We aren't just looking at how the West justifies buying gas from autocrats, we are looking at how an autocracy successfully gets inside, weakens, and silences a major human rights watchdog from the inside out.

To track this institutional shift, the data for this section relies on a targeted collection of parliamentary resolutions, debate transcripts, voting records, and investigative dossiers. This corpus spans from the early 2010s, when Baku's lobbying efforts first gained traction, right up to the eventual suspension of the Azerbaijani delegation in early 2024. The centerpiece of this evidence is the January 2013 PACE vote on the Strässer report regarding political prisoners in Azerbaijan. The fact that most European delegates voted to reject their own rapporteur's findings remains one of the clearest examples of institutional capture in the Council of Europe's history. However, looking at the final vote count only tells half the story. To understand how this outcome was reached, the analysis examines the debate transcripts leading up to the vote. By reviewing the speeches and legislative amendments of the delegates who opposed the report, we can track exactly how democratic representatives justified their political positions. The transcripts reveal a coordinated effort where politicians relied heavily on a vocabulary of "constructive engagement", "incremental progress", and "cultural relativism". This section indicates how European delegates utilized standard diplomatic language to challenge their own human rights monitors and shield the regime from formal criticism.

To understand what drove this shift in language, the official parliamentary records must be read alongside the European Stability Initiative's reports on "Caviar Diplomacy". While the ESI dossiers are technically non-governmental, they provide the hard empirical evidence connecting material bribery like luxury trips, illicit cash, and paid lobbying, to the sudden emergence of pro-regime speeches on the assembly floor. By layering these investigative findings over the PACE debate transcripts, the analysis reveals exactly how autocratic capital rewrote the diplomatic vocabulary of the Council of Europe. Baku did not just try to silence its critics, it bought and changed the narrative. This specific part of the research shows how certain European politicians used terms like "complexity" and "young democracy" to delay formal diplomatic action. This approach shows how standard diplomatic language can minimize political consequences, allowing the Aliyev regime to maintain its position within European institutions while continuing its domestic policies.

As final category of the empirical body, international mega events play a fundamental role. They move from the closed-door negotiations of energy diplomacy and the quiet halls of European institutions directly into the globally broadcast arena of performative legitimization. While treaties and parliamentary votes are essential for securing legal and diplomatic cover, they are invisible to the broader public. To win external legitimacy on a transnational scale, the Azerbaijani state relies on aggressive "nation branding". By hosting massive global spectacles, Baku tries to project a curated image of itself as a modern, stable, and indispensable partner. Because these events are presented as apolitical—focusing on international sports or environmental solidarity—they allow the government to project a positive image that softens external scrutiny of its domestic policies. To pull back the curtain on how this rhetorical sanitization works, I gathered in the corpus the texts surrounding two major case studies. The Formula 1 Baku Grand Prix and the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference (COP29). By analyzing the public relations materials, official speeches, and corporate branding surrounding these events, the research shows exactly how a petro-state successfully operationalizes both "sportswashing" and "greenwashing" on the world stage.

Including the Formula 1 case study is essential for the methodology because it illustrates how the government uses major sports events to align itself with Western cultural and commercial interests. The data collected for this section doesn't focus on the actual sports or the races themselves. Instead, it looks at the global PR machine needed to justify holding these events in Baku. The corpus will bring together official press releases from the Baku City Circuit, promotional materials from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and, most importantly, the corporate social responsibility reports from Formula One Management and its big European sponsors. By revising these texts, the research aims to show how words like "global integration", "tech advancement" and "tourism" are weaponized. This vocabulary is used to cover up the reality of living in an authoritarian police state. The goal is to see how the flashy, high-speed images of the race are paired with stories about "European modernity". This forces the world to see the Aliyev regime through the lens of elite entertainment rather than the lens of human rights.

The peak of this public image cleanup, and the most important addition to the research, is the world surrounding Azerbaijan's hosting of COP29 in late 2024. Handing the world's biggest climate summit to a country that lives almost entirely off oil and gas is a huge contradiction. This is especially true given that just a year earlier, in late 2023, the regime carried out a major military offensive and displaced thousands of people in Nagorno-Karabakh. To understand how the European Union and the rest of the world talked their way around this paradox, I collected the official COP29 bid papers, the strategic messaging created by Western PR and lobbying firms hired by Baku, and the speeches given by European leaders during the summit.

Analyzing these documents offers an opportunity to examine how the "authoritarian trade-off" works. This section explores how the vocabulary of sustainability, green energy transition, and global climate cooperation can be adapted to support regime stability. The analysis also looks at how the EU, in its official communications

surrounding the summit, accepted Baku's environmental commitments, which helped enhance the regime's international standing. By looking at how climate diplomacy language is used to reduce political criticism, this thesis shows that the regime's strategy does not rely only on silencing critics, but on using the language of international cooperation to its advantage. Therefore, gathering these three types of documents, energy agreements, parliamentary resolutions, and the public relations material of global mega-events, provides a strong foundation for this study. These specific texts will now be analyzed using the primary tool of this thesis, the Evaluatory Matrix detailed in the following paragraphs.

After I've previously marked out the boundaries of this set of evidence, covering everything from high-level energy deals to the way human rights groups are silenced, and the big public "shows" like the Grand Prix, it is important to realize one thing. In this kind of research, especially when you are trying to read between the lines of official statements, having a huge quantity of documents can be a bit of a trap. If you don't have a very strict, step-by-step way to look at them, your interpretation can easily become messy or biased. Without a clear plan, you might just end up seeing what you already wanted to find. The documents I've picked are very different from each other. On one hand, you have legal contracts like the 2022 Energy Memorandum, and on the other, you have "social responsibility" reports from Formula 1 sponsors. Because these texts are so different and to make sure this research stays on track and pulls out meaningful political facts, the evidence must be run through a standardized analytical process. You need a disciplined system to break them down properly.

Observing the EU's technocratic vocabulary or Azerbaijan's adoption of climate discourse at COP29 is insufficient for a rigorous analysis. Instead, this thesis deconstructs the mechanics of such language, identifying how rhetorical choices are structured, why institutional actors deploy them, and what material political outcomes they secure. To achieve this, the Evaluatory Matrix is going to be our tool.

This matrix acts as the operational bridge between the macro-theoretical concepts of rentier state survival and the empirical evidence. By filtering treaties, transcripts, and press releases through four distinct variables, actor intent, target audience, discursive output, and institutional impact, the framework replaces subjective interpretation with a highly organized, comparative structure. The next subchapter outlines the architecture of this matrix, providing the lens through which the EU's normative defeat and the resulting "authoritarian trade-off" are empirically proven.

2.4. The Evaluatory Matrix: Operationalizing the Analysis

Gathering a large collection of documents is a necessary first step, but simply collecting diplomatic texts is not enough to get valid scientific results. In political science, moving from collecting data to interpreting it is a significant step. Analyzing language is naturally interpretive because the goal is to understand the power dynamics hidden beneath official words. While this flexibility is helpful, it also carries a risk. Without strict rules, analyzing diplomatic statements can easily become too subjective. A researcher might fall into the trap of confirmation bias, simply choosing quotes that support what they already believe about European policy. This would lower the academic quality of the project and turn it into a descriptive essay rather than a structured study. To prevent this bias, the data must be analyzed in a consistent and disciplined way. To meet that standard, this section introduces the main tool used for the study: the Evaluatory Matrix.

This Matrix was made to function as the central analytical engine of the research, serving as the strict, operational bridge between macro-level political theory and micro-level textual evidence. Its primary purpose is to discipline the qualitative interpretation of the corpus by forcing every selected document through a standardized, highly rigorous analysis. Whether the text in question is a legally binding energy memorandum, a deeply polarized parliamentary debate transcript from the Council of

Europe, or a corporate press release regarding the Baku Formula 1 Grand Prix, it will be subjected to the exact same four-variable framework. By establishing these rigid parameters, the matrix effectively translates the abstract, heavily sanitized language of international diplomacy into measurable, theoretically grounded political science data. It demands that the analysis move beyond broad accusations of Western double standards, forcing a forensic examination of exactly how that double standard is discursively constructed, who precisely is constructing it, and what material outcomes it secures. Ultimately, this framework is the specific operational mechanism that will empirically validate the core thesis of the "authoritarian trade-off". It is designed to track and map the precise, linear progression of how an autocracy's hydrocarbon wealth is actively converted into discursive power, diplomatically sanitized, which is then grants institutional protection. By defining these specific evaluatory constraints before engaging with the primary sources, this framework guarantees that the following empirical chapters are not only observational, but are analytical, highly systematized, and defensible against rigorous academic scrutiny.

The first and most important variable present within the Matrix is Variable 1. Actor Identification and Institutional Granularity. In a lot of traditional international relations studies, it's common to treat countries or big groups like the European Union as single, solid blocks. However, if we look at things that way in this thesis, we are going to run into a major problem. Simply stating that "the EU interacts with Azerbaijan" hides the messy, complicated, and often contradictory reality of how a huge bureaucracy works. The first real step of this analytical engine is to break down those big, simple labels and find the specific offices or groups that are writing these speeches and deals. This variable requires us to be very precise. We must look at every document and ask exactly who is speaking, what their specific job is, and how their role connects to the oil and gas economy. For example, a trade official's goals are very different from a human rights monitor's goals, even if they both work for the European Union. By looking at these specific layers, the matrix lets us see the internal contradictions and the hypocrisies that make the "authoritarian trade-off" possible. It shows us how one part

of the system can sign a massive energy contract while another part is supposed to be defending democracy. By using this level of detail, we can stop treating the EU as if it has just one voice. This is the only way to get a serious look at how the trade-off functions in the real world. We start to see that the move away from European values isn't just a general shift in the mood of the Union, it's a specific result of certain powerful departments and leaders prioritizing energy security over everything else. Keeping track of these actors one by one allows us to prove exactly where the system is breaking down and how the regime in Baku manages to stay on the good side of the people who hold the money and power, even while other parts of the European system are criticizing them. This turns a vague observation into a hard, evidence based analysis of institutional behavior.

On the European side of the equation, Variable 1 is used to map the internal institutional divisions that characterize the EU's foreign policy apparatus. The matrix distinguishes between the executive branches, which focus on practical economic goals, and the legislative bodies, which focus on democratic standards. When analyzing a document, the matrix identifies whether the text comes from the European Commission, specifically the Directorate-General for Energy, which works to secure fuel supplies, or from the European Parliament, which does not have the executive authority to enforce geopolitical treaties. By tracking these internal European divisions, the analysis reveals that the EU does not maintain a single, uniform policy toward Baku. Instead, there is a structural division of labor between different European institutions. The Commission handles energy security through the Southern Gas Corridor, while the Parliament simultaneously issues resolutions concerning human rights. This variable shows that European values have not disappeared from policy discussions. Rather, they are primarily expressed within the non-executive parts of the European system, which limits their impact on the immediate geopolitical requirements of the gas trade.

It is just as important to apply this same level of detail to the autocracy itself. You cannot treat Azerbaijan as a single, simple actor, it must be analyzed as a complex and

adaptable machine. Modern dictators don't just rely on the President's office to speak for them. Instead, they make their message public through a huge network of proxies and international partners. When the matrix looks at pro regime talk, it will categorize exactly who is behind it. The matrix will identify if the actor is the State Oil Company (SOCAR), which acts less like a business and more like a political arm of the regime to deal with European energy lobbies. It will also track if the voice is a high-priced Western PR firm or lobbyist hired to wash the regime's reputation using the progressive language people expect in the West. Finally, it will look for "GONGOs", government-run groups that look like charities or NGOs. These are used to flood events like COP29, pushing out real opposition and creating a fake, managed version of public participation.

By using this level of actor identification, the matrix stops diplomatic texts from being treated as simple, empty words. Every press release, treaty, and speech is tied to a specific office or group. This lets the thesis compare who is asking for human rights against who has the money and power to ignore them. Variable 1 maps out the paths of complicity, showing how the regime's proxies go around Europe's "moral" gatekeepers to make direct deals with the people in charge of the gas. Only with this clear map of who is who can the matrix begin to analyze the specific rhetorical weapons they use against each other in the next step.

Once the matrix has mapped the specific actors involved, it must examine the actual tactics they use. This is the job of Variable 2: Strategic Mechanisms and Intent. When looking at how an autocracy survives, it is not enough to just say the Aliyev regime tries to influence Europe. The research must categorize the exact methods used to gain that influence. It must also decode the real goal behind these actions. Modern oil-states don't engage in diplomacy for cooperation, every deal and event is a calculated move to keep the regime in power. When processing the texts, this variable acts as a diagnostic tool, sorting Baku's tactics into three clear types: material leverage, institutional subversion, and performative legitimation.

The first category, material influence, evaluates how a resource-rich state uses its oil and gas infrastructure to gain diplomatic influence. When analyzing documents like the 2022 Energy Memorandum or statements from the European Commission, the matrix examines how Europe's dependency on alternative gas markets affects its diplomatic positions. The mechanism here is the promise of energy security. The strategic goal behind this mechanism is to use Europe's energy vulnerabilities following the crisis in Ukraine to minimize European criticism of Azerbaijan's domestic human rights situation. By categorizing texts under this mechanism, the analysis indicates how economic utility can override the human rights standards and political conditions traditionally required by the European Union's Eastern Partnership framework.

The second typology focuses on institutional destabilization. It moves past the open economics of the gas trade to look at the hidden, corrupt ways the regime captures elites and uses financial pressure. When looking at parliamentary records and investigations into the Council of Europe, the matrix will track the use of "Caviar Diplomacy". These tactics include direct illegal payments, luxury gifts, state lobbying disguised as consulting, and the bribing of European delegates through fake election monitoring trips. The goal of this financial corruption isn't just to hide from criticism, but to actively break the human rights institutions of Europe from the inside. By buying off key politicians, the regime's goal is to build a fake consensus within the very groups meant to police it. This effectively stops the threat of sanctions and creates a false image of democratic legitimacy.

The third and most highly visible typology is performative legitimation, which evaluates the mechanisms of spatial and discursive manipulation, specifically "sportswashing" and "greenwashing". When the matrix processes the vast public relations corpus surrounding the Formula 1 Baku Grand Prix and the UN COP29 Climate Summit, it will isolate how the hosting of global mega-events is used as an instrument of cognitive distortion. The mechanism here involves the expenditure of

sovereign wealth to temporarily transform the autocratic capital into a highly managed, transnational space of entertainment and progressive environmental discourse. The intent is twofold. Internationally, it seeks to force Western corporate sponsors, diplomats, and international media to associate the Azerbaijani state with the universalizing, depoliticized languages of technological modernity and climate solidarity, rather than with ethnic displacement or domestic crackdowns.

Fundamentally, Variable 2 ensures the analysis never forgets the domestic impact of these international moves. The matrix will constantly compare these external strategies with what is happening inside the country. The ultimate goal of all three tactics, selling gas, bribing politicians, or hosting climate summits, is exclusively about staying in power at home. By getting unconditional support and cooperation from the European Union, the regime cuts off the domestic opposition from their international allies. When the EU validates the autocracy, it sends a clear message to Azerbaijani activists, journalists, and dissidents that the West has abandoned them. Variable 2 provides the link that shows how these international deals are specifically designed to give the regime total power and freedom from punishment at home.

After identifying the actors and their methods, the Evaluatory Matrix focuses on its main task: comparing political language with political reality. This is measured by Variable 3: Discursive Output versus Material Outcome. When studying international relations, especially an actor like the European Union that promotes democratic values, it is important not to look at official diplomatic statements on their own. The main goal of this thesis is to examine the gap between official words and practical results in the relationship between Brussels and Baku. To see if an "authoritarian trade-off" is happening, the analysis compares the text of official agreements with actual political and economic events. Therefore, Variable 3 serves as a tool to measure the difference between formal diplomatic statements and the political reality on the ground.

The first component of this variable requires the matrix to isolate and categorize the discursive output. When processing a primary text from the corpus, the analytical engine will systematically extract the specific vocabulary, ideological framing, and narrative justifications used by the institution that wrote it. The objective here is to reveal the exact shape of the discursive façade. For example, when evaluating the 2022 Energy Memorandum or the speeches that went with it from the European Commission, the matrix will document exactly how often and in what context they use depoliticized, progressive, or technical language. This includes terms like "strategic connectivity", "shared values", "intercultural dialogue", and the very contradictory "green energy transition". The analysis will show how this language is specifically built to project a fake, parallel geopolitical reality. In this invented world of words, Azerbaijan is not labeled as a family-run dictatorship that depends on oil money, but is instead transformed into a modern, essential, and equal European partner. This part of the variable tracks the active process of "epistemic laundering" where the politically toxic reality of funding a dictatorship is cleaned up by hijacking the language of the free world.

