

azerbaijan, caucasus, nagorno karabakh



Azerbaijan’s Aliyeva quits UNESCO post

The organization has been facing accusations of political bias in its investigations (or lack thereof) into cultural heritage in Karabakh.

Ulkar Natiqqizi Nov 16, 2022



Aliyeva and Azoulay in Baku in 2019. (photo: president.az)

First Vice President and first lady of Azerbaijan, Mehriban Aliyeva, has unexpectedly resigned from her role as “goodwill ambassador” to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, amid a dispute between Baku and the UN organization over Karabakh.

Aliyeva [made the announcement](#) on November 15 via a letter in which she implied that she was too busy following Azerbaijan’s 2020 military victory over Armenia. In the letter, “it was emphasized that currently, after the liberation of the territories of Azerbaijan from long-term occupation resulting from the Patriotic War, the First Vice-President is actively involved in the large-scale restoration and revitalization of the region,” state media reported.

But the resignation comes in the context of what has been a long-running conflict between the Azerbaijani government and UNESCO, as Baku considers the current leadership biased toward Armenia.

The organization has long been the subject of criticism from Azerbaijani state officials, starting from President Ilham Aliyev, who accuse it of failing to investigate the destruction of Azerbaijani cultural heritage following Armenians’ victory in the First Karabakh War of the early 1990s.

Then, following the Azerbaijani victory in 2020, when it retook most of the territory it had lost in the 1990s, UNESCO [publicly complained](#) that Azerbaijan was dragging its feet in allowing a UNESCO mission into those territories to assess the situation with cultural heritage. Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry [retorted](#) with a complaint that the organization was “politicizing” the issue.

While Azerbaijan has [in principle agreed](#) that such a mission should take place, it has yet to happen. At a February video meeting between Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, French President Emmanuel Macron, and European Union President Charles Michel, the sides agreed to send UNESCO missions to both countries.

Azerbaijani officials have since accused Armenia of blocking the dual UNESCO missions.

In a July interview, Azerbaijan Minister of Culture Anar Karimov [reiterated](#) that the visits were agreed in February. “However, due to the non-constructive position of the Armenian side, the visit of this mission hasn’t yet taken place. The inaction of UNESCO and the position taken by this organization should be noted,” he said. He further accused the organization of turning a blind eye to copious evidence of “deliberate destruction of historical and cultural monuments as a result of the long-term occupation of Azerbaijani lands” that had been submitted by Baku.

Aliyeva’s resignation letter also stressed the same issue; she expressed hopes for the “soonest dispatch of the UNESCO mission to the liberated territories” to assess the damage to the cultural heritage of Azerbaijan.

Pro-government media had been preparing the ground for the move with a recent barrage of stories critical of UNESCO, and following Aliyeva’s announcement there was another wave of stories airing various grievances against the organization, most significantly that it was biased against Azerbaijan.

A [commentary](#) on the issue by Caliber.az, a site associated with Azerbaijan’s defense ministry, described Aliyeva’s move as a “diplomatic protest against the double-standard approach that UNESCO has adopted towards Azerbaijan.”

It said that UNESCO only became interested in Karabakh’s heritage following the war and when [reports began to surface](#) about Armenian cultural heritage sites being destroyed by Azerbaijan.

It accused the organization of operating under a logic “according to which Muslim Azerbaijanis are ‘barbarians’ and Christian Armenians are their ‘victims.’” It continued: “When it became clear that the UNESCO assessment report of the mission sent to the occupied territories of Azerbaijan will be recording a diametrically opposite picture, the interest in the topic quickly vanished.”

Other analyses [unsobly pointed out](#) the many financial donations Azerbaijan has made toward preserving Christian cultural heritage, notably at several sites in the Vatican.

“The leadership of UNESCO itself chose this dishonest and cynical position – take money from Baku, make official gestures, but when it’s an issue of justice – here they adopt an indifferent expression and completely ignore the essence of the issue,” wrote a [commentary](#) on Haqqin.az.

“However,” one such piece on news agency APA wrote, “during the 18-year activity of the First Vice-President of Azerbaijan as a goodwill ambassador, UNESCO did not respond to Azerbaijan’s calls.”

It was not clear what specifically prompted Aliyeva’s resignation after [18 years in the post](#), but it came the same day that the French Senate adopted a resolution recommending sanctions on Azerbaijan. Much of the anti-UNESCO commentary has focused on the fact that its secretary general, Audrey Azoulay, is French. France has recently become a [popular punching bag in Azerbaijani media](#) as it has been seen as taking a pro-Armenia turn.

Azoulay’s “French origin should not be overlooked among the reasons UNESCO demonstrated a position against Azerbaijan,” [APA](#) wrote.

Azerbaijan may also have other reasons to be unhappy with Azoulay’s tenure.

Her predecessor in the post, Irina Bokova, was [linked via her husband](#) to the money-laundering scheme known as the “Azerbaijani laundromat.” Some of the money in the \$2.9 billion slush fund was found to have been used to buy influence in favor of the Azerbaijani [government](#).

During Bokova’s tenure, it was also [announced](#) Azerbaijan would donate \$5 million to the organization as a part of the cooperation agreement signed by her in the presence of Mehriban Aliyeva. In 2010, Bokova [also presented](#) UNESCO’s “Mozart Gold Medal” to Aliyeva for her “services to strengthening of dialogue among cultures.”

“It seems Azoulay doesn’t like caviar like Irina Bokova, that is why their relationship was cooled,” Azerbaijani activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev wrote on [Facebook](#) following Aliyeva’s announcement.

Ulkar Natiqqizi is an Azerbaijani journalist.

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