

Sockpuppets Target Nagorno-Karabakh

Elena Cryst and Shelby Grossman

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1 Introduction

On February 23, 2021, Twitter announced a takedown of 35 accounts created in order to advance narratives that were critical of Azerbaijan and favorable to the Armenian government. Twitter shared this network with the Stanford Internet Observatory on February 12, 2021. The network included 72,960 tweets dating back to 2014, with most of the tweets occurring before 2017, and several accounts going dormant for months or years and then posting a high number of tweets in a short period of time. Accounts quoted official Azerbaijani state messaging with intermittent pro-Armenian messaging in an attempt to masquerade as Azerbaijani accounts. Most of the accounts had low tweet activity and engagement.

The most noteworthy tactic in this network was the creation of accounts pretending to be Azerbaijani government officials. One of these accounts was created in 2014, and changed its handle in 2020 to impersonate the Minister of Foreign Affairs. This is not the first time this tactic has been used. In October 2020 Twitter announced the suspension of a network of accounts linked to the government of Saudi Arabia that [created accounts](#) pretending to be an interim Qatari government in exile. One of these accounts, @QtrGov, was created in 2016 and had over 90,000 followers, and there is strong evidence that it did not use this handle prior to 2020. By combining an old creation date and handle switching, information operations can create the impression of account legitimacy. It is possible that @QtrGov used spammy follow-back behavior to grow its following, then wiped its tweets and changed its handle.

On the one hand, there are reasons to not be too worried about this tactic. In both operations, Twitter users called out the accounts as fake. And for the operation described in this report, the fake government accounts got at most a few hundred followers. At the same time, this tactic has potential to mislead people. Several of the government officials impersonated in this network lacked their own official Twitter accounts, creating a search vacuum. In an example described in Section 4.2, a Google Knowledge Panel for one of these government officials linked to the fake Twitter account.

Key takeaways:

- This network created sockpuppet accounts impersonating Azerbaijani government officials to push contentious messaging aligned with the Armenian perspective in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In one case, the impersonation dated back to 2016.
- Accounts in this network increased activity around several flash points in the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The accounts used a mix of Azerbaijani propaganda and Armenian propaganda, posting under Azerbaijani account names to mock Azerbaijani figures and criticize actions by the Azerbaijani government.
- Accounts used common Azerbaijani hashtags such as #JusticeforKhojaly and #StopArmenianAggression, but coupled them with Armenian hashtags like #Artzakh (the Armenian name for the disputed republic).

- Multiple accounts posted the same tweets at similar times, indicating coordination (or shared managers) across the accounts.
- Accounts posing as news sites primarily shared Azerbaijani news articles through RSS feeds, but periodically tweeted original content using different Twitter clients. These original tweets were largely pro-Armenian.
- We also observed a specific, low-engagement astroturfing campaign in 2019 that targeted the anniversary of the Khojaly Tragedy.

2 Background

Activity from accounts in this network flared up around several recent flash-points in the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh has existed since the Soviet era. When the two countries became independent in 1991, Nagorno-Karabakh fell within Azerbaijani borders. Nagorno-Karabakh has a majority ethnic Armenian population, and both Armenia and a large portion of the region's population have long contended that it belongs to Armenia. In 1994, after years of war, the two countries signed a ceasefire agreement – notably not a peace treaty – that froze the conflict and created a de facto power-sharing agreement between the self-proclaimed ethnically Armenian Republic of Artsakh and Armenia. Internationally, the territory was recognized as being within the borders of Azerbaijan.

Two major events from the first war became rallying cries on each side of the conflict. The first was the 1988 pogrom against ethnic Armenians in the town of Sumgait that was carried out starting on February 26 of that year. The second was a massacre of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the town of Khojaly on February 26, 1992.

After 22 years of tenuous ceasefire, violence broke out on April 1, 2016. Each side alleged that the other had broken the terms of the ceasefire. During the conflict Azerbaijan gained control of some of the disputed territory. A new ceasefire was agreed to on April 5. Azerbaijan viewed the outcome as a major victory in the conflict. On the other side, the Armenian government, who had been militarily unprepared for the conflict, faced domestic criticism.

