

**Debating the Eastern Partnership:
a comparison of perspectives and expectations – The case of Azerbaijan**

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Executive summary

The aim of this study is to highlight the widening gap between the European Union as an organization promoting regional integration and the Republic of Azerbaijan as a former Soviet republic.

Throughout the recent past the European Union has developed successive programs in order to make its neighborhood safer and more predictable. European strategy papers have repeatedly talked about creating some sort of “belt of democratic countries”, mostly to the south of the EU. These efforts were coupled throughout the 90s and early 2000s by NATO’s ever enlarging agenda within the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and Partnership for Peace.

For almost a decade following Azerbaijan’s independence European integration was a declared as well as intended priority for Azerbaijan. This started to change in 2003 when Ilham Aliyev replaced his father as president of the country. The new tendency corresponds to the period of long expected oil revenues inundating the country up to the mid 2000s. This new period is symbolized by more centralized and consolidated authoritarianism exhibiting a strongly developed personality cult of the late president Haydar Aliyev. During this period European institutions have been vigorously criticised by Azerbaijani political parties and civil society for condoning illegalities and tolerating repressions against the opponents of the regime in Azerbaijan.

I believe today we can speak of a fresh deterioration in relations between Azerbaijan and Euro-Atlantic structures (NATO, the EU, Council of Europe, etc.) and a rejection by the Azerbaijani ruling elite of European values. I assume this is partially connected to the relative loss of European and US power vis-à-vis Russia, especially in the former Soviet sphere.

However, this decline in relations between the EU and Azerbaijan is observed mostly in the realm of human rights and democratization, whereas in the areas of economic development, social policy, the environment, and other “softer” issues the Azerbaijani government is largely open to cooperation. The areas that are potentially sensitive to the Azerbaijani ruling elite do present a special challenge. Hence, the faltering process of Eurointegration.

It seems that the current Azerbaijani authorities in the present phase of building a modern state (although the opposition always complains that the authorities rule as if in medieval times) do in fact understand the ability of modernization to empower various groups. Therefore they have opted for harsher regulations in restricting democracy in order to guarantee the stability of their regime. This formula was described by Samuel Huntington in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968). He argues that “the process of modernization – urbanization, industrialization, increased literacy, and rising wealth – expands political consciousness which broadens political participation, thus multiplying political demands”. He also argues that at the beginning of modernization a state should have a strong structural limit to human rights to guarantee political stability.

When it comes to Azerbaijani experience, some of the opponents of the current regime concede that restrictions on freedoms are acceptable, but only when they are justified by developmental needs, and when the authorities are sincere about this “liberty tradeoff”. In fact, the biggest dissatisfaction of the people in Azerbaijan seems to be with the overwhelming corruption, nepotism, lack of the rule of law, the interference of the authorities in businesses, the almost non-existent social benefits, and low salaries. The lack of political freedoms might be more important in theory, but in practice what the population most often must confront is this set of problems.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to indicate the benefits that the EU could offer Azerbaijan, and in regard for all the unique circumstances and peculiarities of the Azerbaijani case. The questions here asked address these issues in the context of what the Eastern Partnership offers a modernizing “latecomer” country such as Azerbaijan.

1. Introduction

In this study I will first analyze the current Azerbaijani government's policy towards the EU, and then give a history of this policy over the past years. This part of the analysis deals with selected policy priorities and how the Azerbaijani government chooses among the changes and reforms that the EU offers Azerbaijan within the framework of cooperation.

Thereafter I will touch upon the approaches of the country's political opposition and society towards Eurointegration and generally towards the EU as an organization. I will also take up the common impressions and general attitudes of a larger audience in Azerbaijan towards European integration and European institutions, including the idea of "Europe" in general.

The next chapter focuses on the idea of the Eastern Partnership and the perceptions of the key local stakeholders towards it. The importance and relevance of the EaP will be discussed here.

