

Belarus and Azerbaijan: Similar Regimes but Different Treatment by the EU

On 20-21 November, Alexander Lukashenka visited Baku. He held talks with Azerbaijan state leader Ilham Aliyev and they opened the new building of the Belarusian Embassy in Baku. This building became a good sign of the quickly developing relations between the two countries.

Trade between the countries is swelling, partly because of Belarusian weapon exports to Azerbaijan, which irritates both Russia and Armenia. Aliyev is also trying to help Lukashenka with his dealings with Russia and the EU.

Aliyev's record of human rights violations appears worse than Lukashenka's. However, this does not prevent the West from maintaining good relations with the authorities of Azerbaijan, unlike those with Belarus. Belarus has no oil or gas, so its authorities are faced with a much tougher choice—either become Russia's vassal or democratise.

Topics for a Private Conversation

On 21 November, Alexander Lukashenka held one-on-one talks with Ilham Aliyev. Few people know what the leaders of Belarus and Azerbaijan were talking privately about, but they certainly had more than enough topics to discuss.

Belarus sells large quantities of weapons to Azerbaijan is helping it to [modernise its air defence](#). The Azeris remain important customers of the Belarusian defence industry. Minsk, for its part, continues to tighten its economic relations with Baku. From 2006 to 2012 mutual trade increased six-fold, reaching \$223.3 million, with Belarusians assemble tractors,

trucks, and buses in Azerbaijan. Because of the continuous deterioration of the Belarusian economy, even small contracts mean a lot.

Also, the parties could discuss the future of the Eastern Partnership summit. Both countries show little interest in the EU program. However, the West is much more pragmatic in its relations with Azerbaijan. The European Union invited Aliyev to the summit in Vilnius and the Parliament of Azerbaijan participates in the Euronest, the parliamentary component of the Eastern Partnership.

Azerbaijan, like other EU Eastern Partners, supports the Belarusian Parliament to become a normal member in Euronest. It also helped Belarus in conflicts with Russia. In the summer of 2011, Azerbaijan in one day made a decision to give Belarus a \$300-million loan to pay debts to Russia. In that period Azerbaijan also supplied oil to Belarus, having received oil from Venezuela through swap schemes.

Do Their Regimes Differ?

Lukashenka and Aliyev need each other. Although Belarus remains officially neutral in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Belarusian weapon supplies to Azerbaijan [weaken the position](#) of Armenia. Armenia, like Belarus, belongs to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and considers joining the Customs Union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. The Belarus-Azerbaijan deals also irritate Moscow, which has a rather cold relationship with Baku.

Moreover, both authoritarian regimes profit from each other's existence. For the authorities of Azerbaijan, it is convenient that Western public opinion remains focused on human rights violations in Belarus and Lukashenka's policy, not Aliyev's. Different Western approaches towards Belarus and Azerbaijan confirm the existence of double standards. That gives Lukashenka's regime a right to seek from the EU the same

attitude towards it as EU has to Azerbaijani authorities, whose human rights record remains worse.

The elites of Belarus and Azerbaijan both govern with little respect of the rule of law. In both countries, parliaments and courts are not free and elections remain non-transparent. In the world rankings these countries often find themselves in close proximity. In the Democracy Index created by the Economist Intelligence Unit, Azerbaijan held the 139th position and Belarus 141st. In the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders Belarus occupies 157th position, while Azerbaijan sits at 156th.

Aliyev, however, is much more repressive to his own people. According to the Baku-based Human Rights Club, Azerbaijani authorities hold in their prison system 142 political prisoners. Moreover, 18 of them are serving life sentences. According to the Human Rights Center Viasna Lukashenka has 10 political prisoners in jails.

Lukashenka at least once, in 1994, won the democratic elections. Ilham Aliyev in fact inherited the presidency from his father. During preparations for Eurovision Song Contest Azerbaijani authorities evicted hundreds of residents from their homes and destroyed buildings to build Crystal Hallemerged, a place for the contest.

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The EU approaches towards Belarus and Azerbaijan remain completely different. The EU does not impose visa restrictions on the Azerbaijani leadership, it has not introduced targeted economic sanctions. EU top officials regularly meet with Aliyev. Moreover, during his visit to Azerbaijan, the President of the European Commission Emmanuel Barroso did not meet with representatives of the opposition, and Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski did not even ask Aliyev about any human rights violations.

Will Aliyev Help Lukashenka?

Belarus-Azerbaijan relations remain important to the Belarusian authorities. Lukashenka and Aliyev meet almost every year, as well as other top officials from both countries who visit Minsk and Baku regularly. These meetings, in contrast to Lukashenka's visits to Myanmar and [Singapore](#), do result in much needed contacts.

During Aliyev's most recent visit to the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) and Amkodor, the manufacturer of a special type of machinery, the two sides signed new sale agreements with Azerbaijani companies. Lukashenka also invited Azerbaijani investors to take part in the privatisation of Belarusian enterprises.

Lukashenka and Aliyev remain reluctant to lead their countries either east or west. Both feel comfortable as rulers of their own states. Unlike Azerbaijan, Belarus has no oil and gas, on which the West is dependent. Lukashenka remains in a more vulnerable position and is forced to make a choice of either gradually becoming a vassal of Russia or democratising Belarus.

The resource-rich Azerbaijani authorities do not face a similar dilemma. Their support of the official Belarusian Parliament in Euronest shows that they wish to help Lukashenka break his regime's isolation. However, the European Union invested too much effort in the confrontation against Lukashenka, which makes it very difficult to fully recognise the authoritarian Belarusian regime.