The key word in Azerbaijan in recent months appears to be modernisation, with opportunities being given to young and well-educated professionals, replacing a Soviet-time old guard.

EURACTIV met with some of these young professionals and gathered their views about the future of their country.
In snap parliamentary elections, Azeris put hopes in young candidates

People in Azerbaijan ‘have a desire to be active’, says newly-elected MP

University looking to the West is the ‘new face of Azerbaijan,’ says vice-rector

Europe’s Southern Gas Corridor ‘almost ready’, says Azerbaijan’s SOCAR

Azerbaijan government sets up think tank in efforts to increase regional clout
Exit polls look good for the ruling party in Azerbaijan’s snap elections, held on Sunday (9 February). The main difference compared to past elections is that many more young and Western-trained people are expected to fill the 125-seat Azeri Parliament.

Long-term President Ilham Aliyev’s ruling party won a majority of seats in Sunday’s snap parliamentary election, according to exit polls.

The opposition criticised the vote, denouncing electoral fraud and widespread ballot-stuffing. The fairness of the elections is expected to be assessed on Monday in a first communiqué by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Around 350 OSCE officials monitored the election, some of them long-term.

EURACTIV visited two Baku voting stations chosen at random where the vote was taking place in normal conditions. At first sight, the turnout appeared low – there were more local observers than people coming to cast a ballot.

Final results are yet to be announced, but voter turnout was initially put at 47.81% (2,547,982 voters out of 5,329,461).

Aliyev’s New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) secured 69 seats in the 125-member parliament, the Milli Majlis, according...
to two exit polls. This is the same number of MPs as in the outgoing Parliament, where two parties had one and two MPs respectively, and 53 were independent.

Executive Secretary of YAP Ali Ahmadov wrote on Facebook “I can congratulate the member of New Azerbaijan Party with another victory”.

Exit polls were conducted by local observers working for two western agencies – AJF & Associates Inc. (US) and the French OpinionWay Research Institute.

In October, Aliyev dismissed his influential chief-of-staff, Ramiz Mehdiyev, and made other high-profile changes including the appointment of 62-year-old economist Ali Asadov as prime minister. The snap election that followed is seen as part of a reshuffle of the elite.

The authorities made big efforts to present the elections as a democratic contest and a shift from over-control to controlled democracy, in which independent-minded and Western-trained people would have a say.

1,314 candidates were registered. 246 candidates were nominated by 19 political parties while 1,057 were self-nominated, and 11 were nominated by initiative groups.

In terms of gender representation, 21% of candidates were female while 79% were male. While the proportion of women is low, it was in progress compared to the previous election. Historically, the Milli Majlis is considered to be the first secular parliament in the Muslim world.

In Azerbaijan, the key word in politics seems to be “young” – a synonym for Western-trained, pragmatic and possibly pluralistic-minded people.

The situation may be different in rural areas, but in Baku many people said they were excited by the chance to vote for young candidates with successful careers, many of whom have gained prominence on social media.

Surprisingly, no resentment or criticism was noticed for the older generation, as if the old guard had accomplished their role and simply had to make way for younger MPs.

One female voter said her favourite candidate in her constituency, for whom she was going to vote, was a young male professional with journalistic background. If she could choose outside her constituency, she said her preference would go to Nigar Arpadarai, a young female professional now working as communications director for the Baku city circuit for F1.

Middle class professionals to whom EURACTIV spoke said that after three decades in which the country had accomplished the much-necessary nation-building after the Soviet period, now the time of institution-building had come, and especially strengthening the judiciary.

“If we fix the judiciary, everything else will be extremely successful,” said an English-speaking professional in his forties, who was very enthusiastic about the elections. As several others, he took the view that unlike other post-Soviet countries, Azerbaijan had made a rather successful transition, avoiding the kind of chaos that plagued Ukraine in particular.

Some of the young people still speak Russian, but clearly English is the number one foreign language in today’s Baku.

After the fall of the Soviet union, Azerbaijan was able to improve living standards and retain most of the young people who made their studies abroad. “We are able to get roughly the same conditions here,” the young professional explained, saying this was a powerful incentive to return home rather than contributing to the wealth of foreign societies.

He also argued that democracy was imperfect even in the West's most developed societies, and that “exporting democracy” had not worked across the globe, in particular during the so-called “Arab Spring”.

