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BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC CONTROL AND REGIME LOGIC: INTERNAL SECURITY SYSTEMS OF POLAND AND AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract

This paper compares how Poland and Azerbaijan organize their internal security. It looks at institutions, the legal basis on which they rest, and perhaps more importantly the actual working of civilian oversight. The discussion draws on a range of approaches, from classical realism to critical security studies, and treats internal security both as a core state function and as something shaped by processes of securitization and ideas of human security.

What is striking is that the two countries, despite belonging to very different regime types and geopolitical camps, display a number of formal institutional similarities. These similarities, however, conceal sharply different normative logics and patterns of accountability. Methodologically the study relies on close reading of legal acts and strategic documents, combined with desk research of academic literature and reports produced by international monitoring organizations. The comparison brings out both structural convergences and deep divergences in the distribution of authority, the construction of threats, and the practical functioning of oversight. One of the more interesting findings concerns the phenomenon of institutional mimicry – the way similar organizational forms can serve almost opposite political purposes depending on the broader context. The concluding section sketches possible reform directions. For Poland, the main task appears to be the consolidation of democratic control under conditions of hybrid pressure. For Azerbaijan, the challenge runs deeper: moving the security sector away from regime protection and toward something closer to the rule of law.

Key words: internal security, security services, civilian control, Poland, Azerbaijan, security sector reform, hybrid threats, securitization, human security.

1. Introduction. At first glance internal security looks like a rather straightforward administrative category. A closer look quickly shows that the notion is far more layered [13]. It is not only about enforcing territorial control or ordinary policing. It also concerns the state's capacity to hold society together, to keep its own institutions legitimate, and to protect citizens against risks that keep changing shape, often hybrid in character [33]. In this broader sense, internal security becomes one of the basic conditions for constitutional government and for the kind of public trust on which democratic stability depends [13].

Comparing Poland and Azerbaijan is useful precisely because the two cases sit so far apart. After 1989, Poland systematically rebuilt its security apparatus with an eye on Euro-Atlantic requirements. NATO membership in 1999 and EU accession in 2004 locked in expectations of multilateral coordination and relatively strict civilian oversight [13]. Azerbaijan's path after 1991 was different. Core elements of the Soviet security architecture were retained and then adapted to the pressures of the region, above all the long conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and complicated relations with neighboring powers [10].

There is surprisingly little direct comparative work on these two security systems [6]. Most of the literature either stays within Western European democracies or offers broad surveys of post-Soviet

states. Cross-regional paired comparisons of this kind remain rare. Yet Poland and Azerbaijan, standing near opposite ends of the spectrum of democratic control over security, show rather clearly, how external norms, domestic political traditions and formal legal frameworks interact in practice [20].

The present study tries to examine both systems in a structured way. It begins with the theoretical and legal framing of internal security, moves on to organizational structures, and then turns to oversight mechanisms and the role of external geopolitical and resource factors [26]. The empirical material consists of legislative texts, national security strategies, reports by international human-rights organisations, and the wider theoretical literature [1; 2; 15].

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations of Internal Security.

Security as a contested concept

Any attempt to analyse internal security has to start from the recognition that "security" itself is a notoriously slippery concept [2]. Arnold Wolfers already observed that national security functions as an elastic symbol, one whose concrete meaning shifts with historical and institutional context [36]. That elasticity has not disappeared. States continue to blur the boundary between internal and external risks, and threat narratives are frequently put to political use [21].

Classical realist thinking tended to keep security studies focused on external, state-centered military defence [33]. Internal security was largely left to the domain of ordinary policing. The expansion of non-military challenges after the Cold War, organized crime crossing borders, terrorism, cyber operations, deep social fragmentation, made that narrow framing increasingly inadequate [16].

Theoretical responses followed. The Copenhagen School widened the agenda by bringing in political, economic, societal and environmental sectors alongside the military one [7]. Critical approaches went further still, moving the referent object from the state to the individual and insisting that real security has more to do with human emancipation than with the simple preservation of a regime [5]. Once this dual expansion is taken seriously, it becomes difficult to claim that institutions, which routinely violate civil rights, are actually delivering security in any comprehensive sense.

Internal security, sovereignty, and legitimacy

Legally and politically, internal security remains bound up with state sovereignty and the monopoly on legitimate coercion [14]. The old Hobbesian exchange – individuals give up a measure of autonomy in return for protection – still sits at the foundation of much political theory. Weber's classic definition of the modern state as the entity that successfully claims the monopoly of legitimate physical force adds another layer: long-term stability depends less on raw coercion than on some degree of public acceptance of that authority [34].

Judging an internal security system therefore means looking not only at whether it “works” in a narrow sense, but also at whether it stays within constitutional bounds and respects basic human-rights standards [24]. This distinction becomes especially important when formal structures look similar yet operate under very different conditions of transparency and accountability. Poland's framework, anchored in the 1997 Constitution and further constrained by EU and NATO commitments, continues to prioritize constitutional legitimacy, even when domestic politics are polarised [19; 26]. Azerbaijan's arrangement, built around a strong presidency, tends to put regime continuity first [18].

