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Azerbaijan–Armenia–Hungary: The scandal over the Azeri killer being pardoned

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On 31 August, Hungary handed over to Azerbaijan the Azeri officer who had been sentenced to life imprisonment (with no right to a reprieve for thirty years) for killing an Armenian soldier with an axe in Budapest in 2004 during a course held by NATO as part of the Partnership for Peace programme. Upon his arrival in Baku, this officer was immediately pardoned by the president and welcomed as a national hero (for example, he received his outstanding pay and was promoted).The actions taken by the two countries met with a harsh reaction from Yerevan, which suspended diplomatic relations with Budapest and imposed the moral responsibility for these developments on Hungary. The scandal was preceded by closer relations between Hungary and Azerbaijan being established as part of Prime Minister Orban's agenda of 'opening up to the East'. Hungary is protesting against the pardoning of the murderer, but neither the regulations of the Strasbourg Convention nor the revealed correspondence from Baku provided any guarantees that this would not take place. The controversies over Budapest's decision intensified due to reports on talks concerning Baku purchasing of Hungarian bonds worth between two and three billion euros. When the scandal broke out, Azerbaijan officially denied that it had intended to enter into this transaction.

Commentary

- Over the past few years, Azerbaijan has been growing in confidence of its strength and of its being at least an equal partner in relations with the EU. This is due to its economic success based on vast incomes generated by the development of its energy sector (Azerbaijan supplies oil to the EU and is indispensable as a partner for the implementation of the EU's strategic concept to build the Southern Gas Corridor). Recent events are a manifestation of Azerbaijan's arrogance in its policy towards the West, a demonstration of the high impact of the dispute with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh on Baku's policy and proof of the government's determination in this issue, for both internal and external use. However, in practice, the actions taken by Baku have adversely affected the perception of the country in the eyes of the international community and will impede the dialogue between Azerbaijan and the EU, including on the subject of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

- The reaction from Armenia, which has a weaker position than Azerbaijan in relations with the EU, is a protest both to the actions taken by Baku and to the manipulation of an EU member state by Azerbaijan. Armenia will make efforts to publicise this extradition case as much as possible at the international forum in order to discredit Azerbaijan. In turn, at the level of relations with the EU, this issue will be adversely affecting the atmosphere of the co-operation between Armenia and the EU. This will also undermine the reliability of the EU as a promoter of the rule of law (for example, the EU is engaged in reforming the Armenian administration of justice) and as a partner in the process of resolving the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which is one of the goals of the EU's policy.

- Hungary is emphasising the role of Azerbaijan as a potential gas supplier and is interested in building transport infrastructure (especially as part of the AGRI project). Azerbaijan plays an essential role in the Hungarian policy of opening up to the East – the legend of the common origin of Hungarians and the Turkic peoples of Asia has even been emphasised over the past few weeks to facilitate the establishment of special relations. The crisis of confidence in relations with one of the key partners in the East and the bitter diplomatic conflict with Armenia have called into question the effectiveness of Orban's Eastern policy.

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