On September 27, 2020, full war broke out in the region when the Azerbaijani army launched an airstrike against the Nagorno-Karabakh regional capital. The heavily armed Azerbaijani army with the support of its ally Turkey, outmatched the Armenian forces. On October 10, 17 and 25, negotiators from Russia and the United States brokered ineffective ceasefires between the two countries. On November 9, President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia, and President Vladimir Putin of Russia signed a final ceasefire agreement, which went into effect on November 10. The agreement ceded more territory to Azerbaijan. Armenians, shocked by the agreement, openly protested in the streets of the nation's capital. Russian and Turkish peacekeeping forces moved into the region, and many Armenians living in the region fled their homes.

This is the first takedown from Twitter that focuses on content about Azerbaijan actors. Facebook announced the removal of a network that originated in Azerbaijan on **October 8, 2020**. That network primarily engaged in amplifying pro-government content and does not show similarities with this network. A July 21, 2020 study from the **DFRLab** identified hashtag manipulation from Azerbaijani web brigades. That activity also did not show similarities with this network.

3 Summary Statistics

The Twitter network consisted of 35 accounts. They included 10 government sockpuppet accounts – those that lie about their identities – presenting as members of the Azerbaijani government, five fake news accounts,¹ and 19 fake accounts created for a 2019 astroturfing campaign. The remaining account, @visitazerbaijan, was created in 2008 and listed as “for sale.” The network had relatively low engagement. Accounts averaged 172 followers with a maximum of 651 and a median of 134 followers. The per tweet engagement, which we calculate as sum of quote tweets, retweets, replies and likes, averaged less than 0.1 per tweet. 92% of the engagement was with just three accounts. The account @BayramovJeyhun received 4,739 interactions, @haqqin_az received 1,077, and @haqqin__az received 486. The other accounts each had less than 100 total engagements.

Tweet activity can be characterized in three periods, with very few recorded tweets between each period.

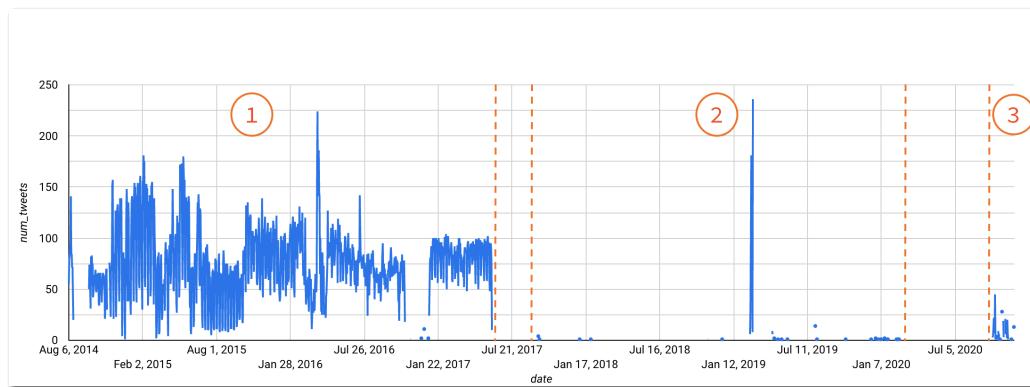


Figure 1: Tweets per day in the dataset. (1) news and early government sockpuppets; (2) #khojaly astroturfing; (3) government sockpuppets.

Period 1, which stretched broadly from early August 2014 to late June 2017, saw high activity but from just five accounts: the fake news accounts @haqqin_az, @haqqin__az, and @novosti_az; and the government sockpuppets @BayramovJeyhun and @zakir_hasanov. The five accounts used Twitter feeds to

¹In this context, we use “fake news accounts” to mean that the accounts were not owned or operated by the news sites whose names they used. We do not mean that the sites shared “fake news, which we did not attempt to verify.

automatically post RSS feeds, and shared a set of identical tweets in April 2016, indicating coordination across the accounts.

Period 2 saw one distinctive peak of account creation and activity from February 19 to 29, 2019, with follower-growth and amplification activity. The accounts concentrated their messaging on February 26, coinciding with the joint anniversaries of the 1988 Sumgait and 1992 Khojaly massacres. Those accounts subsequently went dormant.

