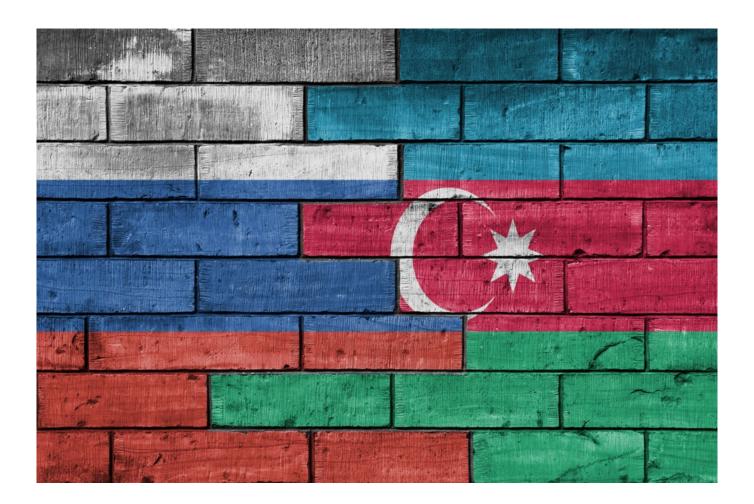**Tomorrow's Affairs**

Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

The arrest of Russians in Azerbaijan – a new distancing between Baku and Moscow

Cold relations between Russia and Azerbaijan were further strained by the arrest of a group of Russians in Baku, engaged in the Kremlin-funded media outlet Sputnik. Angered by the accumulated tragic cases of its citizens, for which it blames Moscow, Azerbaijan is disancing from Russia in, for it, the strategic region of the Caucasus.

Seven people linked to a Kremlin-funded media outlet in Azerbaijan's capital have been detained after a raid on its office, the Interior Ministry was quoted by local media as saying Tuesday, in the latest sign of the rift between Moscow and Baku over the deaths of two ethnic Azerbaijanis in Russian custody.

Tensions have been growing since December, when an Azerbaijani passenger jet was attacked as it approached Grozny, the regional capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya, It later crashed, killing 38 of 67 people aboard, and Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev blamed Moscow and said Russian President Vladimir Putin had tried to "hush up" what happened.

On Monday, masked police stormed the offices of Sputnik Azerbaijan. The Interior Ministry said the Kremlin-backed media outlet had continued operating via "illegal financing," despite having its accreditation revoked in February.

Detained in the raid were Sputnik Azerbaijan's editor-in-chief Yevgeny Belousov, and editorial board director Igor Kartavykh.

Five others linked to the media outlet also were detained and under investigation for alleged fraud, illegal entrepreneurship and acquiring property by criminal means.

2 Russians ordered held for up to 4 months in Azerbaijan

Belousov and Kartavykh were charged with conspiracy to commit fraud, which carries a maximum prison sentence of up to 12 years. They also were charged with conspiracy to launder funds or other property, and conspiracy to carry out an illegal enterprise.

Both were arrested and ordered held for at least four months in pre-trial detention.

Sputnik's parent company, Rossiya Segodnya, said Tuesday it was "deeply concerned" by the raid and that Azerbaijani staff members were among those detained.

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Diplomats from the Russian Consulate have not been grated access to its citizens who were detained, it said, and that Kartavykh's apartment had been searched and computer equipment seized.

"All these actions have no basis and have led to the blocking of Sputnik Azerbaijan," the statement said. "We call on the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately resolve this unacceptable situation and release our colleagues."

The Kremlin also called for their release.

"Such measures against members of the media are absolutely not in line with generally accepted rules and norms and, of course, do not match the spirit and nature of Russian-Azerbaijani relations," spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday.

A police raid in Yekaterinburg, Russia

The detentions followed Russian police raids Friday on the homes of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Yekaterinburg, Russia, as part of an investigation into a number of killings dating back decades.

Two brothers, Ziyaddin and Huseyn Safarov, died while in police custody and several others were seriously injured in the raids, officials

said, with nine people detained.

Sayfaddin Huseynli, a brother of the two dead Azerbaijanis, told The Associated Press the raids were "an inhumane, cruel act by Russia against migrants — an act of intimidation."

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Migrants from Muslim-majority countries that once were part of the Soviet Union frequently complain of discrimination at the hands of Russians.

On Tuesday, the Prosecutor General's Office of Azerbaijan said it would launch a criminal investigation into the two deaths. It said Azerbaijani citizens and others of Azerbaijani descent who were "practically helpless and unable to defend themselves," were subjected to beatings and other physical abuse by Russian officials.

It attributed the deaths of 60-year-old Huseyn Safarov and 55-year-old Ziyaddin Safarov to "post-traumatic shock caused by multiple injuries." Huseyn had also suffered post-hemorrhagic shock, it said.

Russia's Investigative Committee said Monday that one of the deaths had been caused by heart failure. It did not provide details on the second victim, but said a medical examination would be conducted to determine the cause of death for both.

Azerbaijan protests the deaths in custody

Azerbaijan protested the deaths by canceling a scheduled trip to Moscow by government officials, citing the "targeted extrajudicial killings and violence against Azerbaijanis on the basis of their nationality" by Russian law enforcement.

It also called off a visit to Baku by a Russian deputy prime minister, and the Culture Ministry canceled concerts, exhibitions and other events by Russian state and private institutions.

In May, President Ilham Aliyev declined to attend Russia's Victory Day parade in Moscow

Ties between Moscow and Baku have been strained since the December crash of an Azerbaijani passenger jet. The plane eventually crashed as it tried to land in nearby Kazakhstan.

Aliyev said it was attacked over Russia, albeit unintentionally, and rendered uncontrollable by electronic warfare measures amid allegations that Russian air defense systems were trying to fend off a Ukrainian drone strike near Grozny.

Putin apologized to Aliyev for what he called a "tragic incident" but stopped short of acknowledging responsibility.

In May, Aliyev declined to attend Russia's Victory Day parade in Moscow. Later that month, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha visited Azerbaijan, signaling closer ties between Baku and Kyiv.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called Aliyev to express his condolences on the two deaths in Yekaterinburg, Azerbaijan's presidential press service said.