

European institutions and democratic developments: How are the two abused by Azerbaijan?



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Armenia has achieved substantial progress toward developing democratic institutions during the recent years. This progress is particularly tangible in relation to freedom of press, where according to Reporters without Borders, Armenia ranked 77th last year, leaving behind almost all the countries in CIS and the region. Armenia has also made substantial progress in implementing the key recommendations for launching negotiations on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Moreover, Armenia has “further progressed also towards meeting the objectives of the [ENP] Action Plan in the area of poverty reduction and social cohesion.”¹ Tangible improvements have been observed in the recent parliamentary and presidential elections, which the European Commission has assessed as “generally transparent”, adding that though “there was a serious effort to address issues related to human rights and fundamental freedoms, further work needs to be done, especially in the implementation and enforcement of legislation (ibid).

However, while negotiating on DCFTA, Armenia has a unique position compared with other regional states. This uniqueness is prompted also by the political developments in Georgia and the political authoritative deadlock in Azerbaijan that promises to spread into an “Arab spring”. Nevertheless, despite this serious threat, Azerbaijan is the only state in the post-Soviet area that criticizes the process of democratic development in Armenia. Furthermore, ranking among the lowest in the democracy index, it has been heavily criticized for serious violations of minority rights and the terrible situation with human rights and mass media. Still, this country has imagined itself to become a “model for democracy”, which heavily relies on exported caviar, oil and gas.

Why adversary?

There are two reasons for Azerbaijan to treat Armenia as an adversary: the Karabakh issue and its internal politics. The Aliiev regime is using the Karabakh issue to maintain its power. Both the foreign and domestic policy priorities of the regime share a strong focus on the Karabakh issue, thus avoiding to address serious issues such as corruption, human rights violations, electoral frauds, etc. Nevertheless, the threat of Arab spring makes the Aliiev regime extremely vulnerable. Additionally, using tear gas against the opposition, arresting demonstrators, attempting to close down the OSCE Office, repudiating pluralist public figures, glorifying killer, calling a whole nation an enemy and refusing to discuss conflicting historical facts make Azerbaijan an extremely unreliable partner in the international politics.

Fighting democracy?

In recent years the international community has witnessed an unprecedented large scale of attacks against democracy in Azerbaijan. Looking through media reports, one can see no opposition representative either in the government, or the parliament (Milli Mejlis). A media watchdog, Freedom House has assessed the Azerbaijani media as ‘not free’. Moreover, you can hardly find any critique on a current government policy, or an expert evaluation that goes against the Aliiev policy in media. Thus, Azerbaijani state has become a ‘one-person, one-rule’ state. Nevertheless, the Arab spring has shown that such states cannot survive for too long. Azerbaijan has already seen a series of protests since the beginning of the year, denouncing the government’s corruption and abuse of power. The protests have been discussed in social media, particularly in Facebook, and this has been enough to start chasing activists and bloggers.

Another area of concern is the issue national minorities. Officially, ethnic minorities comprise 8.9% of the entire population of Azerbaijan. However, this number is extremely skewed due to the current regime’s

¹ ENP Country Progress report 2012 – Armenia, European Commission.



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policy toward ethnic minorities, which include Lezgins, Avars Tats and other ethnic groups. The rights of national minorities are violated throughout the country, and this process is similar to the practice against Armenians before the Karabakh conflict. Historically one of the largest minorities, Armenians, were brutally banished in 1988, but this is a different and separate issue to discuss.

Among the officially stated 8.9% of ethnic minorities, the Talysh minority has to be paid a special attention. Talysh are heavily represented in the regions of Lenkoran, Astara and Lerik in the Southeast of the country, with a significant number living also in the capital of Baku. Yet, the situation in schools in Talysh-minority areas is similar to that in Dygyah, where there is virtually no instruction in Talysh language. Moreover, there are numerous cases when Talysh NGOs were refused to be registered; editors, journalists and other civil activists have been arrested and prosecuted. The history of Talysh nation, its culture, traditions are all presented as having Azerbaijani roots.

Insult and infringement of self-respect and the national dignity of national minorities has become an integral part of the official policy of Azerbaijani government. The situation with other minorities is almost the same.

Pursuing interests or a meaningless competition?

Does Armenia need to compete over democratic and political processes with Azerbaijan, or should she have its own way and interests that go beyond all the processes related to the region? Does Armenia need to respond to all the accusations of Azerbaijan in the international arena, or it just needs to develop, and be engaged in regional and global issues, leaving the autocratic and hostile state alone with its hysteria? While competing, both states are considered in the same way. We have different examples of two regional states treated in the same way, as long as they were competing with each other in all areas, thus leaving their own interests aside. Examples include India and Pakistan, China and Taiwan.

This rule of twins can have positive impact if both states are on the same level of development. However, Armenia is far ahead of Azerbaijan in development of democratic institutions. While pursuing membership of WTO, Armenia was considered alone, without Azerbaijan, which is still not a member. DCFTA and European integration processes as a whole require the country to make substantial reforms almost in all fields, and Armenia needs these reforms for its own benefit first.

This was clearly distinguished by Armenian authorities, while preparing and conducting the 2012 parliamentary and 2013 presidential elections. Now it is Azerbaijan's turn to show its readiness and willingness to be on the same European wave. Indeed, the Aliev regime has no chance to succeed, when its leader is named as the most corrupt person of the year in 2012.

We are the same

Developing democratic institutions is of vital interest for Armenia, as it is considered not only as a form of government and a model, but also as a guarantee for its security. Being the most reliable partner for Europe within the framework of ENP, Armenia has reiterated its readiness to become as close to the EU as possible. Sharing the same religion, having common perceptions, facing similar issues and problems make the Armenian way towards Europe indisputable. Speaking the same language over common issues makes the Armenian counterparts reliable, which gives them an opportunity to discuss not only the political processes inside the country, but also outside, covering regional and global issues as a whole. Since Armenia has adamantly adopted the European approach, it may be adequately perceived if it criticizes any issue that goes against human rights and democracy in the world. In other words, Armenia has shown its respect toward democratic values, and is ready to take part in the global movement against any type of dictatorship.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion "European institutions and democratic reforms: how our opponents mishandle these values", which took place on April 4, 2013. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

The round table was organized within the framework of a BSPN project.