

Azerbaijan: closer to Russia, further from the West

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On 3 December the Azerbaijani media published an article, by Ramiz Mekhtiyev, the head of the presidential administration and *de facto* the second most important person in the state. Among other statements, Mekhtiyev blamed the USA and the EU for trying to create a fifth column in Azerbaijan and stoking a desire to cause a 'colour revolution', and also specifically named individuals and organisations supported by the West. The article promotes the idea of a multipolar world consistent with the Russian vision, and emphasises the right of sovereign Azerbaijan to conduct a foreign policy which focuses on the development of bilateral relations.

Commentary

- Mekhtiyev's article has been received by Azeri opposition circles as a warning and an announcement of further repression; two days after its publication Hadija Ismailova, the most well-known Azerbaijani opposition journalist and human rights defender, was arrested. Ismailova had been subjected to pressure for years, but because of her recognition in the West, until now the authorities had been hesitant to imprison her, but instead tried to get her to emigrate.
- Both the article and Ismailova's arrest are a demonstration of Azerbaijan's repositioning, which has been going on for several months, as it departs from the West in the political sphere and moves closer to Russia, at least at the tactical level. After the events in Ukraine, the Azerbaijani authorities fear attempts at internal destabilisation from both the West and Russia (which Baku traditionally fears). Ismailova's arrest, and the accusations the West of being hypocritical by defending her, indicates that neither the US nor the EU currently has any instruments to influence the Azerbaijani authorities, including energy tools – the only significant western investor in the Southern Gas Corridor being built by Azerbaijan is the British BP, and the construction of the infrastructure is to be financed by the Azerbaijan Oil Fund (SOFAZ).
- Mekhtiyev's Article indicates that in the ongoing confrontation between the West and Russia, and in the face of the latter's growing presence in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan (despite its desire to keep distance) is coming down on Russia's side. This is due to the fear of unpredictable Russian politics, a mistrust of Western intentions, and a lack of faith of Western support in case of a confrontation with Moscow. It is also possible that Baku has been motivated to assume a Kremlin-like vision of the world by the rapprochement of its traditional ally Ankara to Moscow, as well as the Russian

announcement of the construction of a pipeline through Turkish territory, which might strike a blow at Azerbaijani plans to extend the infrastructure to the EU.

- Tangible results of Azerbaijan's movement towards Russia over the last few months is the development of bilateral cooperation. Manifestations of this in the economic sphere are: the resumption this August, after a three-year hiatus, of the economic committee's work; the active expansion of the legal basis for the development of bilateral relations, such as the investment protection agreement from September, and the holding of numerous business forums. From the perspective of Baku, the development of bilateral economic cooperation is to serve as an alternative to accession to the Eurasian Union which Russia wants; the Kremlin seems ready to accept this move for now, in the hope that this is the first stage of integration. In the area of security, another sign of cooperation is the agreement to develop military cooperation in 2015, and the announcement of the first-ever joint exercises in the Caspian Sea with Russia and Kazakhstan.