A young female voter said these elections would not change much in the country, but would rather gradually set the ground for “completely different” political parties in the future. She was clearly optimistic that her country was going in the right direction.

In restaurants and bars in Baku, full of young urban professionals, optimism largely prevailed. EURACTIV couldn't verify the mood in rural areas.
Azeri people were excited about the elections and have a desire for change, assures Soltan Mammadov, an independent candidate for the 125-seat parliament of Azerbaijan who spoke to EURACTIV as the polling sections were closing on Sunday (9 February).

According to preliminary results released on Monday, Mammadov became a member of the country’s parliament – the Milli Majlis – with 47.2% of the votes.

With his election, Mammadov becomes the representative of a region that was until now led by the country’s vice president and first lady, Mehriban Aliyeva.

Mammadov has more than 20 years of experience in social policy and public health, much of it gained at international level. He was chairman of the finance committee of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria between 2014-2015 and served on the fund’s board as an Eastern Europe & Central Asia Constituency representative.

Since then, he was the director of the international relations department

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of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, the country’s fund that carries out a mix of cultural, political and charitable projects.

“My desire [to serve] mainly comes from the fact that I’m relying on my experience of working with the population,” says Mammadov. However, this time is different, he adds, because he will represent people directly. “For more than 20 years, I have liked working with the citizens, working with people, implementing many social projects,” he said, speaking to EURACTIV’s Senior Editor Georgi Gotev.

Mammadov explained that he ran as an independent candidate because he is used to unaffiliated service in foundations and refrains from directly criticising the Azeri leadership.

“You know what, even in my personal life I like to first be critical of myself. There are many problems that are not the issue of the country’s policies,” said Mammadov, who prefers focusing on implementation.

He hopes to continue his work on social and health policy as an MP but also help fix his country’s infrastructural issues, lack of secure access to potable water, and lagging connectivity between villages.

However, healthcare and education remain his top priority, which in his opinion require urgent solutions within 6-8 months. After building a new school, he also intends to open new medical centres in his constituency.

“What do people want from a member of parliament?” asked Mammadov in a rhetorical question. “As our president always says, an MP must be of the people, he must work and live with them.”

Following this philosophy, the newly-elected parliamentarian plans to meet with his constituents regularly and in different formats. Mammadov thinks that the feeling is reciprocated by citizens, who are excited about taking a more active role in the electoral process.

“People have a desire to be active, because now they have completely different expectations,” said Mammadov, recounting his interactions with voters.

Overall, he is satisfied with the election turnout despite harsh weather conditions. And although he acknowledges pressures were sometimes exerted by local election observers affiliated to political parties, he does not think the problem was systemic.

In a preliminary assessment published on Monday (10 February), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) criticised the elections for lacking a “meaningful choice” despite the larger number of candidates. 1,314 candidates were registered.

The OSCE also found issues with counting and tabulation of votes on election day and expressed disappointment at the lack of female candidates. None of the 55 registered parties are led by a woman, and only about a fifth of the candidates were female.

“There were cases when one of the observers was demanding, asking or doing more” than what is permitted by law, Mammadov said, admitting that “such issues did arise”.

“But this is routine because other observers or electoral commission members explain the rules right away.”

Asked about how he expect his life to change after the election, Mammadov said he was unsure. “That’s a good question. I’m not a pessimist, but I always try to think of the bad, thinking of good things would be too easy.”

His main concern is the family time he will miss with his two daughters, but he hopes that his budding political career will inspire them.

“What we are doing for our country, it’s precisely the future of our children.”

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Talking about Azerbaijan’s snap parliamentary election on Sunday (9 February), the executive vice-rector of the country’s prestigious ADA University, Fariz Ismailzade, said it was “is clearly very different from previous elections” in that it is less “passive”.

Ismailzade, who sat down with journalists as the polls opened on Sunday, said the dismissal of the parliament created a “shock” and an opportunity for the many “Western-educated young people in the society who are looking for an opportunity to be in public service.”

ADA University was originally established to train diplomats for the ministry of foreign affairs during a time when new Azerbaijani diplomatic missions were opening.

Today, the institution already boasts about 3,000 pupils and has branched out to business, economics, public policy, computer science and other fields.

