

Devoid Elites and the Need for a New Elite Configuration: An Analysis of Post-Soviet Societies on the Example of Azerbaijan

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Abstract: This paper provides a comprehensive study of the Azerbaijani ruling elites. This study aims to describe the post-Soviet Azerbaijani elites, their interaction, and their influence to elaborate a basis for studying the impact on the government and the economy. The study focuses on the definition and origin of the Azerbaijani elites after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the analysis of their interactions, and the definition of behavior and hierarchy. The study relies on Higley and Burton's (2006) elite configurations framework and Wedel's (2003) concept of clans. It draws on qualitative analysis and applies analytical autoethnographic approaches to analyze and interpret the information received. The study used data from 113 informal dialogue interviews with those who worked closely with the elite and the elite representatives. These data provided detailed descriptions of their life and behavior in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The total number of respondents was 1,817 people. Not all elites have equal access to power. Some, called "hyperagents," control most decisions. Others, whom the author defines as "devoid elites", have very little or no real power, although they have some privileges that the elites are endowed with in society. The researcher proposes a new elite configuration entitled "imposed unity elites", which better describes the majority of Azerbaijani elites. This elite configuration implies the existence and behavior of devoid elites. It also describes elites that seem to be united in public but lacks any basic ideology or common goals. The research contributes to the further development of Higley and Burton's (2006) framework of elite configurations and the theory of the influence of elites. The possible application of the obtained research results will allow scientists to better understand the development characteristics of the elite configuration in the post-Soviet space and their impact on the state.

Keywords: clientelism, devoid elites, elite theory, loyalty, power.

In the modern world, there are many countries where a disrupted elite unity often leads to internal conflicts and disruption of social partnership, inefficient public administration, democratic underdevelopment, and economic stagnation (Kailitz & Stockemer, 2017; Pogodda & Richmond, 2015). The post-Soviet space is an example. Along with other regions of the world, it attracts scientists' interdisciplinary interest in studying this phenomenon in the context of elite configurations and assessing their impact on the modern development of this region of the world and its countries (Steen, 2019). This interdisciplinary study rests on the power theory, concepts in the field of elites, and the socio-cultural analysis of power and elites. The current

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study examines the role of political and economic elites in governance using the example of Azerbaijan and its political system.

The primary purpose of this study is to describe the post-Soviet Azerbaijani elites, their interaction, and access to power and, subsequently, study the impact on the government and the economy. The research into this issue also includes an additional comparative analysis of certain clan system aspects and authoritarianism regarding the elites of Azerbaijan. The study can offer a rare opportunity to look behind the scenes at internal elite relations and the shadow elite structures of Azerbaijan. Thus, it reveals the way from the nomenclature that ruled all Soviet organizations to today's elite configuration based on a centralized elite society.

In the research process, it is necessary to clarify who the current elites in Azerbaijan are and the driving forces that characterize their relations with each other. It is also important to understand the sources of their power, their activities since the collapse of the USSR, and their influence on governance in Azerbaijan. Therefore, this study aims to describe elite behavior, their reactions to the conduct of others, and how they gain and maintain their influence in general terms. In addition, it is essential to study how others, including non-elites, behave and interact with the elites so that they receive and maintain their power.

A literature review describes elite theories, typologies, and configurations. The first task of this study was to describe who the elites in Azerbaijan are, to identify them, to describe them, and to study the drivers of their influence. The main research questions are the following: 'Who are the elites in Azerbaijan since the fall of the Soviet Union? How did they become elites? Analysis of elite interactions?'

Initially, the author considered general elite theories, configurations, and power sources. Then the study analyzed nomenklatura and clientelism. Further, the research focuses on applying new approaches to understanding elites in the context of the post-Soviet space and specifically in Azerbaijan.

Literature Review

Azerbaijan is characterized by the presence of extremely diverse historical, cultural, and political factors compared to many other states that are the focus of elite studies. In the socio-cultural context, the main macro-social structure of this state is formed by clans, and not tribes or religious groups, as can be seen in Middle Eastern or African countries (Niftiyev, 2022). In terms of the political system, Azerbaijan can be characterized as a special case of stable hegemonic authoritarianism and this definition has been supported by researchers for a long time (Broers & Mahmudlu, 2023; Samadov, 2019). Next, the author defined the main concepts discussed in this paper:

1. **Elite:** In this study, the term elite is used according to the previously proposed statement to denote social groups with a high position in society (Daloz, 2010). As a rule, elites include groups of individual political, socio-economic, and cultural strata of the population who occupy a leading position in society, along with senior managers and administrators of state and other significant social institutions in the political system (Robinson, 2012).
2. **Clan:** A clan is defined as a system of social relations that creates an informal regime, an order of power, and rules. In this regime, clans are the dominant social and political players. Clan networks, rather than formal institutions and elected officials, retain and exercise real power, thus transforming the political system (Collins, 2006).
3. **Authoritarianism:** Authoritarian practices imply power relations when the supreme political leader has control over the society they belong to. In fact, authoritarianism can be defined as a model of actions embedded in an organized context, sabotaging accountability to people over whom the supreme political leader exercises control, or

their representatives, depriving them of access to information and the right to vote (Glasius, 2018).

The Modern Theory of Political Elites

In recent years, a new scientific approach has become widespread. According to the approach, political elites are individuals and small, relatively cohesive, and stable groups with disproportionately large opportunities to permanently influence national and supranational political results (Best & Higley, 2018). It is also necessary to recognize the recursive nature of elitism, which always exists as a relative and absolute reality, operating in different layers and areas of privilege and with varying degrees or scales of inequality (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017). In addition, as a rule, elites cooperate in common economic and political interests. Otherwise, they compete, and the elites split (Bhattacharyya, 2020).

The Elite Typology and Configuration

It is impossible to summarize the complex attributes of most typologies of political elites. Typologies that distinguish elites by the degree of their value consensus or group cohesion are good examples. The same is true for typologies that distinguish political elites by the degree of democratic consolidation or political stability (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018).

Elite configurations largely reflect society's social, economic, cultural, and political structures (Dogan, 2003). Initially, more developed political institutions manage the changes that may or may not lead to the successful democratization of elites in society (Lindenfors et al., 2020).

Since, in most cases, authoritarian regimes revolve around elections with real but unfair competition, business magnates with vast financial resources and media holdings have vital means to participate in political competition on the unequal playing field of such regimes. Accordingly, those who come to power with the help of business magnates are likely to continue to count on their support. As a result, a competitive authoritarian regime remains with a potentially new configuration of ruling elites (Pleines, 2019).

In the context of the existing theory, the typology of the elite structure can be referred to as exclusive if representatives of the elites are recruited from the same social stratum of society and are closely related to each other. The latter implies common social values and attitudes, dense networks of interaction, and active horizontal mobility between the elites. Otherwise, the connections of elite members with citizens are insignificant in terms of interaction networks, social values, and relationships. Low stability characterizes the fragmentary elite structure. In this case, holding privileged positions is low, and abandoning is high (Ruostetsaari, 2021). It is reasonable to consider elite configurations from the standpoint of interaction between elites and how it affects the outcomes of state activity. History knows many different elite configurations (Table 1).