Period 3, which started on October 4, 2020, consisted primarily of government sockpuppet accounts sharing messages related to the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

4 Government Sockpuppets

The Azerbaijan network made heavy use of sockpuppet accounts that posed as public officials and news accounts. Ten accounts posed as Azerbaijani government officials, including the current and former Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, the Minister of Defense, the president's advisor on foreign affairs, and the Vice President (who is also Azerbaijan's first lady). The accounts had no creation date pattern, although seven were created in the latter half of 2020. Notable among the group were the accounts for Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov, Defense Minister Zakir Həsənov and Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Leyla Abdullayeva, which in some instances tweeted identical text and engaged with each other.

Display Name	Screen Name	Profile Description	Followers	Creation Date	Total Tweets
Elmar Mammadyarov	EMammadyarov	Minister of Foreign Affairs Since April 2, 2004.	27	2019-04-17	3
Hikmet Hajiyev	HikmetHajiyev_	Assistant of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Head of Foreign Policy Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration. RT not endorsement.	0	2020-11-11	0
Jeyhun Bayramov	BayramovJeyhun	Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan	527	2014-11-20	14131
Jeyhun Bayramov	BayramovJeyhun1	Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan	651	2020-07-16	0
Leyla Abdullayeva	LeylaAbdulayeva	Spokesperson of @AzerbaijanMFA RT not endorsement.	8	2020-11-08	26
Mehriban Aliyeva	MehribanAliyeva	First Vice President of Azerbaijan Mehriban Aliyeva - The official parody account #ArtsakhStrong #KarabakhIsAzerbaijan	33	2020-10-03	80
Mehriban Aliyeva	viceazpresident	First Vice President of Azerbaijan Mehriban Aliyeva - The official account	0	2020-11-16	0
Tural Ganjaliyev	TuralGanjali	Elected representative of the Azerbaijani population of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.	0	2020-10-16	6
Tural Ganjaliyev	TuralGanjaliyev	Elected representative of the Azerbaijani population of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.	0	2020-11-15	0
Zakir Həsənov	zakir_hasanov	Lieutenant General is an Azerbaijani politician who has been the Minister of Defense of Azerbaijan since 2013. The official account	112	2016-04-10	402

Table 1: Profile data on the ten government sockpuppet accounts.

4.1 Accounts Assuming the Identity of the Azerbaijani Minister of Foreign Affairs

Two accounts in this network posed as the official account for the Azerbaijani Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jeyhun Bayramov, who took office on July 16, 2020. These accounts included @BayramovJeyhun (created in 2014) and @BayramovJeyhun1 (created on the same day the Minister took office in 2020). @BayramovJeyhun1 amassed 651 followers but does not appear to have tweeted. (The Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs created an account for the Minister on July 18, 2020 using the handle @bayramov_jeyhun). @BayramovJeyhun began assuming the identity of the Minister on October 10, 2020. According to Twitter, the account (registered under the unique user ID 2884994283) went through several changes in handle name in October 2020.

Once @BayramovJeyhun assumed the identity of the Minister, it tweeted 31 times in 31 minutes, all copies of old tweets from the real @Baryamov_Jeyhun or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs account. The account also retweeted the official Azerbaijani presidential accounts. However, after that first day of activity, the account started mixing original tweets in with the plagiarized official tweets, occasionally tagging the Azerbaijani president. On October 12, 2020, the account tweeted in Russian “@presidentaz How about you tell us about the capture

of all those villages. Either we here at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs don't know anything about ceasefires or this is a very peculiar truce. Schrödinger's Truce." (Original text: "@presidentaz Давайте и сообщите о захвате ряда сел. Либо мы в МИД ничего не понимаем в прекращении огня, либо это перемирие особенное. Перемирие Шредингера."). The tweet and several subsequent tweets targeted Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's contemporary tweets that shared the Azerbaijani names of villages that had been claimed by the advancing Azerbaijani army in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The tweet referred to the ineffective October 10 truce in Nagorno-Karabakh, seemingly accusing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Azerbaijani government of ignoring the truce with the reference to Schrödinger implying that the truce was both alive and dead. Several other tweets also criticized the president. Such behavior is unusual; Freedom House rates Azerbaijan as "not free," and gives it just 2 of 16 points in the "Freedom of Expression and Belief" category, making this behavior rare for a government account.

