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Elections in Azerbaijan; embarrassment for the West

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The parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan have brought disaster to the opposition, which for the first time since 1991 has failed to win any seats in parliament. The results of the elections are primarily a consequence of the strengthening of the authoritarian system of President Ilham Aliyev, who has held power since 2003. Baku has given up even the appearance of democracy, something which puts the EU, above all, in a difficult situation; on the one hand it wants to intensify its cooperation with Azerbaijan (in the energy field), but on the other, it does not have the tools which would make Western values attractive to the ruling elite and the general public.

The triumph of the system

The parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan on 7 November brought disaster to the opposition, which did not win a single seat; in previous elections, a coalition of two major opposition parties (Musavat and the Parties of the People's Front of Azerbaijan) won a total of 8 out of the 125-seat parliament. At the same time, the position of the ruling party (the New Azerbaijan Party) has been strengthened; it increased its number of seats in Parliament from 64 to 71. The other seats were won by so-called independent candidates (most of these are candidates from the ruling camp who do not formally belong to the governing party) and smaller political parties (the so-called 'soft opposition'), which in practice are pro-government. This means that any debate in parliament will be impossible, and that the parliament itself has been completely reduced to the sole function of rubber-stamping the decisions of the president and the government.

The opposition's defeat has been caused by several factors. First of all, the system which currently exists in Azerbaijan effectively impedes both democratic institutions (such as the media) and the development of business. Another symptom of this is the tight control over political life, including the electoral process (for example, changes have been made to the electoral procedures which hurt the opposition, and a high proportion of opposition candidates – much higher than in the case of candidates of the ruling camp – was denied registration by the Central Electoral Commission). The weakness of the legal opposition also contributed to the defeat. After its leaders compromised themselves in 2005 by failing to lead protests against electoral fraud it has been unable to regain popular support (there was no protests after this year's elections). In addition, the traditional democratic parties (Musavat and the People's Front) have become fossilised (their leaders have not changed since the 1990s) and fractious. It also seems that these parties do not understand the needs of the voters, and cannot reach them.

Elections – a hard nut for the EU to crack

The ambiguous assessment which Western observers made of the elections – in which positive aspects were noted, but it was also stated that "the conduct of the elections did not represent significant progress in the process of the country's democratic development" – indicates the West's embarrassment at the electoral process in Azerbaijan. The rhetorical tightrope-walking to which the OSCE, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the EU resorted in their common declaration has allowed the Western and the Azeri media to present divergent interpretations of the elections' assessment. It seems that the aim was to avoid any explicit criticism of Azerbaijan in the name of carrying out the strategic objectives of the EU, which include imports of Azerbaijan's gas.
Furthermore, Baku has rejected the criticism it has received from the United States; it has sharply denied the US statement that the most recent parliamentary elections "did not meet international standards", and has called on the OSCE to clarify the contradictions in its elections assessment.

Prospects

The absence of the opposition from Parliament, and the lack of any significant protests after the elections, are the results of the effectiveness of the system, the weakness of Azerbaijan's opposition and the growing disillusionment with official politics. The legal opposition have ceased entirely to play the role of even a very limited pressure valve for social frustrations caused by the current team's rule. The consequence of this will be a growing in interest in extra-parliamentary opposition organisations (such as Islamic organisations, or movements linked to ethnic minorities) – or, on the contrary, a widening of the gap between the public and the political processes taking place in Azerbaijan. At least in the short term, however, these processes do not threaten the stability of the country.
Giving up the appearance of democracy, in the form of the presence of opposition parties in parliament, is another step which demonstrates the growing confidence of Azerbaijan's government. This self-belief stems from the influx of petrodollars, and the awareness of the importance of Azerbaijan's raw materials for Europe. In the future, one should expect a rise in the assertiveness of Baku's policy, and also that the system will evolve in the direction of the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia.
Azerbaijan's open disregard of democratic principles is evidenced by actions such as the abolition in 2008 of term limits for the president, which will permit Ilham Aliyev to rule for life. This is awkward for the West, and poses difficulties for Brussels most of all; Azerbaijan participates in a number of institutions and programs concerned with democracy (the Council of Europe, the Eastern Partnership), whereas the EU is interested in promoting Western standards and values. At the same time, the strategic cause of Brussels' interest in Azerbaijan is energy: the EU is actively seeking Azerbaijan's participation in the Nabucco pipeline project. This means that the EU may gradually cease raising questions related to human rights and democracy, and will henceforth increasingly lose its credibility in the eyes of that section of society which considers European values attractive. It also seems that the

EU has no effective tools to put pressure on Azerbaijan, and is even afraid that such pressure may cause a tactical rapprochement between Baku and Moscow or Tehran.