Table 1

Historically-Rooted Options of Elite Configurations

Elite Configuration	Regime Type (and Subtypes)
Consensually united	Stable representative (liberal oligarchy/democracy)
Ideologically united	Stable unrepresentative (totalitarian/theocracy/ethnocracy)
Disunited	Unstable representative (illiberal democracy)
Disunited	Unstable unrepresentative (monarchical, authoritarian, sultanistic, post-totalitarian/theocratic/ethnocratic)

Note. Developed by the author based on data from Higley and Burton (2006)

Wedel is an anthropologist who offered a sociological approach to studying elites in post-soviet societies, focusing on clans, unity, memberships, and the influence of elites (Wedel, 2017). Wedel has been the first to apply anthropological insights to topics that are typically the field of political scientists, economists, or sociologists (Wedel, 2003). After nearly 20 years (from the 1980s to the early 2000s) of studying the role of informal systems in shaping Soviet and post-Soviet societies, Wedel turned her attention from 2000 onwards to the United States and has identified some parallels. Her research journey included post-Soviet countries as well as American and Western societies. The author integrates a sociological vision of the Western world, the free market economy, democracy, and accountability, but not from a political perspective but from a sociological one. Her work explores the undermining factors that threaten democracy in both the Western free-market world and the post-Soviet world. As part of her research, the researcher focused on communist and post-communist societies regarding the factors that undermine democracy. Her studies cover such topics as power, accountability, influence, and social memberships, including informal networks of elites. Since 2005, Wedel turned her focus on development aid, corruption, and the change of global elite impact (Wedel, 2021).

This study focuses on the topics that refer to the studies by both Higley (2010a, 2010b, 2018a, 2018b) and Wedel (2017, 2021). These works demonstrate the development of the past 15 years and allowed us to compare and apply their frameworks, especially in the context of Azerbaijan. The present study is close to Salverda's research experience, which, however, investigated another region and a different social transition. Salverda is an ethnographer who analyzes elites in contemporary contexts.

The theoretical framework applied to this study is Higley and Burton's (2006) elite configuration. Higley and Burton (2006) propose a dynamic typology of elite configurations based on how elites interact and argue in particular state structures. The types of elite configurations are disunited elites, consensually united elites, and ideologically united elites. Each of the types differently impacts the state. The literature review showed that Higley and Burton's framework of elite configurations is one of the most comprehensive. Its implementation is universal and has been applied to different regions of the world and all forms of states (Burton & Higley, 2001; Cianetti et al., 2020; Gerlich, 2021; Higley, 2010a; Higley & Burton, 2006; Higley & Pakulski, 1995; Smit, 2019). Disunited elites lack consensual values and disagree about how the state should be governed. Disunited elites typically result from unstable regimes. In this case, elites frequently compete for power with each other to gain political dominance. Brazil is a modern example of a regime with disunited elites.

States with consensually united elites do not have a dominant elite faction. Thus, members of a consensually united elite group generally agree with how the nation should be governed. Most Western countries have consensually united elites. Ideologically united elites occur when the elite group members share an ideology. The shared ideology may be political, as in a fascist state, or theology, as in a theocracy. However, none of these existing elite configurations seemed to be a fit for Azerbaijan.

Researchers proposed numerous indicators to analyze the complex attributes of political elites and their types. However, limited studies on this issue do not allow to fully assert the validity of the postulated relations between the types of elite configurations and regimes (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). Moreover, it is essential to note that an autocratic leader (as well as any other leader) seeks, first of all, to maximize the private and public benefits available and redistribute these benefits to buy loyalty and provide support (Melville & Mironyuk, 2015). On the other hand, populism is inevitably defined as an anti-elitist doctrine, while elites often lead nationalistic movements (Varshney, 2021).

In general, there is a theory that suggests the configuration of competing elite groups or coalitions to be essential to political structures in a particular state (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Visser et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2014). Some studies (Higley & Burton, 2006; Higley, 2018a, 2018b) argue that the way groups of elites interact, that is, their configuration creates conditions to form governmental structures. Since elites exist in most complex societies, they believe there are three main configurations of elite groups: disunited, united by consensus, and ideologically united (Higley & Burton, 2006; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). At the same time, the authors note that this “unity” has two main characteristics. The first is the value consensus, which implies that the elite groups agree on norms or rules that apply to political behavior and activities (Higley & Burton, 2006; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). For example, elites with a value consensus may agree that an official opposition is essential, elections should determine the party in power, and political decisions should be free from intimidation (Higley & Burton, 2006). Structural integration is the second characteristic of united elites. The above refers to the interaction between elites, including their rivals. In a state with high structural integration, elites can interact with each other largely both in formal structures, such as parliament, and in informal settings, for example, in social clubs (Higley, 2018a, 2018b; Higley & Burton, 2006; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018).

Researchers suggest that configurations of elite groups without any signs of structural integration and value consensus are disunited elites (Higley & Burton, 2006). A struggle for power between rival factions characterizes states with a disunited elite. Since there is no agreement on the rules of political interaction, that is, there is no value consensus, states with disunited elite configurations are more vulnerable to attempts to seize or retain power. They are less stable (Higley, 2018a; Higley & Burton, 2006). Elites can use state institutions to harass, intimidate, or undermine other elite groups. They may also even resort to violent actions, such as intimidation, imprisonment, and other methods of dangerous influence (Higley & Burton, 2006). In this configuration, elites are insecure. Disunited configurations of elites destabilize state political structures, such as illiberal democracies or authoritarian regimes. Elite unity results from a value consensus and significant structural integration (Higley & Burton, 2006).

Nomenklatura

The nomenklatura system had a purely hierarchical structure. In the Soviet Union, the Communist Party created special committees that recruited nomenklatura workers. They chose nominees for bureaucratic positions from a list of names (Nisnevich & Ryabov, 2020; Wedel, 2003). Appointments to the nomenklatura also supported a system of clientelism used by the elites to consolidate their power. Clientelism is a system in which economic and political power is exchanged between those who have political power and others who can provide political support (Gherghina & Volintiru, 2021; Horak & Bader, 2023; McDonald, 2022; Suny, 2019). In the nomenklatura system, higher-level individuals nominated or appointed individuals from their network to positions in the apparatus, thereby turning them into the elite. An appointing person became a patron and an appointed person was, respectively, a client (Kapidžić, 2021; Szanyi, 2022). Thus, the individuals who were connected within the nomenklatura and participated in a complex relational network where they exchanged political support and benefits.

World, Central Asian, and South Caucasian Elites

Modern scientific discourse finds it challenging to determine who are elites and describe them as a separate group. Constant changes in this group problematize the identification and description of elites (Wedel, 2017). Studying this issue, researchers concluded that elites were

people who had access to extensive economic resources. They are traditionally rich, and they are richer at the beginning of the 21st century than in the past. Elites also become more diverse in their national origin. As a rule, Western countries formed the global elite in the 1900s. Now it consists of representatives from various world countries (Alvaredo et al., 2022; Bernstein & Swan, 2007; O'Brochta, 2023).

In the post-Soviet space, in the first years after the collapse of the communist system, some local elites managed to assert themselves and rise to the level of state governance. They were the ones who made decisions, setting priorities and directions to be followed during the transition period of development (Balan, 2020). At the same time, in the post-Soviet space, socio-economic transformation processes took place with the destruction of intertwined elite structures through political will and parallel evolution of the economic sphere toward the market path. The complication of the social structure of society accompanied these events (Colton & Tucker, 2019).

These countries faced a unique set of problems that required them to carry out severe institutional, legal, economic, social, and political transformations by historical standards in a relatively short time. Attempts to assimilate Western democratic institutions formally encountered the need for their adaptation to the very diverse socio-cultural realities of post-Soviet societies. These societies turned out to be largely conservative and traditional. As a result, informal institutions and mechanisms quickly compensated for the shortcomings of institutions that began to form in different countries. These informal structures began to compete with constitutional institutions, prepared the ground for the seizure of power, and led to the formation of neopatrimonialism (Abramova & Vilisov, 2020).

