

Azerbaijan's Euro-Exit

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European legislators demanded release of political prisoners, and a probe into allegations of high-level corruption.

Azerbaijani leaders are furious with the European Union for accusing them of jailing journalists and human rights defenders.

On September 10, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for the “immediate and unconditional release from jail of all political prisoners, human rights defenders, journalists and other civil society activists” including **Khadija Ismayil** and **Leyla and Arif Yunus**, and “a prompt investigation into the **death of the journalist Rasim Aliyev**”.

The Europarliament went further than previous statements by also calling on “EU authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into the corruption allegations against President Aliyev and members of his family revealed by the work of the investigative journalist Khadija Ismaylova”.

The resolution said talks on a Strategic Partnership Agreement between the European Union and Azerbaijan should be put on hold, and asked the European Commission to consider suspending all funding apart from that for “human rights, civil society and grassroots level people-to-people cooperation”. It also proposed travel bans and other sanctions for Azerbaijani officials and judges involved in persecuting political opponents.

In response, Azerbaijan’s foreign ministry cancelled a visit to Baku by an EU foreign policy team, and summoned the EU delegation head Malena Mard to hand her a protest note.

Meeting on September 14, Azerbaijan’s parliament voted to suspend participation in the EU-Neighbourhood East Parliamentary Assembly (Euronest), a body set up in 2011 as a forum for dialogue with the EU’s “Eastern Neighbours” – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The legislators also decided that any sanctions imposed on Azerbaijani officials would be countered with a ban on visits by European Parliament members.

President Ilham Aliyev’s adviser on political affairs, Ali Hasanov, said Azerbaijan would never accept anyone trying to “dominate” it or establish an unequal relationship. He accused the European Parliament of acting under pressure from “Islamophobic” and “pro-Armenian” forces.

In Azerbaijan, critics of the government noted its silence on the substance of the concerns raised by the Europarliament, namely the persecution of opponents, dissidents and journalists.

“Instead of trying to distract attention from the real problems, the government ought to think about the reasons that lead to the resolution being passed,” Musavat party leader Arif Hajili told the online Meydan TV. “The situation could be changed in part by releasing political prisoners and pursuing political and economic reforms.”

The government simply could not afford to destroy its relationship with the EU, Hajili said, adding that “Azerbaijan is not a country with the capacity to challenge the entire world”.

Azer Qasimli, a leading figure in the opposition movement REAL, argues that the government has already made its choice – to abandon previous efforts to build ties with the West, and instead turn back to Moscow.

In an environment where members of the political elite controlled key economic monopolies, any progress towards European integration would require systemic reforms that would show this up.

“That isn’t acceptable to the Azerbaijani authorities. They have therefore opted for Russian patronage rather than become equal members of the club of democratic nations,” he said.

Afgan Mukhtarli is an Azerbaijani journalist living abroad.

Location: [Azerbaijan](#)

Topic: [Corruption](#)

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