

Aggrieved Azerbaijan Could Turn to Moscow

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Azerbaijan's rebuff from the Council of Europe is galling to Baku because neighbouring Armenia looks set to be accepted into the organisation's ranks.

Shunned by the Council of Europe and smarting from a barrage of international rebukes, Azerbaijan may be tempted to abandon its pro-Western outlook and forge a political alliance with Russia.

The former Soviet republic is still reeling from three crushing blows last week delivered by organisations monitoring its progress in the realm of democracy and human rights.

Many political observers are now speculating that the latest developments could sour relations between Baku and Washington and persuade the ruling regime to look for support from Moscow.

A proposed visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Azerbaijan in the near future may dictate the shape of things to come.

The first blow to Azerbaijan's national pride came on May 23, when the PACE Commission on Human Rights refused to recommend the republic for membership of the Council of Europe (CoE). Two days later, the OCSE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) heavily criticised a bill for electoral reform currently passing through the Azerbaijani parliament. Finally, on May 26, the Helsinki Commission of the US Congress launched a withering attack on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

The Council of Europe rejection is especially galling to Baku. Georgia became a full member a year ago and it was expected that Azerbaijan and neighbouring Armenia would both be accepted into the organisation by September 2000. Both former Soviet republics were obliged to fulfil a number of conditions and invite recommendations from the council's relevant commissions.

The decision to refuse Azerbaijan council membership was taken at a CoE session in the Cypriot town of Limassol. To add insult to injury, Armenia was granted membership during the same session.

Commission members said Azerbaijan's membership bid would be reviewed after parliamentary elections in November this year.

"I am stunned by the PACE decision," said Vice-speaker of the Azerbaijani parliament Yashar Aliiev. "Instead of accusing Armenia of direct aggression against Azerbaijan, Europe has the hypocrisy to support Yerevan. I don't rule out the influence of the Armenian lobby in this decision. Religious sympathies may have also played a major role. Christian Europe has decided to support its spiritual brothers in Armenia."

The Azerbaijani opposition shared the government's shock at the decision. "It reminds me of those times in the 1970s when Armenia was awarded a Red Banner and Azerbaijan was not," commented Social Democratic Party leader Zardusht Alizadze. (The Red Banner was one of the Soviet Union's highest accolades and Azerbaijan prided itself on winning more than Armenia.)

Arzu Abdullaeva, the Azerbaijani human rights campaigner and chairman of the National Committee of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, claims the human rights climate in Armenia is no better than in Azerbaijan.

But she also dismisses government claims that the PACE commission decision reflects a religious bias, pointing out recent initiatives by the West to defend Muslims in Kosovo and Chechnya.

Asim Mollazade, deputy chairman of the Popular Front party, held the government partly responsible for the decision, telling the Zerkalo newspaper, "This is not the first rap across the knuckles for the Azerbaijani leadership. President Heidar Aliev was bombarded by declarations and letters of protest but the regime chose not to take them seriously, not thinking there would be any real repercussions.

"There are more than 50 independent TV channels in Georgia today; in Armenia, there are 30. There is no official pressure on the press in either of those countries. I think that this is one reason why Georgia became a member of the CoE and now Armenia is poised to enter its ranks. This is a real catastrophe for us."

While discussions over Azerbaijan's membership bid were still continuing, news came through that ODIHR had passed a resolution demanding significant changes to the Central Electoral Commission bill currently passing through the Azerbaijani parliament.

This announcement provoked obvious displeasure at the president's office. Head of the international department Novruz Mamedov told a press conference that OSCE bureau chief Nikolai Bulchanov had no right to dictate terms to the Azerbaijani leadership.

The forthcoming parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan have also drawn the attention of the Helsinki Commission of the US Congress. Recent hearings included impressive depositions from the Azerbaijani opposition, including reports presented by chairman of the Musavat party Isa Gambar, former president Abulfaz Elchibey and Rasul Guliev, co-chairman of the Democratic Party and a former parliamentary speaker who has been living in America for the past four years.

The government's case was presented by Shahin Aliev, the president's senior legal adviser, and the Azerbaijani ambassador to the USA, Hafiz Pashaev.

During the hearings, a spokesman for the US State Department said that, while Azerbaijan had made modest progress in the realm of press freedom and democratisation, the continued presence of political prisoners and the falsification of election results still posed a serious impediment.

"To date, not a single parliamentary election in this country has been held fairly," said the spokesman. "For this reason, the US State Department should make every effort to ensure a democratic environment for the November elections."

Christopher Smith, head of the Helsinki Commission, rounded on the Clinton administration for being too soft on Baku while opposition leaders cited a catalogue of human rights infringements by the Azerbaijani regime.

After the hearings, Dzheikhun Mollazade, president of the American-Azerbaijani Council, said, "I think that the American establishment has made its dissatisfaction with the Azerbaijani authorities quite plain. The opposition enjoys far more sympathy in Washington and members of the government delegation were walking about as if they had just been given a good soaking."

At the same press conference, Novruz Mamedov said on behalf of the government that the Congress

hearings would have little effect in Baku. Some observers predict that these developments could prompt the abandonment of Azerbaijan's pro-Western policies. (Armenia, on the other hand, has always maintained a staunchly pro-Russian stance).

Indeed, conditions are now more favourable than ever for a rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Russia. Boris Yeltsin apparently held a grudge against Heidar Aliev dating from their time in the Politburo but Aliev has no such problems with the new president, who like him is a product of the KGB system.

Putin would undoubtedly be eager to help exploit Azerbaijan's considerable hydrocarbon resources and curb American interests in the region.

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