Although the rigidly structured nomenklatura system ended with the Soviet Union, the nomenklatura system impacted the elite systems currently existing in the post-Soviet states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Antonyan, 2023; Nisnevich & Ryabov, 2020). For example, many argue that the system of clientelism that functioned in the nomenklatura system of the USSR continued to exist even after its collapse. Patrons provided clients with access to power, and clients supported the political goals of their patrons in return (Horak & Bader, 2023; Kapidžić, 2021; McDonald, 2022). With the liberalization of markets, the system of clientelism has spread to business elites. In this context, individuals with political power created policies or provided political benefits to representatives of business elites. They, in turn, offered monetary and political support to representatives of the political elite (Ergun, 2010). This strategy of clientelism has been successful as a way to preserve power for Central Asian and South Caucasian political elites (Horak & Bader, 2023). In addition, some authors argued that this system filled in the gaps left after the fall of communism (Wedel, 2021).

Elites of Azerbaijan

In post-Soviet Azerbaijan, respect for strong leaders and the continuation of patron-client economic and political networks seem to contribute to the preservation of local ties and attachments. This feature, in turn, hinders the development of a Western-type ruling elite (Rutland, 2023). The line is very mobile and easy to cross between formal and informal in the country. Formal and informal structures, networks, and procedures are closely intertwined. Although analytically separated, these units are, in practice, inseparable, especially in the professional sphere (Ergun & Sayfutdinova, 2021).

The case of Azerbaijan is an extreme form of the political system, which is an ideal type of (neo)patrimonial one. It implies the existence of patrimonial and special patron-client relations, which are rooted both in the communist period of history and in the pre-communist past. The relations also permeate all aspects of the political life of society. At the same time, the formal bureaucratic structure was created and borrowed from the model of the Western legal

system and the professional state apparatus. This structure somewhat complements the situation by the prevailing patrimonial rules of the game (Guliyev, 2020).

In Azerbaijan, the ruling elite dominated from 1993 to 1998 and consisted of loyal characters and proxies of Heydar Aliyev. These characters made extraordinary efforts and lent support after his return to active politics. The old, established clientelism, regional networks, and the memory of his prosperous years in Azerbaijan and the Soviet administration contributed to his return not only as a national leader but also as a “savior” in the “difficult times of the country” (Ergun, 2010, p. 69). After Heydar Aliyev, his son, President Ilham Aliyev, continued the country’s course. However, after the 2000s, although clientelism did not completely disappear, it gradually began to give way to new forms of elite relations. This study addressed them further.

Clans and the Clan Nature of Elites in Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani elites are a patron-client network in which the president uses patronage and other resources to ensure the loyalty and support of the ruling coalition members. Nevertheless, the country is ruled by a strong authoritarian leader and several clan networks (Bagirov, 2021). The researchers emphasize that these networks are not formally clans in the classical anthropological sense. They do not necessarily imply the existence of common roots of the participants. In this case, corrupt economic interests and not deep cultural traditions connect patronage networks. However, members of these networks tend to use the creation of family ties as an additional resource (Broers & Mahmudlu, 2023).

The country’s elite mechanisms of purchasing loyalty support are focused on the family, clan, and dynasty. As long as it remains unchanged in an environment where the elite controls the income from resource rents and seeks to accumulate and preserve power in an authoritarian way, a democratic transit of power should not be expected (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2020). This situation has become dominant in the opinion of researchers in most post-Soviet countries exporting hydrocarbons. In addition, the clannish and authoritarian nature of the political system has created obstacles to the country's full-fledged political and economic integration into the world community (Hille, 2020).

Gaps in the Literature and this Research

This study examines several areas of elite study. The author argues that the elite theory can provide a valuable perspective for studying political structures, including those formed in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The study provides several definitions of local and world elites. It also gives some idea of their representation in the post-Soviet states that are part of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The research uses theoretical resources (Higley & Burton, 2006) to describe how the configuration of elites influences and partially determines the political structures that the state can create.

This investigation seeks to study the elites in the region more profoundly and determine the types of power they possess, how this power manifests itself, and how they receive and retain it. It also aims to study elites’ configurations to better understand the problems of democratization. The paper expands the existing literature by applying the elite theory with a regional focus, not just on one country. The study rests on two important research questions: How do elites behave, act, and interact with each other? Is there a hierarchy within elite groups? The following section describes the research method used to answer these questions.

Data, Method, and Analysis

Research Design

The design of the study involves a qualitative content analysis based on informal interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). It also uses additional statistical studies to reinforce the obtained data. The process is described in more detail below in the Method of Ethnographic subsection (Plows, 2008).

The study examines the Azerbaijani elites through the prism of an insider. The insider has worked and communicated among the elites for 25 years in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. In this study, the center of research interest is the understanding of the elites' role in post-Soviet societies of the region as a whole. Nevertheless, the paper pays primary attention to the example of Azerbaijan due to several reasons. Firstly, this research direction closely relates to Azerbaijan's political and historical context. In addition, this phenomenon is one of the most sufficiently studied. Secondly, most of the experience that constitutes the study's autoethnography occurs in Azerbaijan. In this case, it is possible to contextualize the data, which is especially important for understanding and interpreting the experience of belonging to the elite in Azerbaijan. Thirdly, Azerbaijan is a valuable case study for the region since its history has similar features to other states in the region. Although the details differ slightly in different countries, this trajectory is approximately the same for other South Caucasus and Central Asia countries. Therefore, the recent history of Azerbaijan is the focus of this study.

After more than a century of theoretical research into power, behavior, status, and the elite, the following question is still relevant: What else can the anthropology of elites offer besides focusing on elite cultures? Ethnographies of elites offer an opportunity to illustrate the life of elites more richly and holistically, mainly due to the modern methodological approach in anthropology based on an in-depth study of this phenomenon. Ethnographic studies can help to understand the multidimensionality of elite culture, its internal relations, and power formations. The studies also address the social history and associations of elites with other social groups or classes. This perspective differs from sociological and political science since it pays considerable attention to socio-cultural patterns and practices, symbolic aspects, cultural context, and the construction of meaning and experience of elite members (Salverda & Abbink, 2013).

Data

The author used and analyzed data from the Azerbaijan Statistical Information Service (ASIS) on the employment structure in the country and the number of civil servants. These data allowed the author to assess the changes and the proportion of the highest administrative elite in 2005-2021. The study employed information from Elite Quality Report 2022: Country Scores and Global Rankings for a comparative analysis of the elites in the countries of Transcaucasia and Central Asia (Casas & Cozzi, 2022). Additionally, the analysis used data from a survey of Azerbaijani respondents with different income levels on the importance of friends in their lives. The survey took place in 2018 as part of the World Values Survey Association (World Values Survey Association, 2018). The total number of respondents was 1,817 people.

The Method of Ethnography

This paper presents the results of a qualitative ethnographic study (Reeves et al., 2008). It used 113 informal dialogue interviews with those who closely cooperated with the elites and were the elites themselves. The obtained information reveals the elites' life and behavior in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Ethnography aims to detect and describe cultural

phenomena using an interpretation of observed phenomena to deepen the understanding of a studied culture (Boswell et al., 2019; Dewan, 2018; Ibrahimova & Moog, 2023; Longo & Zacka, 2019). Knowledge about a culture rests on interpreting observations of a studied group (Dewan, 2018; Ibrahimova & Moog, 2023). Ethnography is particularly useful for studying behavior, beliefs, and relationships (Karpa et al., 2021). Although political science or elite theory generally makes little use of ethnography, many argue that it is necessary (Chancer, 2019; Cousin et al., 2018; Harrington, 2017; Herzog & Zacka, 2019; Karpa et al., 2021; Marques, 2021). The use of ethnography as a research method in political science allows for a deeper understanding of culture and relationships that influence politics and governance (Herzog & Zacka, 2019; Ibrahimova & Moog, 2023; Karpa et al., 2021; Marques, 2021). Political science primarily addresses events that happen behind the scenes and are unavailable to the public (Chancer, 2019). Since the main purpose of this paper was to study the behind-the-scenes life of elites, including their behavior and relationships, ethnography was an appropriate research approach.

