

Azeri opposition journalist kidnapped in Georgia

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On the night of 29 May, the Azeri opposition journalist Efgan Muhtarli went missing in Tbilisi. The next morning the government of Azerbaijan reported his arrest and charged him with illegally crossing the border and resisting the border guard. According to Muhtarli's family and lawyer, the journalist was kidnapped in Tbilisi and then transferred to Azerbaijan. For its part, Azerbaijan claims that Muhtarli was arrested while attempting to illegally cross the border smuggling €10,000 in cash. Muhtarli's case has sparked a media outcry in Georgia and beyond. The Georgian authorities have initiated an investigation, and the prime minister and interior minister have also spoken out in an attempt to tone down the outrage. Muhtarli's wife and child, who are resident in Tbilisi, were offered a fast track to Georgian citizenship. The incident was also criticised by representatives of the US, the EU and international organisations involved in the protection of human rights and freedom of expression.

Commentary

- Since the 1990s Tbilisi and Baku have been linked by a strategic alliance, although over time this has come to be dominated by Azerbaijan, due to the difference in the two states' potential. At present Georgia is dependent on the supply of gas and petroleum products from Azerbaijan, and has become a field of economic expansion for Azerbaijani and Turkish businesses. Although cooperation with Turkey and Azerbaijan is beneficial for Georgia, its scale is beginning to restrict its room for political manoeuvre. Tbilisi is also aware that the authorities in Baku have the ability to use the Azeri minority to interfere in the internal affairs of Georgia. Its dependence on Azerbaijan is the reason why the Muhtarli case has not sparked a crisis in bilateral relations, and the Georgian authorities have simply repeated Baku's version of events.
- The opposition in Azerbaijan has interpreted the Muhtarli case as a signal that Georgia is no longer a safe and friendly place, while the authorities in Baku are eager and able to deal with their critics residing outside Azerbaijan. This is helpful for the ruling regime, which had been irritated by Georgia's role as a safe enclave for opposition activities and a channel for sending financial support to independent circles within Azerbaijan. At the same time, the Azeri authorities' sensitivity to the activities of journalists and opposition figures criticising the authoritarian regime is rising in tandem with the deterioration of the economic and social situation, even though the opposition poses no political threat to those in power.
- In the eyes of Georgian public opinion, the Muhtarli case has displayed the dysfunctional nature of the state's institutions, and critics of the government have even suggested that the

Georgian special services played a role in the journalist's kidnapping. In this context, the opposition will use the controversy surrounding the disappearance/kidnapping of the Azeri journalist in the ongoing political battle ahead of the municipal elections to be held in October. This case, together with the accompanying outcry among the public and the media, has also harmed the reputation of Georgia, which had been praised for its development of democracy and the rule of law in the post-Soviet area.