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Institute for a Community
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人类命运共同体研究院



108 Years of Resilience and Renaissance:
Celebrating Azerbaijan's Independence Day



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A Nation Reborn — The Eternal Flame of May 28

On the morning of May 28, 1918, in the embattled city of Tiflis — now Tbilisi — a group of statesmen gathered to do what most of the world had never witnessed before in the Muslim-majority world: they declared a democratic, pluralist, and secular republic. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) was born not merely as a state, but as an idea — radical for its time — that sovereignty, civic equality, and modern governance could flourish in a land where East meets West, where ancient Zoroastrian flame temples glow beside Caspian sunsets.



One hundred and eight years later, on May 28, 2026, that flame burns brighter than ever. From the glittering skyline of Baku to the reconstructed streets of Shusha — the cultural crown of the liberated Karabakh — Azerbaijan celebrates this anniversary not merely as a calendar occasion but as a living affirmation of national will, strategic vision, and civilizational pride. The world watches a country that has endured partition, occupation, and renaissance, and emerged with sovereignty fully restored and ambitions reaching far into the 21st century.

From the Flames of 1918 to the Sovereignty of 2026

The First Dawn — The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic

The ADR stands as a remarkable chapter in world history. Established on May 28, 1918, it became the first secular parliamentary democracy in the Muslim world — predating many European democracies in its progressive credentials. Women received the right to vote in 1919, years ahead of many Western nations. The ADR extended citizenship equally to all religious and ethnic communities, embodying a



vision of civic nationhood that remains relevant today. Baku, already an oil-boom metropolis, became the capital of this short-lived but historically monumental republic.

That dream was violently extinguished on April 28, 1920, when Bolshevik forces swept into Baku and absorbed Azerbaijan into what would become the Soviet Union. For seven decades, the country endured the suppression of national language, religious life, and historical memory. Yet Azerbaijani identity persisted beneath the surface — in poetry, music, family tradition, and the unbroken reverence for the flag of blue, red, and green.

Restoration and the Second Birth — 1991

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan restored its independence on October 18, 1991. But independence came with immediate turmoil: economic collapse, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia, and the immense challenge of building state institutions from the ruins of Soviet bureaucracy. Despite military losses in the 1990s that resulted in the occupation of approximately 20% of its internationally recognised territory, Azerbaijan chose the path of state-building, economic modernisation, and patient strategic development.

The election of Heydar Aliyev in 1993 marked a stabilising turning point, launching a model of development rooted in the strategic management of hydrocarbon resources and the cultivation of complex international partnerships. His son, Ilham Aliyev, continued this trajectory — navigating geopolitical pressures with considerable skill and presiding over two seismic transformations: an economic boom and a military triumph.

A Nation Transformed — Achievements at 108

Economic Modernisation Beyond Petrodollars

For two decades, the Azerbaijani economy was shaped — and sometimes constrained — by its oil and gas wealth. The establishment of the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan (SOFAZ) in 1999 demonstrated rare foresight: rather than allowing hydrocarbon revenues to distort the economy, Azerbaijan institutionalised long-term

fiscal stewardship. Today, that fund holds tens of billions in managed assets, underwriting economic resilience across boom and bust cycles.

By 2026, Azerbaijan's diversification strategy has produced tangible results. The non-oil sector has grown as a share of GDP, driven by agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, and digital services. Baku's newly launched free economic zones attract technology companies and logistics firms from Europe, the Gulf, and Central Asia.



Azerbaijan's ICT sector, once nascent, has expanded significantly — with the Heydar Aliyev Centre symbolising a country that embraces architectural boldness alongside economic ambition. The World Bank has consistently recognised Azerbaijan among the region's strongest performers on ease of doing business, and the country's sovereign credit rating has been maintained at investment grade despite regional headwinds.

Infrastructure Revolution — Connecting Continents

Perhaps no achievement better illustrates Azerbaijan's development model than its infrastructure transformation. The country has invested massively in road, rail, and port connectivity — positioning itself as an indispensable transit corridor between Europe and Asia. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, stretching from the Caspian to Turkey, carries not just goods but geopolitical significance: it is the physical spine of the Middle Corridor, the transcontinental trade route increasingly preferred as an alternative to Russia-dependent northern routes.

The Port of Baku at Alat — a state-of-the-art deep-water facility on the Caspian — has dramatically expanded Azerbaijan's capacity as a transshipment hub. Smart city projects are reshaping Baku's urban fabric, with intelligent traffic systems, digitalised public services, and green building codes reflecting a city determined to compete on



the global stage. Beyond Baku, the reconstruction of liberated territories in Karabakh has given Azerbaijan an extraordinary opportunity: building modern, connected cities and townships from the ground up.