Data Collection Strategy: Informal Interviews

This study combines two databases collected by the author. The first database contains information collected through analytical autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011) and obtained by the author (the author has been a member of the Azerbaijani elite for a long time). The second database comprises evidence from 113 interviews with Azerbaijani elites and people working closely with them (Appendix 1).

The author also conducted 113 informal interviews (autoethnographic data of the author—approximately 800,000 words) with elite representatives of the highest level and employees who worked with them in close contact. People participated in the interviews from the following countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The author chose these informants based on the relationships developed over 25 years of work in the region, including the recommendations of these informants. Extensive and detailed written notes were kept during the interview and analyzed immediately after it. These written notes represent qualitative data used in the analysis presented in this paper.

Although the data obtained in this study rest entirely on the informants' answers, the interpretation and construction of the meaning of these data stem from the author's extensive experience of working directly with the highest-level elite in this region. This work provided a unique perspective for this study. According to some scientists (Cousin et al., 2018), access to information is one of the main problems in conducting observational studies. People with connections to elite groups can gain access to groups that might otherwise be almost inaccessible. In this case, the author's previous work and immersion in culture provided both the opportunity to research and cultural awareness for interpreting the results in the future.

Data Analysis

The author used traditional content analysis to examine the data obtained during the interview. Content analysis belongs to qualitative data analysis methods that aim to study the meaning of texts by grouping text fragments into specific topics (Lindgren et al., 2020). In traditional content analysis, codes that categorize topics originate from the data. An analyst delves into the data by reading the entire text, taking notes, and grouping it. This process results in an initial set of codes. Then the analyst applies this set of codes to the text and begins highlighting topics. The above is an iterative process, and the codes are constantly being expanded and revised. The challenge is to identify a set of topics and subtopics that reflect

qualitative data (Lindgren et al., 2020). To this end, it is necessary to read all the interview notes and then note the main topics and ideas. Next, the analyst returns to the records, applying the initial set of codes to the data. The ultimate result is a reasonably detailed and informative set of topics for research.

This article tells about three main topics that constantly surfaced in the data: the increasing loyalty of the elite in the ascending line (but not in the descending line), risk aversion, and significant control concentrated in the upper elite group. These topics interact with one of the significant discoveries and the central theme of this article: many of those considered elites do not have real decision-making power.

The author structured the results as follows. From the beginning, there is a description of the main results, generally discussing the topic. Then, there is a real story illustrating the topic. All stories describe the elites' behavior and motives in each case. These stories give an idea of what the elites' life is like in this region, how power manifests itself, and who has it and who does not. The stories demonstrate one aspect that has become clear due to these interviews: a very small group concentrates on decisive power, usually in the political sphere of authority. The rest, usually considered elite, are devoid of decisive power in decision-making.

Ethical Considerations

The author took precautions to protect the identity of the participants in this study (informants) who gave informed consent. One of the precautions is that the study indicates only the region where the story took place, not the country. The paper also avoids specifying the year when the story occurred. Each story occurred between January 2004 and October 2019.

These precautions excluded the possibility of identifying specific individuals or circumstances. Since some of these stories relate to representatives of the upper elite, including the leaders of the states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, even details such as country and year may be enough to identify the subjects of the stories. In some cases, the author and the interviewed people decided that it was not problematic to detail the information since it was necessary to understand the story. The author assigned each informant a number and mentioned a country (or a letter of this country) and the year when the conversation took place. Thus, it was possible to distinguish the interviewees mentioned in this paper when retelling their stories.

This study complies with the principles of informed consent. Before the interview, the author provided clarification to inform the participants about what the study would include and that they could stop participation, withhold information, or refuse to participate at any time. Each informant provided explicit written consent before the interview.

The autoethnography procedure respects the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. All participants received pseudonyms and were assured that no information that could hint at their identity (e.g., occupation, social status, etc.) would be revealed to others. During the interviews, no audio recordings were made to eliminate the possibility of identifying any respondent by their voice.

Results

Current power relations in post-Soviet societies have certain peculiarities. In the modern system of elites in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, the elites do not take positions passing through a strict nomenklatura hierarchy, as the former Soviet system practiced. Furthermore, the institution of official commissions for the election of candidates on a competitive basis has not been adequately developed. However, although a strictly regulated elite system no longer exists, this research suggests that some characteristics of the nomenklatura system persist. One of the characteristics is that the upper-level elite decides whom to bring into the fold. At the same time, there is no official task committee in the modern realities of Central Asia and the

South Caucasus. A small group of influential people still makes important decisions, including, first of all, the country's President. Whether it is a more effective system compared to others, time and further research will show.

According to global research into the quality of elites in different countries, the elite of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan occupies the best positions compared with others in the Transcaucasia and Central Asia region. Such countries as Georgia, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic follow them (Table 2).

Table 2

The Scores for the Elite Quality of Country and Global Rankings with Power and Value Sub-Indices (Transcaucasia and Central Asia) – 2022

Country	The Global Rank of Elite Quality	Power (I) Rank	Value (II) Rank
Kazakhstan	46	66	44
Azerbaijan	52	71	49
Georgia	84	110	67
Uzbekistan	88	109	70
Armenia	103	72	116
Turkmenistan	118	134	93
Tajikistan	122	125	114
Kyrgyz Republic	123	118	126

Note. Based on the study of Elite Quality Report 2022 (Casas & Cozzi, 2022)

To understand who represents the elites in modern Azerbaijan today and their current configuration, the author considers their development traits in the post-Soviet period. After the collapse of the USSR in 1992, Azerbaijan began to build its statehood. At the same time, the former party establishment and the economic elite largely retained their positions, strengthening them later when Heydar Aliyev returned to politics. However, in modern Azerbaijan, the elite differs in many ways from the elite of the late Soviet period. It is essential to understand this difference and the current configuration of the elite.

The idea of the elite as people with high social status but not necessarily with significant decision-making powers corresponds to the nomenklatura system of the former Soviet Union. This system delegated little real responsibility and little decisive power to the lower ranks. Only those with real power were at the top of the power pyramid.

They held high positions in essential organizations, had economic and cultural power, and had access to privileges unavailable to most of the population. They occupied elite positions in their society. The members of the nomenklatura elite rather depend on their social status and privileges and not necessarily on the degree of their decisive power. Consequently, it is more reasonable to define modern elites in Central Asia and the South Caucasus based on their social status and privileges. Thus, there is no need to focus on their substantial power.

Thus, one can imagine elites as a group with disproportionately large access to resources in society. This group has a specific social power since it can influence demand and consumption in society. In an elite group, some have the right to make decisions and some do not. According to the previously proposed concept, those with broad decision-making capabilities are hyperagents (Maclean et al., 2014). On the other hand, devoid elites do not have significant decision-making power. These elites may occupy important positions but are closer to the subordinates than the actual political or decision-making participants. As mentioned above, even economic or business elites can be powerless.

One of the study results is that there is a certain unity of elites in each country of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. It implies significant structural integration, while elites contact each other in formal and informal places. In addition, there is a relative consensus on political behavior. This consensus prohibits any conduct regarded as a challenge to the President. Thus, the configuration looks like a unity option.

The elite of Azerbaijan formed in the post-Soviet period of history. It is necessary to consider the employment structure of the able-bodied population of the country and the changes that took place in it for a better understanding of these processes (Table 3).