2. Azerbaijan's policy towards the EU

We may well divide Azerbaijani policy towards the EU into two major periods. The first encompasses Azerbaijan's early independence when the ruling elite (which has changed only once throughout the period of independence – in 1993) was extremely vulnerable because of the immaturity of the economy and constant threats from bigger neighbours. This first period lasted ten years after the coup d'état that brought former KGB boss Haydar Aliyev to power in 1993. This is the period when Azerbaijan was striving towards Euro-Atlantic institutions, which can be explained partly by the vision of Haydar Aliyev, partly by the economic insecurity of the young Azerbaijani state. During that period Azerbaijan's authorities were very sensitive to the moods in Brussels and Strasbourg, and listened attentively to reactions and statements coming from the EU. When Ilham Aliyev became president in 2003 relations between Azerbaijan and the EU took a different turn. This coincides with the flow of large amounts of oil money into Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani ruling elite during Ilham Aliyev's presidency has become increasingly irritated by the messages from Brussels regarding democracy and human rights. As Michael Emerson puts it, Europeans at some point stopped using the word "democracy" in their talks with some authoritarian rulers of the former Soviet Union.¹ During this period Azerbaijan's officials have increasingly used the term "cooperation" instead of "inte-

¹ Emerson, Michael, Richard Youngs (2009): *Democracy's plight in the European neighbourhood. Struggling transitions and proliferating dynasties*. London: Centre for European Policy Studies.

gration” when they refer to the EU (as well as NATO). The growing official attitude is that “the European Union doesn’t really expect us”.

At the same time, *Azerbaijan has* emerged as one of the EU’s major oil and gas partners. This was reflected in November 2006 by the “Memorandum of Understanding” on a strategic partnership between the European Union and the Republic of Azerbaijan in the field of energy. The role of Azerbaijan as an energy supplier for Europe has strengthened the position of the Azerbaijani ruling elite, as European politicians are interested in working with the government of Ilham Aliyev. As the concept of “energy security” increases in relevance for Europe, the government of Aliyev feels more confident about preserving its power. However, some local analysts question the virtue of the “energy security” concept by claiming that this is a unilateral and elitist concept implying only Europe’s security. On the Azerbaijani side it presupposes the security and durability of the authoritarian regime, rather than the welfare and prosperity of the population at large.²

Energy is definitely the most important area for the government of Azerbaijan in its relations with the EU today, as there is a growing interest on the part of Europe in Azerbaijan’s energy capacity. However, it is also worth mentioning that the energy projects that do not involve large political support from the EU do not attract the Azerbaijani government’s attention. This has been quite obvious in the debates surrounding the Nabucco gas pipe-line project, which was a private initiative, as opposed to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipe-line, a project which has enjoyed a very high level of support from the US, the EU, and Turkey. These discussions are still under way as the Azerbaijani authorities would like to see more political support at the level of European governments and political leaders, and not just the CEOs of private companies.³

Azerbaijan has declared its willingness to cooperate on all the aspects included in ENP priority areas. The EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan signed in 2006 includes ten priority areas in which Azerbaijan and the EU committed themselves to cooperation. Among them is a peaceful solu-

² Political analyst Elkhan Mehtiyev believes that this notion of energy security doesn’t provide any benefits for the people of Azerbaijan and that it is mostly about the security of Europeans and oil and gas profits for the ruling elite in Azerbaijan.

³ Interview with Sabit Bagirov, economist, former president of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic.

tion of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, democratization and elections, protecting human rights and the rule of law, the fight against corruption, improved functioning of customs, economic development with diversification of economic activities, EU-Azerbaijani energy cooperation, and the strengthening of regional cooperation.

The EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan states that it opens “the perspective of moving beyond cooperation to a significant degree of integration, including through a stake in the EU’s Internal Market, and the possibility for Azerbaijan to participate progressively in key aspects of EU policies and programs”.⁴

The latest reports (2009) compiled by the EU on the progress of implementing the Action Plan demonstrated that the government of Azerbaijan has succeeded in implementing some of the recommendations (namely, in the economic and social spheres), but largely failed in the area of political dialogue and governance (except for penitentiary system reforms and pardoning of prisoners). The report of ANCEI for 2009 highlighted the same. As regards institutional structure, based on the presidential decree on the implementation of the ENP Action Plan, the State Commission for European integration was established. The main bodies responsible for coordination of the Action Plan’s implementation are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Development. Each ministry has been assigned a coordinator for this.

