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PROTESTS IN AZERBAIJAN

Special Editor: Heiko Pleines

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Protests in Azerbaijan: Hot Months Expected Ahead of the Presidential Election

By Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Warsaw

Abstract

Azerbaijan has seen a series of protests since the beginning of the year. Various social groups have been involved in them: young people, merchants, and residents of the town of Ismayilli. These outbursts have been grassroots protests, independent of each other as the individual groups of protesters were not mutually coordinating their actions. What these protests had in common was their resistance to the government's abuse of power and corruption. The protests reveal the continuing existence of a socio-economic crisis and intensify the political dispute between the general public and the ruling class. They could also potentially reveal a conflict inside the political elite. The protests are likely to re-emerge in the coming months, given the fact that presidential elections are scheduled for autumn.

Characteristics of the Protests

The first protest took place on January 12 at Fountain Square in the centre of Baku. It was organized via social media (mainly Facebook) by young activists and targeted violence in the military. The demonstration was attended by several hundred people; under the slogan of "Stop death in the army," they called for increased accountability for military authorities and the resignation of the long-time defence minister, Safar Abiyev. The initial spark for the demonstration was the death of an 18-year-old soldier who, according to the official version, died of a heart attack; but the photos of the body released by the family provide evidence that he was beaten and suggest fatal levels of abuse. The case has disturbed the public in Azerbaijan, the more so as the government's reaction was limited to demoting several officers connected to the case.

Then, on January 19, merchants from Bine trading centre blocked the Baku-Astara highway in a protest against an increase in their rental payments. The growth in fees was, according to some reports, connected with the merchants' participation in the action ("5 qepik") of gathering coins to pay the fines assessed against some of the participants attending the protest a week earlier.

But the most surprising and violent riots took place in Ismayilli on January 23–24, a provincial town with approximately 30,000 residents, located around 200 km north-west of the capital, Baku. The protest was inflamed by a minor car collision in which Emil Sham-saddinov, the manager of a local hotel—Chirag, was involved. An evening disturbance between the driver and the local community in which he insulted the locals eventually resulted in several cars being burned and in the torching of the hotel allegedly owned by Vugar Alakbarov, a nephew of the local governor Nizami Alakberov and the son of Minister of Labour and Social Protection Fizuli Alakberov. The next day, demonstrations calling for the governor's resignation were continued. Finally,

the police cracked down on the demonstrations, arrested dozens of people and locked down the town effectively. The events were followed by a protest in Baku, held as a sign of solidarity with the residents of Ismayilli on January 26. The hundreds of young protesters were effectively prevented by the police from gathering on Fountain Square and thus dispersed across the city centre. A few days later, there were reports of demonstrations in Zaqatala and Imishli (towns with approximately 30,000 residents) in which public service workers demanded the payment of overdue wages. The authorities in the towns opened a dialogue with the demonstrators.

It is worth noting that not one of the protests was purely political in character. The protesters did not demand that President Ilham Aliyev step down, but they called for the dismissal of lower-ranking government officials and wanted solutions to their every-day problems (wage payments, corruption). At the same time, the protests were organised or inflamed from the bottom up and protesters basically demonstrated their anger towards those in power. This proves that there is the potential for dissatisfaction in the Azerbaijan public, which is not, and may not be, channelled by the existing discredited political opposition parties (Musavat and the Popular Front).

Response of the Government

On a tactical level, the government applied different measures with regard to each of the protesting groups. Rather robust methods were used against the merchants and the residents of Ismayilli (rubber bullets and water cannons). In Baku, however, due to the presence of numerous journalists and diplomats and the fact that protesters had access to social networking media, they were treated relatively mildly, almost entirely without the use of coercive measures. Hundreds of people were detained, dozens were fined and administrative detention was applied to more than ten people. The difference

in the measures applied indicates that the government is keen to avoid harsh criticism from the West ahead of the upcoming presidential election.

Only days after the last protest emerged, several new steps were taken aimed at turning public attention away from the recent protests and the social problems they revealed. On January 31, a campaign against author Ekrem Eylislini began when members of the pro-governmental Azerbaijan Internally Displaced Persons/Refugee Youth Organisation and a group of students held a protest in front of his home denouncing his novel *Stone Dreams*, which was published several weeks ago in the Russian magazine *Druzhiba Narodov* (Friendship of Nations). The novel casts a positive light on Azerbaijan's traditional rival, Armenia, and avoids presenting Azerbaijanis as the victims and Armenians as the aggressors. The issue of the Khojaly massacre, in which hundreds of Azerbaijani people were murdered, and which the Azerbaijani government wants to be recognised as genocide, does not appear in the novel. The message of the novel contradicts official state rhetoric and drew harsh criticism from officials. Following the publication of the controversial novel, a February 7 presidential decree deprived Eylislini, a former lawmaker and staunch critic of the ruling regime, of the title of 'People's Writer,' which he had earned in 1998. The whole case dominated the media and led to the opposition offering cautious support to the writer, a move that will not win them popularity in a country which is fighting Armenians over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Then, on February 4, at least four people were arrested, including Ilgar Mammadov, a political analyst and chair of the opposition group REAL, Tofiq Yagublu, a journalist who is deputy chair of the opposition political party Musavat, and two residents of Ismayilli. The first two travelled to Ismayilli the day after the riots started. They are accused of instigating riots in Ismayilli and were remanded by the court to a two month pre-trial detention.

These steps indicate that the government eventually decided to put strong pressure on opposition groups ahead of the election by imprisoning the most active members. The government is also tightening control over society and on the activities of non-governmental organisations and religious groups. This is clear from the statement of the Prosecutor General who instructed the relevant agencies to maintain socio-political stability, and also from recent legislative changes, which allow the Central Bank to monitor the finances of the above-mentioned organisations. On the other hand, the government took some ad hoc moves to ease the social tensions in the country by providing additional funds to the regions—an example is a presidential decree allocating

5 million euros from the Reserve Fund for the acceleration of the socio-economic development of Quba region.

The Political Context

The protests coincide with the barely concealed tension inside the ruling elite, proof of which include the president's attempts to marginalise representatives of the old part of the elite (who have been in power since the presidency of Heydar Aliyev) by making preparatory moves aimed at removing its key representative, the head of the presidential administration, Ramiz Mehdiyev. He featured as the central figure in a bribery scandal in Azerbaijan in autumn last year. Subsequently, in December, President Ilham Aliyev nominated four deputies to help run the presidential administration. The move strongly eroded Mehdiyev's position and seemed to indicate that he might lose his position during or after the presidential election. Mehdiyev is seen as a guarantor of the old elite's presence in the inner circle of power, thus his possible departure would likely lead to more extensive changes within the ruling elite. However, the recent protests and social tensions may complicate this scenario as dismissal of any prominent officials would be regarded as a sign of weakness by society and could thus encourage further protests. It is worth noting that in March 2012, protests in Quba took place which resulted in the president dismissing the local governor. This action might be seen as a precedent and an incentive for the recent events in Ismayilli.