“We have two hats,” said Ismailzade. “One is to serve the ministry’s needs and the other to create a new generation of Azerbaijani who are different in their skills and their abilities,” underlining ADA’s ambition to be academically free despite its

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partnership with the government.

The university also hopes to play an important role in bringing back those who have left the country decades ago.

"In Azerbaijan, we lack good foreign-experienced professors," pointed out Ismailzade. "So we are specifically targeting" Azerbaijanis who left 10-15 years ago, by “financing special grants.”

While Ismaizade admitted that special treatment of foreign-trained faculty may be unfair to academics who stayed but argued that the labour market should reward those who are more skilled.

“If you have a PhD from Harvard or Sorbonne, you are better qualified in the market than the Azerbaijani who has never been abroad. So we are looking at it from the market perspective.”

ADA’s modern ‘green’ campus, opened in 2012 and heated entirely with geothermal energy, is designed to serve as a testament to the government’s ambition to invest in education.

“Our university is representing the new face of Azerbaijan,” said Ismailzade. “Azerbaijan’s economy is growing and there is a need for young professionals.”

The administrator shared that the university paid special attention to the parliamentary elections not purely out of academic interest.

“We have several of our university representatives running for parliament,” including faculty, alumni and even a student, Ismailzade told journalists.

Mikayil, the student government president, successfully collected the 450 signatures necessary to be registered as a candidate and tried his luck in the exercise.

Asked if the children of Azerbaijani elite stay in the country for their education or prefer to study in Western universities, Ismailzade said that families prefer to keep their children in the country for the first part of their studies but send them abroad for masters.

Sending children to London for the bachelor’s degree is not right, opined Ismailzade. First, “you have to study here in Azerbaijan, to understand your culture, values, traditions, these are important things in life — your national identity.”

However, the university seeks to attract foreign students to Azerbaijan by offering them full-ride scholarships for the duration of their studies.

ADA’s global outlook is also reflected in its collaboration with think tanks and international organisations, such as the UN and the EU. During his mandate as European Commission president, José Manuel Barroso signed a 5-year, 2 million euro grant with ADA University, when visiting the country’s capital in 2014.

“During this five-year project, we established a centre of excellence in EU studies,” said Ismailzade, that trained about 2000 civil servants in EU law and institutions, the bloc’s foreign and security policy, as well as established summer camps for school children and podcasts about the EU called AvropadASAN (“You’re in Europe”).

In terms of collaborating with other academic institutions, the main focus remains on Western establishments because "Azerbaijani youth is geared more towards going to Europe," said Ismailzade, “but with the Russians, we have quite a good dialogue.”

ADA will open a new master’s joint-degree program with MGIMO, Moscow’s own foreign affairs ministry-affiliated institution, after having already established joint-degree programs with universities in Europe and the United States.

While the university is considered public and receives funds from the state, it is seeking to be self-reliant.

“We are charging students because we believe that the university should have its own funds,” said Ismailzade. We cannot rely on state funds alone “because our government budget depends on oil and gas revenues.”
A 25-year supply contract has been signed with Italy, and the first Azeri gas is expected to start flowing before the end of 2020, said Vitaly Baylarbayov, deputy vice president of SOCAR, the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan.

The construction of the so-called “Southern Gas Corridor”, a chain of pipelines linking Azerbaijan to Italy, has cost $40 billion and the project is “almost ready,” Baylarbayov told EURACTIV in an interview.

During the last eleven years, Vitaly Baylarbayov has been one of the leaders of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), an EU-supported project aimed at bringing gas to Europe from the Caspian Sea.

Speaking on the 37th floor of the SOCAR tower in Baku, Baylarbayov said that problems which had arisen in the past have been overcome and that the entire project was now close to completion.

The Southern Gas Corridor’s main source of supply is the Shah Deniz field, located in the economic zone of Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea. The project consists of three pipelines with a total length of almost 4,000 km: The South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) linking Azerbaijan with Georgia, the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) across Turkey, and the Trans-Adriatic pipeline (TAP) linking Greece, Albania

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and Italy with an offshore section.

The total value of works for the entire Southern gas corridor is close to $40 billion, the SOCAR executive said, adding that “substantial savings” were made during the works in Azerbaijan and Turkey. Previous estimations had put a price tag of $45 billion for the entire project.