3. The approach towards the EU: Azerbaijani society and political opposition

When it comes to the approach towards the EU on the part of the country’s political opposition, NGOs, and society the following trends can be observed in Azerbaijan. First of all, for the majority of the population the issue of integration with or accession into the EU and the discourse surrounding that topic is very vague and has nothing to do with daily political matters. However, there is a general, broader discourse of “European integration”, where the notions of necessity and the applicability of Europeanization are debated not as a political, but predominantly as a cultural phenomenon. It has always been widely debated whether European cultural and behavioural standards are compatible with Azerbaijani mentality, standards,

⁴ EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/enlarg/pdf/enp_action_plan_azerbaijan.pdf (22.10.2010).

and lifestyle. Also, it seems that the ruling elite has always supported this sort of discussion and deliberately promoted conservative reactions as opposed to more constructive and pro-integration discourse.

The average Azerbaijani citizen is more familiar with the Council of Europe (CoE), because Azerbaijan joined the CoE in 2000 and there has been a lively history of the Council's reaction to developments and particular events in Azerbaijan in the period thereafter. People used to hear on the news about the commitments the government had taken vis-à-vis the CoE in the areas of democratization and human rights. Most of this news concerned the government's failure to fulfill the CoE's norms and standards, this being an issue very much targeted by the critics in the opposition and civil society groups. When it comes to the EU, again, for the majority of ordinary people in Azerbaijan there is no big difference between the CoE and the EU as people see it all as one decision- opinion-making center. So, generally speaking, Azerbaijani society is potentially interested in the issues of European integration, as people see it as a means for better living standards. However, challenges remain. First of all, because of the lack of hope and distrust of the public authorities, most people do not believe that the Azerbaijani authorities will pursue the road to Eurointegration in order to improve the lives of Azerbaijani citizens.

Moreover, it is crucial to underline one very important feature in Azerbaijanis' public attitude towards European structures (CoE, EU, OSCE). As Moscow used to serve as a final point of reference in terms of restoring justice and maintaining lawfulness during the Soviet era, for the majority of people, including politicians, European intergovernmental political organizations were initially seen as a *sui generis* "higher authority" that would restore law and order and punish violators. This was an extremely widespread illusion, and one which disappeared only gradually as Azerbaijanis learned that the era of having a big brother who makes sure you behave was over and that their country now enjoys independence (of course, to the extent possible, considering the big powers' interests in the region). The elections of 2003 marked a turning point in popular attitudes about Western institutions proclaiming support for democracy and the rule of law. After Ilham Aliyev's highly dubious accession to power in October 2003, the overt (and sometimes silent) support for his rule from the US and Europe brought disillusionment and was an eye-opener for Azerbaijanis, as it pointed to the new realities of the neoliberal world. Widespread public opinion in 2003 was that "the West sold democracy

for oil”. As sad as that is, this could be considered the beginning of a more pragmatic, more enlightened approach towards Western politicians and policies.

This was for the first time that the leaders of the political parties in opposition so harshly criticized the West, and particularly the US. This was without precedence, as the political opposition in Azerbaijan had always upheld and promoted a strong pro-Western, pro-European agenda. The political opposition had always supported and advocated Azerbaijan’s European course. One of the main points of the opposition’s criticism against the Azerbaijani government was the latter’s failure to comply with the commitments it had made vis-à-vis European institutions. The opposition has always seen itself closer to Europe, since it has repeatedly claimed adherence to the values that European organizations declare. Waving the banner of European values worked as a strong tool to enhance the position of the opposition vis-à-vis the government and to draw the support of international organizations specializing in the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

The opposition has always sought support from the EU regarding human rights and democracy, political freedoms, elections and other relevant issues, seeing the EU (and other European organizations) as a guarantor of freedom and justice in Azerbaijan. The EU (together with the US) has become a point where people and groups unhappy with the government can go with their complaints and to seek support.

