

The EU and Azerbaijan: Mismatched Objectives

By Giorgi Gogia, HRW

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EU-Azeri relations are best described as mismatched objectives and ambitions. Brussels wants to diversify its energy resources away from Russia. It is offering benefits such as free trade and visa liberalisation and is seeking comprehensive reforms across a range of areas as a precondition for closer ties.

Baku's interests are more narrowly defined and focused on making the most of its energy resources and resolving the conflict with neighbouring Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. It wants a relationship based on equality, viewing its energy resources as a key factor boosting its stance vis-à-vis the EU.

Negotiations on an association agreement that started in 2009 have been slow, and the lack of progress is evident. While Brussels is contemplating how to accommodate Baku's request for a different kind of partnership, Azerbaijan's human-rights situation is on a rapid decline. Human Rights Watch research shows that since March 2012, the authorities have arrested or convicted at least 22 political activists, journalists, social media bloggers, human-rights defenders, and others who criticised the government. This year alone, people have been charged or convicted in 16 cases.

In more than half of the cases the authorities have used blatantly trumped-up drug- or weapons-possession charges. In others, they have invoked bogus charges of incitement to violence, as with the opposition leader Ilgar Mammedov, the focus of a resolution in the European Parliament last week. Twenty of the 22 are behind bars.

Aliyev has also signed into law scores of regressive legislative amendments, further tightening the space for independent groups to operate by imposing new restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Most recently, last month, amendments expanded criminal libel laws explicitly to include statements made online, apparently intended to intimidate Azerbaijan's growing online activism. Another law approved in May sharply increases maximum prison terms for administrative offences, from 15 days to two months, including for offences the government frequently uses to punish people for involvement in peaceful, albeit unsanctioned, public protests.

Authorities in Azerbaijan have not sanctioned a single protest in the centre of Baku since 2006. The authorities swiftly and often violently break up any unsanctioned demonstrations, detaining and prosecuting dozens of people on administrative charges of hooliganism and disobeying police orders.

In this context of a rapidly deteriorating human-rights situation and growing government hostility toward independent and opposition voices, Aliev's determination to seek enhanced relations with the EU based on "equal partnership", without human-rights conditions, is not surprising. But it should be completely unacceptable to the EU.

Policymakers in Brussels are quick to point to Azerbaijan's growing geostrategic importance to the EU in light of its proximity to Iran, its vast hydrocarbon reserves, and the border it shares with Russia's turbulent north Caucasus. However, this importance is predicated on Azerbaijan playing a stabilising role in the region. The government's human-rights practices, however, not only run counter to the benchmarks set out for it by the EU as part of the European neighbourhood policy and association-agreement negotiations, but they also appear likely to destabilise the country as they further polarise society and drive dissent underground.

While meeting with Aliev, Barroso should impress upon his Azeri colleague that any framework for relations between the EU and Azerbaijan will have a strong human-rights component. This is what the EU is obligated to do with any partner. Azerbaijan is no exception. -0-

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