The Karabakh Triumph — History's Most Consequential 44 Days

No account of Azerbaijan at 108 is complete without addressing the Second Karabakh War of September–November 2020. In 44 days of intense military operations, the Azerbaijani armed forces — deploying sophisticated drone warfare, precision artillery, and well-trained combined arms tactics — liberated the majority of its internationally recognised territories. The Trilateral Declaration of November 10, 2020, halted hostilities with Azerbaijan in full control of strategic heights and towns, including the symbolically paramount city of Shusha.

The liberation of Shusha — the cradle of Azerbaijani classical music, literature, and national consciousness — was greeted with emotional scenes of jubilation across the country. For Azerbaijanis, this was not simply a military victory: it was the completion of a historical arc that began with forced displacement and ended with return. The reconstruction of Karabakh — branded as the 'Great Return' — has proceeded at extraordinary pace. New airports, roads, schools, hospitals, and residential townships have risen in territories that lay in ruins for three decades. By 2026, tens of thousands of internally displaced persons have returned to their ancestral lands — arguably the most poignant and powerful element of Azerbaijan's national renewal.

Energy Statecraft — The Southern Gas Corridor and Green Horizons

Azerbaijan's role as an energy supplier to Europe has grown in strategic importance since Russia's invasion of Ukraine fundamentally reshaped European energy calculations. The Southern Gas Corridor — stretching from the Shah Deniz gas field in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea, through Georgia, Turkey, and into the heart of Europe — has become a lifeline for European energy security. Azerbaijan signed enhanced energy partnership agreements with the European Union, committing to double gas exports to Europe by the late 2020s.

Yet perhaps equally significant is Azerbaijan's pivot toward green energy. The country has announced ambitious targets for renewable energy generation — particularly through solar and wind projects in its vast territories. At COP29, hosted by Azerbaijan in Baku in November 2024, the country placed itself at the centre of global climate diplomacy — a remarkable positioning for a petrostate. Hosting the world's most critical climate conference while simultaneously expanding gas exports required deft diplomacy, but it also opened doors to green investment, technology transfer, and multilateral engagement that could define the next chapter of Azerbaijani development.



Culture, Tourism, and Soft Power

Azerbaijan's cultural diplomacy has grown with its economic confidence. The Baku International Jazz Festival, the Mugham Centre, the Venice Biennale pavilion, and international investments in Azerbaijani cinema have elevated the country's cultural profile. The ancient walled city of Icherisheher, the mud volcanoes of Gobustan, the flame towers of modern Baku, and the restored cultural heritage of Shusha collectively compose a tourism offering of extraordinary range — from UNESCO World Heritage sites to contemporary luxury.

Sport has played a remarkable role in projecting Azerbaijan's soft power. Baku's Formula One Grand Prix, hosted on one of the world's most visually dramatic street circuits since 2016, brings global television audiences face-to-face with Azerbaijani landscapes and hospitality. The country's athletes — particularly in wrestling, judo, and chess — have distinguished themselves at Olympic and World Championship levels, carrying the crescent-and-star to podiums across the globe.

Azerbaijan on the World Stage — Bridge, Partner, and Voice

Azerbaijan's geography has always been its defining strategic asset. Straddling the South Caucasus at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, it sits at the



intersection of trade routes, pipeline networks, and civilisational connections that few countries can match. This geography is not merely physical: it has shaped a diplomatic culture of multi-vector engagement, where Baku cultivates partnerships with the European Union, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf states simultaneously — navigating rivalries with the pragmatism of a nation that has learned, through bitter experience, the cost of strategic isolation.

Azerbaijan's relationship with Turkey is the country's most profound strategic partnership — united by shared ethnicity, language, and the slogan 'one nation, two states' coined by Heydar Aliyev. Turkey's military and political support during the Second Karabakh War was pivotal, and the partnership has deepened into defence production, infrastructure investment, and cultural exchange. With Georgia and other South Caucasus neighbours, Azerbaijan has cultivated pragmatic, mutually beneficial relationships that anchor regional connectivity.

Azerbaijan's ties with Pakistan are warm, longstanding, and grounded in Islamic solidarity, shared positions within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and mutual support on sovereignty issues. Pakistan consistently supported Azerbaijan's position on Karabakh within international forums, and bilateral trade, educational exchange, and diplomatic cooperation have grown steadily. In 2026, both countries commemorate meaningful milestones of independence — Pakistan at 79, Azerbaijan at 108 — sharing a bond forged in the conviction that sovereignty and self-determination are not negotiable.