4. The perception of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in partner countries – the most important advantages and shortcomings of the EaP

The problem with EU programs is that they change so frequently that it is hard for the public to keep up. They are discussed in a narrow circle of professionals, and civil society groups organize advocacy events: seminars, conferences, study trips, etc. But in general these programs are little known at best. Thus, there are clear reasons for this lack of societal awareness. The most important is that people do not see a link between EU programs and their own lives. While in other EU countries during their pre-accession periods the change in legislation or tariffs meaningfully impacted a significant part of citizens’ lives, this has never happened in Azerbaijan. The only issue that the citizens might directly benefit from is visa liberalization, an issue that has emerged with the introduction of the Eastern Partnership.

Besides this, two advantages of the EaP for Azerbaijan are listed. First, the EaP reduces the scope of countries in the neighborhood programs to six former Soviet republics (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus). The second advantage concerns civil society's involvement in Eurointegration. The EaP introduced the Civil Society Forum (CSF) as a separate institution in order to engage more NGOs into the process and make their voices heard. In November 2009 the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum took place in Brussels. European Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner tried to convince civil society representatives that Brussels was taking civil society very serious: "Before, all the issues were discussed only between governments, now you make decisions. Your recommendations will be taken into account. Without civil society, cooperation is impossible".⁵ However, the prominent philosopher Rahman Badalov is very skeptical about the CSF's success in democratization and promotion of European values in Azerbaijan. He believes that "Azerbaijan is primarily a provider of European energy security. The Azerbaijani government will not democratize without external influence, and civil society in Azerbaijan is almost non-existent".

Nevertheless, the Azerbaijani National Committee for European Integration (ANCEI) is perhaps the best success story of civil society in advocating European integration. The committee was founded in early 2006 on the eve of signing the EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan on European Neighbourhood Policy. One of the first things the committee did was to analyze and make recommendations on nine priority areas of the Action Plan before it was adopted.⁶ ANCEI has united almost all active NGO leaders, along with other individuals prominent in civil society. The committee has a formal structure, a rotating co-chairmanship, and regular meetings. It has expressed reactions to various urgent issues regarding the European agenda in Azerbaijan.

5. Government engagement in EaP activities

We can trace the Azerbaijani government's communication with the EU back to 1996, when the EU-Azerbaijan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed, and to 1999, when it entered into force. In 2006 the EU-Azerbaijan Action Plan on European Neighborhood Policy was approved and the EU-Azerbaijan "Memorandum of Understanding" on a strategic part-

⁵ 'Vətəndaş cəmiyyəti "Şərq tərəfdaşlığı" proqramına təkan verə biləcəkmiz?' (*Can civil society boost the Eastern Partnership Program?*), 03.12.2009, <http://deyerler.org/print:page.1.43845-vjtjndae-cjmiyyiti-ejrq-tjrfdaelddd-proqramdna-tjkan-verj-biljckmi.html> (22.10.2010).

⁶ The committee faced challenges while obtaining the text of the Action Plan as the Azerbaijani MFA was not willing to issue it.

nership in the field of energy was signed. The Neighborhood Investment Facility offered Azerbaijan three regional projects with a total value of €24 million in support of the energy and the private sectors. During the period from 2007 to 2010: the ENPI 1 envelope for Azerbaijan stood at €88 million. For the period from 2011 to 2013 the European Commission announced €122.5 million for the Indicative Program in Azerbaijan.

Since the Eastern Partnership entered the stage, the government of Azerbaijan has shown progress in the areas of economic development, energy production, as well as in its capacity as a transit country. However, in the area of protecting fundamental freedoms and human rights, as well as the fight against corruption, the government has performed weakly.⁷ This partly explains the scope of the cooperation that the Azerbaijani government signals to the EU: it will cooperate more on issues of economic integration, energy security, and human contacts – and less on democratization and good governance. These are four general areas covered by the EaP.