On November 6, 2020, after 27 days and 134 tweets, the fake account wrote a bold and potentially risky tweet. The tweet repeated the same message in Azerbaijani and English, with the English message reading, "Dear All, be aware that fake twitter account is opened on behalf of FM Jeyhun Bayramov. Official account of the Minister is @bayramovjeyhun!" The next day, the account tweeted "Dear @Twitter - @verified, why does the #ombudsman of the unrecognized republic #Karabakh @Artak_Beglaryan have an official #Twitter account, and I do not have the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan (@AzerbaijanMFA)? ." The account went silent 8 hours later, when we assume it was suspended. It had 527 followers at the time of its suspension.

The account did not go unnoticed. On November 6, the official spokesperson for the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Leyla Abdullayeva, tweeted in Azerbaijani and English warning followers of the imposter:



Figure 2: Left: a warning tweet from the spokesperson from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the fake account. Right: the profile of the real Jeyhun Baramov Twitter account, which uses the same photos and biography as the imposter.

On November 8, 2020, the day after the @BayramovJeyhun account was suspended, a new account was created posing as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Leyla Abdullayeva. The fake Abdullayeva tagged Twitter, warning that they had suspended the wrong Jeyhun Bayramov account and urging them to suspend the “fake” account @bayramov_jeyhun. Much like the fake Bayramov Jeyhun account, fake Abdullayeva parroted real Abdullayeva’s biography and copied her profile photo.



Figure 3: Left: Leyla Abdullayeva’s real Twitter profile. (@LAbdullayevaMFA); right: profile for the fake (and now suspended) @LeylaAbdulayeva.



Figure 4: The **first two tweets** from the fake @LeylaAbdualyeva account tagged Twitter and warned that they had suspended the wrong Minister of Foreign Affairs account.

The behavior pattern strongly suggests a link between the two accounts, with @LeylaAbdulayeva created the day after @BayramovJeyhun stopped tweeting, and immediately attempting to restore the suspended account. Fake Leyla then began attempting to establish credibility by sharing Ministry of Foreign Affairs press releases and copying and tweeting identical content as the real Jayhun Bayramov and the real Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The account's last tweet was on November 10, two days after its creation. It tweeted a total of 26 times and amassed just 8 followers.

Unlike @LeylaAbdulayeva, the @BayramovJeyhun account had nearly six years to build its (unimpressive) following. As previously noted, Twitter stated that the account had changed its handle several times in October 2020. By analyzing mentions of the unique numeric account user id from within the dataset, we identified three 2014 tweets referring to the account as “@today_az.” It is possible that the account was sold or changed ownership before its repurposing in 2020, and could have changed names additional times. Jeyhun Bayramov was a relatively unknown civil servant in Azerbaijan until he was named Minister of Education in 2018, making it unlikely that an account creator would have had the foresight to establish an account in his name much before that year.

The account was fairly active from November 20, 2014 to October 31, 2016, tweeting 13,978 times for an average of 19.7 tweets per day. Almost all of these tweets were posted using **Twitterfeed**, a Twitter auto-poster that linked to news or blog RSS feeds. Twitterfeed **closed down** on October 31, 2016, coinciding with

the last date of the RSS feed activity from @BayramovJeyhun before its revival in 2020. All of the Twitterfeed tweets shared previews and links to news articles from an Azerbaijani English-language news site, Today.Az.

From April 1-5, 2016, significant clashes broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The account tweeted three times on April 4, tagging foreign media brands and outlets (e.g. the Ellen Show, France24 and BBC World), and using the hashtags #NKPeace and #KarabakhNow. On April 27 and 28, the account posted five more times. The tweets were all critical of the Azerbaijani army, and posted at almost the same time as three other accounts in the dataset, @haqqin__az (which assumed the identity of an Azerbaijan media outlet), @novosti_az, and the newly created account @zakir_hasanov.