The protests are taking place in an election year, where peace and public support is necessary for the incumbent president to prove his public mandate and maintain the image of an efficient partner who does not create problems for the West. Thus, on the one hand, the looming election and the need to avoid criticism will encourage the government to avoid using robust methods against protesters—as was seen in case of the demonstrations held in Baku. On the other hand, the government will increase its control over society in different ways, including arresting coordinators with organisational skills and employing stronger measures to infiltrate opposition activity on the Internet.

Prospects

The measures taken so far by the government are unlikely to solve the problems enshrined in the system, in which the ministers are oligarchs and their relatives or close allies are appointed to posts in the regional administrations. In such a system, the economy is monopolised by various groups and corruption is widespread. At the same time, despite a general improvement in the economic situation of the country driven by revenues from oil exports, the gap between the rich and the poor is wid-

ening as well as that between Baku and under-invested regions. This causes resentment in society and it is likely to surface again as was seen in Quba or Ismayilli. What is more, the looming presidential election, the growing social tensions and the conflict within the ruling elite make any reforms even more difficult.

Despite this, it still seems unlikely at present that the protests will turn into mass political demonstrations aimed against the system, and even less so that the ruling class will be removed from power. However, the grassroots nature of the protests and the universality of the issues the protesters are raising will be encouraging to the rest of society as the date of the election draws near. The lack of a united and coordinated opposition (there are instead a variety of angry social groups comprised of people from different parts of society and dispersed across the country) or a political figure who could pose a challenge to the incumbent president is at the same time both a weakness and a strength of the opposition. Although, the opposition groups cannot present a viable political alternative to the ruling elite, similarly they cannot be dismantled easily by the government.

About the Author

Aleksandra Jarosiewicz is a senior analyst in the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw.

Further reading:

- <http://www.rferl.org/content/armenia-azerbaijan-stone-dreams-akram-aylisli/24890815.html>
- <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/06/azerbaijan-government-detains-outspoken-critics>
- <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66485>
- <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/sex-video-used-to-blackmail-azerbaijani-journalist-7575834.html>

Another important issue is what strategy Muslim circles, which are quite strong in Azerbaijan, will choose. These circles have proven their ability to mobilise the public several times over the past few months, and have protested, for example, against the ban on wearing the hijab. They have so far supported the young activists during a scandal over sex videos used to blackmail Azerbaijani journalist Khadija Ismayilova. Some women wearing the hijab were seen during the recent protest in Baku (January 26) but still the question of a possible joining of forces remains open.

The situation in Azerbaijan will also become more strained due to the example from neighbouring Georgia, where President Mikheil Saakashvili's camp was defeated in democratic elections last October and where a presidential election is also scheduled for autumn this year. This means that in the coming months the government in Baku may increasingly frequently encounter forms of public protests which were typical during the initial phase of the Arab Spring.

Ismayilli: The Winter of Our Alarm

By Arif Aliev, Baku

Abstract

This article analyses the events taking place in January in Azerbaijan and their implications for the presidential elections later this year. The spontaneous violence in Ismayilli shows deep discontent with the regime. The lack of peaceful methods for the population to protest, combined with the regime's reliance on force, suggests that there will be more confrontation in the near future.

Introduction

January 2013 was a month for popular protests in Azerbaijan. The largest of these took place in Ismayilli Raion. The government described the behavior of local residents as an act of hooliganism, growing, thanks to the incite-

ment of "enemies of the state," into disorder. The opposition and many independent experts saw it as the possible beginning of major changes. What, in fact, is going on?

Since 1990, when Moscow sent in its imperial troops in order to prevent the fall of the Soviet authorities in

Baku, the month of January has not been so stormy or full of exciting events. On January 8 the former rector of a private university Elshad Abdullaev distributed new videos which provided evidence of the authorities' participation in serious crimes. On January 12, in the center of Baku, a well-attended protest took place that had been organized by young people with the help of on-line social networks which provoked a strong reaction both in Azerbaijan and abroad. On January 13, there was an incident in the south of the country—the authorities prevented the leader of one of the main opposition parties, Musavat, from entering Lenkoran Raion. On January 17, Rustam Ibragimbekov, a movie director with an international reputation, announced plans to set up a social movement and National Council of opposition forces, declaring that a transfer of power is necessary this year. On January 19, there was a protest in Bine, the largest shopping center in the country. More than 1,000 employees at the center, complaining about high fees and rents, shut traffic on a nearby avenue. The authorities sent in troops, dispersed the protest, and arrested numerous participants. On January 23, a revolt broke out in Ismayilli, the administrative center of one of the raions of Azerbaijan. The action was also suppressed with the use of force. On January 26 young people again used social networks to organize another protest in Baku, supporting the residents of Ismayilli and criticizing the authorities' use of rubber bullets and tear gas against the demonstrators.

This sequence of events led many analysts to speak of an "Azerbaijani Winter" analogous to the Arab Spring.

What Happened in Ismayilli?

Ismayilli is one of the most beautiful raions of Azerbaijan, where 81,000 people live in an area of 2,000 square kilometers. The landscape is mostly mountainous and the population works the land, grows grapes, raises animals while industry consists of several factories, textile mills, and folk art shops.

The region is one of the most politically quiet in the country, both due to its natural environment and the nature of the people who live there. But after what happened on the evening of January 23, even the quiet people of Ismayilli could not remain calm.

According to the General Procurator and Ministry of Internal Affairs, the incident began when Emil Shamseddinov, the administrator of the Hotel Chyrag, crashed into a stop light while driving under the influence of alcohol, after which, together with his passenger Elmeddin Mamedov, he beat a local resident, the taxi driver Ramil Bekirov, and cursed at the people who gathered at the scene of the accident. The enraged people marched to the hotel, set it on fire while also burn-

ing the cars parked in the courtyard, and then tried to burn down the house belonging to the son of the local governor Nizami Alakberov. The police were able to put an end to the chaos, Shamseddinov and Mamedov were detained, and they now face criminal charges.

But why did people try to take revenge for the actions of a hotel administrator on the son of the governor and then proceed to the building where the governor has his office and demand his immediate resignation? The authorities have not answered these questions.

Local residents who participated in the events explain that the cause of the disorder was an incident involving the son of Minister of Labor and Social Protection Fizuli Aleperov, who left the hotel in a Hummer and crashed into a local taxi. The crowd burned down the hotel because it belongs to this minister's son. They then proceeded to the governor's office because Governor Nizami Alakberov is the brother of the minister. The people, as they made clear, are sick of the fact that one family has privatized the raion, and seized its arable land, forests, and pastures.

As many as 4,000 people participated in the demonstrations, which took place 185 kilometers from Baku, according to local journalists. By 3 o'clock in the morning, people went home. However, after 10 the next morning, they again began to gather around the governor's office and demand his resignation. The police tried to disburse the crowds, but people threw stones at them. Then internal troops intervened, firing rubber bullets and tear gas.