Securitization and the politics of threat construction

Securitization theory remains one of the more useful tools for examining how internal security agendas are actually formed (Buzan et al., 1998). Threats are not simply “out there”; they are produced through political speech that frames particular issues as existential dangers requiring exceptional measures [8].

The process works differently in different political systems. In constitutional democracies, claims about threats usually remain open to legislative debate, judicial review and media scrutiny. In more authoritarian settings the same process tends to stay inside the executive, expanding discretionary power with little external contestation [3]. In the Polish case, hybrid risks, cyber vulnerabilities and foreign influence operations are framed as security issues, yet still within a statutory framework that can be contested [26]. In Azerbaijan, civic organizations and political dissenters are frequently presented as threats to national security, which effectively erases the distinction between legitimate opposition and criminal activity directed against the state [1; 15].

3. Legal and Institutional Frameworks of Internal Security in Poland and Azerbaijan.

Constitutional and statutory bases in Poland

Poland's internal security system operates under relatively explicit constitutional instructions. Article 5 of the 1997 Constitution charges the state with protecting independence, territorial integrity, the rights of citizens and public safety more broadly [19]. These general tasks are then given concrete form in a series of statutes that define the powers, internal structure and monitoring arrangements of the various agencies [28; 29; 30; 31].

One of the more consequential reforms was the Act of 24 May 2002, which formally separated domestic security functions (now under the Internal Security Agency, ABW) from foreign intelligence (Foreign Intelligence Agency, AW) [30]. The separation was intended to break with the Soviet-era model in which a single service handled both internal surveillance and external intelligence (Cohen, 2002). Subsequent legislation establishing the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau and specialized military intelligence bodies pushed the system further in the direction of functional decentralization [17].

Strategic planning, expressed most clearly in the National Security Strategy, places particular emphasis on hybrid threats, cyber incidents and foreign disinformation [26]. The whole domestic legal structure is also tied to NATO and EU operational standards, which in practice set external limits on what the agencies can do [37].

Constitutional and statutory bases in Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani framework rests on the 1995 Constitution, substantially revised by the referenda of 2009 and 2016 [18]. Those revisions further concentrated power in the executive and expanded presidential control over appointments, policy direction and administrative oversight [10]. The statutory language still contains democratic-sounding

guarantees, yet daily practice reflects a high degree of centralised administrative control [1; 15].

The main operational weight falls on the State Security Service (DTX) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, together with specialized border and state-protection units [10]. The DTX retains a combination of intelligence, counter-intelligence and criminal investigation powers, preserving a clear line of continuity with earlier Soviet administrative structures [38]. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, for its part, exercises wide authority over ordinary policing and the maintenance of internal order.

What really defines the system is the direct vertical subordination of the key agencies to the presidency [18]. This arrangement leaves parliamentary and judicial monitoring bodies with limited real autonomy and marks a clear contrast with the more distributed Polish model.

Organizational architectures: decentralization versus centralization

On the surface both countries maintain distinct agencies for domestic security, border management, anti-corruption work and the protection of the executive [17]. The underlying administrative logic, however, points in opposite directions.

Poland has opted for a decentralized, functionally specialized architecture. The ABW deals with internal threats, the AW with foreign intelligence, the Police with ordinary law enforcement, the Border Guard with territorial control, and the CBA with corruption; military intelligence remains largely confined to the defense sphere [28; 31; 32]. Coordination between these bodies is handled through formal institutions such as the College for Special Services under the Council of Ministers [17].

Azerbaijan works with a much more centralized structure. The DTX functions as the core security body and retains combined intelligence and investigative powers, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs oversees domestic policing [10]. Decision-making is concentrated at the top: the President chairs the Security Council and retains direct authority over the leadership of the services [18]. That concentration has obvious consequences for both accountability and the way the agencies operate on a day-to-day basis.

4. Civilian and Democratic Control over Internal Security Services.

Mechanisms of oversight in Poland

Effective civilian oversight is generally regarded as one of the core elements of democratic security governance [4]. In the Polish case it rests on a combination of constitutional constraints, parliamentary monitoring, judicial authorization and executive supervision [12].

Specialized parliamentary committees examine agency budgets, review operational reports and look into particular administrative problems [6]. Intrusive forms of operational surveillance normally require prior judicial approval, and the possibility of recourse to the European Court of Human Rights adds a further layer of legal accountability [11]. Executive supervision is shared between the Prime Minister and the relevant ministers, who set policy directions and control senior appointments [17].

These mechanisms are not immune to political pressure. During periods of intense domestic contestation the intensity of legislative oversight can fluctuate with the parliamentary majority [25]. Even so, the existence of binding judicial review and relatively institutionalized oversight channels still sets the Polish system apart from more purely autocratic arrangements.

Mechanisms of oversight in Azerbaijan

Formal oversight provisions can be found in Azerbaijani law, but in practice they tend to function as little more than administrative formalities [1; 15]. Parliamentary bodies possess only limited independent capacity to scrutinize security operations. The judiciary, while theoretically empowered to review certain measures, rarely does so in any meaningful way under current political conditions [10].