The second component of Variable 3 imposes a harsh confrontation with the Material Outcome. To measure the hypocrisy of the discursive output, the matrix must establish an empirical baseline of the actual political economy and human rights environment within Azerbaijan during the exact timeframe the text was produced. The analytical engine will cross reference the diplomatic language with the undeniable material facts of the Aliyev regime's behavior. This includes integrating the concurrent documentation of electoral fraud, the arbitrary detention of political prisoners and independent journalists, the monopolization of domestic wealth by the ruling elite, and the aggressive military offensives executed in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and 2023. By establishing this material baseline, the matrix prevents the official diplomatic narrative from existing in a vacuum. It forces the research to acknowledge that while the European Union was rhetorically celebrating "mutual trust" and "climate solidarity", it was at the same time engaged in the multibillion-euro expansion of a

fossil fuel extraction network that directly funded a state apparatus actively engaged in domestic repression and regional warfare.

The main analytical value of Variable 3 lies in comparing these two components. By comparing official language with material outcomes, the matrix maps the divergence between the EU's stated values and its practical policy choices. For example, this variable analyzes the dynamics of the COP29 summit. It defines how international environmental cooperation language was used alongside a domestic economic strategy that relies on expanding the extraction and export of Caspian gas. It also examines how terms like "incremental democratic progress" were used in the Council of Europe while the regime remained free from formal diplomatic sanctions. This variable indicates that formal diplomatic rhetoric plays a functional role in managing the relationship between the two sides. The matrix shows that this language helps balance conflicting priorities, allowing the EU to maintain necessary energy partnerships while addressing its formal commitment to democratic values.

The final component of the Evaluatory Matrix is Variable 4: Institutional Impact and Outcomes. While the previous variable measures the gap between what European actors say and what they do, identifying this divergence is not the only goal of this study. To evaluate the true impact of the relationship, the methodology must trace how diplomatic rhetoric affects the European policy framework. Variable 4 is designed to measure the concrete policy outcomes of this diplomatic language. It asks the central analytical question: What specific legal, diplomatic, or institutional actions did the European Union take, or choose not to take, as a result of these discussions? Therefore, this final variable shifts the matrix's focus from language analysis to actual institutional results, tracking how a resource-dependent state's diplomatic strategy can influence the policy choices of external actors.

When processing the documents, the matrix uses Variable 4 to index and categorize specific cases of institutional policy shifts. This involves tracking how political

conditions are adjusted or reduced within legal frameworks. For example, when analyzing energy diplomacy, the matrix evaluates how the European Commission's focus on a "strategic partnership" changed the language of bilateral agreements. The analysis measures the reduction of explicit human rights clauses, democratic benchmarks, and anti-corruption terms in documents like the 2022 Energy Memorandum, comparing them to the stricter requirements previously found in the older Eastern Partnership Association Agreements. Furthermore, Variable 4 tracks institutional choices regarding policy actions. It documents how the executive branches of the EU emphasized energy security when discussing policy options, which aligned with the decision not to implement economic sanctions following significant regional events, such as the mass displacement of populations in Nagorno-Karabakh. By measuring these policy outcomes, the matrix indicates how this diplomatic strategy can limit external political criticism and reduce the likelihood of diplomatic sanctions.

The application of this variable is also important when analyzing legislative and human rights bodies, specifically the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Here, Variable 4 evaluates how diplomatic strategies impact voting behaviors and institutional outcomes. When the matrix processes the voting records and parliamentary transcripts surrounding the rejection of human rights reports, especially the defeat of the 2013 Strässer report on political prisoners, it evaluates the practical impact of external influence on the assembly. The methodology maps how the material factors identified in Variable 2 and the diplomatic vocabulary identified in Variable 3 aligned with institutional voting choices that protected the state from formal criticism. By tracking these voting patterns, the matrix examines how participating delegates voted against the findings of their own human rights rapporteurs. This represents a key metric of institutional impact: the moment when the decisions of a pan-European human rights body served to limit formal scrutiny of a member state.

Finally, Variable 4 evaluates the institutional impact of hosting global mega-events. When analyzing the decision to award the COP29 presidency to Baku, the matrix

measures the international standing and political validation that a host state receives from participating in United Nations frameworks. It tracks how international participation in these events leads external diplomats and corporate stakeholders to align with the host country's official narrative, which can reduce international attention on domestic critics and journalists.

By analyzing all primary texts through this final framework, the Evaluatory Matrix connects your empirical data to your core theory. It indicates that the "authoritarian trade-off" is a functional, structurally embedded system of exchange. Through this system, energy resources are provided to external markets, while the state receives international recognition and a reduction in formal political scrutiny, which helps maintain its domestic stability.

The methodological power of this research design does not reside in the isolated application of the single variable, but rather in their simultaneous, synergistic synthesis. Variable 1 identifies the specific institutional actors, Variable 2 isolates their strategic mechanisms and coercive intent, Variable 3 measures the hypocritical gap between their sanitized diplomatic rhetoric and the material reality and Variable 4 calculates the final, tangible damage inflicted upon the European normative order. However, these variables are not mutually exclusive, they function as linked, interdependent gears within a singular analytical engine.

When a primary document from the empirical corpus, whether it be the technocratic text of the 2022 Energy Memorandum, the compromised debate transcripts of the Council of Europe, or the aestheticized greenwashing public relations surrounding COP29, is processed through this comprehensive evaluatory matrix, the result is a methodological combination. The matrix strips away the carefully constructed disguise of international diplomatic politeness, dissolving the artificial boundaries that typically separate the economics of fossil fuel extraction from the politics of human rights observation.

By analyzing every treaty, press release, and voting record through this four-part matrix, the thesis provides a clear map of how these institutions interact. With this Evaluatory Matrix fully explained, the framework for the study is now complete. The theoretical ideas about energy resources and European policy have been established, and the history of the relationship between Brussels and Baku has been outlined. The primary sources have been gathered, and the analytical tools are ready. Therefore, this methodology chapter has fulfilled its goal by providing a consistent, structured framework that prevents personal bias.

The study now moves from theory to practice. By applying the matrix to the collected documents, the upcoming chapters will examine the data step by step. Chapter 3 begins this work by focusing directly on the data, exploring how the practical needs of energy security connect with Europe's stated political values.

Chapter 3: Energy Diplomacy and EU Complicity

The handshake in Baku on July 18, 2022, perfectly shows how theoretical ideas look in real life. When European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and President Ilham Aliyev signed a new energy agreement, the "institutional schizophrenia" of the European Union became obvious. This moment, without doubt, proved that economic interests mattered more than standing by political values.

Chapter 3 forms the main evidence-based part of this thesis, focusing on a concept this study calls “The Shield”. It examines how the Azerbaijani government uses its position as an important energy supplier to protect itself from international criticism. Given the decline in global stability caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this chapter argues that Baku relies on energy politics as its main tool to gain international approval and acceptance.

By using the Evaluatory Matrix that was explained in the previous, the following sections break down the "Authoritarian Trade-off" at the heart of EU-Azerbaijan relations. The analysis tracks how this shield developed from its physical beginnings in the Southern Gas Corridor to its political reinforcement in the 2022 Gas Deal, resulting in the "Savior" narrative that now defines relations between both sides. Through this look, the chapter shows how sending physical gas from the Caspian Basin is directly connected to the suppression and silencing of political opposition inside Azerbaijan's borders.

3.1 Moving from Methodology to Material Reality

Moving from the second chapter to the third chapter means shifting from planning the research to looking at the actual data. As established at the end of Chapter 2, the main foundation for this study is now complete. I have already explained how the Azerbaijani government relies on its energy resources to stay in power, and we have shown how the European Union's focus on promoting democratic values has weakened over time. The main tools for this study, specifically the Evaluatory Matrix and the collection of official documents, are ready to be used. This chapter marks the exact moment when those tools stop being just ideas and start being used to analyze real world events. By looking closely at the four key parts of the matrix, we will study who the main actors are, what they are trying to achieve, what the actual results of their deals are, and how these actions change European institutions. Doing this allows us to look past the deceiving polite language used in diplomacy. The following pages will show that phrases like "strategic partnership" are not just friendly words. Instead, they are part of the approach that gives the Azerbaijani government international support while covering up the reality of Europe's growing dependence on its energy.

The central argument of this chapter is that a transactional relationship has developed between Brussels and Baku. This research demonstrates that major infrastructure projects, such as the Southern Gas Corridor, and high-level political agreements, such as the 2022 gas memorandum, extend beyond simple economic cooperation.

The analysis shows how these agreements serve as primary mechanisms for the Azerbaijani government to secure international recognition and political validation. By positioning the country as an alternative source to Russian gas, the administration uses its resource wealth to reduce external political pressure.

This dynamic provides empirical evidence for what scholars describe as the "Authoritarian Trade-off", a policy framework where external actors prioritize energy

security, resulting in a reduction of formal scrutiny regarding domestic human rights and governance. The data indicates a direct correlation: as energy imports into European markets increase, formal political pressure from EU executive bodies decreases.

Finally, this chapter demonstrates how strategic energy requirements can lead the European Union to alter the enforcement of its foundational values, illustrating how a commercial infrastructure project can impact the domestic political stability of a partner state.

To fully understand this relationship, it is necessary to examine it within a much larger global context, focusing on what academic terminology calls the *Erkenntnisinteresse*, the broader intellectual problem that motivates this entire study. Azerbaijan's diplomatic success is not an isolated event, rather, it is a clear symptom of a much larger geopolitical transformation happening across the world. Specifically, this case shows how a small, autocratic state can successfully navigate international relations and secure external validation under the conditions of a weakening international order. For decades, the international system was mainly guided by Western rules, institutional norms, and a stated commitment to spreading democratic values. However, that traditional order is slowly falling apart, leading to a far more divided and practical global landscape.

The major geopolitical crisis caused by the war in Ukraine completely accelerated this weakening process and reshaped the rules of international politics. When the European Union suddenly faced an urgent crisis to replace Russian gas, its long-standing commitment to promoting human rights and democracy was instantly put to the test. In this moment of desperation, immediate energy needs completely overrode the values that Brussels had spent decades claiming to champion. This sudden shift in global affairs gave a small state like Azerbaijan leverage over a much larger and more powerful actor like the European Union. By stepping in to cover Europe's energy needs,

Baku proved that in a changing world where international norms are weakening, small autocratic regimes do not need to reform their political systems to be accepted by the West. Instead, they can use their valuable natural resources to bargain for their survival on equal terms. Ultimately, this situation reveals a profound transition in global politics away from a system guided by shared moral standards and toward pure, transactional power politics. Azerbaijan's success in gaining strong praise from European officials while at the same time suppressing its domestic civil society offers clear proof of this new reality, showing that in a fragmented international system, material resources matter far more than democratic commitments.

To explain how this process works, the analysis applies the Evaluatory Matrix directly to official policy documents and diplomatic speeches. The chapter begins by focusing on the first two pillars of the matrix: identifying the primary actors and analyzing their strategic intentions. By doing this, the data indicates a clear internal division within the European Union's institutional structure. This division is evident when comparing the immediate objectives of the European Commission, represented by President Ursula von der Leyen, with the objectives of the Azerbaijani government. On one side, the European Commission was motivated by an urgent requirement to secure alternative gas supplies to stabilize European energy markets following the supply disruptions with Russia. On the other side, the Azerbaijani administration sought to secure international validation and limit external political interference in its domestic governance.

This data matrix tracks exactly how the specific language used by the EU and Azerbaijan led to major political and legal outcomes. By looking closely at their joint statements, speeches, and agreements, this chapter proves that the words chosen by EU leaders were carefully picked to push traditional human rights rules to the side. Instead of holding Baku accountable to European democratic standards, these deals used language that made human rights look completely secondary to the urgent need for energy security. Ultimately, this chapter shows how words were weaponized to

politically insulate the Azerbaijani government, turning official diplomatic language into a direct tool to protect an autocracy.

To guide the reader through this investigation, the remainder of Chapter 3 is organized into three specific sections that analyze how this relationship operates in practice. First, Section 3.2 examines the physical infrastructure of the Southern Gas Corridor, demonstrating how this pipeline system serves as the material foundation for Azerbaijan's geopolitical relevance. This section explores how long-term energy transit routes establish a physical dependency that connects European markets to Baku, providing the state with structural economic influence. Second, Section 3.3 conducts a close reading of selected texts inspired by discourse analytical approaches, focusing on the historic Memorandum of Understanding signed in July 2022. By examining the official language, public speeches, and press statements from the event, this section analyzes how the European Union balanced its foundational normative values against its immediate energy security requirements. Finally, Section 3.4 evaluates the broader strategic narrative that the Azerbaijani government uses in its international communication. This final section explains how the state positions itself as a vital energy partner during periods of regional instability, translating commercial agreements into international political legitimacy. Together, these sections provide a structured breakdown of how material resources and diplomatic language interact to reduce external political scrutiny.

3.2. The Southern Gas Corridor: The Physical Artery of Autocratic Leverage

Before any high-level political agreements could be signed or diplomatic declarations could be made between Brussels and Baku, a physical relationship had to be constructed in steel and concrete. The Southern Gas Corridor should not be viewed only as a complex engineering project or a commercial pipeline network meant for simple market trade. Instead, it serves as the material foundation of Azerbaijan's entire

geopolitical strategy (Ibadoghlu 2024). This infrastructure is precisely what makes the regime's diplomatic "shield" real and functional. By laying down thousands of miles of physical pipelines across multiple borders, the relationship between the European Union and Azerbaijan moved past vague diplomatic promises and turned into a concrete, long-term physical dependency. This network links the natural gas fields of the Caspian Sea directly to the European continent, keeping locked European energy security into a permanent alliance with Baku (Ibadoghlu and Bayramova 2023). This physical connection ensures that Europe's need for fuel overrides its political values, anchoring Azerbaijan's international immunity directly in the ground.

To understand how the Southern Gas Corridor operates as a defensive shield for the Aliyev regime, it is necessary to see how fixed infrastructure functions as a major political weapon. In international energy markets, there is a fundamental difference between flexible transit systems and fixed transit systems. For example, Liquefied Natural Gas gives importing countries a high degree of geopolitical flexibility, it can be bought on the open market from various shifting suppliers, loaded onto open transport ships, and easily redirected to different ports depending on changing prices or political situations (Ibadoghlu 2024). Pipeline networks, however, operate on a completely opposite logic. They require billions of dollars in upfront capital investments to design, excavate, and construct across multiple international borders, tying the buyer to the specific seller for decades at a time (Ibadoghlu and Bayramova 2023). This physical reality creates a permanent connection that cannot be easily undone or altered.

Once these pipelines are buried deep in the ground, they establish a rigid relationship from which the European Union cannot easily escape. If the EU wishes to change its supplier due to political disagreements or human rights concerns, it faces an almost impossible choice. Walking away from a fixed pipeline network means completely writing off billions of dollars in infrastructure investments and immediately risking severe domestic energy shortages, especially in an environment where alternative gas

options are highly limited (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022). This structural vulnerability gives Baku an immense amount of long-term power over European decisions. Because the physical layout of the pipelines makes diversification away from Azerbaijan economically and logistically ruinous for the near future, the Aliyev regime gains a permanent form of influence. This material reality forces European leaders to prioritize the stability of the bilateral relationship, ensuring they remain cooperative and silent regardless of Baku's domestic suppression.

While the basic definition of a rentier state explains why a government does not rely on its citizens for tax revenue, looking at how this model works in practice shows how the Aliyev regime uses physical transit networks to buy international protection. In Azerbaijan, the numbers show just how deep this resource centralization goes. Oil and natural gas sales regularly account for over 90 percent of the country's total export revenues and fund more than half of the national state budget (Ibadoghlu 2024). This inflow of external cash flows directly into state-controlled structures like the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan, completely bypassing the public and leaving the ruling elite with control over the country's wealth. However, the true geopolitical power of this economic setup is found in how the regime manages its transit capacity. When Baku signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the European Union in July 2022, the agreement explicitly targeted a doubling of the Southern Gas Corridor's capacity to deliver at least 20 billion cubic meters of gas annually to Europe by 2027 (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022).

By tying the state's financial survival to this specific project, the Aliyev government changes the traditional rules of external dependence. The regime does not just sit back and collect oil rents, it uses the European Union's physical reliance on these expanding pipeline volumes to secure political concessions (Ibadoghlu 2026). Because European countries are locked into long-term purchase agreements to justify the costs of expanding the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, they become direct financial stakeholders in the stability of the Azerbaijani state. This

means that any international criticism of Baku's domestic human rights abuses is viewed by European policymakers as a direct threat to the smooth transit of energy (Ibadoghlu and Bayramova 2023). By mixing the centralized wealth of a rentier state with the undeniable strategic value of a major transit route, the Aliyev regime turns hard infrastructure capacity into a functional tool for diplomatic protection, ensuring that Western capitals remain quiet while domestic civil society is systematically dismantled.