The law enforcement agencies eventually restored "order" in the raion center. They drove out the protesters and set up check points. They detained 60 people, filing criminal charges against 8, imposing administrative fines on 38, and issuing warnings to 14.

The Reaction of the Authorities

Certainly, the events in Ismayilli caught the authorities by surprise and they were confused. The president was not in the country at this time and did not change his plans to visit Davos.

Journalists covering the events faced some difficulties. But there were no insurmountable barriers and many transmitted their reports directly from the epicenter of events, literally tracing their development from minute to minute. The new media played a major role in this effort. Additionally, the law enforcement agencies reacted immediately: the Ministry of Internal Affairs press service made an announcement that evening and the local police chief did not "disappear," as happened earlier, but tried to intervene in events, while actively commenting on them.

The country's power agencies know what to do in such situation: they succeeded in sending in the necessary troops and equipment to restore order.

- However, the politicians dropped the ball. They only made comments after the law enforcement agencies had finished their main job of dispersing the protesters. And how they talked! Here are some of the comments recorded in statements and interviews from the heads of the ruling party and top state agencies: The country is rapidly developing, the living standards of the people are improving. What happened in Ismayilli Raion was not a protest, but an “act of hooliganism,” a “domestic conflict,” and a “fist fight among two people with the participation of their relatives.”
- The events in Ismayilli are the result of the anti-state activities of the radical opposition, which is inciting people, summoning them to disobey the authorities, and politicizing incidents from daily life.
- The opposition media is guilty as it distributes biased information, distorting what is actually happening.
- Also guilty are irrational people who have fallen under the influence of the opposition.

The officials also spent considerable time denouncing foreign “third” forces. They did not clarify who they had in mind, but in an interview with ANS, Presidential Administration Department Head Ali Gasanov noted that “The fact that information about the events immediately appeared in the press of several countries leads us to certain thoughts.”

In general, everyone is to blame except the authorities. But the authorities, as statements from the General Procurator and Ministry of Internal Affairs made clear, would decisively intervene against any similar actions.

The Reaction of the Opposition

The opposition, in the face of the Social Chamber, uniting dozens of parties and non-governmental organizations, described these events as popular action against the lawlessness of bureaucrats and oligarchs. They declared the use of force against peaceful members of the population unacceptable, demanded the removal of the troops from the region, and the release of those who had been arrested. It decided “to call on the state agencies to immediately begin negotiations with representatives of the protesting population” and “appealed to ordinary citizens to support the just demands of the residents of Ismayilli.”

Popular Front party leader Ali Kerimli propounded three theses, calling them the Lessons of Ismayilli:

- The authorities should understand that they will not get far operating only on the basis of force and repression and that it is necessary to immediately start reforms.
- We should understand that only a united and organized opposition can direct the people in a period

of social protests and save the country from chaos. As long as we do not transform the protest energy into a country-wide popular movement, it will be consumed in social explosions.

- The people should understand that fighting against the overreaching bureaucrats at the raion level in current conditions is not a route to salvation. Replacing them at the local level will not change anything. It is necessary to fight for a change of the entire regime, and to do that, to participate actively in a country-wide protest movement which will strengthen the opposition.

The Reaction of Population and Society

The events in Ismayilli had a strong impact in society, something that has not happened in a long time. Reporting about the protest actions on the web site of the newspaper Azadlyg attracted more than 220,000 readers over the course of the day, which is a record for Azerbaijan’s on line media.

The people who shared their opinions online in social media or gave interviews to journalists from mainstream and on-line publications, including those who were participants in the events, rarely discussed the incident which led to the disorders. Rather, they spoke more about unemployment, ubiquitous corruption, the tyranny of bureaucrats, and the inability of ordinary people to have a say in the decision-making process. Many focused on the fact that, over the course of the events, none of the authorities wanted to meet with the protesters or listen to them in an attempt to understand their concerns. Only representatives of the law enforcement and military spoke with the people. And when words were not enough, they used force. Young people in the capital appealed to all to join in a demonstration to support the people of Ismayilli.

Leaders of civil society also supported the demands of the protesters. Many non-governmental organization leaders considered the events the result of a systemic crisis in the management of the country: “People are in a hopeless situation, no one pays attention to their votes, they cannot influence who rules at the federal or local levels: all elections are falsified, therefore they cannot achieve justice through legal means.”

Economists, including Chairman of the Center for Economic Initiatives Gubad Ibadoglu, argued that there are serious social reasons for popular discontent. In the Gorno-Shirvan economic zone, which includes Ismayilli and three other raions, average salaries are 40 percent lower than for the country as a whole. Investment in the development of the zone last year was just 1.1 percent of all state investment. The result is that the infrastructure of the raion is not developing. Injustice in the dis-

tribution of incomes, widespread violations of social-economic rights, in particular, the right to private property, the concentration of the region's wealth in the hands of a small group, and growing corruption deepen the amount of social conflict in the raion where poverty and unemployment are the main problems.

The Reaction of Foreign Experts

The events in Ismayilli have been widely discussed by foreign experts, who know the region well and have experience working in Azerbaijan. Caucasus specialist Karl Rader pointed out a change in the tactics of the authorities in contrast with last year's events in Gub: then a large number of protesters were arrested, but the governor who had aroused the anger of the people was replaced. However on January 24, Ali Gasanov, presidential administration department head, said that some people want to use these events to undermine Azerbaijani statehood. He threatened to arrest the guilty, which means prosecuting the demonstrators, but not the bureaucrats. This announcement could indicate a degree of panic at the highest level, where they are seeking a scapegoat. But the fact is, Rader concluded, that arresting famous activists and members of the opposition in the course of demonstrations in Baku is not as dangerous for the authorities as arresting ordinary citizens in outlying areas, where the wrath of people is completely different and could have extremely unpleasant consequences.

According to Thomas de Waal of the Carnegie Endowment, the events in Gub and Ismayilli show that the authorities no longer control the provinces of the country as they did in the past. People are seriously unhappy about the corruption and limitless power of the authorities, which led to unrest in both cases. The expert thinks that all the pre-conditions that led to the recent events in the Middle East and Africa exist in Azerbaijan: "But there is something specific in what increases the patience of people in a specific place."

Former U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Kauzlarich (1994–97) claimed that the Gub and Ismayilli events in Azerbaijan remind him of the situation in China. The relatives of bureaucrats mired in corruption fight with all of society. The concentration of great wealth in the hands of a small group is a cause for concern. Thanks to social media, events taking place in a specific area lose their merely local significance and come to the attention of the entire country and the world. Information flows quickly and influences international public opinion: "I do not want to draw a direct parallel with the Arab countries, where revolutions took place, but experience shows that similar events outside the capital can turn into major upheavals."

After January

Near the end of the month, on January 26, a demonstration took place in Baku in support of the residents of Ismayilli. Fountain Square, where the rally was to take place, was surrounded by law enforcement agents from the morning hours. The police dispersed the demonstrators and did not allow them to gather in one spot. About 100 people were arrested, according to the media, and those arrested complained about rough treatment at the hands of the police. After receiving warnings, many left the area. However, four were punished by administrative means and sentenced to 13–15 days in jail. Twenty individuals, including two journalists, were fined from 300 to 2,500 monat (1 monat = approximately 1 euro).

