

Azerbaijan expels the OSCE

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On 5 June, the office of the OSCE's Project Co-ordinator in Baku received a note from Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry, in which the Azerbaijani side demanded – without giving reasons – that it should suspend its activities before the end of the month. It is not yet clear when the organisation will withdraw from Azerbaijan. The OSCE's status in Baku was already reduced to the rank of project co-ordinator in 2014, after many months of pressure from the Azerbaijani government; this move limited the organisation's room for manoeuvre in Azerbaijan. The note demanding the OSCE's withdrawal was sent a week before the inauguration of the European Olympic Games in Baku. The Azerbaijani government wanted to use this event to build up the country's prestige on the international stage.

Commentary

- Azerbaijan's actions towards the OSCE are part of a wider trend of restricting foreign organisations, the independent media and non-governmental organisations from investigating the country's internal affairs. In the past two years, Baku has brought about the closure of the offices of the American National Democratic Institute (accusing it of intending to force a revolution) and of Radio Free Europe, and arrested a number of journalists and activists. In turn, on the eve of the European Olympic Games in Baku, representatives of Amnesty International and the British newspaper *The Guardian* were refused entry into the country, in an attempt to prevent criticism from them. These activities are further manifestations of Azerbaijan's overconfidence towards the West and its unwillingness to brook any criticism; but they also reflect Baku's concerns about the possibility of socio-political destabilisation fuelled from abroad.
- The anticipated closure of the OSCE's office in Baku does not yet mean that all cooperation with the organisation has been broken off. However, the issue of inviting the OSCE to observe the autumn's parliamentary elections has now been called into question, the more so as Baku considered the OSCE observers' quite harsh assessment of the presidential elections in 2013 as unjustified and overly critical. It is also conceivable that Azerbaijan, which for years has been criticising the ineffectiveness of the OSCE's Minsk Group, set up to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, will try to promote an alternative format for the talks, as well as a different resolution of the Karabakh issue, for example by taking into account a greater role for Russia.
- In the political dimension, Azerbaijan's actions are a part of its process of shaping relations with the West; in Baku's intentions, these will be based on cooperation in the

economic sphere (in effect, on energy matters), while avoiding issues of democratisation and human rights. This strategy has so far proved relatively effective. Renewed interest in the possibility of reducing the EU's dependence on gas supplies from Russia through cooperation with Azerbaijan (within the framework of the Southern Gas Corridor) seems to be helpful in weakening the criticism.