Within multilateral frameworks — the OIC, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation — Azerbaijan has been an active and constructive voice. Its chairmanship and hosting of COP29 elevated it to a genuinely global forum. The country's contributions to international peacekeeping and its diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts through dialogue rather than force further cement its reputation as a responsible international actor.

The Spirit of May 28, 2026 — A Nation in Full Voice

"Azərbaycan! — Azerbaijan! — the chant that rises from a hundred cities is not nostalgia. It is arrival."

This year's Independence Day celebrations carry a depth of meaning that surpasses many previous anniversaries. For the first time in generations, Azerbaijan celebrates with its full territorial sovereignty restored, its people returned to ancestral lands, and its place in the global order more secure than at any point since 1918. The mood is not triumphalist but deeply grateful — the quiet pride of a people who endured and prevailed.



In Baku, the Azadliq (Freedom) Square fills with tens of thousands for the ceremonial military parade — a display that balances patriotic pride with a message of defensive capability and national resolve. The streets around Fountain Square and the Old City are transformed into festive promenades, with performances of Mugham — the hauntingly beautiful traditional modal music of Azerbaijan, a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage — mingling with contemporary concerts and light installations.

In Shusha, celebrations carry particular emotional weight. The Khan's Palace, lovingly restored, hosts cultural performances that link ancient tradition with contemporary expression. Families who fled decades ago gather at ancestral homes — some rebuilt, some still being restored — in scenes of profound personal and national meaning. Across Karabakh's newly populated towns of Aghdam, Fuzuli, and Lachin, inaugural community events mark both homecoming and new beginning.

Youth are at the heart of the 2026 celebrations. Azerbaijan's median age is under 35, and the country's universities, tech hubs, and cultural institutions pulse with generational energy. Young Azerbaijanis — who grew up watching their country transform, who celebrated the Karabakh victory as university students, and who now



enter the workforce in a nation of expanding opportunity — carry a sense of possibility that no national statistic can fully capture. Their message: sovereignty is not an inheritance to guard, but a foundation to build upon.

Challenges on the Path Forward — Honest Optimism

Honest celebration must acknowledge complexity. Azerbaijan faces real challenges as it looks toward its second century of national existence. Economic diversification, while progressing, remains incomplete: oil and gas revenues still dominate state finances, and building a dynamic private sector that can compete regionally remains an ongoing project. Strengthening institutions of governance, press freedom, and civic participation are areas where international observers continue to encourage progress — and where the interests of long-term stability align with those of broader reform.

The peace process with Armenia, while dramatically advanced by Azerbaijan's military success, remains unfinished. The final demarcation of borders, the resolution of outstanding humanitarian concerns, and the normalisation of relations between two neighbours who share so much history represent the most consequential diplomatic challenge of the coming decade. Azerbaijani leaders have expressed genuine interest in durable peace — for the region's prosperity depends upon it — and 2026 finds the process alive, if not yet concluded.

Environmental sustainability, water resource management, and the diversification of energy exports toward renewables are challenges that Azerbaijan must confront with the same strategic discipline it has brought to its geopolitical positioning. The hosting of COP29 was a statement of intent; translating that intent into measurable transition will define Azerbaijan's standing in the global sustainability conversation for decades.

Yet these challenges are the challenges of a state with agency — a state that controls its own destiny, chooses its partners, and debates its future. That in itself is the greatest gift of independence. And the trajectory of the past three decades suggests that Azerbaijan possesses the institutional capacity, the human capital, and the



strategic intelligence to navigate these challenges with the same resilience that defines its national character.

From Survival to Leadership — A Message to the World

One hundred and eight years ago, a small nation on the shores of the Caspian dared to imagine itself free. It built universities, parliaments, and newspapers. It extended rights to women and minorities. It connected its ancient trade routes to modern ambitions. And when that dream was crushed beneath the boots of empire, the Azerbaijani people did not forget — they preserved the flame, generation to generation, until the moment came to light it once again.

Today, that flame — symbol of ancient Zoroastrian heritage, symbol of modern energy wealth, symbol above all of national will — burns at the centre of a society that has earned its place in the world. Azerbaijan's journey is not merely its own. It is a message to every small nation that sovereignty is worth defending, that patience and capability are complementary virtues, and that a people united by a common story can achieve what external powers once deemed impossible.

As the flags of blue, red, and green rise across Baku and Shusha and every township in between on this 28th day of May 2026, they rise not in defiance, but in declaration: that Azerbaijan has arrived. That a nation once doubted has proven its endurance. That 108 years of resilience have produced not exhaustion, but renaissance.

Happy 108th Independence Day to the Republic of Azerbaijan — may the flame of sovereignty and vision illuminate the century ahead.