Now there is a tense quiet and there is time to think.

Obviously, a situation slipping out of control as a result of an unplanned automobile accident cannot be described as a protest action organized by "enemies of the state," as the government tries to do. Otherwise, we would have to assume that the Minister of Labor and Social Protection, as well as his closest relatives, are cooperating with the protesters.

It is also clear that the stability, which the authorities consider the main accomplishment of their many years in power, also does not exist. During the last days of the month, state agencies had to deny that Neftchalin, Imishlin, and Zakatal raions were also about to face upheavals.

These events are associated with social-economic and political roots. People are revolting not because they are living poorly, but because they do not have an opportunity to improve their lives, are deprived of their vote, as well as the right to participate in ruling the country, their raion, or even determining their own fate. Then they engage in lynching, burn hotels and cars, as in Ismayilli, or homes, as in Gub, belonging to hated bureaucrats. Of course, these are not democratic means of restoring justice. But this is not their fault. It is the fault of the authorities, who have deprived the people of the right to express their protest through democratic means. When the authorities restrict fundamental rights, such as the freedom of assembly or expression, or do not allow political parties to meet with people in the regions, they should understand what choice they leave to those who are doomed to poverty and a lack of rights.

The stormy events marking the beginning of the year in which presidential elections will take place show how high the temperature of society might go on the eve of major political campaigns. And if events will continue at the pace set in January in the succeeding months, it is not clear if it will be possible to finish the campaign without violence.

We are not simply speaking about revolts and revolutions. Neither the authorities, nor the opposition wants

these; the independent institutions of civil society are particularly opposed to such outcomes. The Forum of the Intelligentsia in Azerbaijan consistently warns participants in the political processes in the country of these dangers.

But will the authorities, relying only on force, hold the situation under control and direct it in the direction they need before the elections? Or will the looming collision in the country and within the ruling elite lead to a lack of coordination, and possibly a split at the highest levels of power? Perhaps, such a scenario serves the secret desires of some groups among the authorities, who support the idea of worsening the situation in the country to force a culmination that would allow them to impose martial law or adopt extraordinary powers making it possible to postpone the elections.

It is interesting to lay out the famous political scientist Zafar Kuliev's answer to these questions which are often posed in the media:

"The January announcements presage a growth in confrontation processes and to a small degree work for a democratic vector in the development of the pre-election environment. They, de facto, demonstrate the beginning of a systemic crisis among the authorities. If the crisis is dragged out for a long time, then the country can expect disturbing developments, fraught with increased repression and a destabilization of the situation.

The authorities are repeating the mistake of corrupt authoritarian regimes who face crisis situations—they are relying only of force and money, trying to crush or buy everyone. Like other similar regimes, the ruling

circles of Azerbaijan are hostages to their own political course, which rejects dialogue and reforms as effective methods of resolving conflicts. Listening to the demands of citizens, or appeals by the opposition or international organizations is perceived by the authorities as a risky display of weakness, which could call into question the stability of the regime. Thus, in the face of growing domestic and foreign pressure, the regime dooms itself to ever more aggressive responses. It would rather collapse than voluntarily give up its position.

The euphoria in some opposition circles that the pace of events set in January will lead to the quick collapse of the authorities and open the road to democratic elections has little basis. Above all the problem is that the events are largely proceeding at their own pace, in a spontaneous manner, and not under the control of the opposition. Social and political organizations are lagging behind events. They are not in the thick of the action, to say nothing of leading or controlling events. In such a spontaneous and revolutionary situation, it would be naïve to assume that these events will create a base for a magic transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

The January dynamic of events seems more aimed toward a revolutionary, rather than an electoral evolution of the situation. In equal measure, the authorities count on a counterrevolutionary, and not an electoral response. The elections remain in the shadow of a deepening crisis and a confrontational split in society. Only time will tell if it is possible to develop the situation in a different direction.

Translated from the Russian by Robert Ortung

About the author

Arif Aliev is the chairman of the Ieni Nesil Association of Journalists and the head of the Baku press club. He is a journalist with 30 years of experience and the author of several books and research reports.

January 2013 in Azerbaijan: The Election Has Begun

By Rashad Shirinov, Baku

Abstract

This article complements the other articles published in this issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest by providing details on the main events in January and examining the inner struggle at the highest level of the political elite.

Upheaval

January 2013 has been a month of protests in Azerbaijan. Two major spontaneous protest actions took place: at

the Bina Trade Center and in the city of Ismayilli, proving that groups are ready to come out into the streets. Additionally, another large demonstration took place

in Baku on January 12, to protest against non-combat soldier deaths (accidents, suicides, diseases, army hazing etc.). This cause united people from different age groups and social backgrounds, activists as well as the typically passive. Moreover, on January 26, two days after the civil unrest in Ismayilli, young people staged a protest in Baku demanding an end to the alleged ill-treatment and persecution of those who participated in the earlier riots.

All the organized and unorganized protest actions in January demonstrated one new tendency: the citizens' tolerance of business-as-usual practices is nearing its limits. People no longer want to tolerate the things they tolerated in the past.

January 12—The Death of Jeyhun Qubadov

Certainly, many soldiers have died in suspicious circumstances in Azerbaijan in the past, but this time the reaction was completely different from previous ones. So what caused thousands of people to take to the central square of Baku after years of silence? It is difficult to identify a single cause, but to start with, this time the evidence of abuse on the body of the soldier Jeyhun Qubadov was clearly visible and suggested what had happened to him in an effective manner. There were clear marks of ill-treatment on the dead soldier's face and pictures of his body circulated in the country's social media networks. Defense Ministry officials said he slipped and had injured himself falling down a hill. Their story was not convincing, to say the least. Also, this death provided a specific, concrete case and it helped to unite and mobilize the people.

Some observers say that January 12 was such a successful event in part because the number of social media (Facebook and Twitter) users in Azerbaijan has reached 1 million persons, which is a two-fold increase from 2011. Now it is not only young people who join Facebook and socialize but also middle-age and older people who come to social media to discuss problems and engage in politics. In that respect social media has become an indispensable tool for people in a country where the traditional media is controlled by the authorities, public assembly is banned, and voluntary associations face huge administrative obstacles.

Another important question is why authorities allowed the January 12 protest to happen. January 12 was an unusual event because, starting from late 2005, protesters were never really permitted to occupy Fountain Square in the heart of the city. It appears that this time the authorities realized that they had a problem. Political parties did not organize the protest, which is probably one reason why the government was more tolerant towards the demonstrators, as they did not per-

ceive the protest to be "political." The protesters did not call for the resignation of the government in general but targeted the Ministry of Defense.

