

Unwelcome to Azerbaijan

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Hosting image-boosting European Games while shutting down human rights criticism hasn't worked, if the aim was positive headlines.

Days before the fanfare of the European Games launch on June 12, the authorities in Azerbaijan quietly ordered a key international institution to close its office in Baku.

Despite spending millions on a sports event intended to enhance its image, the Azerbaijani government still managed to make the headlines for barring Guardian journalist Owen Gibson, Amnesty International and others from attending. Its action against the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) a week earlier was just as significant, however, and was the culmination of a protracted **campaign to close down criticism** at home and abroad.

The OSCE's Baku office told the Trend news agency that on June 5, the Azerbaijani foreign ministry gave it a month to halt its activities, "without any kind of explanation". Spokesman Shiv Sharma told RFE/RL that the OSCE was "assessing our options."

The OSCE has 57 members including the United States and Canada as well as countries in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Its broad remit includes human rights, media freedom and the democratic process as well as security issue and arms control. Azerbaijan joined in 1992 soon after it became independent, but it has chafed under the OSCE's scrutiny of civil and political rights.

Ulvi Hasanli of the NIDA youth movement finds the government's strategy baffling.

"On the one hand, they hold the European Games, and on the other they call a halt to the OSCE office in Baku. The Azerbaijani government's manoeuvring between Russia and Europe is now beyond logical explanation," he said. "The fact that the expulsion of international organisations has now got as far as the OSCE shows how serious things are. Azerbaijan is turning into a closed country."

Elman Fattah, deputy head of the opposition Musavat party, sees the action taken against the OSCE as only the latest of many steps to shut down foreign organisations operating in Azerbaijan.

"When the government decided to restrict registration for NGOs in 2009, it was already clear that it was going down the road of curbing civil society. The process then took off in 2012, and it culminated in the closure of a number of international human rights organisations, the still-unregistered National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute," he told IWPR. "The closure of NGOs effectively stifled civil society. Democracy was smothered and it just about doesn't exist now. Closing the OSCE's Baku office similarly serves to bolster authoritarianism."

As international organisations were forced to shut up shop in Azerbaijan one after another, the local NGOs they worked with and sometimes funded through grants found their accounts frozen as the authorities levelled various charges of wrongdoing. (See **Activists Arrested in Azeri Crackdown** on how this works.) NGO leaders and human rights defenders, together with opposition supporters and critical journalists, have been arrested and jailed in an intensified clampdown that began more than a year ago.

Avaz Hasanov, head of the Society for Humanitarian Research in Azerbaijan, says the OSCE presence has been in the government's crosshairs for two years now.

"In March 2013, the Azerbaijani foreign minister wrote to the OSCE requesting a review of the office's mandate to give it the status of 'project coordinator'," he said, recalling that the then OSCE chairman-in-office replied that any member state could decide what status a mission office held. "But it's obvious that the aim of changing its status was to increase the Azerbaijani government's control over the organisation's activities, in this case [to ensure] that the foreign ministry approved all projects which the OSCE's Baku office was planning.

"Having failed to achieve that, the government decided to end the organisation's operations in country."

The foreign ministry has yet to give its reasons for ending the OSCE presence, but the deputy speaker of parliament, Bahar Muradova, who heads the Azerbaijani delegation to the OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly, told the APA news agency that the OSCE did not need a coordinator in Baku since cooperation could continue via her country's representative at the grouping's Vienna headquarters.

"Azerbaijan's successes in protecting human rights and security show that there is no need for an OSCE project coordinator's office," she said.

WHAT ABOUT KARABAKH MEDIATION?

The OSCE plays a major role in the South Caucasus as the leading international organisation tasked with helping resolve the two-decade-old dispute over Nagorny Karabakh. This is done through the Minsk Group, a diplomatic team co-chaired by the US, France and Russia.

Muradova took a swipe at the Minsk Group, saying her country had “repeatedly made serious criticisms” of the OSCE’s position. She did not specify what these were.

The Minsk Group’s efforts to engage Azerbaijan and Armenia in talks, or even talks about talks, have made little headway over the years since a truce in 1994 ended full-scale hostilities. Although a basis for negotiations called the Madrid Principles is on the table, there has not been much progress as Armenian and Azerbaijani visions of what a settlement would look like remain fundamentally different and irreconcilable.

Azerbaijan and Armenia occasionally express frustration with the Minsk Group’s role, but they generally accept its role as mediator and reserve allegations of undermining the talks process for one another.

Baku’s decision to effectively expel the OSCE’s local mission has thus caused consternation among those who still hope for a mediated end to the conflict.

Hasanov thinks the move might reflect Azerbaijan’s annoyance at the lack of progress on Karabakh, but he also argues that it might not be much of a setback to the peace process.

“There’s no particular link between the OSCE’s Baku office and the Minsk Group,” he said.

Nurgul Novruz is the pseudonym of an Azerbaijani journalist.

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