4.2 Accounts Assuming the Identity of the Azerbaijani Minister of Defense

The second significant government sockpuppet was created in the name of Azerbaijan's Minister of Defense Zakir Hasanov. The account was created on April 10, 2016 and its first tweet read, "Zakir Hasanov, the Minister of Defense of Azerbaijan, now has an official Twitter account #Azerbaijan #Twitter" (original text "На Twitter'е начала действовать официальная страница Министра Обороны РА Закир Гасанова Azerbaijan Twitter"). On April 28, 2016, four accounts – @zakir_hasanov, @BayramovJeyhun, @haqqin__az and @novosti_az – pushed out the same set of four tweets accusing the Azerbaijani military of targeting civilians and using human shields in the Karabakh region. The tweets and their timestamps are in Table 5. This sequence of behavior coupled with the fact that all four accounts switched from using Twitterfeed to using Twitter Web Client for just these tweets strongly suggests that these accounts were either managed by the same individual or operated in coordination. The behavior and subject matter of the tweets is uncharacteristic of an official government account, which would not criticize the nation's military, and, based on observed behavior of official Azerbaijani accounts, would likely post straightforward government talking points with a regular cadence.

user_screen_name	tweet_time	tweet_text
BayramovJeyhun	2016-04-27 17:07:00	#KarabakhNow #NKPeace #aztwi #haqqin https://t.co/3ogMFKKQGw
zakir_hasanov	2016-04-27 17:13:00	#KarabakhNow #NKPeace #aztwi #haqqin https://t.co/3MpvnfJT4
haqqin_az	2016-04-28 18:48:00	Military installations of Azerbaijan Forces located in close to civil settlements in violation of Geneva Conventions https://t.co/jNZ8e1ILDW
haqqin_az	2016-04-28 18:50:00	#Azerbaijan army using own population as a shield installing artillery in civilian settlements #KarabakhNow #NKPeace https://t.co/PdixaVKqWM
haqqin_az	2016-04-28 18:51:00	#Azerbaijan army shelling #Karabakh cities using artillery deployed in settlement @geneve_int https://t.co/P8dIYEYpfKV
haqqin_az	2016-04-28 19:40:00	Президент Азербайджана @presidentaz отозвал генконсулов в Екатеринбурге и Санкт-Петербурге https://t.co/GJyS1XOc15 #KarabakhNow #NKPeace
novosti_az	2016-04-28 21:27:00	#Azerbaijan army shelling #Karabakh cities using artillery deployed in settlement @geneve_int https://t.co/qLegfpN8Zr
novosti_az	2016-04-28 21:27:00	#Azerbaijan army using own population as a shield installing artillery in civilian settlements #KarabakhNow #NKPeace https://t.co/xRb40F7Re8
novosti_az	2016-04-28 21:27:00	Military installations of Azerbaijan Forces located in close to civil settlements in violation of Geneva Conventions https://t.co/4sc8HQjxpr
novosti_az	2016-04-28 21:27:00	Президент Азербайджана @presidentaz отозвал генконсулов в Екатеринбурге и Санкт-Петербурге https://t.co/cYvFmgiyM3 #KarabakhNow #NKPeace
BayramovJeyhun	2016-04-28 21:28:00	Military installations of Azerbaijan Forces located in close to civil settlements in violation of Geneva Conventions https://t.co/fS0GW4D5TN
BayramovJeyhun	2016-04-28 21:29:00	#Azerbaijan army using own population as a shield installing artillery in civilian settlements #KarabakhNow #NKPeace https://t.co/luWt8Yz3DM
BayramovJeyhun	2016-04-28 21:29:00	#Azerbaijan army shelling #Karabakh cities using artillery deployed in settlement @geneve_int https://t.co/lncV15Ubz9
BayramovJeyhun	2016-04-28 21:29:00	Президент Азербайджана @presidentaz отозвал генконсулов в Екатеринбурге и Санкт-Петербурге https://t.co/cYvFmgiyM3 #KarabakhNow #NKPeace
zakir_hasanov	2016-04-28 21:41:00	Military installations of Azerbaijan Forces located in close to civil settlements in violation of Geneva Conventions https://t.co/4sc8HQjxpr
zakir_hasanov	2016-04-28 21:41:00	#Azerbaijan army using own population as a shield installing artillery in civilian settlements #KarabakhNow #NKPeace https://t.co/xRb40F7Re8
zakir_hasanov	2016-04-28 21:41:00	#Azerbaijan army shelling #Karabakh cities using artillery deployed in settlement @geneve_int https://t.co/qLegfpN8Zr
zakir_hasanov	2016-04-28 21:41:00	Президент Азербайджана @presidentaz отозвал генконсулов в Екатеринбурге и Санкт-Петербурге https://t.co/O6LEJrpzyL #KarabakhNow #NKPeace
zakir_hasanov	2016-04-30 18:00:00	#KarabakhNow #NKPeace #Aztwi https://t.co/zml0X9Ff2c
haqqin_az	2016-05-01 13:06:00	@zakir_hasanov #KarabakhNow #NKPeace #Aztwi #Armenia #Azerbaijan #Soldiers #Army #War https://t.co/Yj7FTCal6Y