The Southern Gas Corridor changed from a regional infrastructure project in a major geopolitical shield. In order to understand why, it is necessary to examine the hard data and historical context surrounding the year 2022. The historical turning point occurred in February 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine completely destroyed Europe's security architecture and forced the European Union into an immediate state of panic over its energy supplies. Prior to the war, Germany and other major European economies relied heavily on cheap Russian pipeline gas to fuel their industries and heat their homes. The sudden interruption of these supply lines, combined with the EU's political decision to implement the REPowerEU plan to rapidly phase out Russian fossil fuels, left European capitals hunting in desperation for immediate alternative energy sources (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022). This structural crisis completely changed the strategic value of Azerbaijan's pipeline infrastructure. A pipeline system that had previously been viewed by many Western policymakers as a secondary, regional project was suddenly transformed into an important lifeline for European survival, completely altering the power balance between Brussels and Baku (Ibadoghlu 2024).

The research of expert Gubad Ibadoghlu highlights the exact scale of this transition and provides the hard numbers that ground this development. As European leaders scrambled to secure non-Russian hydrocarbons, Azerbaijan's existing transit routes became priceless assets overnight. According to data collected by Ibadoghlu, the European Union's urgent demands meant that the material value of the Caspian supply

lines skyrocketed, allowing Baku to command unprecedented diplomatic attention (Ibadoghlu 2024). The Aliyev government recognized that Europe's panic over a winter without gas and industrial collapse had created a window of opportunity. By offering its infrastructure as a direct solution to Europe's supply crisis, the regime ensured that the physical presence of the Southern Gas Corridor would take center stage in all future bilateral discussions (Ibadoghlu and Bayramova 2023). This geopolitical crisis allowed Baku to convert its physical steel and transit routes into direct political leverage, which brought with it also a huge increase in export volumes that silenced Western criticism of Azerbaijan's domestic political environment.

In order to understand the scale of Europe's dependency on Baku, it is important to take a look at the specific volume increases that occurred following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The research provided by experts and by Gubad Ibadoghlu illustrates how fast this physical reliance escalated. According to this data, before the geopolitical crisis reached its peak, Azerbaijani pipeline gas deliveries to the European Union stood at a relatively modest 8.1 to 8.2 billion cubic meters in 2021 (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022; Ibadoghlu 2024). However, as the need for alternative energy sources became more urgent, these export volumes experienced an immediate increase. Driven by the urgent political agreements signed in 2022, Azerbaijan's gas deliveries were projected to rise to 12.8 bcm by the year 2025, with an overall structural commitment to expand the Southern Gas Corridor's capacity to 20 bcm annually by 2027 (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022; Mammadov 2022).

This unprecedented rise in export volume is not only a statistical achievement. It also quickly elevated Azerbaijan to the strategic position of being the European Union's fifth-largest external pipeline supplier (Ibadoghlu 2024). By analyzing these specific numbers, a deeper political reality becomes clear. Europe did not simply decide to buy a larger quantity of gas on the open market. Instead, through these volume commitments, the European Union integrated the Azerbaijani state into its primary, long-term energy network. Increasing gas production and pipeline capacity by billions

of cubic meters within such a short timeframe requires coordination, multi-billion-dollar investments, and institutional alignment. As official policy reviews highlight, hitting these gas targets cannot happen automatically. It requires "joint efforts in a coordinated fashion to accelerate the development and construction of necessary projects" between Brussels and Baku (Mammadov 2022). In plain terms, this means the EU and Azerbaijan cannot just sign a piece of paper, they must actively team up to fast-track the building of physical pipelines, compressor stations, and drilling platforms to get the gas moving. European leaders transformed a basic commercial transaction into a permanent structural dependency by tying Europe's future energy security directly to the Caspian Basin. Baku used this crisis to permanently anchor itself within Europe's critical infrastructure, creating a material reality where the EU cannot afford to challenge the Aliyev regime's domestic actions without putting at risk its own vital supply lines.

We need to look past the basic numbers of export volumes and have an idea of the real political impact of this dependency, therefore I will now apply in the analysis the first part of the Evaluatory Matrix which is identifying the main actors who drove the expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor. Understanding how this diplomatic shield actually operates requires looking at who exactly is sitting at the negotiating table. On the European side, the drive to expand the pipeline network is led by a decentralized coalition of executive and commercial actors. The central institutional figure is the European Commission, which acts as the main political driver coordinating the sudden rush for energy diversification across the continent (Mammadov 2022). Operating alongside the Commission are major national governments, particularly in Southern Europe, such as Italy and Greece, which serve as the crucial physical entry points and primary market beneficiaries of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (Ibadoghlu and Bayramova 2023). Furthermore, this European coalition relies heavily on a network of transnational European energy corporations, which provide the billions of dollars in capital and the highly specialized technical expertise required to manage and expand these infrastructure projects. Together, these European actors approach the partnership

primarily through an economic and technocratic lens, seeking to stabilize a panicked market.

On the Azerbaijani side, the research and the matrix reveals a fundamentally different type of actor, characterized by extreme political centralization. The ultimate decision-making power does not rest with a diverse coalition, but it is centered in the hands of the President Ilham Aliyev, who personally directs both the country's foreign policy and its energy strategy (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022). Operating directly beneath the authority of the presidency is the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR). In the context of a rentier state, SOCAR functions not only as a standard commercial enterprise, but as the main financial engine and the direct operational arm of the authoritarian government itself (Ibadoghlu 2024). Backing SOCAR is the exclusive inner circle of the ruling elite, who exercise monopolistic control over the country's energy infrastructure, transit capacity, and resulting financial revenues. By analyzing and indicating these specific actors through the matrix, an absolutely and highly significant contrast emerges. A decentralized group of European technocrats, politicians, and corporate executives desperately seeking market stability is negotiating directly with a centralized, autocratic power structure entirely focused on regime survival. This difference in institutional structure is exactly what allows this collaboration and trade-off to be successful, as the unified Azerbaijani elite can easily leverage Europe's fragmented economic panic to secure its own political protection.

It is important to understand the actual intent of the European actors using a clear, realistic lens rather than an idealized one. When the European Commission approached Azerbaijan following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, it was not acting from a position of strategic luxury, but rather out of desperation (Mammadov 2022). The sudden severing of Russian hydrocarbon imports created an existential threat to the European economy. As formalized under the emergency framework of the REPowerEU plan, the primary goal of the European Union was strictly focused on short-term political and economic survival. The executive leaders in Brussels were under domestic pressure to

achieve three immediate objectives. Stabilizing the energy markets, preventing skyrocketing gas prices from sparking mass protests or industrial shutdowns across member states, and replacing the loss of Russian supply as quickly as physically possible (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022; Ibadoghlu 2024).

Because of this devastating economic pressure, the European Commission viewed the expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor strictly as a technical, apolitical solution to the highly unpredictable crisis. The institutional focus of the EU was entirely focused on construction deadlines, pipeline capacities, investment frameworks, and delivery volume agreements. By focusing only on technical details like gas volumes and prices, European leaders chose to ignore the bigger picture. They completely separated their urgent need for energy from their usual talk about human rights and democracy. In doing so, they intentionally overlooked the fact that they were making a deal with an authoritarian government (Ibadoghlu 2024). For the European technocrats, securing the gas became vital and the democratic deficit of the supplier became completely irrelevant. Eventually, this desperate drive for market stability stripped the resulting energy agreements of any human rights conditionality, allowing the EU to legally and politically justify a deep, structural alliance with an autocratic regime simply by framing it as a matter of emergency economic necessity.

While the European Union rushed to expand the Southern Gas Corridor out of a desperate need for energy, the Azerbaijani government had a completely different goal. By applying the Evaluatory Matrix to Baku's actions, it becomes clear that the Aliyev regime's motivations were purely political and aimed entirely at keeping his regime in power for the long term (Ibadoghlu 2026). Rather than simply seeking to stabilize a volatile energy market or contribute to a broader system of global energy security, President Ilham Aliyev recognized Europe's sudden weakness as a historic opportunity to strengthen his government against external criticism. By quickly agreeing to send more gas through the pipeline, the regime aimed to hit two important goals at the exact same time. First, the infrastructure investments and long-term delivery contracts

guaranteed an uninterrupted, unconditioned flow of capital directly into state reserves, thereby keeping the ruling elite wealthy and powerful, allowing them to maintain strict control over the country without relying on the public (Ibadoghlu 2024). Second, and even more importantly, making Europe depend on this specific gas supply gave Baku strong political influence over key European institutions.

The Azerbaijani leadership clearly understood that by stepping in as a strong partner to satisfy Europe's desperate material needs during a crisis, it could permanently eliminate Western pressure regarding its own democratic reforms and human rights abuses (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022). Aliyev weaponized the physical flow of hydrocarbons to force a compromise, knowing perfectly well that European leaders would abandon their traditional normative values without a problem rather than risk another freezing winter without enough energy (Ibadoghlu and Bayramova 2023). This strategy meant that for every billion cubic meters of gas promised to Europe, the EU would criticize Baku less for its domestic crackdowns on civil society and political opposition. The huge expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor was not just a business deal. The Azerbaijani government planned it from the beginning to act as a political shield, making sure the ruling elite would stay in power no matter what was happening in the rest of the world.

To see how this final deal was made, we need to look closely at how these two very different goals collided at the negotiating table. When the European Union's desperate need for market stability clashed with the Aliyev regime's careful plan to stay in power, the situation favored Baku. Because European leaders were under pressure from an immediate crisis, their narrow focus on getting physical gas played perfectly into the Azerbaijani government's long-term political strategy (Mammadov 2022). The European Commission treated the expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor purely as a business math problem of supply and demand. By doing so, they completely took human rights out of the talks. President Aliyev and his inner circle saw this vulnerability immediately, understanding that the EU's fear of a winter energy collapse

and domestic economic ruin completely outweighed its commitment to promoting human rights or civil liberties (Ibadoghlu and Bayramova 2023).

This conflict of interests indicates that the European Union prioritized a long-term energy partnership over specific democratic conditions. In the process of securing the July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding, which aimed to double gas deliveries to 20 billion cubic meters by 2027, European policymakers adjusted their political leverage regarding domestic governance within the partner state (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022).

The diplomatic framework showed that commercial reliability was the primary metric of the partnership, which correlated with a reduction in formal Western scrutiny regarding Azerbaijan's internal policies. As a consequence, this interaction aligned with the strategic objectives of the Azerbaijani government. The European Union secured the necessary energy imports to stabilize its internal markets, while the administration in Baku established a framework where its domestic political practices faced fewer diplomatic consequences from European institutions (Ibadoghlu 2024). This focus on energy security modified a standard commercial transaction into a stable political arrangement, reducing the impact of international accountability mechanisms on the partner state.

The development of the Southern Gas Corridor illustrates how infrastructure, capital investment, and resource data combine to shape the geopolitical relationship between the European Union and Azerbaijan. The physical reality of fixed pipeline networks establishes a long-term structural dependency that limits the implementation of a values-based foreign policy (Ibadoghlu and Bayramova 2023).

By addressing Europe's requirement for alternative energy supplies following the war in Ukraine, the Azerbaijani government established strategic influence before formal diplomatic negotiations began. Because European institutions prioritized securing

specific volumes of non-Russian natural gas, the bilateral relationship became primarily organized around energy supply parameters (Mammadov 2022). Once this infrastructural interdependence was established, the baseline for subsequent political interactions was set (Ibadoghlu 2024).

Physical pipelines alone did not fully define this partnership. Both sides still needed a formal framework to align their public and legal positions. With the physical infrastructure in place, the relationship shifted toward diplomatic communication. This transition leads directly into the next section, which conducts a close reading inspired by discourse analytical approaches of the July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding. This upcoming analysis examines how official diplomatic text was structured to balance democratic principles against the immediate needs of European energy security (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022).

3.3. The 2022 EU Memorandum of Understanding

Now that the physical and structural foundations of Europe's growing reliance on gas from the Caspian Basin have been clearly established, the analysis must shift its primary focus. We need to look away from the physical infrastructure and move toward the specific language used to formalize, protect, and justify this unequal relationship. The construction of steel pipelines and the promises of specific gas volumes provided the physical framework for Europe's dependence. However, it was the official signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy in Baku that gave this political compromise its formal, written stamp of approval.

Signed on July 18, 2022, by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, this bilateral agreement served as the official trigger for a deep transformation in the European Union's diplomatic language. We

should not look at this Memorandum and the public speeches that went with it as just routine paperwork, normal bureaucratic steps, or standard press updates. Instead, a close reading of these texts reveals them to be the core piece of a strategic political cover-up.

By carefully breaking down the text of the agreement, it becomes obvious that official language was carefully rewritten in real time to shift Europe's geopolitical morality. European leaders completely swapped out their traditional, long-standing promises to defend democratization and human rights. In their place, they used a carefully chosen vocabulary centered entirely on practical urgency, commercial necessity, and mutual reliability. This deliberate change in words created a protective diplomatic framework around the deal. Ultimately, this turning point demonstrates that Europe's compromise does not only exist in the physical security of pipeline valves. It is also continuously built and maintained through a calculated speech strategy designed to clean up the image of an authoritarian partner in direct exchange for energy security.

A foundational premise of text analysis is that diplomatic language is rarely a neutral instrument used only to transmit technical data, rather, it can reflect a strategic exercise of political priorities. Discursive choices can frame new political relationships, establish state hierarchies, and legitimize specific bilateral behaviors (O'Byrne 2022; Karimli 2022). By applying a close reading inspired by discourse analytical approaches to the text of the Memorandum of Understanding and the joint press declarations delivered in Baku, this analysis moves beyond a surface-level summary of the diplomatic prose. Specifically, by examining the specific vocabulary and strategic omissions within the statements made by European leadership, the analysis tracks the institutional adjustments of the Authoritarian Trade-off (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022).

This approach indicates how the European Union altered its traditional discourse of democratic conditionality to accommodate immediate energy security goals. Through

these specific rhetorical adjustments, the EU's executive branch structured an official narrative that balanced the partners' differing political systems, reducing the potential for an institutional legitimacy crisis while securing its energy interests (Mammadov 2022).

To see how this language-based shield works in practice, the analysis must look directly at the specific wording and structural layout of the Memorandum of Understanding itself. Moving past the immediate geopolitical crisis that triggered its creation, the agreement acts as a deliberate political tool designed to create an appearance of equal status between completely different political systems. Throughout the document, the relationship between the European Union and Azerbaijan is described using very friendly and equal language, making both sides look like equal partners. The text relies on idealized diplomatic concepts and administrative themes such as "shared commitments", "strategic coordination" and "mutual trust" to characterize what is, in reality, just energy dependency (Mammadov 2022; Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022). By continuously using these specific, elevated terms into a formal bilateral accord, the text achieves a powerful ideological objective. It transforms a simple transactional commodity purchase into a deep, values-based strategic alliance (Karimli 2022). This calculated choice of language does not just facilitate the logistics of resource transit, it also manufactures a false equivalence that linguistically whitewashes the profound, systemic institutional differences separating democratic, rules-based Brussels from the autocratic, rentier governance of Baku (O'Byrne 2022). Under normal commercial circumstances, a supply agreement would be confined to technical volume metrics, delivery timelines, and financial clearing mechanisms. Instead, by using broad, cooperative language, the 2022 MoU suggests a total alignment of political goals and mutual respect. This rhetorical approach effectively cleans up the image of the Aliyev regime by wrapping its highly centralized, repressive power structure in the mild, universally accepted language of modern international diplomacy. Ultimately, the written text of the Memorandum acts as the first layer of the defensive shield. It allows European and Azerbaijani leaders to present an urgent fossil-

fuel deal as a noble effort toward shared strategic goals, thereby blocking any local or international moral criticism regarding Azerbaijan's systematic domestic human rights abuses.

The analysis must move from the broad text of the Memorandum to a micro-level deconstruction of the official press speech delivered by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Baku during the signing ceremony on July 18, 2022. The rhetorical centerpiece of her address relies on a strong binary contrast designed to legitimize the EU's sudden interest toward the Caspian region. Von der Leyen explicitly said that even before Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, Russian gas supplies had proven to be "no more reliable", which forced the European Union to "diversify away from Russia and to turn towards more reliable, trustworthy partners" (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022, 1-2). Immediately following this contextual setup, she introduced the main discursive theme of the agreement, directly stating "And I am glad to count Azerbaijan among them. You are indeed a crucial energy partner for us and you have always been reliable" (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022, 2; Mammadov 2022). This repetitive, calculated usage of terms like "reliable", "trustworthy", and "crucial" works as a powerful diplomatic tool that goes far beyond a simple validation of logistical capabilities. By using this specific vocabulary as president of the European Commission, von der Leyen constantly projects an image of absolute predictability, honor, and institutional reliability onto the Azerbaijani state apparatus (O'Byrne 2022).