Table 3
Changes in the Employment Structure of Azerbaijan (%)

Indicator	2005	2021	2021 to 2005
Economy, total (thsd. workers)	100.0	100.0	-
Agriculture, forestry, and fishing (thsd. workers)	3.5	3.6	0.1
Mining (thsd. workers)	3.1	1.9	-1.2
Manufacturing (thsd. workers)	8.1	7.4	-0.6
Electricity, gas, and steam production, distribution, and supply (thsd. workers)	2.2	1.6	-0.6
Water supply, waste treatment, and disposal (thsd. workers)	1.8	1.9	0.1
Construction (thsd. workers)	4.8	7.4	2.7
Trade: repair of transport means (thsd. workers)	19.3	18.6	-0.7
Transportation and storage (thsd. workers)	5.7	4.3	-1.4
Accommodation and food service activities (thsd. workers)	1.0	1.7	0.7
Information and communication (thsd. workers)	2.1	1.8	-0.3
Financial and insurance activities (thsd. workers)	0.9	1.9	1.0
Real estate activities (thsd. workers)	0.4	1.0	0.6
Professional, scientific and technical activities (thsd. workers)	2.9	3.4	0.5
Administrative and support service activities (thsd. workers)	0.7	5.0	4.3
Public administration and defence, social security (thsd. workers)	3.7	6.6	2.9
Education (thsd. workers)	25.2	19.5	-5.7
Human health and social work activities (thsd. workers)	9.9	8.1	-1.9
Art, entertainment, and recreation (thsd. workers)	3.8	3.2	-0.7
Other service activities (thsd. workers)	0.8	1.1	0.3

Note. Based on ASIS (2022)

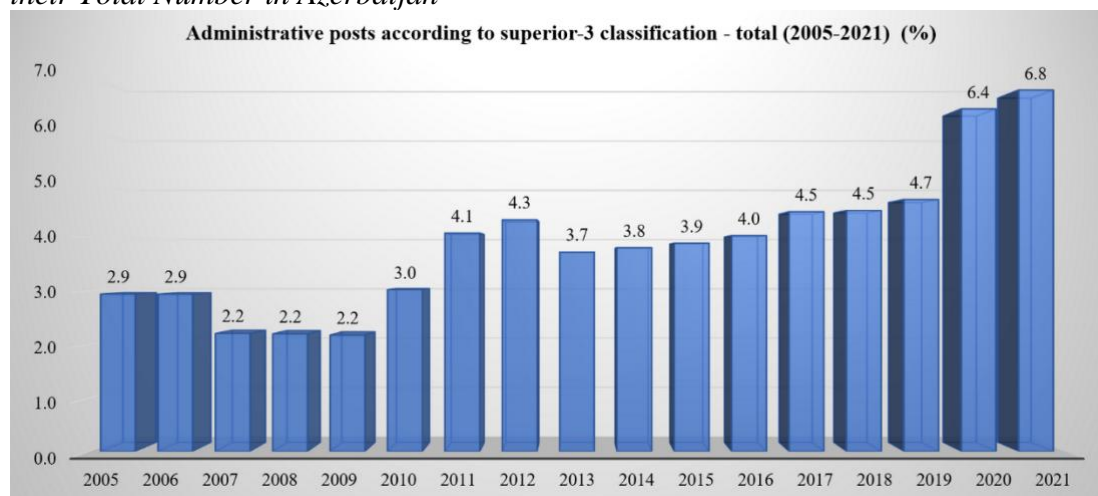
Azerbaijan underwent certain structural changes from 2005 to 2021. There was an increase in the role and importance of sectors where the country's elite occupied important positions. Thus, the share of financial and insurance activities increased by 1%; public administration and defense increased by 2.9%; administrative and auxiliary activities increased by 4.3%.

On the other hand, there was a significant increase in the share of the highest administrative elite among civil servants. This indicator rose from 2.9% in the overall structure in 2005 to 6.8% in 2021 and may indicate both the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus and the elite (Figure 1, Appendix 2).

The number of the upper administrative elite increased from 757 people in 2005 to 1801 in 2021. At the same time, the total number of civil servants increased from 25735 people to 26655 people, respectively. In addition, the data show a steady increase in the number of civil servants until 2015. It reached a peak of 30123 people and then began to decline.

Figure 1

The Dynamics of Changes in the Share of the Upper Administrative Elite of Civil Servants in their Total Number in Azerbaijan



Note. Based on ASIS (2022)

The results of this study on the example of Azerbaijan indicate that some elites have most of the power while others are nominally devoid of it. Thus, there are hyperagents and devoid elites. The hyperagents are the President and a minimal number of individuals and families who comprise the inner circle. These people make almost all decisions, even relatively insignificant ones, and even those that go beyond their authority. The information about these decisions is unavailable to the public. Moreover, the ways to this power are unknown to most, even to other major business partners.

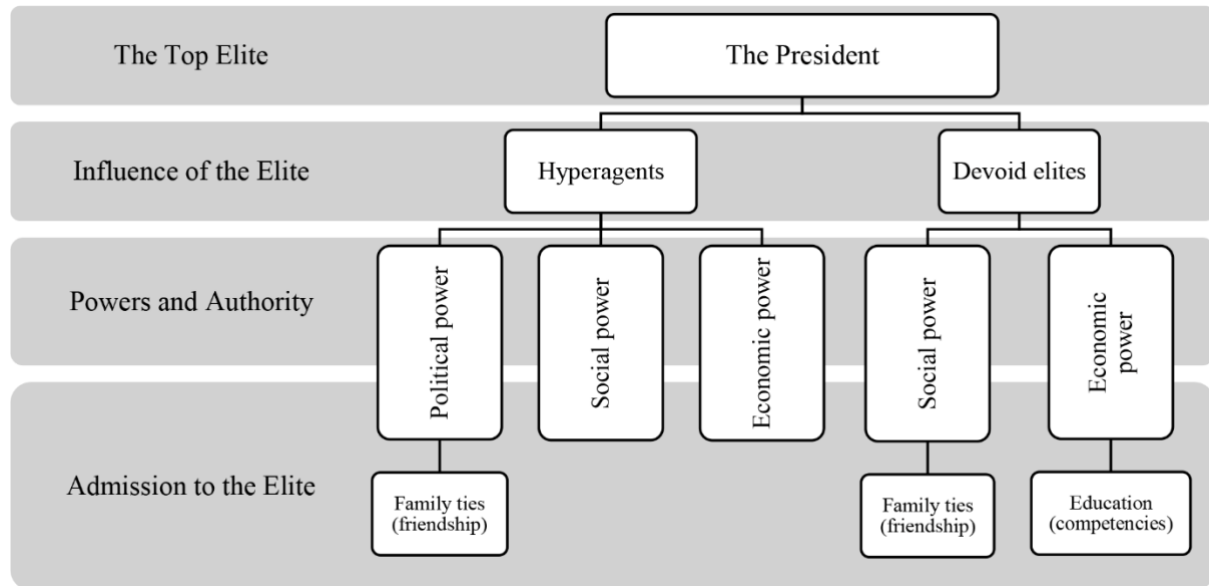
Sometimes it is impossible to create thriving organizational partnerships because the real decision-maker is unclear, unavailable, or does not participate in negotiations. The above also implies a relatively narrow power structure. In this case, many people who hold positions of power are devoid of this power and cannot make any significant decisions. Thus, the author considers these elites “devoid.” These are people who occupy leading positions in political, economic, and social organizations. The organizations they lead have vast resources and power. Therefore, these people may seem to have considerable power because they are at the top of the organizational hierarchy. However, they cannot make decisions or influence the results of management.