6. Civil Society's Response to the EaP

Civil society and NGOs have of course applauded the adoption of a new EU program, especially one that has a strong civil society element into it. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum has already made that impression and NGOs in Azerbaijan are now getting ready for the second Civil Society Forum in Brussels. Another very practical advantage of EaP negotiations is the discussion on visa liberalization, which is something that civil society groups are very much interested. NGOs have always complained about state officials having better access to visas than civil society members. NGOs believe that they also do publicly crucial work and have a right to better access to Schengen-area visas. However, as I described above, there have been various responses to the EaP, ones ranging from very optimistic to extremely skeptical.

Moreover, as the Azerbaijani authorities have decided to put more restrictions and more control on NGOs, civil society groups are now very concerned that their functioning in Azerbaijan will soon become impossible. Civil society is considered as the last safe haven of democracy, as the authorities have already put under control or marginalized media and political opposition. Youth groups are also harassed and partly immobilized, although recent events

⁷ The EU Commissioner criticized the government. *Azadliq*, 11.04.2010.

surrounding the anniversary observances of the Oil Academy killings have shown that the young are unpredictable and not easily managed.

It seems like the biggest concern of civil society is that the EaP may turn into yet another EU initiative that means little for the Azerbaijani people. But there is also hope for positive results, as the EaP has included instruments for fostering civil society.

7. The forecast for the EaP in Azerbaijan

It is becoming increasingly obvious that Azerbaijan will generally benefit from the EaP as the program progresses. Yet the key problem will be the Azerbaijani government's resistance to the political reforms proposed by the EU. At the same time, the social and economic reforms and energy cooperation are likely to continue in the future, as well.

The Association Agreement between the EU and the Azerbaijani government is likely to be signed sometime soon. It seems that Azerbaijan's ruling elite is lukewarm towards this agreement as it encompasses non-political issues. The agreement is mostly about a free-trade zone and visa liberalization⁸. During my talks with Azerbaijani diplomats they have told me that the government is in fact genuinely interested in signing the Association Agreement.

All in all, it appears that the EU has lowered its expectations for Azerbaijan, and political stability inside the country is becoming a higher priority. Free trade and visa liberalization are being seen as a prospect, although there is skepticism that Azerbaijan (together with Armenia) significantly lags behind other EaP countries.⁹

8. Conclusion

Azerbaijan and the EU have a history of cooperation starting in the early 90s with the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. This cooperation has never turned into integration, partly because of the parallel process of building an independent nation-state in Azerbaijan. Although the country has been in need of security (including the security of its political regime), it largely opted for a process that has not imposed any sort of commitments on the regime in return for security. Moreover, increased multipolarity (meaning Russia's partial

⁸ 'Avropa İttifaqı Azərbaycanla assosiativ saziş imzalamağı təklif edir', *Deryeler*, 01.10.2009, <http://deyerler.org/38624-avropa-dttifaqd-azjrbaycanla-assosiativ-sazie.html> (22.10.2010).

⁹ Lobjakas, Ahto (2009): 'EU's Eastern Partnership Stuck in Low Gear', *Radio Free Europe*, 08.12.2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/EUs_Eastern_Partnership_Stuck_In_Low_Gear/1898201.html (22.10.2010).

restoration of its power) has led to two sorts of developments. First, Russia has become an alternative to the West in terms of the attractiveness of its political system. Second, Russian pressures (including the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008) reduced Azerbaijan's motivation to strive for closer cooperation with Euro-Atlantic structures. The potential shortcoming for the EaP is that it doesn't offer conditionality clauses for Azerbaijan. This makes reforms for Azerbaijan less possible, since the country lacks incentives.

Because the geopolitical situation is changing around the south Caucasus it seems the EU needs a more flexible approach that would not be too demanding towards regimes in transition, at the same time drawing them into closer and closer integration. Eastern Partnership has significant advantages in this sense. It lowers the degree of initial expectations (which covered areas such as democracy and human rights) and offers more pragmatic areas for cooperation, such as a free-trade zone and easing visa procedures. Another important factor is that the EaP also offers a very considerable new civil society tool for cooperation in the form of the Civil Society Forum.

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