This discursive refinement is highly important because it happens at the exact historical moment when the Aliyev regime is aggressively carrying out domestic suppressions, intensifying its silencing of independent journalists, and dismantling what remains of local civil society (Karimli 2022). Calling a state partner 'reliable' and 'trustworthy' traditionally meant a complete validation of that country's respect for international laws and rules-based governance. However, by using this idea within a narrow, crisis-driven context, the speech creates an isolated narrative space where the autocratic nature of

the Baku government is cleaned up. The regime's centralized, repressive efficiency is politically reframed as a guarantee of commercial stability, turning a human rights problem into a strategic benefit for an unstable and panicked European market. In the end, von der Leyen's exact words give the Aliyev government political cover. By publicly tying Europe's economic survival to Azerbaijan's perceived "honor" as a partner, the language ensures that any future Western criticism regarding domestic tyranny is made politically useless and secondary to the more important narrative of mutual trust.

A detailed structural and textual analysis of this language shows the manipulation involved in changing the meaning of the word "reliable". In traditional European Union foreign policy, especially within the European Neighborhood Policy and various partnership agreements, calling a country a "reliable partner" usually came with political and ethical expectations. It showed that a country generally respected international law, followed rules-based institutional frameworks, and shared a basic commitment to democratic values, human rights, and transparent governance. However, in the text of the July 2022 energy deal and von der Leyen's speech, the word "reliable" is completely stripped of its usual meaning regarding political values. Instead, "reliability" is emptied out and rebuilt in a purely business-like, practical way. In this new, crisis-driven language, a partner is judged as reliable based only on its ability to keep gas flowing through the pipelines, build more drilling sites, and meet strict delivery numbers during a market shortage (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022; Mammadov 2022).

This change in meaning achieves a major political goal. It cleans up the image of the Aliyev government by changing how the rest of the world views a dictatorship. By making political worth all about business predictability, this language turns Azerbaijan's strict control from a terrible human rights issue into a highly valuable benefit for Europe (O'Byrne 2022). Within a standard democratic framework, unexpected infrastructure expansions, long-term capital investments, and energy

reallocations would be subject to prolonged parliamentary debates, intense environmental lawsuits, judicial reviews, and public opposition from the civil society. On the contrary, the total concentration of power within Baku's ruling elite eliminates these democratic tensions entirely (Karimli 2022). The authoritarian state can guarantee regulatory compliance, command immediate domestic resource allocation, and enforce rapid pipeline construction because it faces no independent domestic opposition or institutional checks and balances. By reinterpreting this authoritarian efficiency as a form of admirable geopolitical "trustworthiness", von der Leyen's rhetoric implicitly validates the structural mechanisms of the dictatorship. The linguistic strategy communicates to international markets that the suppression of domestic civil liberties is not an obstacle to partnership, but rather the very political condition that guarantees the stable, uninterrupted flow of Caspian hydrocarbons to European consumers.

The evaluation of a strategic text must look beyond what is explicitly spoken to critically examine what is systematically excluded, a linguistic phenomenon known as "structural omission". Within the diplomatic discourse surrounding the July 2022 energy agreement, these mechanics of silencing are deployed with remarkable structural precision to protect the EU-Azerbaijan partnership from normative critique. A rigorous reading of both the final text of the Memorandum of Understanding and von der Leyen's official public address reveals an obvious absence of any substantive, conditional language regarding fundamental human rights, democratization, judicial independence, or systemic state repression (Ibadoghlu 2024). While the European Commission President does quickly mention wider social issues near the end of her speech, the specific choice of words tells the real story. She states that to reach Azerbaijan's full potential, it is important to "create the right conditions for investor confidence", specifying that this objective "includes a greater involvement of civil society, and a free and independent media". Rather than treating democratic freedoms as basic moral duties or non-negotiable rules for European foreign actions, this small, passing mention clearly puts civil society and free media below the practical use of

Western money and market stability. By framing human rights only as a helpful sub-part of "investor confidence", the text completely strips these values of their political urgency, making them totally secondary to the main business goals of growing the Southern Gas Corridor and doubling gas supplies. This manipulation of language proves that the total silence on Baku's internal dictatorship was not a paperwork mistake, but a planned choice of words designed to ignore, isolate, and block out any critical opinions. By making real human rights accountability completely invisible, the official writing ensures that the cruel nature of the supplier state is hidden, leaving the main story of European energy survival totally unchallenged.

The deep manipulation of words, rewritten meanings, and missing pieces seen in this official agreement cannot be viewed as just random speaking mistakes. Instead, they show a direct, real example of the European Union's deep internal and political split, a system conflict often called "institutional schizophrenia". In this review, the language used during the Baku meeting highlights a divide between the clashing daily goals of the EU's main governing branches. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen traveled to Azerbaijan acting as the primary representative and diplomatic lead of the pragmatic, executive wing of the Union, reflecting the immediate, technocratic priorities of the European Commission and the Directorate-General for Energy. During this period of acute geopolitical shock and unprecedented market volatility, this executive apparatus operated under a singular, overriding operational mandate. To secure immediate, alternative fossil fuel volumes to prevent a catastrophic energy collapse across the continent. By framing her entire diplomatic mission around the necessity to "double the supply of gas" to "20 billion cubic meters", von der Leyen effectively aligned the EU's public voice with pure realpolitik. The executive branch went as far as praising the autocracy as "a crucial partner not only for our security of supply, but also in our efforts to become climate neutral". This specific phrasing is highly revealing; it takes a transactional, dirty energy deal and wraps it in the noble, diplomatic language of Europe's green transition, effectively polishing the image of the dictatorship.

Through these promises of "stable and reliable gas supplies", the executive branch strategically used the urgency of the energy crisis to completely bypass, ignore, and override the normative, value-driven foreign policy discourse that has traditionally been institutionalized, and demanded by the EU's legislative wing, most notably the European Parliament. While von der Leyen was in Baku praising Azerbaijan as a trustworthy partner, MEPs were passing resolutions condemning the Aliyev government's treatment of journalists, political prisoners, and civil society organizations (Ibadoghlu 2024). These two positions were not in dialogue with each other. The Commission did not engage with the Parliament's concerns or attempted to incorporate democratic conditionality into the agreement. While the legislative branch consistently treats human rights and democratic conditionality as non-negotiable prerequisites for external partnerships, the Commission used the pressure of the crisis to protect its energy negotiations from these very checks and balances. By monopolizing the linguistic parameters of the Memorandum of Understanding, the executive branch separated external trade security from domestic ethical accountability. The MoU made sure that the urgent resource needs of the European markets could be rapidly satisfied without being interrupted by the legislative branch's persistent demands for democratic reforms in Baku. This institutional division demonstrates that during periods of material scarcity, the EU's executive branch may adjust its external rhetoric. This dynamic illustrates the operational mechanics of the Authoritarian Trade-off, where immediate resource security requirements take precedence over the Union's codified commitments to external democratic conditionality.

While von der Leyen stood alongside Aliyev and described Azerbaijan as a trustworthy and reliable partner, MEPs were issuing resolutions that told a very different story. The Parliament was condemning Azerbaijan's structural violence. The EU was publicly praising a government that its own legislative branch was publicly condemning. European lawmakers were actively issuing harsh institutional resolutions that

condemned Azerbaijan's domestic human rights abuses, its widespread political imprisonments, its aggressive suppression of independent journalism, and its ongoing regional military aggression in the South Caucasus (Mamedov 2022; Ibadoghlu 2024). These two narratives existed simultaneously, within the same institution, and they were in direct contradiction with each other. This deep tension reveals that the European Union was far from speaking with a unified diplomatic voice during the peak of the energy crisis. Instead, the discourse surrounding the meeting shows a calculated effort by the executive branch to intentionally marginalize and suppress the Parliament's values-driven stance. By dominating the immediate media cycle and utilizing the narrative of existential European resource scarcity, the Commission effectively neutralized the legislative branch's persistent demands for democratic conditionality. The legislative branch's normative discourse was treated not as a guiding foreign policy principle, but as an institutional inconvenience that needed to be contained so it would not disrupt or jeopardize the final execution of the energy deal. This deliberate exclusion underscores that the "Shield" does not only operate externally to sanitize an autocratic supplier; it functions internally as well, allowing the EU's pragmatic, technocratic executive to silence its own democratic oversight mechanisms in the pursuit of raw material survival.

A critical linguistic examination of the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding reveals how its specific phrasing was intentionally designed to construct a customized, "bespoke" bilateral framework. In the conventional execution of European Union foreign policy, particularly within the traditional architecture of the European Neighborhood Policy and standard Association Agreements, external partnerships rely on standardized, rigid legal templates. These conventional frameworks embed the normative "more-for-more" principle, which explicitly conditions deeper economic integration, institutional market access, and financial assistance on verifiable domestic progress in democratic governance, judicial independence, and rule-of-law reforms. However, the tailored prose of the 2022 agreement avoided these standardized legal mechanisms and conditional clauses (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022;

Mammadov 2022). By using a highly flexible, non-binding text, the document established a localized sector-specific partnership that separated the energy sector from broader normative scrutiny (O'Byrne 2022). This strategic linguistic engineering allowed the Aliyev regime to extract European political validation, long-term commercial commitments, and substantial infrastructural investment coordination while bypassing traditional democratic requirements (Karimli 2022). By replacing the standardized language of political conditionality with a tailor-made rhetoric of mutual commercial necessity, the text of the MoU created an exceptional, norm-free diplomatic path. This framework signaled to Baku that its domestic governance model would remain completely unpenalized and would face no financial consequences.

Deepening the analysis of the political trade-off reveals exactly how the official discourse surrounding the July 2022 agreement establishes a strict, non-negotiable order of priorities. By framing the expansion of Caspian gas infrastructure as a necessity to protect millions of European citizens from the economic warfare of a hostile Russia, President von der Leyen's language positions European internal energy security as a superior moral virtue, one that outranks external normative concerns such as Azerbaijani human rights violations (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022; Mammadov 2022). For example, in her opening remarks in Baku, von der Leyen explicitly stated that Europe had "decided to diversify away from Russia and to turn towards more reliable, trustworthy partners", adding, "I am glad to count Azerbaijan among them". This specific choice of words transforms a standard realpolitik transaction into a rescue mission, shifting the primary ethical duty of the European Commission away from promoting global democracy and redirecting it toward protecting its own citizens. In this carefully engineered framework, maintaining public silence regarding the Aliyev regime's domestic abuses is reframed as a rational sacrifice for the greater good of European solidarity. The text goes so far as to praise the authoritarian state as a "crucial partner not only for our security of supply, but also in our efforts to become climate neutral". By attaching Baku directly to Europe's praised green transition goals, the discourse neutralizes any ethical disagreement. The

structural terms of this "Authoritarian Trade-off" are made even more obvious by how human rights are explicitly minimized in the text. When von der Leyen finally mentions civil liberties near the end of her address, she packages them as a tool for business, stating that Azerbaijan needs "a greater involvement of civil society, and a free and independent media" specifically to "create the right conditions for investor confidence". This clear framing proves that when a democratic superpower faces a strong resource crisis, the immediate preservation of its own economic welfare legitimately surpasses the political liberties of the supplier state's citizens.

Azerbaijani state media and government institutions used President von der Leyen's explicit public description of Ilham Aliyev of the country as a "crucial" and "reliable" partner to build up its political legitimacy at home and abroad (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022; Karimli 2022). Within the domestic news space, this high-profile approval was highlighted to show that European institutions respected the government's leadership. As a result, the specific vocabulary used by the EU became a useful tool for local political validation. By including these Western expressions of trust in its official communications, the Azerbaijani government strengthened its narrative position. This framework gave the administration diplomatic leverage to counter future Western criticism about its human rights record or regional policies, allowing Baku to frame such criticism as inconsistent with the EU's own formal statements (O'Byrne 2022). This high-level validation shows how diplomatic language can be used by a partner state to lower the impact of international political pressure. This process highlights how the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding worked as a mechanism that helped protect the international standing of the host government.

In conclusion, the analysis of the July 18, 2022 summit proves the active construction and application of the linguistic "Shield" as a core mechanism of the Authoritarian Trade-off. As this section has demonstrated, the formal text of the Memorandum of Understanding and President von der Leyen's accompanying rhetoric succeeded in legally and politically subordinating foundational human rights to the existential

priority of European energy security (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022; Mammadov 2022). Through the strategic deployment of the "reliable partner" trope, semantic redefinitions of trustworthiness, and calculated structural omissions, the European Union's executive branch effectively detached its commercial energy procurement from any democratic conditionality (Karimli 2022; O'Byrne 2022). By manufacturing this protective linguistic shield within the highest institutional echelons of Brussels, the Aliyev regime acquired an invaluable layer of international political legitimacy (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022). Therefore, safely insulated from Western normative sanctions, Baku was able to confidently transition away from basic defensive diplomacy, which focused merely on deflecting international criticism, and pivot toward a far grander, offensive public relations strategy. This smooth strategic transition leads directly into the next subchapter, Section 3.4, which will examine how the Azerbaijani regime systematically transformed this elite-level, technocratic diplomatic language into a broader, highly public "Savior" narrative designed to project autocratic power on the global stage (Ibadoghlu 2024).

3.4. The "Savior" Narrative

While the technocratic formulation of the July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding successfully constructed a localized linguistic shield within elite diplomatic circles, the Azerbaijani state recognized that long-term autocratic survival and external legitimation could not rely exclusively on insulated, bureaucratic transactions. To permanently neutralize external normative pressures, Baku needed to scale its strategy from a private elite consensus into a macro-geopolitical, public-facing offensive public relations campaign. This strategic imperative delivered the "Savior" narrative, a highly calculated, aggressive rebranding mechanism designed to fix the international perception of the Aliyev regime. Through this strategy, the Azerbaijani state actively transformed its image from a defensive, resource-rich post-Soviet autocracy, which had traditionally been forced to deflect Western criticisms regarding its domestic human

rights record, into an indispensable, active global savior capable of rescuing the European continent from imminent economic ruin and political destabilization (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022; Ibadoghlu 2024). By capturing the public imagination during a period of acute continental vulnerability, Baku shifted the terms of international engagement from a position of transaction to one of existential benevolence. This public relations offensive meant that the Aliyev administration no longer wanted only tolerance from its Western counterparties, rather, it framed the expansion of its transit architecture as an act of profound strategic solidarity, capitalizing on European desperation to build an unquestionable narrative of indispensability (Mammadov 2022; Karimli 2022). In the end, this macro-level shift allowed the regime to weaponize its energy identity on the global stage, presenting its domestic control not as an authoritarian anomaly to be sanctioned, but as a vital guarantee of regional predictability and supply security that Europe could not afford to lose.

This total rebranding campaign cannot be understood in isolation, rather, it must be contextualized within the wider academic debate regarding the structural transformation and contemporary fragmentation of the international system. The post-Cold War unipolar international order, traditionally anchored by Western normative hegemony, mandatory democratic conditionality, and the institutional expansion of liberal internationalism, has experienced a systematic weakening, giving way to a more fragmented, transactional multipolar reality (Börzel and Risse 2012). For decades, non-Western states, particularly post-Soviet autocracies, operated within an asymmetric global architecture where external political legitimacy was mainly depending on at least a superficial alignment with Western-defined governance norms (Manners 2002). However, the sudden and catastrophic escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 acted as a definitive geopolitical catalyst, exposing the severe, structural vulnerabilities rooted within the European energy matrix and accelerating the erosion of this normative hierarchy.

By suddenly cutting its primary pipeline dependencies, the European Union was rushed into an acute panic over resource security, a crisis that effectively stripped Western powers of their traditional moral leverage and forced an immediate reordering of political priorities. In this climate of universal distress, European policymakers were forced to prioritize raw material survival and internal economic stabilization over the global promotion of democratic standards or human rights advocacy (Youngs 2004). This structural shift engineered an unprecedented historical opportunity for small autocratic states to aggressively pursue and extract external political legitimacy without undergoing domestic liberalization. As Western institutions shifted from a focus on norm diffusion to a priority of material acquisition, the traditional leverage of democratic conditionality was significantly reduced (Börzel and Risse 2012). The Azerbaijani government recognized that this shift changed the traditional balance of power between the two actors. Europe's immediate physical requirement for alternative hydrocarbon flows transformed Azerbaijan's transit infrastructure into an important geopolitical asset. This adjustment in regional relations allowed the state to use its strategic leverage, trading "material security" for a level of political acceptance that minimized external governance pressures. This dynamic shows a clear example of how resource-rich states can navigate international relationships to support their own "political survival" in the modern era (Ibadoghlu 2026).

This change requires a closer look at how non-democratic states build their international standing in a modern, multipolar world. In today's changing global environment, Western values and democratic standards are no longer the only way for a government to gain international acceptance (Stuenkel 2016). Instead, the shift away from a Western-dominated world has changed how these governments secure their position abroad, allowing smaller states to overcome previous limitations and gain real leverage over larger global actors. By taking advantage of a divided geopolitical landscape, these governments avoid Western political pressure. They achieve this not by isolating themselves, but by connecting themselves directly into the vital

infrastructure networks and supply chains that major democratic states depend on (Hurd 1999; Aliyev 2025).