In the structure of modern Central Asian and South Caucasus elites, there does not seem to be a comprehensive ideology that is the center of unity. Instead, unity seems to result from a leader and their entourage’s success in creating an environment where incentives support their leadership. As structural integration and value consensus, unity most likely arises due to imposing consequences rather than adherence to ideology. Thus, the configuration of Central Asia and South Caucasian elites does not fit into the unified collaborative design or the disunited structure. It would be correct to say that it represents a different kind of unity—“imposed unity”. In this configuration of “imposed unity,” there is structural integration and value consensus, as in consensual unity and ideological unity. However, instead of genuine consensus or adherence to ideology, control by those at the top of the elite hierarchy are factors that create this unity (Figure 2).

The presence of devoid elites is a central element in this kind of configuration. In a structure where elites have some power, they are unlikely to show loyalty to the leader, as it happens in the configuration of imposed unity. However, in the case when the elite power structure is minimal, there are a small number of hyperagents and a large number of powerless elites who do not have real decision-making power. These higher-level elites can create a kind

of unity among those who do not have much power. Since the devoid elites enjoy the privileges but have no practical power, they accept the imposed unity and contribute to it with the leader's support. Therefore, they consistently agree in public with the decisions and actions of the leader. In the study, the elite should be defined based on its social power, not necessarily decisive power or the ability to influence political processes or outcomes directly. Social power often stems from kinship and friendly ties.

Figure 2
Elite Configuration in Azerbaijan



Note. The author's development.

In 2018, researchers surveyed 1817 respondents in Azerbaijan with different income levels. The survey aimed to show the importance of friends for the participants. Thus, the majority confirmed that friendship played a vital role in their lives. This result is not surprising since social ties based on friendship are one way to access the country's elite and be promoted (Appendix 3).

Clientelism moved from elite relations' lower and middle levels to the top of power. It is an essential aspect of the studied problem. At the same time, loyalty replaced trust within the elites. Loyalty was one of the main topics for many informants in this study. The majority of them (92%) described loyalty shown by less influential elites to more influential ones. In terms of clientelism, it implies the loyalty that a client shows to a patron. The informants mentioned this topic at least once in each of the countries. The informants made it clear that showing loyalty to more influential people was one of the most important motivators for the elite. However, loyalty is not mutual; patrons do not necessarily signalize clients their commitment. The informants often described situations when a high-ranking or "hyper" elite removed one person from a post and appointed another. They were involved in every aspect of the country's overall policy and strategy. Although some representatives of the political elite, such as ministers, were allegedly responsible for decisions in their departments, a tiny group at the top of the political elite made all decisions. Ministers had social privileges and advantages from their position, for example, high salaries, membership in exclusive clubs, a leading position in business, and so on, but they had no decisive power.

These situations demonstrate several things. First, it shows how the very top of the hierarchy of the political elite concentrates power in this country. The President is a person who has the right to make decisions, assign power and receive loyalty from the inner circle elites.

Secondly, it demonstrates a kind of clientelism that still exists: the President (patron) provides the political elite, for example, ministers (clients), with a position and, consequently, any social power and privileges they receive due to their position. In turn, these elites are clients and demonstrate their loyalty and avoid challenging the President's power, partly hiding their achievements from the public. This loyalty is one-sided: although clients must demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the President, the President can replace them with someone else at any time, depriving them of income, social power, and benefits. While the system of clientelism was more like an exchange of power in Soviet times, it was one-sided in Azerbaijan.

In addition, the majority (86%) of the informants emphasized the attempts of the elites to minimize their risk, even when it could lead to worse results for themselves, their business, or their party. Since showing loyalty to the party was paramount, the elites avoided actions that could be interpreted as disloyalty. The informants from each of the studied countries mentioned this aspect.

All the above illustrates the minimal power structure in many countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The President has almost all the decision-making powers. Although ministers are officially responsible for their departments, they must receive approval for almost all decisions in practice. Moreover, they are interested in maintaining their privileged positions in an environment where they can be easily replaced. Therefore, they are risk averse and prefer to avoid decisions without approval, even if failure to make them could lead to significantly worse consequences for the country.

The third aspect is that the control of the primary political elites extends to other areas, including business. According to the informants, it is typical for the political elite in Central Asia and the South Caucasus to control the private sector and its elite. The informants noted a proliferation of informal networks between elites in six studied countries. These networks spread from political elites to representatives of private enterprises, although they seem primarily one-sided.

This study rethinks the elite configuration in countries with strong clan influence and a post-socialist past (Azerbaijan). The most important conclusions are the following:

- The concept of deprived elites and the elites of imposed unity may be of considerable interest as a theoretical approach. It may reveal the relationship between elites and elite configurations in other societies, not just in post-Soviet ones. Therefore, this study can serve as a basis for further research in other countries;
- A broader implication of this research is the understanding that research into elite configurations should consider which elites are configured in a certain way. Consensually united elite factions are a prerequisite for democracy. As described above, consensual unity has two characteristics: value consensus and structural integration. Given that some elites (hyperagents) have most of the power, and some elites (devoid elites) do not, it may be reasonable to consider which elites are included in the consensus and which are structurally integrated;
- Consensus unity can no longer be considered as consensually united when one elite is forcing unity on others. An elite configuration, where all but one or a handful of elites have actual power and the rest are the devoid elites, requires a new definition. The author proposes the configuration of *imposed unity elites*.

In societies with imposed unity elites, the elites are expected to act by consensus, but the reality is different. It is crucial to understand power levels within elite groups to more clearly apply these theoretical concepts. Further research may attempt to clarify how powerless elites should be conceptualized within the framework of these theories in other societies. As

demonstrated, the configuration of the elite in Azerbaijan changed: it almost completely lost access to the power of decision-making.

Discussion

In this article, the author has tried to describe the power structures of the elite existing in the states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus using an ethnographic approach. This description gives an idea of how the elites behave, act, and interact with each other in the region and also allows the author to show the existing hierarchies. This discussion is necessary to reconsider the role and importance of elites in this region and regard it with clinical detachment.

This study considers elites as people who influence political processes regularly and significantly based on their disproportionate access to resources (Gilleard, 2020; Smit, 2019; Wacquant, 2019; Wedel, 2017, 2021). In modern developed or developing societies, elites play a prominent role in determining policy or government decisions (Karaoğuz, 2022; Smirnova et al., 2021). This study confirms the conclusions on the functionality of the post-socialist noted by previous researchers: the real participation of the public in decision-making is minimized, mediated, and determined by corrupt elites (Cianetti et al., 2020). However, the nature of this mediation and determinism differs across countries, and elites are transformed in the course of economic and political change (Colton & Tucker, 2019). When analyzing and explaining the changing forms of power relations, it is important to investigate the role of elites in building and maintaining different systems of governance (Gerlich, 2021).

The theory of elite configuration is important as a means of understanding the process of elites' transformation in the post-socialist space. In addition, it can be a tool for the formation of their configuration in the state of disunited elites. Disunited elites lack an agreement on state governing and consensus values. These elites usually arise due to unstable regimes and are often involved in power struggles with each other to achieve political dominance. Brazil is an example of a modern regime with disunited elites. In states with a consensually unified elite, there is no dominant elite faction. In such cases, consensually unified elite group members usually agree on how the country should be governed (Higley, 2018b; Hoffmann-Lange, 2018). There are consensually united elites in most Western countries. Ideologically united elites arise when members of an elite group share an ideology. The common ideology can be political, as in a fascist state, or theological, as in a theocracy. However, none of these existing elite configurations is suitable for Azerbaijan.

In general, the emergence of elites is due to the behavior of human communities, which have come to understand the need for their existence in the process of evolution. Theorists point out that, as a rule, elites also arise on a specific rational principle of their existence (Best & Higley, 2018; Burton & Higley, 2001; Cousin et al., 2018). Any normally functioning political system rests on a rational approach of individuals and groups who believe their attempts are unprofitable to demand everything they think they deserve. Subordination to the existing political organization and distribution of privileges provides better benefits than the ones they could get by openly challenging the established order (Higley, 2010b).