Figure 5: Tweets posted across four accounts, @BayramovJeyhun, @zakir_hasanov, @novosti_az, and @haqqin_az. The tweet in Russian translates to “The President of Azerbaijan @presidentaz has recalled the Consul Generals from Ekaterinburg and Saint Petersburg.”

The @zakir_hasanov account maintained its pattern of primarily copying Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Presidential tweets through May and June 2016. On June 17, 2016, the account posted four tweets promoting the Formula One race in Baku, Azerbaijan’s capital. After that the account went silent for six months. When it came back, the behavior was different. The account posted using Tweet Web Client and shared news links to a wide range of news articles and tweets, including articles from Haqqin.az, Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik, Armenian news sites, and Armenian accounts. All the shared content mentioned Hasanov, although not always in a flattering light.



Figure 6: The [final tweet](#) from the account @zakir_hasanov purportedly celebrating Gurgen Margaryan.

@zakir_hasanov had been active for four years, tweeted 402 times and amassed 112 followers by the time it was suspended. It had gained enough credibility that as of February 21, 2021, the Google Knowledge Panel results for “Zakir Hasanov” linked to the now suspended Twitter account. (See Figure 7.) As of this report, there is no official account for Zakir Hasanov.

Zakir Hasanov

Azerbaijani Politician

Zakir Əsgər oğlu Hasanov is an Azerbaijani politician and Colonel General who has been the Minister of Defence of Azerbaijan since 2013. [Wikipedia](#)

Born: June 6, 1959 (age 61 years), [Astara, Azerbaijan](#)

Nationality: Azerbaijani

Education: [Baku Higher Combined Arms Command School](#) (1980), Cəmşid Naxçıvanski adına Hərbi Lisey

Awards: Shohrat Order [Links to twitter.com/zakir_hasanov](#)

Profiles

[Twitter](#)

A red arrow points from the "Twitter" link in the "Awards" section to the "Twitter" icon in the "Profiles" section.

Figure 7: The Google Knowledge Panel for “Zakir Hasanov” links to the now-suspended fake Twitter account.

4.3 Additional Government Sockpuppets

The other government sockpuppet accounts had low activity and follower counts. @TuralGanjali, a fake account for the representative for the Azerbaijani community in Nagorno-Karabakh, shared six tweets openly mocking President Aliyev. @EMammadyarov masqueraded as Azerbaijan’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs. It posted just three tweets, all on April 17, 2019. @MehribanAliyeva was a blatant parody account mocking Mehriban Aliyeva, Azerbaijan’s Vice President and the wife of President Ilham Aliyev. The bio read “First Vice President of Azerbaijan Mehriban Aliyeva - The official parody account #ArtsakhStrong #KarabakhIsAzerbaijan.” Artsakh is the Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh; Azerbaijanis prefer the name Karabakh or Nagorno-Karabakh. The account tweeted in Russian, mocking the Azerbaijani Russian accent.



Figure 8: A [tweet](#) from now-suspended @MehribanAliyeva sharing a political cartoon mocking President Aliyev and Vice President Aliyeva.