The Bina Trade Center

The protest in the Bina Trade Center was sparked by the increase in fees for shop-keepers. Later the protest turned into violent clashes between shop-keepers and riot police. The event was unique because of who was protesting—traders, who spend most of their time running their business rather than engaging with political and civil society. Although the authorities were tolerant towards the January 12 protesters, their response to the situation in Bina and Ismayilli was different. Several demonstrators faced criminal prosecution on both occasions.

Ismayilli

A car accident and the subsequent beating of a local taxi driver allegedly by the relative of the governor resulted in violent civil unrest in the city of Ismayilli. People burned down one hotel and another house that belonged to the governor. The residents of Ismayilli announced through these actions that they were fed up with the local governor's illegal behavior and demanded the governor's replacement.

This event was particularly important because the protesters did not seek to change the system, but the person. They never asked, for instance, to have governors elected by people and not appointed by the president. Some protesters were also chanting that the government in Azerbaijan must change.

The government sent internal troops and special forces to Ismayilli to restore order. Police used tear gas against the protesters, then arrested and beat them.

The potential sources of popular discontent in Ismayilli were social and economic more than anything else. Ismayilli is one of the least economically developed regions of Azerbaijan, the unemployment rate is high, and capital investment is low. By contrast, the neighboring Gabala is advancing rapidly as a tourist center with recently built five-star hotels and an airport.

The political problem is that governors in Azerbaijan are appointed by the president and not elected by popular vote. In a country where tribalism remains strong, locals typically dislike outsiders coming to rule them from other places. This tendency is less prevalent than in the 1990s and early 2000s, but it is a sensitive issue when governors do not represent the local people. Another political problem is that, in fact, the country is being administered according to a system in which a region (or group of regions) are attached to a particular minister (or another influential bureaucrat). According to this informal division, Ismayilli, for instance, is under

the management of the Minister of Social Welfare Fizuli Alekperov. Hence his brother Nizami Alekperov is the governor. This division has created differences between regions in terms of socio-economic development, as some ministers they “take a good care” of their regions, and others do not.

However, perhaps the most surprising development was the arrest of two prominent opposition politicians in connection with the Ismayilli events. Tofiq Yagublu, Deputy Chairman of Musavat Party and Ilgar Mammadov, Chairman of REAL Movement, were charged with inciting public disorder in Ismayilli, where they went the next day after the unrest started. Although people expected that the president would punish the authorities in Ismayilli for their lawless behavior, in fact the government decided to hold the opposition accountable for reasons that remain unclear.

Domestic Politics in the Run-up to the Elections

The election season is already well under way. The prosecutor has launched a criminal probe into corruption charges at the Azerbaijani Cinema Union, which is led by the prominent Oscar-winning Azerbaijani movie director Rustam Ibrahimbeyov. Ibrahimbeyov, who is becoming a well-respected leader of the civil opposition, has been critical of the government and he is the main founder of the Intellectual Forum, which seeks

to achieve major political changes in Azerbaijan. Ibrahimbeyov is also a member of the Union of Azerbaijani Organizations in Russia, also known as the “Billionaires Union.” This organization brings together the most powerful Russian oligarchs of Azerbaijani origin. It is possible that the Union might also nominate someone or support an existing candidate in Azerbaijan’s presidential elections in October.

The Musavat Party and REAL Citizens Movement have already nominated their candidates. This is part of the overt struggle for power; at the same time, there is another layer of the power struggle, which is not very visible and public knowledge of the proceeding are largely based on rumors. This is the internal struggle of various power groups within the regime. The tension mainly centers around the battle between the Pashayevs (the family of Mehriban Aliyeva, the first lady) versus Ramiz Mehdiyev, a powerful eminence grise of the late president Heydar Aliyev. There is a political crisis inside the regime since Ilham Aliyev (even if the amended constitution removed term limits) legally is not permitted to run for a third term, as the law does not have retrospective effect. Therefore, the regime might need to produce a new candidate and this is quite a challenge.

Overall, 2013 promises to be an exciting year, many in Azerbaijan already look forward to the end of year and the major question is: “Will the regime finally change this year?”

About the Author

Rashad Shirinov is an independent political analyst based in Baku. He finished his graduate studies in Turkey, the UK and the US and has worked for OSCE Election Missions and US National Democratic Institute.

INTERNATIONAL PRESS REVIEW

Media Reports on the Protest Actions in Azerbaijan

Dozens arrested after Azerbaijan protests

Aljazeera (Qatar) 26 January 2013

Police have arrested about 40 activists demonstrating in Azerbaijan’s capital Baku against President Ilham Aliyev’s government, and in support of residents of a northern town where protests were crushed earlier this week. [...]

Unrest [there] reflected frustration at what some Azeris see as an overbearing government, corruption and a large divide between rich and poor in the mostly Muslim Caspian Sea nation of nine million where many lack jobs, money and prospects. [...] “Our patience came to an end. People are very unhappy with this regime. We demand a change of power in our country,” demonstrator Malakhat Nasibova said at the protest in Baku.

Source: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/201312623135907244.html>

Minor vehicle collision in Azerbaijan triggers showdown with authorities, exposes tensions

Washington Post (USA) 24 January 2013

It began late at night with a minor car accident. By midday Thursday, a hotel had been burned to the ground, several expensive vehicles torched and crowds were facing off with police to demand a leading regional official's resignation.

The episode has exposed latent tensions nurtured by economic inequality and unresponsive governance in the oil-abundant Azerbaijan. The ostentatious display of wealth and aggressive, arrogant behavior among well-connected individuals is commonplace across resource-rich former Soviet republics and engenders much bitterness. That appears to have served as the spark for the unrest in Ismayilli, a resort town of 15,000 people beside a hilly nature reserve 175 kilometers (110 miles) from the capital, Baku. [...]

A week before that, in Baku itself, hundreds of demonstrators gathered in a central square to protest the death of a military conscript earlier this month. The demonstration was broken up by police. That rally was organized through social media, not by established opposition parties — an indication that opposition to the government is increasingly being propelled by grass-roots activism. Authorities are particularly anxious about any signs of public discontent in view of this October's presidential election, which is expected to see incumbent Ilham Aliyev retain his iron grip over the Caspian Sea nation. [...]

Source: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/minor-vehicle-collision-in-azerbaijan-sparks-mass-riot-attack-on-local-officials-son/2013/01/24/d0e783e6-65f7-11e2-889b-f23c246aa446_story.html

Officials in Azerbaijan Claim to Restore Order to Rioting City

New York Times (USA) 25 January 2013

[...] Mubaiz Gurbanli, deputy chairman of the majority New Azerbaijan Party, sought to downplay the significance of the riots in an interview on Friday. "This was not a revolt," he said, adding that the protests were driven by "emotional" young men. "This was a local incident and that does not reflect the situation in the whole of Azerbaijan."

Residents of Ismayilli said they were fed up with cronyism among regional officials and growing income inequality between locals and businessmen from the capital. "Half of Ismayilli belongs to the governor and his family, they do whatever they want," said Leyla, 22, in a telephone interview from the city where her family owns a business. "The city is full of military," she said. "It is like Ismayilli is at war." [...]

Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/26/world/asia/officials-in-azerbaijan-claim-to-restore-order-to-rioting-city.html>

Two Azerbaijani journalists arrested

The Guardian 28 January 2013

Two prominent journalists, Emin Milli and Khadija Ismayilova, were among up to 100 people detained in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, during a peaceful protest on Saturday (26 January). [...] Milli, a writer who spent 16 months in prison until November 2010 for his criticisms of the government, tweeted: "I approached police at demo and asked them to join us! They were thinking for a while. Then Arrested me." [...]

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2013/jan/28/journalist-safety-azerbaijan>

U.S. ambassador issues statement over recent events in Azerbaijani region

Azernews (Azerbaijan) 30 January 2013

U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Morningstar has issued a statement in connection with recent events in Ismayilli, Trend news agency reported. "We have seen reports of public unrest in the Azerbaijani town of Ismayilli on January 24, resulting in injuries and destruction of property, including the burning of a private hotel and the local executive's private house," the statement says. [...]

"We regret the violence in Ismayilli. At the same time, we encourage meaningful dialogue between the Azerbaijani government and its citizens to address legitimate grievances and also encourage authorities to respect citizens' freedom of assembly and expression," the statement said. [...]

A joint statement of Azerbaijani Interior Ministry and General Prosecutor's Office said on Tuesday that a massive conflict took place in Ismayilli on January 23 caused by hooliganism, involving destruction of property, committed by a drunk administrator of Chirag hotel Emil Shamdinov and his acquaintance Elmeddin Mammadov, followed by burn-

ing of Chirag hotel and cars by a group of people who gathered at the scene. As a measure of restraint, 8 people were arrested who were actively involved in violating public order, destruction of property, using force against law enforcement bodies, and causing fire and damage in Ismayilli. Administrative fines were imposed on a number of people.

Source: <http://www.azernews.az/azerbajjan/49100.html>

Protests against the excessive use of force directed at the own people

Ekho (Azerbaijan) 29 January 2013

Recently in Baku and the Ismailinksiy region some persons who stood under the influence of forces that want to destabilize the political tranquility in our country tried to disturb the public law and order, cause rumors, and incite opposition," according to (news agency) APA said the head of the department on work with law-enforcement bodies of the Administration of the President of Azerbaijan, Fuad Aleskerov, referring to the events in Baku and Ismaili. (...) "Law enforcement agencies have so far and will always stand on the side of Azerbaijani statehood and protect it. Nobody should forget that this state, which was created thanks to the incomparable achievements of the national leader Heydar Aliyev, is a strong state, able to exercise its authority and to reject pressure from any destructive forces. [...]

Markus Lening, the representative on human rights of the Government of Germany, called on Baku to release all jailed activists immediately. "As a member of the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan is obliged to protect freedom of speech," DAPD agency quotes the German politician. The human right organization "The Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF)" strongly condemns the rigid actions of the Azerbaijani police.

Source: <http://www.echo.az/index.php?aid=34563> (translated from the Russian)

Azerbaijan's General Prosecutor warns the Azadliq newspaper

Ekho (Azerbaijan) 05 February 2013

As APA reports, the newspaper Azadliq on 05 February 2013 has published an article [...] which reports that a protest action related to social problems will take place on 20 February in front of the building of the regional administration in Shamakhy. [...] The investigation by the general prosecutor has revealed that the article is not based on objective reality [...]. In line with the law on the general prosecutor an official warning was issued about the adoption of serious measures, foreseen in the law, including administrative and legal responsibility, in the case of further publication [...] of fully unfounded reports aimed at the destruction of public and political stability. [...]

Source: <http://www.echo.az/index.php?aid=35030>

Compiled by Eva Wachter

CHRONICLE

Opposition Protest Actions in Azerbaijan 2011–12

29 January 2011	More than 100 activists gather in Baku to protest against the government
16 February 2011	Hundreds of demonstrators in Nardaran village in Azerbaijan near the capital Baku protest against a lack of gas and electricity
11 March 2011	After 60 people gather in Baku for a Facebook-coordinated protest action, security forces quickly clamp down arresting more than 40
12 March 2011	Several hundred people participate in a demonstration organized by the opposition party Musavat. About 50 people are arrested by the police

2 April 2011	Several hundred people join a protest action organized by opposition parties in Baku. When they form an unsanctioned demonstration moving towards the city center the police arrests over 200 demonstrators
17 April 2011	At a protest action in Baku 65 people are arrested according to police figures
20 April 2011	20 journalists hold a one-day hunger strike to commemorate the imprisonment of Azerbaijani journalist Eynulla Fatullayev
6 May 2011	Police in Azerbaijan's capital of Baku break up a protest against the hijab ban in schools
22 May 2011	Youth activists rally on Baku Boulevard to call for the release of "political prisoners". Four are arrested
1 June 2011	Residents in a village in Azerbaijan's Naxcivan Autonomous Republic protest against unemployment and other social issues including electricity, gas and water shortages
19 June 2011	Police arrest "23 of about 80 protesters" affiliated with the opposition Public Chamber in Baku in front of the Narimanov Cinema
14 July 2011	Three Azerbaijani army officers post a video online addressed to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to complain of financial extortion by their commanding officer
19 July 2011	The Azerbaijani police breaks up an unsanctioned anti-corruption rally
21 September 2011	More than 300 residents of a Baku district protest against "noise and immoral activity at night" in local cafes
15 November 2011	Around 30 opposition youth activists protest in front of Baku's City Hall chanting "Freedom!"
2 December 2011	Exiled former Azerbaijani parliamentary speaker Rasul Quliyev calls on Azerbaijani citizens to join his newly founded "resistance movement" in a video appeal
16 January 2012	Police officers attack hundreds of Azeri taxi drivers demonstrating in front of the Transport Ministry in Baku against new restrictions on the use of privately owned cars as taxi vehicles
1 March 2012	Thousands of protestors demanding the removal of Governor Rauf Habibov are dispersed by police using tear gas and rubber bullets in the city of Quba, Azerbaijan. The next day Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev announces the dismissal of the governor
17 March 2012	Mass demonstration for democracy and human rights with about one thousand participants in Baku
8 April 2012	A mass opposition protest calls for reforms and the resignation of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku
18 April 2012	Azerbaijani investigative journalist Idrak Abbasov is beaten by security personnel from the SOCAR state energy company after filming a confrontation that erupted when SOCAR employees were demolishing houses in the village of Sulutepe near Baku
22 April 2012	Several thousand protesters from the opposition movement demand the release of political prisoners and the resignation of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku
7 May 2012	Opposition parties rally in Baku during an unsanctioned demonstration to demand that the authorities allow them to organize public gatherings in the center of the capital
21 May 2012	Azerbaijani opposition parties held an unsanctioned demonstration in Baku to protest against human rights abuses in the country on the eve of the Eurovision song contest
24 May 2012	Demonstration for press freedom in front of the building of the state TV station. 40 participants are arrested according to official figures
25 May 2012	Police apprehend approximately 70 peaceful protesters demonstrating in central Baku
5 October 2012	The Azerbaijani police clashes with protesters in Baku who had gathered in front of the Azerbaijani Education Ministry to protest the banning of Islamic head scarves for women in schools