Baylarbayov said that onshore work is 100% complete in Azerbaijan, in Georgia, TANAP on the territory of Turkey is also 100% complete and on 30 November the completion and readiness for supplies to Europe was inaugurated in Turkey in the presence of Presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Sixteen wells have been drilled in the Shah Deniz gas field and are now fully ready for operations, he said, explaining that gas will start flowing at full capacity once works on the final stretch of the Italian pipeline is completed. Eight of the wells are producing already and their gas is flowing to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. The rest will be gradually put onstream with full capacity once works on the final stretch in Italy are fully completed.

“The only remaining part of the corridor is TAP, the readiness of which is 91%,” the SOCAR executive said.

MOST SENSITIVE 8 KILOMETERS

But this last 8 km stretch on Italian territory is also the most sensitive politically. The local population have resisted the pipeline, fearing for their pristine beaches and tourism industry.

According to Baylarbayov, a micro-tunnel allowing the pipeline to avoid the beach of San Foca, the landing point in southern Italy, has now been completed. The conservative timing to make TAP operational was the end of 2020 – possibly earlier than that, he said.

“Whatever we do on the territory of Italy is done with the absolutely highest level of environmental precaution, which is not less strict on the territory of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Greece,” the executive insisted.

What could still delay construction were for example new archaeological discoveries, he explained. Multiple sites were discovered during the construction phase of the pipeline in Turkey and Greece. Whenever this happened, work was stopped and the authorities were invited to step in, Baylarbayov explained.

Regarding the volumes of gas expected in each section of the pipeline, Baylarbayov said Turkey is already receiving gas from 1 July 2018. It received about 2bcm in 2018, about 4bcm in 2019, and in 2020 the supplies should be about 6 bcm. This is in addition to the 6 bcma which Shah Deniz supplies from the Stage 1 of its development.

Furthermore, 2 bcm have been earmarked for Greece and Bulgaria. The volumes will be delivered once TAP enters operation, and when the Greece-Bulgaria interconnector is completed, by the end of 2020.

The SOCAR executive explained that the entire TAP system will be made operational in one go. For Italy, supplies are earmarked at 8+ bcm/y, he said.

“All the buyers are lined up, waiting for the supplies. Hopefully there will be no further obstacles,” he said.

IS TURKSTREAM A COMPETITOR?

Asked if Southern gas corridor was in competition with Turkish stream, he said this was a question asked by many journalists and the answer was always NO.

“Our volumes, contracted to Greece, Bulgaria and Italy for 25 years, will start arriving to Italy as soon as TAP is ready. This cannot be changed. Whether there will be Russian, Libyan, Algerian or any other gas, it doesn’t matter, because we secured our own place”.

Asked if Italy needs more, he replied: “We understand that Italy will need more gas in the next 10 years, much more than they have now. From that point of view, the capacity of the Southern gas corridor and its TAP leg is sufficient to cover most of this potential deficit”.

Asking if the 16 wells in Shah Deniz he referred to are enough to supply the 8 bcm/y for Italy plus the 2 bcm/y for Greece and Bulgaria, and also 6 bcm/a to Turkey, he said that the answer was affirmative, but as their production decline over time, others will be drilled. He also mentioned, that he strongly believes in to the huge potential of Shah Deniz which will justify its 3d and even 4th Stages of further development. He also mentioned huge potential of other Azerbaijani fields which are already under exploration and development.

Asked about the effect of cheap US LNG gas on European markets, he said that while of course this effect exists, nobody could nowadays predict price trends, which are affected by earlier not envisaged factors, giving as example the coronavirus which put down prices as a result of the slowdown of Chinese consumption but this trend will change as soon as peak of the disease is over.

“US administration recently threatened that Russian companies might become subject of sanctions because of their involvement in Venezuelan oil industry. If they will do that, prices will jump up”, he said, illustrating his argument.

Speaking about the long-term, he admitted that most of fossil fuels would be less and less welcome, but for gas he said the picture would be different, and that the resource would still be needed for at least another 50 years.
He added that gas would become cleaner, less methane would be evaporated or allowed into the atmosphere, proudly stating that SOCAR is the first national company in the region to quit completely gas flaring and implementing zero waste discharge policy on all oil and gas operations in Azerbaijan and abroad.