Azerbaijan's strategic behavior over the past several years shows how this dynamic works in practice. By leveraging its transit geography and positioning its pipeline network as an important asset for European economic stability, Baku shows how a small state can translate localized resource partnerships into broader geopolitical influence. This exercise of state leverage changes the traditional relationship between a major regional actor like the EU and a smaller partner state. Instead of adjusting its policies to meet the liberal-democratic expectations of Western partners, the Azerbaijani administration has established a structural dependency. Under this framework, any disruption to energy cooperation carries economic consequences for European markets (Ibadoghlu 2026). This strategic alignment with Western resources needs help to protect the host government from external political pressure. It suggests that within contemporary international relations, control over material transit routes can be effective for maintaining external legitimacy and reducing the impact of international normative critique.

The practical application of this external validation shows up in the deliberate use of a broad "Savior" narrative, where the regime takes advantage of Europe's material anxieties to improve its global standing. This complex public branding campaign relies on a synchronized communicative apparatus including Azerbaijani state organs, diplomatic missions, and state-backed international media outlets, which have reframed the expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor not as a transactional commercial venture, but as an act of profound strategic solidarity with a vulnerable and resource-deprived European continent (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022). Central to this rhetorical mechanism is the aggressive contrast of Azerbaijan's stability against the geopolitical hostility of the Russian Federation. While Moscow is condemned for weaponizing its gas reserves to impose a punitive regime of "energy blackmail" upon Western consumers, Baku projects itself as the structural solution to

Russian revanchism, a reliable, benevolent partner stepping into the breach to secure Western civilization (Mammadov 2022; Karimli 2022). By positioning itself as the indispensable guardian of European industrial and economic survival, the Aliyev administration has engineered a permanent pivot in the international discourse (O'Byrne 2022). This highly effective rebranding strategy constructs a protective shield around the regime, effectively escaping Western normative critique, by elevating its status to that of an irreplaceable geopolitical support. Baku has successfully forced international institutions to drop concerns over domestic structural violence, human rights regressions, and the eradication of civil society in exchange of continental energy security (Ibadoghlu 2024).

To fully understand the mechanics behind Baku's successful positioning, it is helpful to integrate Thomas Risse's revolutionary theoretical framework on "communicative action" and strategic persuasion into the analysis of Azerbaijan's diplomatic offensive. Risse theorizes communicative action as a distinct mode of social interaction that stands apart from both the utility-maximizing calculations of strategic bargaining and the rule-guided compliance of sociological institutionalism. Within this paradigm, actors do not only exchange pre-determined preferences or execute coercive leverage, rather, they engage in a rigorous process of argumentation, deliberation, and persuasion aimed at reaching a mutual understanding and establishing a shared definition of a given situation based on the validity claims of the "better argument".

As a consequence of the 2022 European energy crisis, Azerbaijani diplomats and state organs adjusted their diplomatic strategy to match the practical and logistical priorities of their Western counterparts. Instead of using a confrontational approach that might cause political tension, the Azerbaijani government focused its diplomacy on clear arguments about energy supply that directly met Europe's immediate needs. By presenting detailed technical data during discussions, particularly highlighting natural gas reserves in the Caspian basin and the expansion capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor, the administration established a powerful position of operational

indispensability (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022; Karimli 2022; Mammadov 2022).

This diplomatic approach led European policymakers to accept the government's perspective on the regional crisis. Because the Azerbaijani government based its arguments on infrastructure capacity and resource availability during a period of energy shortages in Europe, its positions gained considerable support within European Union institutions. Brussels accepted these logistical factors as the baseline for cooperation, meaning that bilateral discussions were limited to matters of pipeline capacity and security of supply. Through this approach, the administration did more than complete a commercial transaction, it led its European partners to accept a shared consensus that valued reliable energy supplies. As a result, the EU aligned with these strategic terms, which insulated the Azerbaijani government from external political and human rights critiques.

This communicative consensus sets the stage for a more profound structural consequence: the phenomenon of "rhetorical entrapment". Within Risse's framework, rhetorical entrapment occurs when strategic actors, having initially adopted specific normative positions or validity claims to achieve short-term tactical goals, find themselves progressively constrained by their own public discourse. Once an actor publicly legitimizes a particular argumentative framework, it becomes increasingly difficult to change or abandon those positions without incurring severe costs to its international credibility and communicative consistency (Schimmelfennig 2001).

In the context of the EU-Azerbaijan energy negotiations, this theoretical mechanism explains how European leaders became trapped by the very crisis-driven logic they initially used to justify the partnership. By enthusiastically embracing Baku's arguments and publicly elevating the Aliyev regime to the status of a "reliable, trustworthy partner" in a moment of existential material panic, Brussels handed Azerbaijan a powerful discursive weapon (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022). Azerbaijani state actors and diplomatic organs capitalized on this shift, holding

the European Union accountable to its own highly publicized declarations of strategic partnership.

Whenever European institutions or civil society organizations raised concerns regarding the country's domestic political environment or restrictions on independent media, the government was able to manage these challenges by referring to the economic priorities. Because European officials had framed the fast expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor as a necessity for economic stability, they could not easily apply sanctions or sharp critiques without undermining their own statements regarding Azerbaijan's reliability as a partner.

To establish this mechanism of rhetorical agreement in a broader structural context, it is helpful to integrate Ian Hurd's theoretical framework on authority, compliance, and international legitimacy into the analysis. Hurd theorizes that order and compliance within the anarchic international system are maintained through three distinct motivational pathways. Fear of coercion, raw material self-interest, or a deep-seated belief in the legitimacy of a normative structure. For Hurd, legitimacy represents a form of social recognition where an actor perceives an international rule, institution, or relationship as inherently rightful and authoritative, prompting compliance not out of fear or transactional calculation, but due to an internalized sense of obligation.

Azerbaijan's strategic behavior over the past several years shows exactly how this dynamic works in real life. By leveraging its location and positioning its pipeline network as an asset for European economic stability, Baku shows how a small state can turn a local resource partnership into broad political influence. This strategy alters the traditional relationship between a major actor like the EU and a smaller partner state. Instead of changing its laws to match the democratic expectations of Western partners, the Azerbaijani administration built a system where Europe depends on its energy. Under this setup, any disruption to energy cooperation carries severe economic consequences for European markets (Ibadoghlu 2026). This focus on Western resource

needs, protects the host government from external political pressure. It suggests that controlling energy transit routes is enough to maintain external legitimacy and reduce the impact of international criticism.

Azerbaijan gained this international authority by adapting the pathways identified by scholar Ian Hurd. Usually, countries get international approval by changing their domestic governance to match Western liberal-democratic values. Instead, Baku built a resilient system based purely on shared strategic interests. By tying its energy infrastructure to the economic needs of democratic partners, the state turned a brief commercial deal into a long-term relationship. Within this framework, Western powers grant Azerbaijan international authority and legitimacy because they believe that working with Baku is necessary for their own domestic stability. Therefore, Azerbaijan's external standing shows that when a non-democratic state connects the resource security of its partners to its own institutional permanence, it can gain significant international recognition. This process indicates that external validation can be achieved through strategic utility rather than Western democratic standards.

This system of shared interest is clearly reflected in how the Azerbaijani government presents its internal political stability as an alternative to liberal-democratic governance. By connecting Ian Hurd's ideas on legitimacy with Azerbaijan's public relations strategy, we can see how the state uses the anxieties of a highly unstable global environment to its advantage.

Within a fractured international system facing unpredictable politics and supply-chain disruptions, Baku offers Western democracies a consistent display of domestic predictability and order (Ataşer 2020). By maintaining tight control over domestic civil society, minimizing legislative friction, and enforcing strict legal guarantees for long-term investments, the government presents its centralized political system as a useful asset rather than a political liability.

Baku contrasts this continuous command-and-control system against the unpredictable, polarized decision-making processes found in modern Western democracies and the unstable political transitions of its regional neighbors. Under Hurd's model, this performative execution of order shifts the baseline of international social recognition. Shared material expectations and transactional predictability step into the structural gap left by the absence of shared normative values. Subsequently, Western institutions are constrained to accord deep systemic authority to a closed dictatorship because its authoritarian consolidation guarantees a reliable, tensionless oasis of resource transit and energy security. At last, this performative stability overturns traditional liberal conditionality, demonstrating that within the current global order, the enforcement of domestic political paralysis can be leveraged as a primary currency to command unconditional external legitimacy and paralyze international normative critique.

In summary, the implementation and subsequent success of this strategic narrative demonstrate the priority of pragmatic energy interests within a changing and increasingly divided international order. When evaluated through the complementary lenses of Thomas Risse's communicative action and Ian Hurd's model of social legitimation, Azerbaijan's strategic deployment of its material advantages reveals a sophisticated mastery of contemporary geopolitical vulnerabilities. By framing negotiations around infrastructural and engineering requirements, the Azerbaijani administration secured both a profitable commercial arrangement and elevated political legitimacy from the European Union. Because Europe was so worried about its energy supply, showing that they were a reliable partner became much more important than agreeing on democratic values.

This public relations outcome directly supports the core thesis of this study regarding the nature of the "Authoritarian Trade-off". Azerbaijan's strategic behavior indicates that when a state combines tangible material leverage, like controlling critical energy infrastructure, with clear diplomatic language and a public narrative of usefulness, it can significantly reduce external political criticism.

By placing democratic partners in a position where their own domestic stability is linked to the steady flow of Caspian energy, the state makes its external legitimization strategies highly effective. In a changing, multipolar global system, this strategic focus on Western vulnerabilities helps protect the host government from external political interference. This approach reduces outside scrutiny of its domestic political conditions and supports the long-term survival of the government.

3.5. The Matrix Outcome and Institutional Impact

To fully understand the structural and narrative dynamics of the Southern Gas Corridor, the analysis must address the third and fourth dimensions of the Evaluatory Matrix: What is the final outcome? and Does it have a direct impact on EU institutions, and how do they act? The outcome of this bilateral energy diplomacy, formalized by the July 18, 2022, Memorandum of Understanding, goes far beyond a standard commercial contract to expand Caspian gas delivery to 20 billion cubic meters annually by 2027 (Center of Analysis of International Relations 2022). The outcome represents a significant reduction of the European Union's normative leverage over the Azerbaijani state. By integrating its energy transit infrastructure into the economic needs of Europe, the Azerbaijani administration established a clear structural irregularity. Under this framework, the European Union became tied to a material path dependency, while Baku maintained deep domestic political autonomy. This dynamic effectively limited the impact of external regulatory or normative pressure on Azerbaijan's internal governance.

This asymmetry has had a profound impact on the functioning behavior of European Union institutions, especially altering the diplomatic output of the European Commission and the European External Action Service. Historically, the EU's external identity was anchored in the principle of democratic conditionality, which required

third-party state partners to show clear alignments with liberal values, human rights, and the rule of law to access preferential economic frameworks (Manners 2002). However, under the weight of the continental energy crisis, Brussels transitioned from an international actor that enforces democratic norms to one that actively practices discursive accommodation and strategic omission (Youngs 2004).

This institutional displacement is observable in the adoption of a sanitized, highly technocratic vocabulary by EU officials. Following the 2022 agreement, European executive bodies deployed the trope of "constructive engagement" and the semantic redefinition of Baku as a "reliable, trustworthy partner" to bypass, downplay, and compartmentalize severe domestic human rights violations (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022). By codifying this linguistic shield within the highest bureaucratic echelons of Brussels, EU institutions did not just tolerate autocratic consolidation. They institutionalized moral compromise within their own foreign policy framework, actively protecting the energy partnership from parliamentary scrutiny and civil society oversight to guarantee a smooth physical security of supply.

This situation reveals the true internal impact of the "Authoritarian Trade-off". Instead of encouraging democratic reforms through economic cooperation, the expansion of the energy partnership happened at the exact same time as a major government crackdown on domestic opposition within Azerbaijan. The clear link between Western energy dependency and the shrinking space for Azerbaijani civil society is carefully documented by scholar Gubad Ibadoghlu.

Ibadoghlu's (2024) research shows that the influx of European energy money and the increase in international political protection directly strengthened the state's security forces. Eventually, this income and international support helped protect the government from any outside political penalties or sanctions.

Since mid-2022, the exact moment European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stood in Baku and validated the regime's international legitimacy, the Aliyev administration aggressively weaponized its geopolitical indispensability (Statement by President von der Leyen 2022). Safe in the knowledge that European policymakers had framed Caspian gas as an existential necessity for their own domestic economic survival, the regime initiated a sweeping campaign to permanently liquidate independent political opposition, investigative journalism, and non-governmental organizations.

The number of political prisoners within Azerbaijan increased significantly following the signing of the MoU, illustrating that domestic state violence grew in direct proportion to international energy integration. In a tragic validation of his own theoretical model, Ibadoghlu himself became a primary target of this structural violence, subjected to politically motivated arrest and severe state persecution (Ibadoghlu 2024). This reality exposes the true mechanics of the Authoritarian Trade-off. European energy security was purchased at the direct expense of the freedoms and physical safety of Azerbaijani citizens, proving that Western diplomatic silence functions as a foundational pillar of modern autocratic survival.

The successful construction of this defensive external shield did not only offer Baku an effective mechanism to deflect international normative critique; it provided the Aliyev administration with the unprecedented material capital and geopolitical confidence to launch an offensive, revisionist foreign policy. Having leveraged European vulnerability to transform a transactional energy dependency into an unquestionable framework of international legitimacy and social recognition, the regime recognized that Western normative institutions were fundamentally vulnerable to direct, deep-seated institutional penetration.

With its state coffers filled by guaranteed long-term energy rents and its status as Europe's irreplaceable "Savior" locked into the continental architecture, Baku moved

beyond passive defensive diplomacy. The regime understood that if European executive bodies could be obliged to subordinate their core normative values to material self-interest, the human rights supervisory body of the West could be neutralized and corrupted through the application of financial and political influence.

This profound shift from defensive isolation to offensive capture establishes the analytical bridge to Chapter 4. The next chapter will provide a rigorous empirical examination of how the Aliyev administration translated its energy-backed leverage and elite-level diplomatic immunity into a sophisticated, illicit lobbying network inside Europe's human rights supervisory body: the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly. By examining the structural mechanics of what has become globally recognized as "Caviar Diplomacy", and by analyzing the investigative exposures compiled by the European Stability Initiative, Chapter 4 will demonstrate how the Authoritarian Trade-off weaponized the wealth of the Caspian basin to destroy and manipulate the democratic institutions tasked with defending the human rights.

Chapter 4: Institutional Corruption and "Greenwashing"

The structural outcome of the July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding, analyzed in Chapter 3, did not only cause a shift toward European diplomatic silence. Under the crushing weight of the continental energy crisis, this partnership operated as a direct incentive for a major evolution in Baku's external strategy. The "Authoritarian Trade-off" provided the Aliyev administration with two vital assets. Financial liquidity through locked-in, long-term fossil fuel rents and a robust layer of structural impunity (Ibadoghlu 2026). These assets transformed Azerbaijan from a passive actor focused on deflecting international criticism into an aggressive, well-capitalized state capable of projective operations across the European continent. The regime acquired the material resources and geopolitical insurance needed to transition from defensive insulation to offensive penetration of the international architecture.

The central thesis of Chapter 4 is that the Aliyev regime carefully built a double layered external facade designed to dissociate its international reputation from its domestic reality. This facade relies on two different mechanisms. Institutional capture through elite-level networks within the EU, alongside global prestige politics achieved through multilateral association. The strategic objective of this facade is to mask ongoing domestic structural violence, such as the crushing of independent media, political suppressions, and rentier consolidation, by manufacturing a powerful illusion of normative alignment, progressive global citizenship, and systemic indispensability. By setting up this positive outside image, the government successfully stops global human rights criticism before it can even start.

To better understand this dynamic, this chapter follows clear chronological successions that move from the legal-political capture of European supervisory body to the discursive arena of global climate politics. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 use the landmark

European Stability Initiative reports on "Caviar Diplomacy" to dissect the mechanics of asymmetric lobbying, transactional compliance, and institutional decay within the Council of Europe in Strasbourg (ESI 2012, 2016). Following this analysis of institutional corruption, Section 4.4 evaluates the macroeconomic and discursive dimensions of global "green washing" by investigating the structural paradox of Baku hosting the 2024 UN Climate Summit (COP29) while simultaneously expanding its domestic fossil fuel infrastructure. Finally, Section 4.5 applies the Evaluatory Matrix to summarize these combined outcomes and demonstrate how this dual facade secures modern autocratic survival.

