

## Azerbaijan and the EU: Recalibrating Relations?

By Eldar Mamedov, Eurasianet.org

BAKU. February 28, 2013: Azerbaijan's efforts to host the European Olympic Games and other high-profile international events show that Azerbaijani leaders yearn to be taken seriously in European Union capitals. But that doesn't mean Baku is willing to listen to Brussels.

When the EU foreign policy supremo Catherine Ashton and the enlargement and neighborhood commissioner Stefan Fule criticized the Azerbaijani government for the recent arrests of an opposition leader Ilgar Mammadov and journalist Tofiq Yaqublu, President Ilham Aliyev retorted that Azerbaijan had no obligations toward organizations of which it is not a member. EU representatives "had no right to interfere in Azerbaijan's internal affairs," Aliyev stated bluntly.

By Eldar Mamedov, Eurasianet.org

BAKU. February 28, 2013: Azerbaijan's efforts to host the European Olympic Games and other high-profile international events show that Azerbaijani leaders yearn to be taken seriously in European Union capitals. But that doesn't mean Baku is willing to listen to Brussels.

When the EU foreign policy supremo Catherine Ashton and the enlargement and neighborhood commissioner Stefan Fule criticized the Azerbaijani government for the recent arrests of an opposition leader Ilgar Mammadov and journalist Tofiq Yaqublu, President Ilham Aliyev retorted that Azerbaijan had no obligations toward organizations of which it is not a member. EU representatives "had no right to interfere in Azerbaijan's internal affairs," Aliyev stated bluntly.

The signs of a chill in relations were also evident on February 18, when EU foreign ministers announced that they expected the signature of the EU association agreements with Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia in time for the Eastern Partnership summit scheduled for the fall of 2013. On Azerbaijan, they merely "welcomed progress achieved during the negotiations." In diplo-speak this meant Azerbaijan is lagging behind other countries of the Eastern Partnership - a formula invented by the EU to seek a closer association, in fact a privileged partnership of sorts with a number of countries lying between the EU and Russia.

The underlying philosophy of the Eastern Partnership is "more for more" - more benefits, such as free trade and visa liberalization, in exchange for more EU-aligned reforms in the partner countries. While the logic, by and large, works with many formerly Soviet states, it doesn't in the case of Azerbaijan. This is so because the Azerbaijani government feels it does not need "more" from the EU.

In recent years, Baku's perception of its own importance has grown vastly. It sees its energy reserves as a potent card that can be played in its dealings with the EU, which is seeking to diversify its energy supplies away from Russia. The tendency of Western states to view Baku as a key partner in addressing regional security issues is another confidence booster. In addition, steady domestic growth rates, driven mainly by energy-export revenue, inflate Baku's sense of its own worth.

Perceptions of its own ascendancy, combined with the sense of that the EU's stature is diminished by its own internal fiscal difficulties, have led Baku to conclude that it has little to gain from closer alignment with EU norms. Accordingly, Azerbaijan will not be content with the status of junior partner to the EU. Baku wants a strictly equal relationship based on shared interests, such as energy supplies and security cooperation. And even in the case of such a strategic partnership, Azerbaijani officials would likely be unbending on two issues where it sees fundamental differences with the EU; the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and human rights and democratization in Azerbaijan.

On Nagorno-Karabakh, Baku is irritated by what it sees as the EU failure to acknowledge unambiguously Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, i.e. including Nagorno-Karabakh. It is also puzzled by what it sees as EU reluctance to play a more direct role in conflict resolution within the Minsk Group framework.

On the democratization question, officials in Baku insist that the expansion of individual rights can come only after political and economic conditions in the country are modernized. A preoccupation with the concept of "modernity" is evident in President Aliyev's speeches and visible in Baku's cutting edge architecture. Democracy is seen as a messy distraction. This helps explain why Aliyev's reaction to Ashton and Fule's criticism was not an occasional outburst, but an indication of a fundamental disagreement on democratization and human rights.

So far, Azerbaijani leaders have done whatever they think is necessary for maintaining the domestic status quo, occasional protests from the EU notwithstanding. Baku feels it has nothing to fear from the EU, even if Brussels was to apply the "less for less" principle towards it, as opposed to the "more for more" approach.

But Baku better be careful not to overplay its hand. If the EU is interested in diversifying its sources of energy supply, so is Azerbaijan in diversifying its exports. Despite the questions surrounding individual government debt and the euro, the EU is a stable and reliable buyer of Azerbaijani oil, but it has other alternatives.

In terms of regional security, the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan in 2014 will lessen Western attention given to Azerbaijan in exchange for over-flight and transit privileges. At the same time, to prevent the resurgence of the Taliban, the West will have to work with Russia, Iran and India. If there is a normalization of relations with Iran - something that is clearly not imminent, but is conceivable - Azerbaijan's strategic value for the West could greatly decrease. And there is an incongruity between Baku's increasingly vehement denunciations of the EU and its wish to see the EU more involved in the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on terms favorable to Azerbaijan.

If current trends are not reversed, the most likely outcome would be a recalibration of the EU-Azerbaijan relations: away from a closer association based on a progressive alignment by Azerbaijan with the EU norms and values and towards a relationship based purely on selected shared interests - not unlike those the EU had in the past with the Mubarak's Egypt and has currently with Saudi Arabia.

Such a development would be bad news for the democratization process in Azerbaijan over the near term. But by unnecessarily and imprudently alienating the EU, the Azerbaijani government could significantly narrow its room for geo-strategic maneuver, and, in so doing, damaging its national interests. -0-

\* Eldar Mamedov is a political adviser to the Socialists & Democrats Group in the European Parliament, who writes in his personal capacity.