MORE GAS FROM CENTRAL ASIA?

Baylarbayov also seemed relaxed answering a question about the possibility that gas-rich Turkmenistan starts building an offshore pipeline with the aim of delivering gas to Europe. In that case, Azerbaijan would simply become a transit country for Central Asian gas, be it from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, he said.

“The capacity of the SGC system allows that. The capacity of SCP and TANAP is technically expandable at least until 31 bcm, and this is commercially and legally expandable without additional negotiations with host countries. The capacity of TAP can be doubled, increase by another 10 bcm. In principle, SGC capacity could be increased even further, but that would require negotiations with the host countries.”

CAN RUSSIAN GAS FLOW VIA SGC?

“We, as TAP shareholders, will of course, act in strict compliance with the European regulation, which is currently based on the Third Energy Package. Whatever is envisaged for the third parties should be granted to the third parties without any discrimination”.

He added that TAP launched in the summer of 2019 the market test which is ongoing in the moment, and which is expected to provide the exact answer to the question asked: how much of the capacity various gas producers want, and when. After this market test will collect this information, TAP will state what are its scenarios for future development.

“Only at that future stage we will now who wants to use the capacity of TAP, with 50%, or more, or less percentages of its expandable capacity, which is 10 bcm. At that point in time, under the strict guidance of the European rules TAP will decide what and how will be implemented,” the SOCAR executive said.

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At the start of last year, Azerbaijan's government established the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) think tank, in an effort to modernise and increase its regional and international clout.

Farid Shafiyev, a diplomat who came back to academia to chair the think tank after more than 20 years in the foreign service, sat down with journalists a day before the parliamentary elections on Sunday (9 February).

"Now we are working to have a scholarship funded by the government" to come and research at the centre, said Shafiyev, who also contacted think tanks in the region as well as Brussels-based organisations.

The number one research topic for the AIR Center is the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenia, with more than two-thirds of efforts going in this direction.

Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions are internationally recognised territories of Azerbaijan but have been occupied by Armenia following a 1988-94 war that claimed an estimated 30,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Continued on Page 14
A ceasefire was called in 1994, but decades of internationally mediated negotiations with the involvement of the OSCE’s Minsk Group have failed to result in a resolution. The Minsk Group is co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States.

Also, AIR Center also spends considerable resources on studying Azerbaijan’s neighbours, Georgia, Russia, Turkey and Iran.

“We have a complicated relationship with Iran,” said Shafiyev, former ambassador of Azerbaijan to the Czech Republic and Canada. “We have millions of ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran.”

The number of ethnic Iranian Azeris is heavily disputed, with estimates ranging from 12 million to as much as 30% of Iran’s population, or about 23 million people. Azerbaijan’s own population is 10 million.

“That’s an important factor in our relationship,” said Shafiyev, “the other, of course, the differences in our state systems.” Azerbaijan is staunchly secular.

The former diplomat sees a parallel between Iran and Russia in that both attempt to bring Azerbaijan within their sphere of influence.

“At least Russians don’t deny our ethnic identity,” said Shafiyev. “With Iran it is much more tricky,” because the Islamic Republic plays on the religious kinship between the two states. About 80% of Azerbaijanis are Shia Muslims.

“Plus, another factor that irritates Iran is that we have relations with the United States and Israel,” said Shafiyev, adding “we, in turn, always point to the good relations between Iran and Armenia.”

“Having said all that, we believe it’s important to have good neighbourly relations with Iran,” underscored Shafiyev, describing the American withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal as “unfortunate” and “raising tension in the region.”

“As a neighbour, we don’t like to see war,” especially one that would have direct repercussions for Azerbaijan because of the potential inflow of refugees, added Shafiyev.

On the issue of trade, Shafiyev said that having a “solid economic relationship with the EU” will remain a priority for the Caucasian country as it attempts to become more competitive and open.

“However, there is the ‘Russia factor’ which Azerbaijan should keep in mind, especially in view of disunity within the EU and the World Trade Organisation, Shafiyev said.

“We have seen what happened in Ukraine”. “Because the EU is not God, it’s not going to come and rescue your economy or [solve] your political problem with your neighbours.”

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