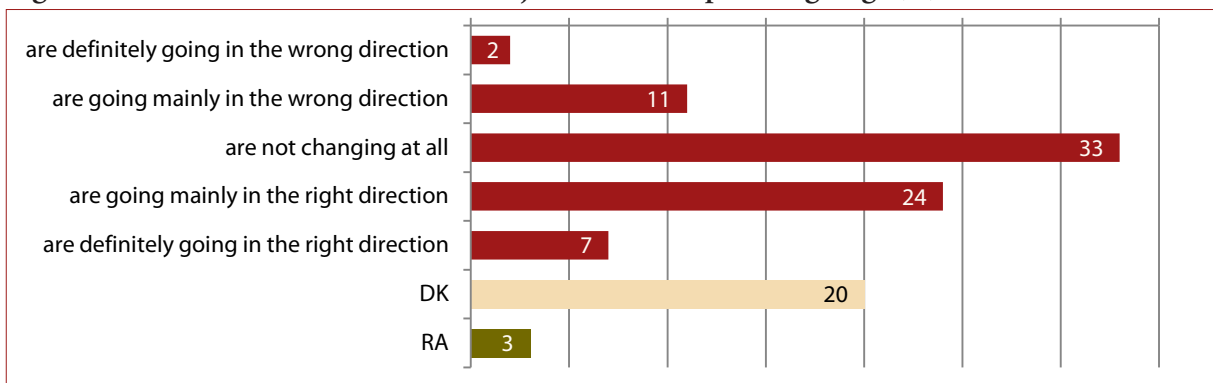
20 October 2012	The police in Baku arrest at least 30 people during an unauthorized rally in the capital organized by opposition and independent youth groups calling for the dissolution of the Azerbaijani Parliament after a video was shown of a ruling-party lawmaker asking a bribe in exchange for securing a seat in parliament
10 December 2012	The Azerbaijani police disperses an unsanctioned gathering of opposition activists trying to mark Human Rights Day in a central Baku square

Sources: regular chronicle of the *Caucasus Analytical Digest* (<http://www.laender-analysen.de/index.php?topic=cad&url=../cad/chronik.html>), news reports and *Wikipedia* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Azerbaijani_protests)

OPINION POLL

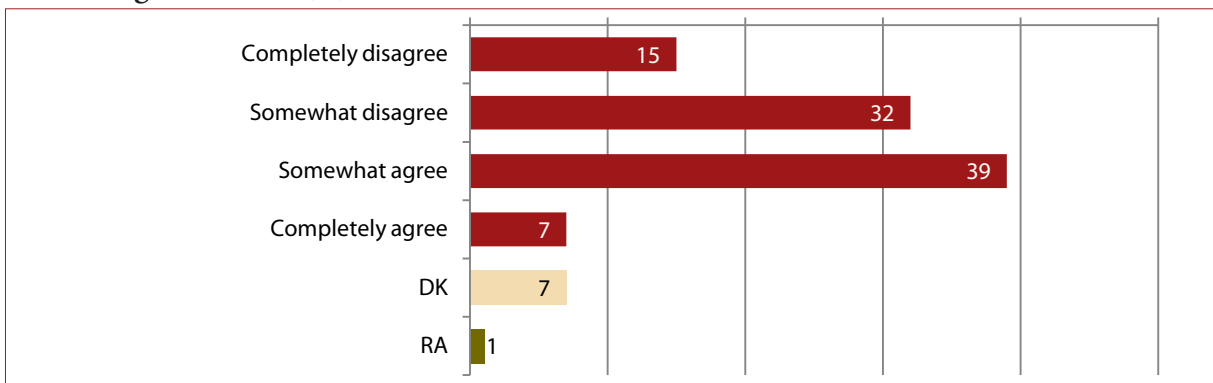
The View of Azerbaijan's Population on Politics (2011)

Figure 1: In which direction are Azerbaijan's domestic politics going? (%)



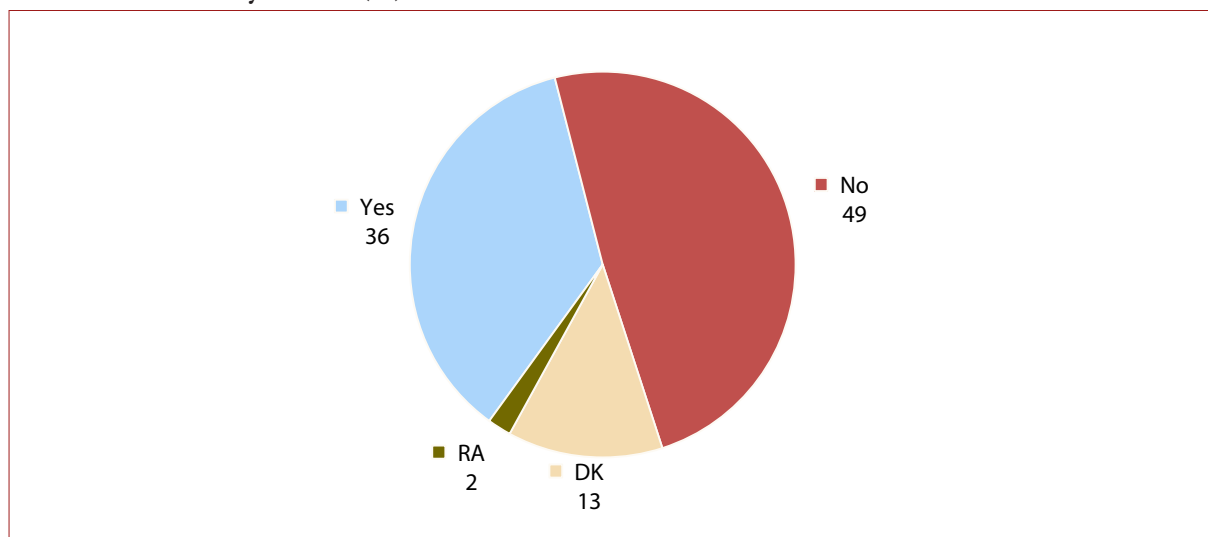
Source: *Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2011 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)*

Figure 2: Do you agree with the statement that people like you are treated fairly by the government? (%)



