
The EU Is Tough on Minsk, But Easy On Baku

By Gorkhmaz Asgarov

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After all, next week European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso will meet with Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan. And last week the same Barroso visited Azerbaijan and met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, whose human rights record is comparable to that of his Uzbek counterpart. And the same week, the EU extended an invitation to President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov of Turkmenistan to visit Brussels and discuss energy and trade cooperation.

Ilham Aliyev, his wife Mehriban Aliyeva, and Alyaksandr Lukashenka during the Belarus dictator's visit to Heydar Aliyev Foundation in Baku, Azerbaijan

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What makes Lukashenka any different from the dictators mentioned above? After all, you can't blame him because Belarus doesn't have any oil or natural gas.

'Dynamic' Society

It's no secret certain post-Soviet countries look very different when European leaders view them through the prism of oil and gas. 'I know that your country has a very dynamic society,' Barroso told Aliyev during his Baku visit.

Dynamic? Maybe. But you wouldn't know it by considering that every single election there has been rigged since 1993, when Aliyev's father, Heydar Aliyev, overthrew the democratically elected government and became head of state in what observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe described as a coup.

You wouldn't know it by considering that Azerbaijan's government has consistently scored abysmally on the corruption ratings of Transparency International and President Aliyev has been listed as a predator of journalists by media watchdog groups.

Dynamic, indeed.

Last month, Lukashenka caused an uproar in the EU and triggered talks of possible sanctions with a brutal postelection crackdown. He might have taken his cue from Aliyev, who did precisely the same thing in both 2003 and 2005.

The Endless Presidency

In March 2009, Aliyev altered the constitution (through a managed referendum, of course) to abolish term limits for the presidency and setting the stage for him to "run" endlessly for president. When a journalist from EuroNews asked him recently if he considers himself a king, Aliyev simply shook his head. But it is hard to imagine what powers a king might have that Aliyev does not.

Yet Lukashenka is a ruthless dictator to be shunned by good European society, while Aliyev is a true friend presiding over a "dynamic" country.

The EU needs alternative energy routes, and the gas deal for a "southern corridor" through Azerbaijan makes a lot of economic sense. From the economic point of view, cooperation with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan also makes sense.

By why not restrict relations to the framework and rhetoric of the necessary cooperation? Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and other countries have hydrocarbons to offer and the EU has the cash to pay. So is it really necessary for European officials to clap their arms around the shoulders of authoritarian rulers and spout nonsense about their "dynamic" development?

Why must Barroso make the gratuitous comment that "we want to make clear that our relations are not limited to oil and gas" when everyone knows that 98 percent of EU imports from Azerbaijan are oil and gas?

Adding Insult To Injury

It has been said before but, obviously, it needs to be said again. When EU leaders make high-profile visits to such countries and praise their rulers, they add highly valued political capital to these commercial transactions. The authoritarians conclude that they have the EU in their pockets as long as they are willing to take European money. Lacking legitimacy from their own people, they happily take scraps of legitimacy from the lips of people like Barroso.

This is a game the authoritarians are happy to play. After all, the EU is an example to citizens of countries like Azerbaijan of a strikingly different political model. So the "energy dictatorships" feel the need to discredit

it, to show their people that Europe's talk of democracy and human rights is just a veneer of lies.

When they shake hands with top EU officials like Barroso, they send the message that past criticism (mostly from European organizations) never mattered and has been forgotten. In Azerbaijan's case, the message is even worse. Aliyev has repeatedly argued that "some countries" manipulate issues of democracy in order to force Azerbaijan to make economic concessions. When EU officials sign deals and talk about "dynamic" Azerbaijan, everyone in that country understands that democracy, rigged elections, arrested journalists, and beaten demonstrators are just bargaining chips to get cheaper gas and oil. At least, that's what Baku wants everyone in Azerbaijan to think.

And it doesn't help that when Barroso held a joint press conference with Aliyev in Baku, none of the country's independent media outlets were present. Later, when Barroso held an individual briefing organized by the EU office in Baku, journalists' questions were screened in advance.

Why would the EU participate in this Kabuki dance with the Azerbaijani government?

Here are some noncommercial facts for the EU to think about. Eynulla Fatullayev is an Azerbaijani journalist who was arrested in 2007 on trumped up charges because the two newspapers he founded were critical of the government. He was sentenced to 8 1/2 years in prison on charges of libel, slander, inciting terrorism, and tax evasion.

Last year, the European Court of Human Rights cleared him of all charges and directed Azerbaijan to release him and compensate him in the amount of 28,000 euros. In anticipation of this ruling, Azerbaijan's Supreme Court quickly convicted him of new charges of drugs possession and additional tax evasion. He remains in prison today.

The Strasbourg-ordered compensation was paid to a bank account that had been frozen because of Fatullayev's imprisonment, allowing Baku to claim it had complied with the court ruling while ensuring that Fatullayev cannot receive the money.

Barroso claimed he discussed the case with Aliyev. "The European Court of Human Rights has ruled in his favor and I have argued for his release," Barroso said. "And these matters, I brought them, in the spirit of openness and friendship, very clearly to the attention of President Aliyev."

On January 21, Baku's Appeals Court will consider Fatullayev's appeal for his release. It will make a good test for Barroso's friends in Baku.

And here's another example of the extreme cynicism with which the Azerbaijani government treats its European partners.

More than a year ago, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) named a special rapporteur for political prisoners in Azerbaijan, German Social Democrat Christoph Straesser. However Straesser has not been given an invitation by the Azerbaijani government to visit the country and implement his mandate.

The Council of Europe has asked Baku to resolve the problem, but to no avail. Straesser will probably get his invitation

around the same time Fatullayev gets his compensation.

Lukashenka may get sanctions; Aliyev will have the last laugh.

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