

In a cool climate: controversy over the COP29 conference in Baku

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The UN Climate Change Conference (COP29), held from 11 to 22 November in Baku, represents the most significant event ever hosted by independent Azerbaijan. Approximately 72,000 individuals from nearly 200 countries have registered as participants, including 80 presidents, vice presidents and prime ministers. However, the leaders of the leading Western states, including the presidents of the US and France, the prime ministers of Australia and Canada, the German chancellor, and the president of the European Commission, chose not to attend the summit. The leaders of the BRICS countries also decided against coming to Baku; instead, Russia sent its prime minister as its representative.

The decision to host a climate conference in a state whose economy is based on mining fossil fuels (the oil and gas sector accounts for almost half of the country's GDP and 92.5% of its export revenues) was not unprecedented, as the previous edition of the event – COP28 – was held in Dubai. The controversy linked with this move was exacerbated by President Ilham Aliyev's statements. In his opening speech, he referred to oil and gas as a 'gift from God' and said that although his country strongly supports a green transition, a realistic approach is needed. He accused Western governments of hypocrisy because, on the one hand, they buy Azerbaijani gas and, on the other hand, they criticise Baku on its approach to saving the planet. Aliyev also accused France and the Netherlands of continuing their colonial policies, which, according to him, will likely result in a climate catastrophe in locations such as Mayotte (an overseas department of France) and Curaçao (a dependent territory of the Netherlands).

Baku has leveraged COP29 to emphasise its importance and strength, while highlighting the need to preserve state sovereignty, which, in international relations, should not be subject to any external constraints. Azerbaijan has consistently refrained from participating in political, economic, or military cooperation organisations and has expressed no interest in joining from one hand the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and from the other hand, the European Union and NATO. However, it is interested in maintaining the broadest possible economic relations with foreign partners.

Commentary

- **Azerbaijan's hosting of COP29 is intended to demonstrate the country's prestige and importance.** Baku seeks to present itself as a modern country with a strong executive

and a cultural background that belongs neither to Europe nor the broadly defined Middle East, one that observes the principle of the state's secular nature and, through its model of government based on strong leadership, resembles the more recent period of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule (see '[Azerbaijan in 2024: dizzy with success](#)'). In the past, Azerbaijan hosted other significant events such as the inaugural edition of the European Games and the Eurovision Song Contest; it has also hosted the Azerbaijan Grand Prix since 2017. The message conveyed by hosting major events – that Azerbaijan is an important participant in international relations, deserving of respect from the world's leading actors – is directed at both its domestic audience and foreign partners.

- **The absence of the most important Western leaders can be viewed as a manifestation of their opposition to Aliyev's authoritarian rule and to Baku's military action carried out in autumn 2023 targeting the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, whose dissolution resulted in a forced exodus of approximately 100,000 Karabakh Armenians.** In this context, Aliyev's criticism of France (which supports Armenia), was notable and was enthusiastically received, for instance, by representatives of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), an organisation with more than 40 members and observers. The leaders of the BRICS states were absent, having recently held a meeting attended by Aliyev during their summit in Kazan from 22 to 24 October.
- **The proceedings of the COP29 conference in Baku raise questions about the purpose of hosting future summits in countries heavily involved in fossil fuel mining.** Risks linked with this practice were discussed in a joint report published by Transparency International and the Anti-Corruption Data Collective less than two weeks before the event, titled 'COP CO-OPTED? How corruption and undue influence threaten multilateral climate action'. These risks include the influence of oil and gas companies on conference proceedings (Azerbaijan's state oil company, SOCAR, was actively involved in the preparations for COP29) and the use of the conference as a platform to sign commercial contracts for the export of oil and gas. For instance, on the sidelines of COP28, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company reportedly signed contracts worth \$100 bn.