4.1. Caviar Diplomacy: The Structure of Institutional Capture

The aggressive side of Azerbaijan's strategy to gain international approval is best seen in the practice of "Caviar Diplomacy". This term was first coined in a groundbreaking 2012 report by the European Stability Initiative (ESI) titled Caviar Diplomacy- How Azerbaijan Silenced the Council of Europe. It describes a clever method of buying influence that completely changed Baku's relationship with European democratic supervisory body groups. It is important to understand that this practice was not just a handful of random, clumsy bribes or occasional acts of corruption. Instead, the ESI report shows that Caviar Diplomacy was a calculated, long-term strategy designed to slowly change how international politicians thought and acted (ESI 2012). Instead of directly contesting Western demands for human rights, which would create diplomatic tension, the Azerbaijani administration effectively neutralized the impact of those institutional requirements. They did this by rewriting the personal and professional rewards for the very politicians who were supposed to enforce the rules.

The operational mechanics of this socialization strategy relied on a meticulously organized apparatus of hospitality and "material incentives". Azerbaijani state organs and diplomatic representatives targeted visiting European parliamentarians,

rapporteurs, and political delegates with an outrageous quantity of luxury experiences and gifts. This included the luxurious distribution of high-grade Caspian caviar, often measured in kilograms per delegate, alongside expensive handmade silk rugs, premium jewelry, and all-expenses-paid vacation packages to luxury resorts in Baku (ESI 2012). For high-profile targets and key institutional gatekeepers, these material courtesies were frequently amplified by substantial, illicit cash distributions given through complex networks of offshore shell companies and bank accounts across the European continent (ESI 2016). By embedding these transactions within the regular schedule of official monitoring missions and diplomatic visits, Baku stripped away the traditional professional distance expected within multilateral monitoring frameworks.

The strategic goal of this vast business network was to build a permanent, transactional network of dependency and mutual goodwill within the heart of Europe's normative architecture. By trapping European officials in a web of material obligations, the Aliyev regime cultivated a dedicated faction of allies who were incentivized to protect the host state's international reputation. This corrupted network was capable of actively changing voting behaviors, delaying important investigations, and dilution-focused editing of human rights resolutions. Caviar Diplomacy allowed Baku to achieve institutional compliance from within the very organizations meant to hold it accountable. By transforming a relationship based on human rights monitoring into a network of transaction-driven solidarity, the regime neutralized the threat of external democratic pressure, making its domestic structural violence invisible within the official records of European diplomacy (ESI 2012).

Azerbaijan's decision to target the Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) was a calculated move. It perfectly highlights the first two questions of our Evaluatory Matrix: Who are the actors? and What do they actually want?

On one side, Baku deployed senior state diplomats, wealthy oligarchs, and elite lobbyists backed directly by the Aliyev administration. On the other side sat cross-

national members of European parliaments who were sent to Strasbourg to serve as democratic watchdogs.

The regime's decision to flood this specific organization with gifts and money reveals a striking paradox. The Council of Europe is supposed to be the continent's ultimate guardian of human rights and democracy. Instead of avoiding this hostile territory, Baku launched an offensive right into its core.

The main goal behind this institutional infiltration was to carry out a deliberate, early campaign to neutralize the specific international body responsible for monitoring, exposing, and penalizing Azerbaijan's systemic domestic democratic failures. Upon its accession to the Council of Europe in 2001, Azerbaijan committed to a rigorous set of post-accession obligations regarding political freedoms, judicial independence, and the protection of civil society. As the regime progressively centralized power and escalated its domestic structural violence, PACE's regular monitoring missions and human rights resolutions posed a persistent threat to Baku's external political legitimacy. In response, the Aliyev administration formulated an aggressive counterstrategy. By targeting and capturing PACE, the regime did not seek to adjust its internal political behavior or improve its actual governance to match European liberal values. Instead, its intent was to directly corrupt the European machinery of moral judgment from within.

This manipulation of PACE ensured that the institutional authority of the Council of Europe was turned against its own initial mission. By establishing a reliable network of compromised European parliamentarians through the mechanisms of Caviar Diplomacy, the Azerbaijani state gained unprecedented control over the assembly's output. The intent was to manipulate the institutional workflow so that any official reports, resolutions, or statements regarding Azerbaijan's human rights record would be softened, indefinitely delayed, or entirely voted down (ESI 2012). Therefore, instead of facing international condemnation, the Aliyev administration sought to transform PACE into an external validation mechanism that would issue sanitized assessments of

its flawed electoral processes and repressive legal frameworks. This internal capture paralyzed the Council of Europe's ability to apply normative control, successfully converting Europe's chief human rights supervisory body into a defensive shield that granted international cover to an autocracy.

A key development occurred on January 23, 2013, during a critical voting session in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. This event directly addresses the third dimension of the Evaluatory Matrix: What is the final outcome? The focal point of this institutional confrontation was a documented report made by German Member of Parliament Christoph Strässer, who served as the PACE rapporteur on political prisoners in Azerbaijan (ESI 2012). Strässer's report represented a merciless, fact-based accusation of the Aliyev regime's domestic repressions, detailing judicial arbitrariness, illegal detentions, and the calculated incarceration of journalists, bloggers, and opposition figures. Despite facing unprecedented obstruction from Azerbaijani authorities, including being repeatedly denied an entry visa to conduct on-the-ground investigative missions within the country, Strässer finalized a complete resolution that wanted to bind the Council of Europe to a strict monitoring mandate over Baku's growing prison population.

The structural power of Caviar Diplomacy became visible on January 23, 2013, when German lawmaker Christoph Strässer presented his anticipated report identifying 85 political prisoners in Azerbaijan. Baku mobilized its extensive network of co-opted delegates to defeat the resolution, resulting in a historic 125 votes against the report and only 79 in favor (ESI 2013).

This unexpected margin of victory was achieved through intense coordination by parliamentarians who supported the Azerbaijani delegation's position during the session. Critics attacked the rapporteur, falsely claiming that his text was "politically motivated", rushed, and "unfairly focusing on Azerbaijan" while implementing "double standards".

To completely delay the human rights mandate, lawmakers even deployed extreme fear tactics during the debate, warning the assembly that "if the report is approved, real terrorists can all announce themselves to be political prisoners". Furthermore, Spanish corrupted rapporteur Pedro Agramunt, who was later central to the ESI's corruption investigations, sabotaged the human rights initiative from within by taking the floor and explicitly telling PACE: "I ask members to support the first report (a weaker monitoring report favored by Baku), but I will vote against Mr. Strässer's report, for obvious reasons".

This voting data revealed that the regime's long-term patronage strategy had successfully dissolved traditional ideological and national alignments within PACE, uniting a disparate coalition of European lawmakers to vote in direct opposition to the foundational human rights mandates they were sworn to protect (ESI 2016).

Evaluating the macro-political significance of this outcome reveals a catastrophic turning point in Euro-Caspian relations. The rejection of the Strässer report marked a historic collapse of European normative integrity, exposing the profound vulnerability of Western democratic watchdogs to asymmetric material penetration. By purchasing institutional compliance, the Aliyev administration extracted an official, institutional guarantee of impunity from the continent's premier human rights body. The defeat of the resolution signaled to Baku that its domestic structural violence was now fully protected from Western institutional consequences. This pivotal victory effectively dismantled the credible threat of external democratic conditionality, providing the consolidating autocracy with the domestic security and international cover required to launch even more aggressive crackdowns against its internal civil society in the years that followed.

4.2. Corruption, Prosecutorial Failures, and Institutional Decay

The full extent of Azerbaijan's offensive strategy became clear with the publication of the second major report by the European Stability Initiative in 2016, titled *The European Swamp: Caviar Diplomacy, Part 2 – Prosecutors, Corruption and the Council of Europe*. This investigation showed that Baku's methods had evolved from casual, individual bribery into an organized, top-down system. Instead of simply trying to win over ordinary members of parliament one by one, the Azerbaijani regime focused its resources on capturing the highest levels of management within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (ESI 2016). By gaining influence over the individuals who controlled the assembly's agenda, Baku was able to institutionalize its defensive shield right inside the core structures of the institution.

A central figure in this top-down system was Luca Volontè, an Italian member of parliament and the leader of the European People's Party group, which was one of the largest political factions in PACE. The 2016 ESI report, drawing on evidence uncovered by Italian criminal prosecutors, detailed how Azerbaijani officials gave approximately 2.39 million euros to Volontè between 2012 and 2014. These funds were washed through a complex network of British and offshore shell companies before arriving in Volontè's private bank accounts and his political organization. In return for this stream of money, Volontè worked as a key coordinator for Baku inside the assembly. He regularly told other European lawmakers how to vote, worked to stop critical debates, and pressured colleagues to reject official initiatives that aimed to expose Azerbaijan's human rights record (ESI 2016).

The regime secured its foothold at the top of the institution with the political rise of Pedro Agramunt, a Spanish senator who was elected President of PACE in 2016. Agramunt had spent years serving as an election observer for the Council of Europe, during which he consistently praised Azerbaijan's rigged elections as “free, fair, and democratic”, directly contradicting the findings of independent human rights groups.

The 2012 and 2016 ESI reports exposed that the Azerbaijani state managed Agramunt's career advancement within the assembly, viewing him as its most valuable strategic asset. According to the subsequent 2018 Report of the Independent Investigation Body on the allegations of corruption within PACE, there was a "strong suspicion" that Agramunt was central to the systemic bribery scheme, with witnesses testifying that his election observation missions were explicitly designed to "whitewash" the regime's image.

Once Agramunt took the presidency, Baku gained direct control over the assembly's executive decisions. This created an incredibly destructive legislative coalition. While Italian deputy Luca Volontè was managing a voting block on the assembly floor, orchestrated via millions of euros channeled through Baltic bank accounts to "bring Baku's positions to the European stage", Agramunt was using the presidency to block debates and silence critics.

When the corruption scandal finally erupted, Agramunt desperately attempted to shut down the process, aggressively claiming on the PACE floor that the increasing evidence was only a targeted defamation campaign: "I cannot allow the honor of the Assembly or any of its members to be defamed... or to be misused to fight battles against states that some see as rivals or enemies".

Despite his deflections, the official investigation concluded that the Azerbaijani government had transformed PACE's top leadership into a highly functional tool for its own external validation, breaking the continent's premier human rights watchdog from the inside out.

The capture of PACE's top management had immediate, practical consequences for the assembly's day-to-day operations. The corrupted leadership weaponized their bureaucratic and procedural powers to actively disrupt the normal functions of the assembly. Instead of maintaining neutral oversight, these officials used their control

over committee assignments, meeting agendas, and speaking times to favor Baku. Whenever independent parliamentarians attempted to raise concerns about Azerbaijan's deteriorating domestic situation, the leadership used technicalities and red tape to stall debates, deny floor time, or rule motions out of order (ESI 2016).

This internal control was used to kill off any new, independent investigations before they could gain momentum. When concerned European lawmakers tried to launch inquiries into the growing number of political prisoners or the spreading corruption network, the captured leadership stepped in to protect Baku. They used their influence within the Bureau of the Assembly and key monitoring committees to vote down inquiry proposals, deny funding for specialized investigative groups, and block the appointment of independent rapporteurs. By controlling these institutional gatekeepers, the pro-Baku network made sure that any serious attempt to look into Azerbaijan's human rights record was stopped at the committee level (ESI 2016).

When official monitoring missions to Baku could not be blocked entirely, the corrupted leadership resorted to intentional delays and scheduling manipulations. They stretched out the planning phases for months, pushed back departure dates, and argued over minor administrative details. These delays had a devastating operational impact on the ground. By pushing back monitoring visits, PACE's leadership intentionally gave the Aliyev regime the time it needed to complete its domestic suppressions, arrest dissident journalists, and close down independent civil society organizations without any European eyes on the ground. By the time a qualified monitoring delegation finally arrived in Baku, the political damage was already done, and local critics had already been silenced (ESI 2016).

When human rights reports and resolutions managed to bypass the initial gatekeepers and make it to the assembly floor, the pro-Baku network turned its attention to altering the actual text. Through the coordinated filing of hundreds of minor amendments, co-opted parliamentarians systematically intercepted the drafting process. They targeted

any specific, realistic accounts of political repression, independent media crackdowns, and arbitrary arrests. Detailed evidence gathered by non-governmental organizations and local activists, such as the names of specific political prisoners or descriptions of state-sponsored harassment, was systematically stripped out of the final drafts before they could be voted on (ESI 2016).

In place of these harsh realities, the corrupted network inserted weak, harmless bureaucratic language designed to obscure the truth. Phrases condemning the Aliyev regime for crushing political opposition were replaced with neutral comments. For instance, the 2018 corruption investigation highlighted how critical edits transformed unfavorable human rights accusations into softened, non-committal summaries, such as noting that "improvements were still desirable with regard to the electoral framework", rather than calling out structural election fraud.

Furthermore, the pro-Baku faction frequently added clauses that falsely praised Azerbaijan, forcing language into official resolutions that commended the regime for its "constructive cooperation with European institutions" and celebrated its supposed "democratic progress".

According to the ESI, this deliberate editing destroyed the objectivity of the Council's official output. By using co-opted rapporteurs to inject these sanitized, diplomatic synonyms, Baku successfully transformed authoritative monitoring documents into biased, defensive texts. The resulting reports gave a false impression of step-by-step reform, effectively providing an international cover-up while the regime continued its crackdowns on civil society entirely unchecked (ESI 2016).

This manipulation directly answers the fourth question of the Evaluatory Matrix regarding the direct impact on European institutions and how they act. The final institutional outcome reveals a deep structural paradox: Caviar Diplomacy did not just create an external shield to protect Azerbaijan from international pressure, it

fundamentally degraded and corrupted the host institution itself. Rather than the European body projecting its democratic and human rights norms onto an external partner, the authoritarian state projected its own corrupt methods into the heart of the European institution, altering how its officials behaved (ESI 2016).

As a direct result of this internal decay, PACE suffered a total role reversal. The assembly was originally created as Europe's premier human rights watchdog, built specifically to protect democratic freedoms, hold governments accountable, and defend political prisoners across the continent. Yet, under the influence of Azerbaijan's offensive lobbying and financial co-optation, it transformed into a political whitewashing mechanism used to legitimize a dictatorship. When the assembly repeatedly voted down critical assessments and issued sanitized reports, it was no longer acting as a defender of human rights. Instead, it was actively working as a public relations tool for the Aliyev administration, using its own historic moral authority to provide international cover for ongoing domestic repression (ESI 2016).

4.3. The COP29 Paradox: Autocratic Rentierism and Global "Greenwashing"

In the study of modern international relations, the concepts of "nation-branding" and prestige politics explain how states intentionally alter their external reputation to build soft power and diplomatic influence. For authoritarian regimes, hosting major global mega-events has become a primary tool within this public relations framework. When the Azerbaijani government secured the hosting rights for the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Baku, the decision was not driven by a sudden interest in environmental protection or a desire to boost local tourism. Instead, it was a deliberate, centralized strategy designed to present Azerbaijan to the international community as a progressive, responsible, and modern global citizen. By inserting itself directly into the center of global environmental governance, the Aliyev administration

wanted to perform the role of an indispensable, forward-thinking partner capable of hosting complex, multilateral negotiations on the world stage (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2024).

The primary objective of this strategy is to reshape the international narrative surrounding the host state. By drawing thousands of foreign delegates, journalists, and global leaders to Baku, the regime carefully controls what the outside world sees, using the media spotlight to overshadow its domestic political realities. In the case of COP29, the Aliyev administration used the event to shift global media attention entirely away from its systemic autocratic governance, lack of press freedoms, and closed political system. The complex machinery of a UN climate summit allowed Baku to substitute international criticisms with images of diplomatic cooperation, high-level speeches, and pledges toward renewable energy development. This public relations push aimed to delete the regime's negative international reputation, separating its standing in global politics from its actual domestic behavior by replacing the label of a repressive autocracy with that of a constructive global host.

The choice of Baku as the host city for COP29 highlights a profound economic and environmental contradiction. Beneath the summit's green rhetoric lies the reality of Azerbaijan's extreme dependence on fossil fuel rents. Hydrocarbons form the foundation of the country's economy, with oil, gas, and related petroleum products consistently making up roughly 90% of Azerbaijan's total export revenues (The Guardian 2024; International Trade Administration 2026). The State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic serves as the primary financial supplier for the Aliyev administration, funding the state budget and keeping the regime financially stable. This structural reliance creates a clear paradox. A state whose entire political economy is built on extraction was selected to host a global summit explicitly dedicated to transitioning away from fossil fuels.

This institutional setup allowed Baku to turn a global decarbonization forum into a tool for fossil fuel expansion. Rather than using the conference to scale back its hydrocarbon operations, the Azerbaijani government leveraged the presence of international energy delegates to conduct traditional commercial transactions. Behind the scenes of the climate negotiations, state officials actively negotiated and finalized new long-term oil and gas export agreements. During the summit, SOCAR secured major deals to expand its natural gas supplies to European markets, including extending contracts with North Macedonia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Serbia (PISM 2024; Greens/EFA 2024).

