



Report from the Debate about the Human Rights Situation in Azerbaijan

The debate began with a detailed examination of the human rights conditions in Azerbaijan. Historically, Azerbaijan has never fully embraced democratic principles. However, for the past thirty years, it maintained a relatively cooperative relationship with the West, which held sympathy for it as a "young democracy" with the potential to integrate more closely with the European Union. Nevertheless, this facade has deteriorated significantly, particularly since the autumn of 2023, when the regime initiated a new wave of systematic repression against journalists, resulting in many being imprisoned or forced into exile. This crackdown has since extended to other segments of civil society, including notable human rights defenders like the watchdog Anar Mammadli, economist Gubad Ibadoglu and many journalists such as Imran Aliyev, Ulvi Gasanli, and Akif Gurbanov. Consequently, civil society in Azerbaijan is now severely restricted and operates in an atmosphere of pervasive fear. The authorities have intensified their use of arbitrary arrests, often employing charges of "smuggling" to detain critics and have continuously harassed the dwindling number of human rights lawyers, of whom only sixteen remain active. The regime's hostility towards civil society has evolved into an overt and systematic effort to paralyze it.

Several key factors explain the increasing aggressiveness of President Aliyev's rule. The victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh war has significantly transformed the Aliyev regime from one that was largely unpopular domestically to one that enjoys substantial popularity. The victory is seen as the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, a triumph which resonated deeply with national pride and unity. Aliyev further successfully utilized state-controlled media to amplify the narrative of himself as the national hero. The victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, combined with the energy crisis in Europe, elevated Azerbaijan's geopolitical significance. This new status provided the regime with greater leverage on the international stage, allowing it to act more assertively both domestically and in foreign policy. Attempts of corruption and blackmail are becoming more prevalent in Azerbaijani foreign policy. Consequently, the Western response to human rights abuses in the country has become severely compromised.

Additionally, the global focus has shifted away from the Caucasus due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. President Aliyev's increasing alignment with Russia and Iran is moving Azerbaijan closer to authoritarianism akin to that seen in Belarus under Lukashenko. The cooperation with Russia is underpinned by a belief that Ukraine will lose the war, weakening the West and allowing Azerbaijan to assert dominance in the Caucasus. The West has largely abandoned efforts to promote democracy in the region, focusing instead on energy interests and the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Overall, this approach amounts to a policy of clear appeasement.



Recommendations:

- As the biggest and most urgent priority, advocate for the release of imprisoned individuals and for the dropping of all charges against them, ensuring the return of their property and documents. This advocacy should involve consulting the relatives of the imprisoned to avoid potentially exacerbating their situation.
- Protect lawyers and activists who advocate on behalf of these individuals.
- Recognize that offering any support, albeit symbolic, is important.
- Support Azerbaijani civil society, particularly journalists who have relocated abroad, to maintain channels of free information for those in Azerbaijan.
- Utilize COP29, the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference, which will be held in Baku in November, as an opportunity to highlight human rights abuses in Azerbaijan to the global audience. Both civil society and national governments should participate in this effort.
- Expose the luxurious lifestyles and corruption of the Azerbaijani elite, contrasting it with the widespread poverty among the general population.
- Highlight the properties owned by the Aliyev family in Europe and the U.S., advocating for the freezing of their personal foreign assets. National governments can effectively implement such measures.
- Commence the discussion about possibly imposing economic sanctions on the regime in conjunction with personal sanctions, as the regime is sensitive to economic pressures.
- Reevaluate Azerbaijan's status on the international stage, recognizing it not as an ally, especially given its alignment with Iran and Russia. Increased and consistent pressure from high-level entities such as the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the U.S. Congress, and the United Nations is essential to improve the human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

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