According to recent studies, elites include people who stand out and have unique skills and rights that give them superiority over others in their social group. As a result, such people become leaders in their social groups and exercise power, and they can also receive authority for this (Jones, 2021). That is, the elite includes those who have extremely disproportionate control over or access to a resource. Accordingly, elite members form careers for field and network positions in transnational policymaking (Henriksen & Seabrooke, 2021).

Elites are individuals or groups with power and influence. The sources of their power vary across regimes and societies. In the West, these are entities that control economic capital and have leadership positions in large and important organizations or fields of activity. The definition of elites goes beyond one category; there are various types of elite groups with

differentiated interests and origins. Their members also have different goals. Elite groups may cooperate, compete for resources and power, be in a state of conflict, or exist separately from each other at different levels with little contact. When studying this phenomenon, it is important to understand the extent to which different elites support each other and converge in tasks and actions and the extent of conflict between them. Earlier studies addressed this issue as a problem of integration or unity of elites (Gulbrandsen, 2019).

Currently, functionalistic approaches predominate in discussions about elites. The classical studies are those by Pareto and Mosca. They showed the apparent dichotomy of elites and masses, attracting more and more attention in recent years. Nevertheless, the functionalist view continues to determine the approaches adopted in the vast majority of theoretical and, especially, empirical studies. The essence of this phenomenon lies in the fact that longer ruling classes or homogeneous elites have disappeared. There are competing, more or less equally powerful sub-elites. They should be seen as socially open since their access mainly depends on individual outcomes, not on pedigree or social background. It is argued that today's parliamentary democracy rests on consensus among the elites. This consensus cannot be established based on social homogeneity. However, it results from discussion, debate, and competition between individual functional elites (Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Hartmann, 2007).

Populism is invariably expressed in high-intensity politics, which is also fundamentally anti-elitist and is supported by the frequent mobilization of the masses. In contrast, elites often control nationalism. It can remain dormant for a long time since it is implanted in the institutions, laws, and routine practices of a state (Varshney, 2021). Thus, the theory suggests that populism and nationalism can contradict each other in political discourse. The configuration of elites in class systems reflects this situation (Abramova & Vilisov, 2020; Bagirov, 2021). The results of this study for Azerbaijan also point to a similar conclusion.

In many ways, the post-Soviet space has changed significantly over the past three decades. Researchers generally agree that many of the formalities of the nomenklatura system no longer exist (Antonyan, 2023; Nisnevich & Ryabov, 2020). For example, elites are not appointed to positions corresponding to a strict hierarchy of 14 levels in the modern system of elites in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as they used to in the Soviet system. There is no official commission that selects candidates from a list (Antonyan, 2023). However, although these elements of a strictly regulated elite system no longer exist, this research suggests that some characteristics of the nomenklatura system persist. One of these characteristics is that upper-level elites decide on the appointment to the ranks. According to the theory of influence, informal position and real influence matter (Hille, 2020; Nisnevich & Ryabov, 2020). There is still a small group of influential decision-makers in modern Central Asia and the South Caucasus, traditionally including the countries' presidents (Antonyan, 2023).

At the same time, most researchers stress that the highest level of the hierarchy concentrates most of the actual decision-making power as the old nomenklatura system did. In contrast, the lower classes have very little practical influence (Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Gallo, 2021). The above is consistent with the results of previous studies (Antonyan, 2023). It was found that the studied political systems have a common feature. Thus, although high-level individuals, such as ministers, enjoy some social privileges, they often lack the power necessary to influence decision-making (Szanyi, 2022; Visser et al., 2019). This research shows that even relatively small bureaucratic decisions require approval at the highest level in some cases. Subsequently, it reduces the effectiveness of government activities.

The distinction between hyperagents and powerless elites has implications for understanding the elite theory of this region or, in a broader sense, a specific area. In the region, this difference may bring some clarity to the system of clientelism that roots in the previous nomenklatura system. Those elites with more power (the so-called hyperagents) appoint others, less influential (powerless elites), to positions with social status and privileges.

Further, this study showed that the modern elite system included a kind of clientelism. This conclusion is consistent with previous studies (Antonyan, 2023; Horak & Bader, 2023). Presidents are patrons in this case and grant certain privileged positions to other people from their circle. In turn, the people compete with each other to demonstrate loyalty. They praise presidential decisions and avoid anything that can be interpreted as criticism. Furthermore, the mentioned above elites deliberately avoid positive recognition since it may be a threat to the highest political power. However, the exchange of loyalty, as a rule, is purely one-sided. While clients must demonstrate unwavering loyalty to their patrons, the patrons can show a minimum of commitment in return and replace the clients easily and quickly.

Some researchers concerned with the theory of elites proposed to consider a possible third (intermediate) form of government between democracy and dictatorship—an autocratic capitalist system. According to those authors, the principle of separation of powers within this system becomes less important, while the leader's influence becomes stronger and institutionalized clientelism takes on a greater role (Hénin & Insel, 2021).

In contemporary autocracies and transitional democracies in Africa, political leaders form elite coalitions in the government that tend to be inclusive. However, they distort the power levels of groups and elites at the highest political echelons. There is significant volatility at all levels of government depending on how regimes govern, support, and limit the influence of inclusive coalitions. In this case, elite political leaders maintain power by spreading it but limiting the chances of others to seize it (Raleigh & Wigmore-Shepherd, 2022).

Researchers have previously considered the characteristics of elite interaction and clientelism in the post-Soviet states, namely Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The factors of globalization and authoritarianism also play an important role (Gallo, 2021). A patronage policy represents the extensive networks of patron clients, the dominance of informal practices and unwritten rules, the elevation of private interests over the public good, undeveloped formal institutions, and the intra-elite struggle for access to scarce resources. These peculiarities may also be defining attributes of most of post-Soviet Eurasia (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2019). The experience of democratization of the ruling elite of Azerbaijan is not always convincing for further democratic consolidation. At the same time, Azerbaijan's oil-based economic development may lead to a more prosperous country with an equal distribution of resources in the hands of the future elite, based on the possible incorporation of pro-democratic ruling characters (Ergun, 2010).

Conclusion

The results of this study present an overview of the elites' configuration, the structure of influence, and the possible process of their transformation in Azerbaijan. The findings confirm the assumption that elites in Azerbaijan significantly influence the outcomes of state activity. However, the data also suggests that not all elites have access to the same power. Some of them, "hyperagents," control most decisions. Others, "devoid elites," have very little or no real power, although they have some privileges. Considering their professional position and high position in society, devoid elites are usually expected to have decision-making power or influence based on. Nevertheless, they are deprived of it. If devoid elites do not have the power to make decisions, they should still be considered elite. Devoid elites still have high social status and disproportionately large access to the resources they use and social power. The concept of devoid elites explores political power considering the power as a decision-making process that is opposite to social power.

The nomenklatura system of the Soviet Union has naturally influenced the strategy of elites that currently exists in former Soviet countries. It also reflects the perception of elites. The political system of Azerbaijan is based on authoritarianism and clan power relations. It strongly influences the interaction among the elites and the formation of their hierarchy. The

President has constantly deprived elites of their powers over the past years. Traditional forms of clientelism no longer work in Azerbaijan since loyalty and support are expected from above (hyperagents), not below. Therefore, the interaction between the elite and society has changed. Hyperagents are patrons, and powerless elites are clients. Patrons retain their power through the ability to grant social privileges but not the right for their clients to make decisions. Clients receive and retain their positions and privileges, demonstrating loyalty to their patrons and avoiding the perception of competition for power.