These actions demonstrate that the Aliyev administration did not view the UN environmental framework as a binding set of green rules. Instead, the regime used COP29 as a public relations shield to hide its constant fossil fuel operations. By publicizing minor investments in solar and wind infrastructure on the main stage, Baku maintained a progressive image while simultaneously locking in decades of new carbon emissions through backroom energy deals. This manipulation turned the premier global climate forum into a direct tool for expanding fossil fuel commercial networks, also exposing how a resource dependent autocracy can exploit global multilateral initiatives for its own economic survival.

In the months leading up to COP29, the Aliyev administration intentionally weaponized its domestic security apparatus to carry out a comprehensive lockdown of civil society. Rather than allowing the international summit to promote a more open political environment, the regime used the event as a deadline to dismantle what remained of Azerbaijan's independent civil space. State authorities launched an extensive wave of arrests and judicial harassment designed to completely clear the public sphere of any domestic critics before the arrival of foreign delegates and international journalists (Human Rights Watch 2024; Amnesty International 2024).

This pre-summit hunt targeted local environmental activists, independent journalists, and civil society leaders who wanted to expose the reality behind the government's

green image. High-profile figures were arrested on fabricated charges, such as illegal smuggling or financial fraud, to strip away their legal protections. For instance, authorities targeted journalists from independent media outlets like Abzas Media and Toplum TV, who had spent months exposing state corruption linked to environmental mismanagement and profitable government construction contracts. Also local advocates who criticized the ecological destruction caused by state-run gold mining operations or pollution from the state's Caspian oil fields were detained or forced into hiding, effectively cutting off foreign media from any authentic local sources of information (Human Rights Watch 2024).

By implementing this lockdown, the Azerbaijani government used the strict security protocols of a UN sanctioned forum in their favor to neutralize domestic opposition. The regime framed its aggressive police presence and restrictions on public assembly as necessary security and logistical measures required to host a major global event safely. This dynamic insulated the Aliyev administration from international diplomatic consequences. Because global leaders and climate diplomats were entirely focused on rescuing difficult multilateral climate negotiations, they routinely minimized or ignored Baku's domestic human rights violations. This dynamic allowed the host state to silence its own citizens and consolidate its autocratic control while maintaining its position at the center of global diplomacy (Amnesty International 2024).

The outcome of the Baku climate summit demonstrates the mechanics of global "greenwashing" as an offensive tool for autocratic survival. By hosting COP29, the Aliyev administration secured a high degree of international validation, allowing the regime to dissociate its international standing from its domestic human rights record. Instead of facing diplomatic isolation or economic sanctions for its political suppression, Baku forced foreign heads of state, UN officials, and global climate diplomats to publicly praise its logistical execution and hosting capabilities (PISM 2024; Amnesty International 2024). This international praise separated the regime's technical competence as a multilateral host from its ongoing domestic structural

violence, creating a powerful narrative of international legitimacy that whitewashed its internal autocracy.

The political consequences of COP29 show how easily global multilateral organizations and international frameworks can be used by resource-dependent states to advance their own interests. By placing the UN framework at the center of its external legitimation strategy, the Azerbaijani state proved that a closed autocracy does not need to make actual democratic improvements or environmental reforms to achieve high-level diplomatic integration with the West. Instead, by controlling the physical space, executive agenda, and commercial side-deals of a global summit, the Aliyev administration transformed an international decarbonization forum into an elite defensive shield (Corporate Europe Observatory 2024; CIEL 2024). This co-optation allowed the regime to secure lucrative long-term fossil fuel export contracts and silence its domestic critics, extracting international validation directly from the very systems meant to promote global progress and accountability.

A final assessment of Chapter 4 through the lens of the Evaluatory Matrix reveals the structural outcomes and direct institutional impacts of Azerbaijan's external legitimation strategies. When evaluating Matrix Question 3 (What is the final outcome?) and Matrix Question 4 (Direct Institutional Impact), both Caviar Diplomacy and the hosting of COP29 must be understood as highly successful operations that delivered deep social recognition and international validation to the Aliyev administration. Rather than operating as isolated public relations campaigns, these initiatives acted as sophisticated, proactive foreign policy measures designed to neutralize external political pressure. By targeting the vulnerabilities of Western institutions, Baku altered how these external actors behaved, converting potential centers of democratic scrutiny into instruments of autocratic validation (ESI 2016; PISM 2024).

The outcomes of these strategies suggest that Azerbaijan limited the effectiveness of Western democratic conditionality. In the case of the Council of Europe, the Azerbaijani government used the diplomatic approaches associated with Caviar Diplomacy to influence PACE's leadership, restrict independent monitoring, and vote down the 2013 Strässer report on political prisoners (ESI 2012). This internal influence reduced the effectiveness of the organization's human rights monitoring, leading to a period of limited institutional supervision for Baku. Also, by hosting the COP29 summit in 2024, the Azerbaijani administration used global environmental governance frameworks to its advantage. The summit led Western heads of state and international diplomats to acknowledge Baku's logistical capabilities, while the government simultaneously signed new long-term fossil fuel contracts and increased restrictions on domestic civil society (Amnesty International 2024; Human Rights Watch 2024). The traditional Western policy of linking diplomatic integration or economic cooperation to democratic reforms was minimized. This outcome indicates that a state can secure international integration and political legitimacy without making significant changes to its human rights policies or domestic governance.

By combining institutional corruption in Strasbourg with climate diplomacy in Baku, the Aliyev administration constructed a flawless, dual-layered external facade that fully protected its domestic monopoly on power. This dual facade protected the regime from two distinct angles. The first layer, established through Caviar Diplomacy within the Council of Europe, acted as a defense within traditional human rights institutions. It dismantled the legal and normative mechanisms that Western watchdogs typically use to sanction or reprimand repressive regimes. The second layer, achieved through the green-washing of COP29, functioned as a projective mechanism that reframed the petro-state as an indispensable global leader in climate diplomacy and energy transition. Together, these strategies allowed the regime to exploit the structural weaknesses of both regional legal bodies and global multilateral forums for its own political survival (ESI 2016; Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2024).

This dual-layered architecture ensured that the regime's domestic structural violence was entirely insulated from external consequences. The international validation extracted from PACE and the United Nations provided the Aliyev administration with the domestic security and international cover required to escalate its internal repressions without fear of diplomatic isolation or economic pushbacks. With its external defensive perimeter fully secured through institutional capture and global prestige politics, the regime successfully stabilized its domestic political economy.

This protection from external political pressure provides the structural foundation for understanding the next phase of Azerbaijan's foreign policy strategy. While Chapter 4 has detailed how Baku neutralized Western political and normative pressure from the outside, Chapter 5 will shift the analytical focus inward. It will examine how the Aliyev administration leveraged this international impunity to manage its domestic vulnerabilities, focusing specifically on the suppression of local independent labor movements, the control of state-backed trade unions, and the silencing of critical economic and environmental dissidence within the borders of the Azerbaijani state.

Chapter 5: Structural Violence at Home

While the previous analysis demonstrated how the Aliyev regime constructed an external facade through institutional capture in Strasbourg and global environmental diplomacy in Baku, this chapter shifts the analytical focus inward to examine the domestic consequences of that international strategy. It deconstructs the empirical reality inside Azerbaijan, directly contrasting the country's carefully engineered image as a progressive, modern global citizen with the systemic deployment of state-sponsored violence against its own population. This internal examination evaluates the domestic cost of Baku's international impunity, revealing a political dynamic where external validation from the West does not encourage liberalization, but instead directly subsidizes and stabilizes a brutal domestic campaign of authoritarian consolidation.

Rather than opening the political sphere to reform, major international prestige events and the diplomatic security they provide act as direct catalysts for accelerated domestic repression. Secure in its external legal and diplomatic defenses, the Azerbaijani state has weaponized its internal security apparatus and corrupt judiciary to enforce total civic silence. This domestic lockdown manifests primarily through state purges executed around international deadlines, where prominent civil society leaders and climate justice advocates are isolated from global networks using fabricated criminal charges. By eliminating key independent monitors before the arrival of foreign observers, the regime covers its internal abuses from genuine international scrutiny.

This domestic violence relies on a strategic transition from traditional, clear state censorship to sophisticated financial lawfare. The state architecture has refreshed its repressive mechanisms, routinely re-categorizing independent investigative journalism and structural economic critiques as corporate or economic crimes. By prosecuting anti-corruption media collectives and independent academics under the pretext of tax evasion, illegal entrepreneurship, or smuggling, the regime attempts to mask political

persecution as routine law enforcement, thereby minimizing direct diplomatic blowback from its international partners. This judicial cleansing ensures that any authentic exposure of state corruption or the ecological mismanagement of the rentier economy is treated as a direct national security threat.

The scale of these domestic measures is shown in an increasing number of political detainees, highlighting the tighter restrictions placed on internal dissent. This reality shows a strong connection between domestic political control and European resource dependency. The Western demand for Azerbaijani energy resources creates a geopolitical buffer for the Azerbaijani administration, which limits the effectiveness of traditional democratic conditionality. By directing European energy revenues into expanded domestic security and administrative budgets, the government leverages its strategic commercial alliances to sustain its internal control mechanisms. This dynamic indicates that international economic validation provides the financial resources that support the host government's internal security measures.

5.1. The Pre-COP29 Suppression

The framework of the prestige deadline paradox shows how international mega-events hosted by centralized governments can act as accelerated timelines for tighter domestic political control, rather than prompts for democratic opening. In the political economy of modern states, the Azerbaijani administration views a major international gathering, like COP29, not as an opportunity to loosen political restrictions, but as a fixed deadline by which independent civic space must be managed and restricted (Human Rights Watch 2024). Traditional liberal theories often suggest that increased international scrutiny during global forums forces host states to tolerate some domestic dissent to protect their international reputation. However, the situation in Baku demonstrates the opposite dynamic. The arrival of thousands of foreign delegates, journalists, and world leaders creates a structural incentive for the government to implement preemptive

security measures and restrictions across the public sphere (Amnesty International 2024; Human Rights Watch 2024).

Because the Aliyev government completely refuses to tolerate any public protest, the arrival of a massive global summit forces the regime to move fast to crush local dissent (Human Rights Watch 2024). This timeline was clearly seen during the state's recent violent crackdown on popular environmental protests. To prevent any embarrassment on the world stage, the government aggressively uses its structural restrictions on free speech, assembly, and association to systematically dismantle independent groups months before the opening ceremonies.

The targeted neutralization of high-profile human rights defenders provides a clear example of how the Aliyev administration aggressively silences actors who threaten the state's carefully engineered external branding. A definitive micro study of this tactical containment is the April 29, 2024, arrest of Anar Mammadli, one of Azerbaijan's most prominent civil society figures. As the co-founder and leader of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center, a former political prisoner, and a recipient of the prestigious Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, Mammadli possessed international credibility (Human Rights Watch 2024). Recognizing the global attention accompanying the upcoming UN summit, Mammadli had recently co-founded the "Climate of Justice Initiative", a domestic coalition explicitly designed to use the diplomatic leverage of COP29 to advocate for environmental accountability, civic space, and the release of political prisoners. His abduction by undercover police officers in Baku occurred immediately after EMDS published independent, critical assessments exposing widespread structural flaws and electoral fraud during the February 2024 snap presidential election (Amnesty International 2024).

Mammadli's arrest demonstrates the regime's acute intolerance for any intellectual or organizational capacity capable of linking domestic human rights violations with global environmental frameworks. By placing a globally recognized advocate into pre-

trial detention just as the logistical preparations for COP29 were accelerating, the state apparatus effectively neutralized a vital communication node between local civil society and international monitoring bodies (Human Rights Watch 2024; Amnesty International 2024). This preventive arrest confirms that the Aliyev administration treats domestic human rights monitoring as a critical national security threat, systematically removing individuals who possess the international stature necessary to disrupt the state's multi-million dollar green-washing campaign.

The elimination of domestic opposition ahead of the summit relies on an infrastructure of financial lawfare, a tactical mechanism engineered to dismantle civic resistance while avoiding explicit political justifications. The state's operational playbook is clearly visible in the specific legal machinery deployed to silence Anar Mammadli. Rather than invoking obvious political restrictions, the judiciary weaponized Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan, placing him under maximum-security pre-trial detention on fabricated charges of "currency smuggling by prior conspiracy" (Amnesty International 2024). This economic indictment allowed the Aliyev administration to bypass political arguments entirely, reframing a calculated act of state-sponsored silencing as a routine, technocratic anti-corruption enforcement measure. By using financial criminality as a pretext, state prosecutors authorized invasive, warrantless searches of both Mammadli's home and his parents' properties, seized personal records, and froze critical financial assets linked to his election monitoring networks (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Furthermore, the state apparatus violated procedural norms by restricting Mammadli's immediate access to independent legal counsel and subjecting him to closed-door accusations. This deliberate judicial isolation served three structural purposes: it immediately terminated his organization's election-monitoring capabilities, shattered the organizational foundations of his newly formed "Climate of Justice Initiative", and severed his communication channels with international bodies. By neutralizing Mammadli through the framework of financial lawfare, the judicial system completely

insulated the host state from independent monitoring, ensuring that no credible domestic watchdogs could disrupt the regime's official narrative during the global climate summit (Amnesty International 2024; Human Rights Watch 2024).

5.2. The Eradication of Independent Media

The strategic evolution of the Aliyev administration in suppressing the free press is characterized by an aggressive financial lawfare, as I've explained before. Rather than relying on blunt instruments of political censorship, such as explicit publication bans or political arrests, which draw immediate international condemnation and complicate delicate diplomatic and commercial relations with Western energy partners, the state architecture has intentionally re-engineered its repressive mechanisms (Human Rights Watch 2024). By recategorizing independent investigative journalism as corporate financial crime, the regime effectively masks targeted political persecution under the guise of routine, technocratic rule-of-law enforcement. This strategy of bureaucratic legalism allows state authorities to craft an external narrative for international consumption, claiming that the judiciary is not penalizing journalists for their critical reporting, but is instead prosecuting criminal enterprises engaged in illicit domestic and trans-border financial operations. This defensive doctrinal shift allows the regime to dismantle the structural foundations of independent media collectives while offering its international partners the legalistic cover necessary to prioritize energy security over human rights considerations (Global Forum for Media Development 2026).

The operational execution of these legal strategies relies on the application of specific legislative frameworks deployed by the Baku Court of Serious Crimes. Throughout the 2025 judicial proceedings, state prosecutors consistently used coordinated economic accusations to minimize potential political backlash while securing prison sentences of up to nine years (Human Rights Watch 2024; Global Forum for Media Development 2026). Rather than addressing the content of independent reporting, the state's legal

framework focused on interconnected charges of "illegal entrepreneurship", "large-scale tax evasion", and "money laundering". By emphasizing these technical financial mechanisms, the judiciary utilized domestic regulatory frameworks to achieve political outcomes through administrative means.

This approach allowed the court to revoke the legal status of independent media collectives, dissolve their local operating networks, and freeze their institutional assets and bank accounts (Global Forum for Media Development 2026). The procedural mechanics of these trials, characterized by brief hearings, restricted access to financial records, and the regular rejection of defense motions, demonstrate how the criminal code was systematically applied. By turning complex financial regulations into instruments of domestic political management, the judiciary effectively restricted the economic viability of any press outlet operating outside the direct financial framework of the state.

The consequence of this judicial strategy is the purging of the country's last remaining independent outlets, marking a devastating 2025 judicial sweep that altered the domestic information landscape. Primary targets of this coordinated assault included the leadership and newsroom of Abzas Media, an independent platform that had stubbornly reported on issues suppressed by state-controlled media (Global Forum for Media Development 2026). In a series of tightly controlled trials, the Baku Court of Serious Crimes handed down severe prison sentences of up to nine years to key management figures of the outlet, including director Ulvi Hasanli and editor-in-chief Sevinj Vagifgizi (Global Forum for Media Development 2026). Along with their newsroom colleagues, these journalists were sent into maximum security facilities. This institutional demolition was matched by a parallel escalation against contributors, journalists, and operators tied to Meydan TV, an outlet whose domestic bureau had faced historic state containment and was repeatedly forced to navigate severe physical and legal threats to survive (OCCRP 2014; Human Rights Watch 2025). By targeting both the executive leadership of Abzas Media and the distributed network of Meydan

TV writers, the state forced independent watchdogs entirely out of the physical territory of Azerbaijan. This comprehensive purge left the domestic information space completely monopolized by state-controlled media, ensuring that alternative data regarding state operations cannot organically reach the domestic public.

Discovering the underlying political reality behind this financial diversion reveals that the severe judicial sentences of 2025 were direct acts of state retaliation rather than routine legal enforcement. The regime's fury was specifically triggered by a series of high-level investigative dossiers published by Abzas Media and Meydan TV, which directly threatened the carefully managed reputation of the ruling elite. These empirical exposés featured deep-dives into how senior government officials acquired multi-million-dollar properties abroad, such as luxury real estate in France, and how close associates and family members of President Ilham Aliyev systematically received lucrative state contracts (Global Forum for Media Development 2026). Most damningly, these reports exposed the political economy of mega-events, documenting how companies tied to the president's immediate circle, including his former son-in-law, were awarded major construction and service contracts to host COP29 in Baku (Global Forum for Media Development 2026). By linking the precise timing of the judicial crackdowns to the publication of these anti-corruption reports, the structural intent of the state becomes undeniable. The financial accusations functioned as a targeted, defensive maneuver designed to protect the ruling elite's illicit financial networks and maintain control over the state's rentier economy, establishing a clear pattern where exposing corruption is treated as an existential national security threat.

