

**Azerbaijan PERFORM Year One (Malign Influence) 2021 Case Study***Period of Performance: August, 2021***Practice Area:** Counter Malign Influence**Donor/Client:** USAID**Partner:** Lumbee Tribal Enterprises**Surveys:** 1,750**Qualitative Engagements:** 13**Project Objectives**

At the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe, Azerbaijan borders the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains. Azerbaijan is surrounded by regional powers that have long sought to increase their influence in the region and is the only country in the world that shares borders with both Russia and Iran. Azerbaijan is a secular, Western-oriented state with a Shi'a Muslim-majority population. This position exposes Azerbaijan to malign influence, which requires monitoring.

- **Project Objective 1:** Understand and provide analysis on malign actors' influence on Azerbaijan's democratic institutions, policy, and civil society
- **Project Objective 2:** Understand and provide analysis on public's awareness of disinformation by China, Russia, and Iran
- **Project Objective 3:** Understand and provide analysis on regional energy sector dynamics that drive competition between Azerbaijan and other oil producing nations
- **Project Objective 4:** Understand and provide analysis on the impact of malign actors on Azerbaijan's non-oil economy
- **Project Objective 5:** Understand and provide analysis of malign actors' influence on social dynamics

### **Key Findings**

- The Azerbaijani Government is the most malign influence in the country.
- Soviet associated, Old Guard officials maintain “Modern Authoritarianism,” with increased control of civil society, political opposition, and the media
- Young, New Guard technocrats focus on economic reforms which led to an increase in non-oil exports
- Disinformation and propaganda against western NGOs as a defense against Color Revolutions
- Oil money and European markets provide resilience against influence and facilitates kleptocracy
- Popular affinity for Turkey and US and negative perceptions of Russia and Iran

### **Methodology**

The overarching system by which data was analyzed was the Political Economy Analysis Framework, which enables iterative assessments of how malign actors exploit foundational influences (Soviet history, Shia and Azeri culture, or geography); the impact of immediate events and actors (gas export prices, the pandemic, post war border disputes); and the institutional framework (encompassing formal laws and informal practices) that shape how malign actors’ operations are rejected or enabled by Azerbaijani stakeholders. Key informant Interviews, and the results of several publicly available information data scraping softwares were the inputs used.

### **Programming Recommendations**

Small refinements are required to increase the effectiveness and success of year two. The PEA framework is a valuable tool for designing our KIIs and framing issues of malign influence. However, it is not clear how easily the PEA framework nests within the larger Mission strategy. Understanding how to seed this data into Mission workflows should be a year 2 goal.

While Wolf Totem measures large quantities of media narratives, Team PERFORM’s monthly disinformation investigation will use keyword searches to illuminate specific instances of disinformation that undermine the relationship between Azerbaijan and USAID, the US, NATO and EU. Team PERFROM should abandon the media landscape analysis due to the time required to do it correctly. However, aspects of the media analysis workflow will be employed in disinformation analysis to evaluate the news sites producing or amplifying disinformation and their reach within the Azerbaijani audience.

While the EUvsDisinfo database is imperfect and incomplete for Azerbaijan, and only measures Kremlin linked themes, the format can be used by Team PERFORM to record instances of disinformation and propaganda we find from China, Iran and malign news sites in Azerbaijan such as Haqqin and SIA. An example will be included in the Data Collection Report.