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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 1.06.2016 www.osw.waw.pl

Pretended thaw in Azerbaijan

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On 25 May, the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan conditionally released Khadija Ismailova, the most famous Azeri journalist both domestically and abroad. Ismailova had reported for the Azeri section of Radio Free Europe and the BBC, among others. She was imprisoned in December 2014, and in mid-2015 sentenced to seven and a half years' imprisonment, for alleged tax fraud among other charges. The journalist, who is renowned for her uncompromising attitude and courage, has been the Azeri authorities' target for years: in 2012, they attempted (unsuccessfully) to blackmail her over the disclosure of intimate recordings. Directly after her release Ismailova announced she would be returning to work.

Commentary

- Ismailova's conditional release is part of an ongoing 'sham thaw' in Azerbaijan; in March 15 political prisoners were released, including the lawyer Intigam Aliyev and the activist Rasul Jafarov, and in April the well-known human rights defender Leyla Yunes and her husband were allowed to leave the country. However, some less well-known activists and opposition politicians still remain in prison, such as the leader of the REAL party Ilgar Mammedov. The release of political prisoners does not mean the authoritarian system in Azerbaijan is undergoing any real reform, but it is the result of a tactical calculation by the regime of Ilham Aliyev, which has come under unprecedentedly strong pressure from the international community, as it struggles with financial problems and tries to win Western support over the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh.
- From the perspective of Baku, the further detention of these political prisoners would have incurred too great a political cost. At the end of 2015, the US Congress considered a bill imposing sanctions on key figures of the regime, including the president and his wife. The March amnesty was therefore forced by the regime's desire to improve its relationship with US directly prior to President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Washington in early April. In terms of the country's image, the increasing negative publicity given to Ismailova was bad for the government (her defence was undertaken by the famous American celebrity lawyer Amal Clooney, and Ismailova was given the prestigious UNESCO award) on the eve of the Formula 1 race in Baku scheduled for June. In this context, the release of the journalist should be seen as an attempt to avoid losing face.
- In a wider perspective, the prisoners' release was forced by the economic and social crisis which has been plaguing Azerbaijan. The collapse of prices for the country's main export product, oil, has dramatically reduced the budget revenue, and the tense social

situation in the country (a wave of spontaneous protests broke out in January this year) has led to an increase in expenditure on social services. Azerbaijan has also had a problem with raising funds on foreign markets; despite pledges to the contrary, the state energy company SOCAR withdrew from issuing bonds thisspring, probably due to the lack of interest from investors. In this situation, Azerbaijan, whose strategic objective is to build up its energy infrastructure (based on the TANAP gas pipeline), is becoming dependent on Western financial institutions (Baku is holding talks with the EBRD and the World Bank), and its gestures imitating the liberalisation of the system are intended to make this process easier. In the current situation, the regime is probably more afraid of uncontrolled expressions of social rebellion than of the few dozen political activists who have been deprived of broader public support.