

Silent or public diplomacy in Azerbaijan?

Azeri society loses confidence in Europe when its diplomats and officials fail to discuss human rights in Azerbaijan publicly, Anar Mammadli writes

Ilham Aliev, Azerbaijan's president, will visit Brussels this Friday (21 June) to meet José Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, and Herman Van Rompuy, president of the European Council. The conversations are likely to touch on a pending decision on a pipeline carrying Azeri gas to Europe, energy issues and the EU's Eastern partnership.

What Azeri human-rights defenders and political activists hope will also be discussed is political repression within Azerbaijan, which has increased in recent years.

Ilham Aliev succeeded his father Heydar in 2003 after undemocratic election and, in the ten years since, Aliev Junior has strengthened his rule and created a political-financial oligarchy. He has remained loyal to the political traditions of his father, continued his foreign policy, and applied pressure to domestic opponents and critics. No election held while he has been in power has been considered either free or fair by domestic and international election observers. The murderers of two journalists killed during his rule – Rafiq Taghi and Elmar Huseinov, editor of the magazine Monitor – have not been found. Among the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan currently occupies one of the top spots in terms of the number of activists who have fled the country and the number of political prisoners, Azerbaijan has long been known as an exporter of oil and gas; over the past decade, it has also become known for corruption and human-rights violations.

Last week, Aliev's New Azerbaijan Party announced his nomination as the party's candidate for the presidential election in Azerbaijan next October and thus started preparations for Aliev's third term in office.

Aliev, who rarely pays working visits to democratic countries, will, if he can, avoid talking about human rights and the forthcoming election during his visit to Brussels. The government reacts nervously to any public criticism of Azerbaijan's behaviour in these fields and could start an anti-European campaign at home as a result. Over the past 12 months, the European Parliament has adopted a number of resolutions critical of the situation in Azerbaijan; TV channels controlled by Ilham Aliev subsequently ran an anti-European campaign. This is one reason why Western diplomats prefer to make their concerns known privately. But when Western diplomats avoid making public statements in support of human rights and democracy in Azerbaijan, Azeri society loses confidence in Europe. Moreover, private diplomacy is failing to yield results; and year by year the restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association increase.

The brutal dispersion of the demonstrations over Gezi Park in Istanbul has given Aliev a new example as he prepares for the presidential election in October. Azerbaijan has a strategic alliance and close ethnic-cultural ties with Turkey, and it is all the more likely now that Aliev will follow the example of Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan if there are peaceful demonstrations in Baku and elsewhere in Azerbaijan.

Previously, Azerbaijan has followed Russia's example in restricting political rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly. Events in Turkey now give the Azeri authorities added reason to continue doing what they have done over the decade of Aliev's rule – to use truncheons, water cannon and rubber bullets against demonstrators. This is all the more reason for EU leaders to raise the issue of human rights when they meet the president of Azerbaijan this week.

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