5.3. Criminalizing Academic and Economic Dissent: The Case of Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu

In the consolidated rentier state of Azerbaijan, the Aliyev administration views structural critiques of its political economy as significant challenges to its institutional stability. This dynamic is clearly shown by the targeted prosecution of Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, who serves as a primary source for this thesis and represents a notable intellectual challenge to the state apparatus. Rather than operating as a traditional political opposition figure, Dr. Ibadoghlu is a political economist and a senior visiting fellow at prominent global institutions, including the London School of Economics and Rutgers University. His academic work analyzed Azerbaijan's opaque oil and gas management, pointed out inefficiencies in public finance, and provided data-driven critiques of the government's lack of budgetary transparency (European Parliament 2023). By explaining the specific mechanisms of wealth accumulation and state resource distribution, his research directly addressed the core of the state's economic structure. The state's legal response proves that in a political system heavily reliant on the control of hydrocarbon revenues, independent economic analysis is often treated by authorities as a form of political opposition and managed through strict legal restrictions.

The physical execution of Dr. Ibadoghlu's neutralization highlights the regime's reliance on extrajudicial violence and fabricated, non-political criminal charges to silence prominent academic voices. On July 23, 2023, while traveling with his wife, Dr. Ibadoghlu's vehicle was intercepted by approximately twenty plainclothes police officers who detained them both without offering any immediate legal justification (Friedrich Naumann Foundation 2024). To mask the political nature of this abduction, state prosecutors bypassed his academic and civic activities, instead charging the senior international economist with the absurd crime of "manufacturing counterfeit money". Authorities claimed to have found forged currency in an office space that, according to

his family, Dr. Ibadoghlu had not used in years (Friedrich Naumann Foundation 2024). When the financial charges drew international skepticism, the judiciary arbitrarily compounded his indictment by adding charges related to the "preparation, storage, and distribution of religious materials" (Friedrich Naumann Foundation 2024). This deliberate layering of fabricated economic and extremist charges illustrates the state's tactical methodology: destroying the credibility and liberty of an intellectual opponent while avoiding a trial based on his actual political and economic critiques.

Beyond the fabricated charges, the state apparatus weaponizes punitive pre-trial detention and medical deprivation as calculated tools of physical and psychological terror. Throughout his detention, authorities have deliberately denied Dr. Ibadoghlu adequate medical care for his severe, pre-existing health conditions, including diabetes and severe heart problems (European Parliament 2023). This medical neglect is not an administrative failure, but a punitive mechanism designed to break his determination and extract a forced confession. The gravity of this targeted medical deprivation prompted immediate international legal interventions, with the European Court of Human Rights adopting temporary interim measures on September 5, 2023, explicitly ordering the Azerbaijani government to take urgent action to protect his health, directives the regime routinely ignored (European Parliament 2023). The European Parliament further condemned this weaponization of health, demanding independent investigations into his ill-treatment and violations of due process rights, while highlighting that the state's refusal to transfer him to house arrest effectively transforms his pre-trial detention into an extrajudicial death sentence (European Parliament 2023).

The targeted prosecution of Dr. Ibadoghlu serves a broader structural function. To terrorize the domestic academic sphere and criminalize all analytical exposure of the state's political economy. The regime's punitive measures extend beyond the individual scholar, employing tactics of collective punishment to amplify the chilling effect. Authorities placed extrajudicial travel bans on Dr. Ibadoghlu's family members, trapping them within the country even though they are not subject to any criminal

investigation (Friedrich Naumann Foundation 2024; European Parliament 2023). By detaining an internationally recognized scholar, threatening him with up to 12 years in prison on fabricated charges, and persecuting his family, the Aliyev administration sends a definitive disciplinary message to the broader research community. This judicial theater establishes a rigid red line. Any empirical investigation into the structural corruption of the regime, the shady management of public finances, or the elite distribution of hydrocarbon revenues is now classified and prosecuted as a direct national security threat. By silencing Dr. Ibadoglu, the state effectively ensures that no domestic scholar will dare to apply critical economic analysis to the regime's political survival strategies.

5.4. The Metric of Violence: The Political Prisoner Benchmark

To understand the current political environment in modern Azerbaijan, one must look beyond the official diplomatic communication and examine the empirical data defining the country's civic space. Contemporary human rights data serves as an objective metric for tracking the growth of state security measures, establishing a clear baseline of political centralization. According to documentation compiled by domestic groups such as the Union for Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan, and supported by annual assessments from international monitoring bodies, the number of recognized political detainees in the country has risen to nearly 400 individuals (Union for Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan 2024; Human Rights Watch 2024). This figure should not be viewed as a static statistic or a brief administrative error; rather, it functions as a clear indicator of expanding state legal control.

The detention of hundreds of citizens shows the nature of the government's approach to limiting independent civil society. By documenting these targeted detentions, human rights monitors reveal a clear strategy of preemptive administrative containment. As the government prepares to host major international meetings such as COP29, this

statistical increase proves a calculated plan to restrict the public sphere, ensuring that few organized civic networks remain to challenge the state's official narrative or mobilize local concerns while international attention is focused on Baku (Human Rights Watch 2024). This data-driven reality clarifies the nature of institutional governance in the country, indicating that political detentions have become a primary tool for maintaining the state's centralized monopoly on power.

Beyond the quantitative volume of these detentions, a detailed analysis of the political prisoner population reveals that the state's security measures are not an isolated, reactive response to a single political crisis, but rather a comprehensive, multi-sector management of Azerbaijani society. An analysis of the nearly 400 detainees currently held in state custody demonstrates that these individuals are not drawn from a localized geographic region or a single, marginalized faction (Union for Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan 2024). Instead, they represent a broad and carefully managed cross-section of the nation's civil sphere. The legal measures include independent journalists who challenge the state's dominant role in the information space, political opposition leaders who attempt to organize institutional alternatives to the established government, and religious activists whose independent congregations offer alternative moral and social frameworks outside state-sanctioned structures (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Furthermore, these administrative actions extend to labor activists attempting to organize local economic concerns and anti-corruption researchers dedicated to mapping the complex financial networks of state entities. The Azerbaijani administration is not only neutralizing a specific ideological opponent, but executing a broad strategy of societal containment. This cross-sector administrative approach is designed to systematically limit the infrastructure for civic resistance before it can coalesce into a unified movement. The deliberate targeting across such varied professional and civic affiliations indicates that the state perceives independent mobilization, alternative political thought, or structural economic critique as a potential

national security concern (Amnesty International 2024). This demographic range illustrates a government working to maintain strict limits on its populace, ensuring that no independent sector of public life retains the organizational capacity, intellectual autonomy, or leadership necessary to challenge the established political order.

Internationally, the Azerbaijani state invests heavily in a highly sophisticated public relations apparatus designed to project a modern, cooperative, and progressive image. On the global stage, the government actively markets itself as a reliable, rules-based energy partner to the West and a legitimate, welcoming host for prestigious multilateral dialogues (Human Rights Foundation 2024). This external projection relies heavily on the performative adoption of international human rights treaties and superficial rhetoric about constitutional pluralism. It is a carefully engineered diplomatic strategy crafted specifically to pacify foreign investors, maintain lucrative trade agreements, and ease the conscience of international allies who prioritize energy security over human rights.

However, the scale of mass incarceration completely ruins this diplomatic theater. The extensive roster of political detainees serves as an undeniable litmus test, demonstrating that the country's constitutional guarantees of free speech and assembly are functionally void in practice. What the statistical reality reveals is not simply a flaw in the justice system, but the criminalization of everyday democratic behavior. Within the country's borders, the state has fundamentally redefined basic civic engagement, the very foundation of a functioning democracy, as a severe threat to national security.

Activities that are entirely normalized in open societies, such as advocating for environmental justice, questioning the allocation of public funds, or organizing independent grassroots coalitions, are no longer treated as fundamental civil rights. Instead, the legal code has been maliciously adapted to reclassify these actions as anti-state conspiracies. By systematically charging civil society actors with severe, non-political felonies like high treason, smuggling, or grand financial fraud, the regime brilliantly obscures its political motives behind a veil of ordinary law enforcement

(Freedom Now 2024). This deliberate misapplication of the penal code ensures that any citizen attempting to participate in public life outside of strictly controlled, state-sanctioned channels is immediately branded a criminal.

The political prisoner benchmark proves that the judiciary has been fully subordinated to the executive branch's survival instincts. The justice system no longer functions to uphold the rule of law but operates as a centralized mechanism for domestic pacification. This dual-faced governance model allows the Aliyev administration to enforce a terrifying monopoly on power at home, while simultaneously reaping the economic and diplomatic benefits of a manufactured democratic facade abroad (Justice for Journalists 2026).

5.5. The Energy-Impunity Nexus: The Political Economy of Repression

The escalation of domestic terror and repression within Azerbaijan cannot be accurately analyzed outside of the geopolitical context as it is the direct consequence of the structural impunity granted to Baku by European resource dependency. At the core of this dynamic is the "energy-impunity nexus", a foundational macroeconomic enabler that directly facilitates the regime's campaign to eradicate internal dissent. Following the geopolitical rupture caused by the severing of Russian hydrocarbon ties, a resource-starved European continent rapidly elevated Azerbaijan to the status of a crucial, irreplaceable alternative energy supplier. The Aliyev administration has weaponized this sudden shift in European vulnerability, using its natural gas exports not only as an economic commodity, but as a strategic diplomatic shield. The detention of independent journalists, dissenting academics, and civil society leaders represents a calculated domestic security strategy rather than an improvised reaction to internal dissent. The state apparatus operates under the strategic calculus that its elevated value to Western energy security mitigates the risk of meaningful international intervention

or human rights accountability (Human Rights Watch 2024). By controlling the energy lifelines considered essential to European economic stability, the Azerbaijani leadership operates with the assurance that foreign responses to its domestic violence will remain strictly confined to performative rhetoric, entirely devoid of the punitive consequences that might otherwise constrain an autocratic state (Amnesty International 2025).

The result of these geopolitical dynamics is the creation of a strong diplomatic shield, developing directly from the European Union's increased demand for Azerbaijani natural gas, which limits the effectiveness of Western human rights sanctions. To fully understand how this dynamic supports the administration's stability, one must analyze the explicit diplomatic priorities outlined in recent bilateral agreements. The clear institutionalization of this approach, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is the 2022 EU-Azerbaijan Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy (European Commission 2022). Framed in Brussels as an important step for energy diversification and supply chain resilience, this agreement prioritizes European energy security, omitting binding human rights conditionalities, specific benchmarks for civic protection, or clauses requiring structural governance reforms. By linking the continent's industrial stability and winter heating requirements to Baku's hydrocarbon exports, this strategic reliance limits the impact of subsequent Western diplomatic critiques.

When European institutions or member states issue standard statements of concern regarding the changing civic space or the arrest of journalists, the Azerbaijani administration can maintain its policies. The government recognizes that European leaders are constrained by their own energy needs and are less likely to support their rhetoric with concrete punitive actions. This dependency limits the likelihood of the European Council deploying its Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, reducing the potential for targeted asset freezes and travel bans against senior officials managing domestic security (Human Rights Watch 2024). Furthermore, it reduces the possibility

of leveraging the procurement process, ensuring that future energy contracts are not conditioned upon the release of the political prisoners currently held by the state (Amnesty International 2025). This analysis demonstrates that the EU's energy demand does not just lead to a compromise of political values, rather, it functions as a structural diplomatic shield that protects the organizers of Azerbaijani internal security measures from significant international accountability.

The most devastating consequence of the energy-impunity relationship extends far beyond simple diplomatic passivity. It manifests as the active, material sponsorship of state violence. To answer the overarching questions regarding external enablement, one must shift the analytical focus from the absence of Western sanctions to the precise political economy of domestic repression. The structural reality of the Azerbaijani autocracy is that total societal control is an inherently expensive enterprise. Maintaining a monopoly on power requires continuous capital to sustain a very loyal internal security architecture. This required capital is overwhelmingly supplied by the uninterrupted influx of foreign currency derived from hydrocarbon exports to the European market. Because the domestic budget operates with virtually zero independent parliamentary oversight or public transparency, these European gas revenues flow directly into heavily centralized state coffers. From there, they are systematically diverted to subsidize the regime's coercive apparatus (Global Anti-Corruption Consortium 2024).

This foreign capital finances the daily mechanics of authoritarian consolidation. It procures the advanced digital surveillance technologies and spyware utilized to monitor the communications of independent journalists and civil society leaders. It funds the extensive administrative overhead of the judicial machinery required to draft, process, and enforce hundreds of fabricated indictments. Most chillingly, European energy revenues directly pay the wages, pensions, and operational budgets of the militarized police units and plainclothes security officers who physically abduct dissidents from the streets of Baku (Global Anti-Corruption Consortium 2024).

Western enablement cannot be dismissed simply as a disappointing failure of diplomatic morality or a temporary geopolitical compromise. It operates as a direct, structural financial sponsorship model. By continuing to prioritize supply chain security without imposing strict, verifiable human rights conditionality, European energy consumers are inadvertently but actively underwriting the very state budgets that sustain structural violence. This economic reality transforms Western energy reliance from a passive vulnerability into a proactive financial engine that guarantees the survival and domestic supremacy of the Aliyev administration.

Conclusion

The findings of this research challenge a central geopolitical assumption often associated with Liberal Peace Theory which is the hypothesis that economic integration and energy interdependence encourage democratic reform. Returning to the theoretical framework established at the beginning of this analysis, the case study of Azerbaijan serves as a critique of the belief that international trade inevitably liberalizes centralized governments. Instead of incentivizing domestic liberalization or institutional transparency, the evidence gathered throughout this study points toward a different trajectory. As Baku's economic connection with Europe grew, supported by fossil-fuel export agreements, the country's domestic civil space narrowed. The increase in political prisoners, the tightening restrictions on independent media, and the management of academic dissent all grew in parallel with the country's growing role in Western energy markets. This outcome indicates that "Quality Peace", a concept defined not only by the absence of interstate conflict but by the presence of human security, institutional accountability, and fundamental civil rights, is difficult to achieve through transactional resource extraction partnerships that remain entirely separate from binding human rights conditionalities.

By combining the macroeconomic data of hydrocarbon exports with the human rights metrics detailed in the previous chapters, a clear material reality emerges. In the specific context of Azerbaijan, European energy payments do not serve as catalysts for state modernization but rather work as a significant structural subsidy for the existing autocratic regime. The scale of domestic repression, visible in the high number of political prisoners currently held in state custody, requires substantial financial resources to maintain. The influx of foreign capital generated by the export of Caspian natural gas is concentrated within state-controlled channels. Instead of financing institutional reform or diversified economic development, these revenues are largely directed toward the architecture of authoritarian consolidation. This resource wealth

helps fund an extensive internal security apparatus, covers the administrative costs of the judicial system, and helps maintain the patronage networks that secure elite unity within the Aliyev administration. This transaction goes beyond simple trade. It creates a system where European energy purchases unintentionally help finance the domestic mechanisms of control in Azerbaijan.

Finally, this analysis leads to a reevaluation of Baku's geopolitical posturing, forming the final thesis of this research. The Aliyev regime's "Energy Hub" narrative is not only a foreign policy strategy, but a calculated diplomatic framework that limits external pressure. Projecting Azerbaijan as a reliable, indispensable, and progressive energy partner to a resource-dependent European continent works as a mechanism of state survival. This international discourse limits Western diplomatic accountability, making the application of human rights sanctions or economic conditionalities unlikely. By positioning itself as a vital supplier of European energy security, the administration has secured international protection for its internal actions.

This dynamic exposes a significant vulnerability in the concept of "Normative Power Europe". It indicates that the European Union's structural dependence on external fossil fuels can compromise its commitment to promoting human rights and democratic governance abroad. When faced with energy supply crises, the EU's normative framework is frequently subordinated to executive realpolitik and resource security. This compromise reveals that the EU is not only a passive observer, but an active participant in legitimizing non-democratic partners through its own diplomatic rhetoric. Therefore, the "Energy Hub" identity can be understood as the mechanism that allows the state to pursue domestic consolidation without significant geopolitical consequences. Under this framework, the regime has constrained independent media, placed immense pressure on leading academic minds, and restricted the freedom of civil society. As long as this energy relationship remains transactional, the Azerbaijani state is likely to continue its authoritarian trajectory shielded from global repercussions,

suggesting that in the modern geopolitical arena, strategic resource wealth can work to protect a regime from democratic scrutiny rather than invite it.

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