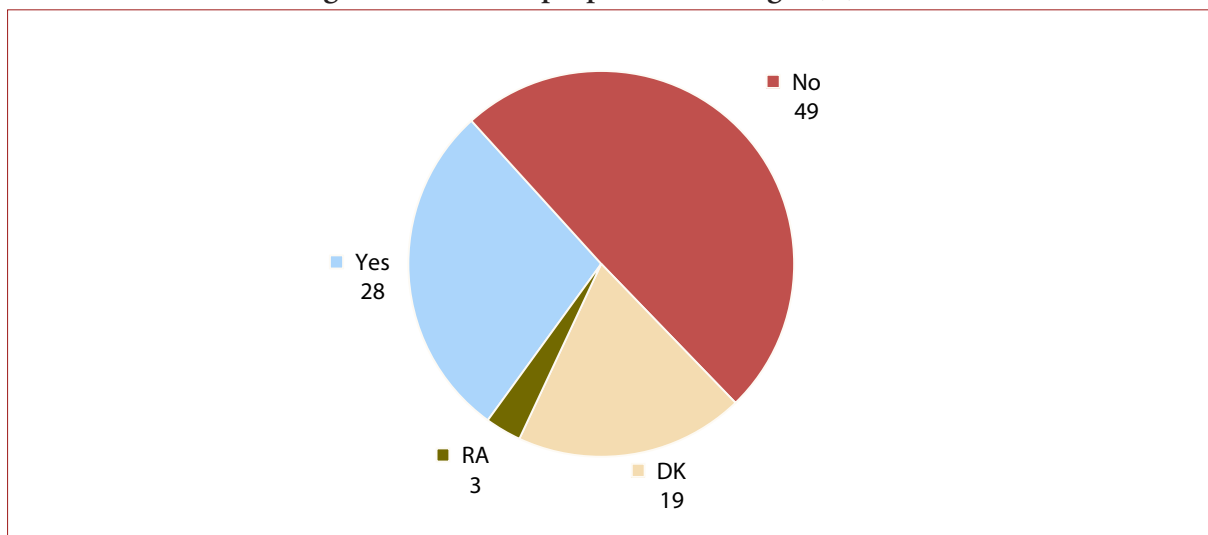
Source: *Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2011 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)*

Figure 3: In Azerbaijan today, do you think that people like you have the right to openly say what they think? (%)



Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2011 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)

Figure 4: Do you agree with the statement that people should participate in protest actions, as this shows the government that people are in charge? (%)



Source: Caucasus Research Resource Centers. Caucasus Barometer 2011 (representative nationwide sample excluding territories affected by military conflicts)

CHRONICLE

From 12 December 2012 to 8 February 2013

12 December 2012	The twenty second round of the international Geneva talks is held on security and humanitarian issues with representatives from Georgia, Russia, the United States and the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia
12 December 2012	The leader of the Prosperous Armenia Party (BHK) Gagik Tsarukian says that he will not run for President in the Armenian presidential elections in February 2013
12 December 2012	Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nickolay Mladenov and the head of the Polish president's chancellery Jacek Michalowski visit Georgia as part of a trip to the three South Caucasus countries
13 December 2012	The Russian Federal Investigative Committee accuses Georgian parliamentary deputy Givi Targamadze of conspiring with Russian activists to organize protests in Russia
14 December 2012	The Georgian Prime Minister's special representative Zurab Abashidze and the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin meet in Switzerland to discuss trade, economy and humanitarian issues
19 December 2012	Former energy and finance minister Alexander Khetaguri and the director general of Rustavi 2 TV Nika Gvaramia are arrested on corruption charges in Georgia
20 December 2012	Russian President Vladimir Putin says that the issue of the import of Georgian products to the Russian market should be "depoliticized"
21 December 2012	The Georgian Parliament passes with its third and final reading a law envisaging several forms of amnesty for prisoners in Georgia
21 December 2012	Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili says that there are some question marks regarding the construction of the Baku–Akhalkalaki–Kars railway which will link Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey
23 December 2012	Workers at the oil terminal in the Georgian Black Sea Coast city of Kulevi go on strike demanding to receive the same pay as foreign workers as well as better working conditions
26 December 2012	Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili visits Azerbaijan to hold talks with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev
25 December 2012	The leader of the Armenian National Congress (HAK) opposition movement and former Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossian says that he will not run for President in the presidential elections of February 2013
27 December 2012	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili says that he will not sign the parliamentary bill on amnesty into law
27 December 2012	Armenian Public Council Chairman Vazgen Manukian says that he regrets the lack of alternatives to Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian in the upcoming presidential elections on 18 February 2013
29 December 2012	A Georgian soldier who went missing in Afghanistan on 19 December is found dead, bringing the number of Georgian soldiers who have died in Afghanistan to 19
31 December 2012	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili arrives in Afghanistan to spend New Year's eve with the Georgian troops deployed there
9 January 2013	The Georgian State audit agency launches a probe into the alleged violation of funding political parties' rules by the United National Movement during the electoral campaign of 2012
11 January 2013	Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulates the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ilia II, on his 80th birthday
18 January 2013	During an official visit to Armenia, Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili promises to the head of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church Catholicos Karekin II that Armenian history will soon be taught in Georgian schools
19 January 2013	police in Baku clash with shopkeepers protesting a rent increase by the managers of Azerbaijan's largest shopping center
24 January 2013	The Azerbaijani police break up protests in the town of Ismayilli demanding the resignation of the local governor Nizami Alekberov
26 January 2013	Hundreds of people demonstrate in Baku to express their solidarity with the protests in the town of Ismayilli and some 40 participants are detained by the police including the blogger Emin Milli and investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova

26 January 2013	A statue of Azerbaijan's late President Heydar Aliyev is removed from a park in Mexico City
27 January 2013	Three activists involved in a 26 January protest in the Azerbaijani capital of Baku are given prison sentences
28 January 2013	The Azerbaijani and Armenian foreign ministers meet in Paris for talks mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group and aimed at settling the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh
28 January 2013	Georgian Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze meets with Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski in Warsaw with Poland reiterating its support to Georgia's European aspirations
29 January 2013	The head of the Adjara's Revenue Service who was appointed by the new Georgian government under Bidzina Ivanishvili in mid-November 2012 is arrested on corruption charges
31 January 2013	Armenian presidential candidate Paruyr Hairikian is shot by an unidentified attacker in the street of the capital Yerevan
4 February 2013	The deputy chairman of the opposition Musavat Party Tofiq Yaqublu and the chairman of the REAL movement Ilqar Mammadov are charged with organizing mass disorders in Azerbaijan
6 February 2013	The US embassy expresses concern over the arrest of two opposition leaders in Azerbaijan
7 February 2013	The Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Paata Zakareishvili says that the government plans to initiate draft amendments to decriminalize the entry into the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from territories other than those controlled by Georgia
7 February 2013	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev strips Azerbaijani writer Akram Aylisli of the title "People's Writer" after he published a novel sympathetic to Armenia
7 February 2013	Azerbaijan launches its first telecommunications satellite into orbit
8 February 2013	Chaotic scenes at the National Library in Tbilisi delay Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's presidential address with members of the United National Movement party being assaulted by protestors

Compiled by Lili Di Puppo

For the full chronicle since 2009 see www.laender-analysen.de/cad

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Lili Di Puppò, Iris Kempe, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Natia Mestvirishvili, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines

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Research Centre for East European Studies • Publications Department • Klagenfurter Str. 3 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: fsopr@uni-bremen.de • Internet: www.laender-analysen.de/cad/