

Azerbaijan arms itself

On 22 October, the parliament of Azerbaijan confirmed its budget plan for 2011, foreseeing a near-doubling in growth of expenditure on defence. The decision to increase the military budget of Azerbaijan in a period of heightened tension in the Nagorno-Karabakh region is undoubtedly intended as propaganda, but it also testifies to the fact that Azerbaijan has not ruled out an armed resolution to the conflict.

Last year's defence expenditure in Azerbaijan (US\$3.12bn) makes up around 20% of the entire state budget (US\$16bn), and is bigger than the whole budget of Armenia (US\$2.8bn). Baku, which more than once in recent years has threatened to use force in the Karabakh conflict, has also declared further increases in defence spending. According to statements made by the finance minister, almost half of the designated sum is to be allocated to modernising weapons and purchasing modern arms.

This high level of expenditure on armaments has been maintained in Azerbaijan for several years, and although it is hard to evaluate the real effectiveness of modernising the army, it is a constant element of pressure on Armenia, as well as on the mediators from the so-called Minsk Group of the OSCE, who are charged with resolving the Karabakh conflict. Although the likelihood that Azerbaijan will use force in Karabakh in the immediate future does not seem high (Baku cannot be sure how such a war would turn out, and while planning it, it would also have to calculate the interests and reactions of Russia in the region), armed conflict cannot be completely ruled out; tension around Karabakh in recent months has reached its highest level since open warfare ended in 1994. <wol>