5 Accounts Assuming the Identity of Real Media Outlets

5.1 The Fake Haqqin Accounts

Haqqin.az is a Russian language news site founded by Azerbaijani journalist Eynulla Fatullayev. Fatullayev was an outspoken government dissident and was imprisoned in Azerbaijan from 2007 to 2011 on defamation charges. His arrest elicited outcries from international human rights groups including [Reporters Without Borders](#) and [Amnesty International](#). After his release from prison, however, his overt political views shifted. His newly founded news site, Haqqin, became a staunchly pro-Aliyev operation, with some speculating that his stories are fed to him by the [government intelligence agency](#). The site and its content are on the radar of Armenian news outlets, which sometimes post fact-checking stories debunking Haqqin's [evidentiary sources](#). Haqqin's [site](#) links to Fatullayev's [live personal Twitter account](#), and the Haqqin.az live [Facebook page](#), with nearly

48,000 followers.

The now-suspended Twitter network included four accounts that pretended to represent Haqqin: @haqqin_az, @haqqin__az, @haqqin_az_, and @Haqqinz.

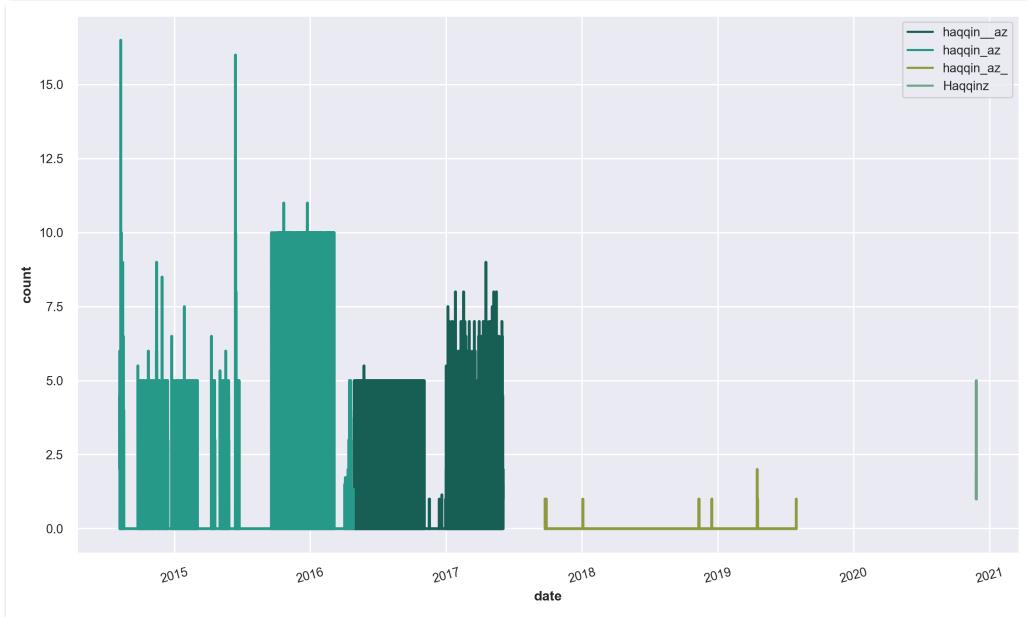


Figure 9: Tweet frequency for the fake Haqqin accounts. They had no temporal overlap in activity.

The first two accounts, @haqqin_az and @haqqin__az (two underscores) show clear signs of being related and potentially co-managed. They also look to be related to the @BayramovJeyhun and @zakir_hasanov accounts, as well as another fake news account, @novosti_az. @haqqin_az was created on August 6, 2014, and started tweeting that same day. As with the government sockpuppet accounts, most of the early tweets were posted using Twitterfeed and shared articles from Haqqin with links to either the news site or its Facebook page. In April 2016, the account began posting heavily using Twitter Web Client; its tweets engaged directly on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, repeatedly including “#KarabaghNow #KarabakhNow #Armenia #Azerbaijan,” and pushing anti-Azerbaijani content. The account tweeted in Armenian as well as Russian and English. This activity continued, intermixed with more automatic Twitterfeed posts, until April 25. On April 27, the account @haqqin__az (two underscores) opened, with the first tweet reading “Our official page @ haqqin_az has been blocked for many complaints by Armenian separatists #KarabakhNow #NKPeace #aztwi #haqqin” (original text: “На многочисленные жалобы армянских сепаратистов наша официальная страница @haqqin_az была заблокирован. #KarabakhNow #NKPeace #aztwi #haqqin”).