The clientelism system increases the concentration of power in the hands of several individuals at the top of the hierarchy. This difference makes it possible to assess the configuration of the elite that exists in the region. This paper suggests that the elite configuration existing in the countries of this region does not correspond to any of the configurations described in the literature. Instead, another configuration that focuses on imposing unity among the elites by a few powerful hyperagents seems to characterize these states best. It can be defined as “imposed unity.” It is not the unity stemming from true consensus or adherence to ideology, imposed unity results from imposing consequences by influential elites.

Specific structural changes and an increasing concentration of elites in society have been observed in Azerbaijan. In this country, during 2005–2021, the role and importance of sectors in which the country’s elite occupies important positions have increased. Thus, financial and insurance activities increased by 1% in the whole country, public administration and defense, respectively, grew by 2.9%, and administrative and auxiliary activities increased by 4.3%. On the other hand, it is also possible to observe a significant increase in the share of the highest administrative elite among civil servants. In the overall structure, this indicator rose from 2.9% in 2005 to 6.8% in 2021, and the number, respectively, grew from 757 people in 2005 to 1801 in 2021.

This study contributes to the further elaboration on the concept of elite configurations and the theory of their influence. The obtained research results may allow researchers to better understand the development characteristics of the elite configuration in the post-Soviet space. Using these findings, scientists and practitioners may search for ways to democratize the societies of these countries. The broader implication of the results adds knowledge to the sociology of elite transformation. The results deepen the understanding of the more dangerous functioning of clan structures, which is important not only for developing countries.

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Appendix 1*The main empirical basis of the study*

Country	Number of interviews	Average interview duration; minutes	The years of the interview	Institutions and companies where respondents covered by the interview worked
Azerbaijan	All interviews	60-90min	2012-2019	Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Ecology, Tax Ministry, Customs Committee, President's Administration, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Members of Parliament, AzPromo, Statistics committee, State Oil Fund, Ministry of Finance, Central Bank. Company names cannot be listed due to confidentiality agreements.

Appendix 2

The number of employees holding civil service positions in Azerbaijan

Indicator	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
On Republic total (person)	25735	26976	27507	27894	28608	29581	30272	31099	32070	33101	34193	35347	36564	37845	39192	40606	42091
Administrative posts according to superior-3 classification - total (Administrative posts based on 1-4 classification in 2005-2012) (employees)	7570	7300	6800	6500	6800	8100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100	1100
Administrative posts according to 4-7 classification - total (Administrative posts based on 5-9 classification in 2005-2012) (employees)	2073	2176	2270	2289	2260	2258	2227	2209	2207	2210	2219	2233	2247	2256	2264	2270	2271
including: deputy head of local executive authority (employees)	000	000	000	000	000	000	000	295	299	295	295	295	294	294	293	293	293
head of division (employees)	3479	3312	3288	3356	3362	3397	3406	3466	3528	3593	3662	3735	3812	3891	3972	4056	4142

deputy head of division (employees)	2 1 3 3. 0	2 1 7 7. 0	2 2 4 2. 0	2 2 7 9. 0	2 2 9 1. 0	2 3 3 9. 0	2 2 8 5. 0	2 2 5 1. 0	2 3 8 0. 0	2 4 5 2. 0	2 5 3 7. 0	2 5 5 2. 0	2 5 2 5. 0	2 5 8 6. 0	2 6 1 1. 0				
head of sector (employees)	1 7 3 7. 0	1 7 6 7. 0	1 8 5 5. 0	1 8 5 3. 0	1 8 7 3. 0	1 8 7 2. 0	1 8 9 5. 0	2 0 5 5. 0	1 9 0 7. 0	1 9 6 4. 0	1 9 1 9. 0	1 8 8 2. 0	1 8 1 5. 0	1 7 4 9. 0	1 7 4 0. 0				
chief adviser (employees)	5 0 5 7. 0	5 3 0 8. 0	5 4 5 0. 0	5 4 7 4. 0	5 5 7 9. 0	5 5 7 2. 0	5 2 5 1. 0	5 7 2 4. 0	5 9 4 8. 0	6 1 0 3. 0	6 0 4 7. 0	5 8 9 8. 0	5 7 6 3. 0	5 6 5 8. 0	5 7 6 7. 0				
senior adviser (employees)	1 1 7 6. 0	1 1 9 5. 0	1 1 6 0. 0	1 2 1 2. 0	1 2 8 4. 0	1 1 8 0. 0	1 1 5 3. 0	1 1 9 9. 0	1 0 5 8. 0	1 0 9 4. 0	1 0 8 9. 0	1 1 8 8. 0	1 1 7 1. 0	1 1 5 8. 0	1 1 5 1. 0				
leading adviser (employees)	2 9 2 5. 0	3 1 5 0. 0	3 1 5 7. 0	3 0 7 9. 0	3 1 6 8. 0	3 1 8 9. 0	2 8 3 0. 0	2 8 2 0. 0	2 9 0 8. 0	2 9 1 5. 0	2 9 0 0. 0	2 9 8 8. 0	2 9 0 7. 0	2 8 2 8. 0	2 8 3 9. 0				
adviser (employees)	4 2 2 4. 0	4 8 3 7. 0	4 8 8 9. 0	4 9 2 1. 0	4 9 6 8. 0	4 8 5 4. 0	4 7 5 9. 0	4 6 7 5. 0	4 7 2 5. 0	4 7 6 8. 0	4 6 2 9. 0	4 8 7 4. 0	4 5 6 1. 0	4 6 1 1. 0	4 6 2 6. 0				
Administrative positions according to 4-th classification - total (employees)																9 2 7. 0	8 9 6. 0		
Administrative positions according to 5-th classification - total (employees)																	3 2 8 5. 0	3 0 9 2. 0	
Administrative positions according to 6-th classification																		2 2 3 8. 0	2 3 5 3. 0

- total (employees)																	
Administrative positions according to 7-th classification - total (employees)																130250	128970
Supplementary posts in civil service - total (employees)	424470	447370	477790	502310	556510	599040	633990	665090	709900	754400	799900	844400	889900	934400	979900	1024400	1069900
including: chief specialist (employees)	22670	235130	257210	278980	299890	321090	339900	359900	379900	399900	419900	439900	459900	479900	499900	519900	539900
senior specialist (employees)	7910	850230	113850	117010	127020	137030	147040	157050	167060	177070	187080	197090	207100	217110	227120	237130	247140
leading specialist (employees)	3930	42130	44880	47630	50380	53130	55880	58630	61380	64130	66880	69630	72380	75130	77880	80630	83380
specialist (employees)	79960	81190	82420	83650	84880	86110	87340	88570	89800	91030	92260	93490	94720	95950	97180	98410	99640

Source: ASIS, 2022

Appendix 3

The survey of Azerbaijani respondents with different income levels about the importance of friends in their lives

	Total	Lower step	Second step	Third step	Fourth step	Fifth step	Sixth step	Seventh step	Eight step	Ninth step	Tenth step	Not sure	No answer
Very important	26.1	30.6	30.8	22.8	23.6	23.4	19.6	19.1	0.0	0.0	34.2	31.5	24.8
Rather important	59.7	57.0	56.5	63.6	61.7	59.6	74.5	66.4	86.7	100.0	65.8	44.0	65.4
Not very important	10.8	11.0	10.5	10.7	9.8	15.6	5.9	14.5	13.3	0.0	0.0	11.6	9.8
Not at all important	2.6	0.0	1.6	2.3	4.2	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.3	0.0
Not sure	0.7	1.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0
No answer	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
(N)	1817	84	536	583	249	97	41	20	10	3	3	141	49

Source: World Values Survey Association (2018)