Real authority over personnel, appointments and strategic priorities remains firmly in executive hands [18]. Independent civil-society organisations and investigative media face tight legal constraints that severely restrict their ability to monitor abuses [1; 15]. As a result, agency accountability runs almost exclusively upward toward the executive rather than outward toward the legislature or the broader public.

Democratic content versus authoritarian practice

The comparison of oversight arrangements in the two countries illustrates rather clearly how similar legal structures can produce opposite practical outcomes once the broader political context is taken into account. Both systems have written constitutions, judicial institutions and detailed statutory regulations. The capacity of those institutions to constrain the use of state coercion, however, differs sharply.

In Poland, even under conditions of political strain, civilian oversight continues to exercise real influence. Parliamentary debates, court decisions and media reporting still affect the behavior of the agencies [20]. Integration into EU and NATO frameworks supplies an additional set of external standards concerning proportionality and the rule of law [37].

In Azerbaijan the formal institutions operate alongside political practices that are oriented primarily toward the continuity of the regime [1; 10]. Civic organizations and political opponents remain subject to ongoing securitization, which leaves few effective channels for legal recourse. Any serious attempt to assess the democratization of the security sector therefore has to move beyond the letter of the law and look at actual operational practice and the real distribution of political power.

5. Geopolitical Determinants, Energy Resources, and Prospects for Reform.

External threats and internal security agendas

Geopolitical location continues to shape domestic security agendas in both cases [37]. Poland's position on NATO's eastern flank, its proximity to zones of regional conflict and the recurring pressure along the Belarusian border have pushed hybrid threats, cyber incidents and foreign disinformation to the center of strategic planning [26]. Historical experience of vulnerability reinforces the emphasis on institutional resilience and territorial defence [13].

Azerbaijan's security perspective has been dominated for decades by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict [38]. Placed between Russia, Iran and Armenia, and deeply integrated into regional energy logistics, the country has developed a distinctly militarized approach to internal security [10]. The prolonged sense of external threat has helped normalize elevated levels of domestic surveillance and a political environment in which dissent is readily classified as a danger to national stability.

Energy resources and security sector financing

Resource economics play a noticeable role as well. As a net energy importer, Poland has long been concerned with the risks of supply disruption, particularly in relation to Russian natural gas [37]. That concern stimulated sustained investment in diversification, LNG infrastructure and deeper integration into European energy networks [26], thereby strengthening broader state resilience.

Azerbaijan's position as a major oil and gas exporter works in the opposite direction. Hydrocarbon revenues provide a direct and relatively stable source of funding for a well-resourced, centralised security apparatus [10]. At the same time, the energy infrastructure itself constitutes both a strategic asset and a critical object of protection, so that internal security operations become closely intertwined with national economic policy and foreign relations.

Short- and medium-term prospects for reform

The short- and medium-term reform prospects of the two countries point in different directions.

In Poland, the main tasks appear to be the further strengthening of democratic control mechanisms, the improvement of cyber-defense capabilities, and better adaptation to evolving forms of hybrid pressure [26]. EU and NATO standards continue to supply external reference points, while relatively active civic institutions maintain a degree of pressure for transparency and administrative accountability [20].

In Azerbaijan, the structural incentives for genuine democratisation of the security sector remain limited. As long as regime stability is treated as the overriding priority within a highly centralized executive framework, any adjustments are more likely to focus on operational modernization – technical counter-terrorism capacities, digital surveillance tools – than on the expansion of independent civilian oversight [1; 10]. A more substantial shift would require a real rebalancing of authority between the executive and the legislative branch, together with stronger legal protections for open political debate.

6. Conclusions. The comparison suggests that similar statutory language and organizational charts can mask political realities that are fundamentally different. Both Poland and Azerbaijan maintain specialized security agencies, constitutional declarations of rights, and formal mechanisms of oversight. The extent to which these elements add up to a functioning democratic security architecture, however, varies widely.

For Poland, the ongoing institutional challenge is to keep democratic civilian control meaningful in the face of political polarization and hybrid threats. Continued adherence to statutory limits, a reasonable degree of operational transparency, and public accountability remain essential if existing democratic standards are to be preserved.

For Azerbaijan, the central question is whether the security sector can move away from its present role as an instrument of executive protection and toward a system more clearly oriented toward public rights and legal accountability. Achieving that kind of change would require both institutional reform and a political environment in which legitimate public discourse is no longer routinely treated as a national-security threat.

In the end, both security architectures reflect the political contexts in which they operate. Future comparative work will need to keep examining the ways in which geopolitical forces, economic structures and domestic political systems shape internal security models across democratic, transitional and authoritarian settings.

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were applied during the preparation of introductory structural elements of the article, as well as separate editorial and stylistic fragments of the main text. The selection and analysis of scientific sources, the processing of regulatory materials, and the formulation of scientific arguments, conclusions, and proposals were conducted independently by the authors. All results obtained through artificial intelligence tools were additionally verified by analyzing the provisions of the criminal procedural legislation of Ukraine, scientific sources, and law enforcement practice. The use of artificial intelligence technologies did not affect the independence of the authors' scientific conclusions and did not determine the results of the study.

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