On April 28, @haqqin__az shared the four tweets (see Figure 5) that were reshared by the other three accounts. These were not original tweets — three of them were first posted by Samvel Martirosyan, an Armenian self-described social media analyst.

Both @haqqin_az and @haqqin_az had attempted to make their accounts appear more legitimate before their suspensions. The accounts frequently requested verification and reported what they claimed were fake Haqqin accounts. @haqqin_az posted two tweets on April 28 asking Twitter to unblock @haqqin_z.

A few months after @haqqin_az went silent, an older account @haqqin_az_-, began tweeting for the first time. In addition to sharing Haqqin news links, it retweeted the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the fake @zakir_-hasanov account. The fourth Haqqin account, @Haqqinz was created November 23, 2020 and tweeted 13 times, all on November 25.

5.2 The Fake Novosti.Az Account

The account @novosti_az (novosti means news in Russian) also followed similar patterns to the earlier Haqqin accounts. It exclusively posted using Twitterfeed from its creation on November 19, 2014 to April 3, 2016. It linked to articles from the Russian-language Azerbaijani Sputnik site, a Russian state news outlet. Its activity in April 2016 was similar to that of the fake Haqqin accounts and government sockpuppet accounts, including posting identical tweets. Its last post was on April 28, 2016.

6 Azerbaijani Citizen Sockpuppet Accounts and the 2019 #Khojaly Astroturfing Campaign

A cluster of accounts in the network were created days before the February 26 memorial date of the Khojaly massacre. The account names and bios look Azerbaijani, with many using hashtags like #shareforkhojaly, #Justiceforkhojaly and #StopArmenianAggression in their bio descriptions. The 19 accounts were created between February 21 and 25, 2019. Their first tweets shared Azerbaijani tourism content (“just look at all the caravanserais that held travelers moving along the Silk Road. #Azerbaijan today is a unique combination of the many #cultures and empires that have passed through, as well as home to some of the most stunning natural landscapes of the #Caucasus.”), then the accounts engaged in some common follower-growth behavior. For example, one account tweeted “🔥🔥 Follow me, like ❤️ and retweet 🌱 this, (so I know who you are) and I'll follow back instantly 24/7 😎🔥🔥 #TeamFollowBack #TFBJP #TEAMHITFOLLOW #followback #AUTOFOLLOW #MUSTFOLLOW #FOLLOWBACK #FOLLOWNGAIN”.

On February 26, an astroturfing campaign began in earnest. The campaign flipped the narrative from the massacre in Khojaly to the Armenian casualties that resulted from Azerbaijan shelling the city of Stepanakurt/Khankendi (its Armenian and Azerbaijani names) just before the Khojaly massacre, and the February 26, 1988 Sumgait pogrom. The tweets shared pro-Armenian messaging followed by the Azerbaijani hashtags #Shareforkhojaly and #Justiceforkhojaly. Given this behavior, it is likely that the accounts were attempting to flood the Azerbaijani social media campaign with pro-Armenian content. A search on TweetDeck for the text of these tweets shows several more accounts with similar

profiles and creation dates that all engaged with these tweets. The now-suspended accounts went silent on February 28, 2020, after just a week of activity.

7 Conclusion

The network discussed in this report shared content that likely would not mislead most Azerbaijanis to the account origins. Use of anti-Azerbaijani content and hashtags would be viewed by most as out of character for political officials and unusual for Azerbaijani citizens. The impact of this network may have instead been more in confirming or fueling perceptions of Azerbaijani officials to an Armenian audience, further entrenching cross-border divisions. The creation of fake government accounts has been seen in previous disinformation operations, and in this case emphasizes the opportunities available when those being impersonated either do not have an official Twitter account, or have a new account that lacks perceived legitimacy and can easily be spoofed.



The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Observatory was created to learn about the abuse of the internet in real time, and to translate our research discoveries into training and policy innovations for the public good.

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