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## Time for Sanctions on Baku

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*As the West has turned its attention to the Islamic State and the Ukraine crisis, the government of President Ilham Aliyev has expanded its crackdown on dissenting voices in Azerbaijan with harassment, threats, beatings, and arrests. Even American citizens and international NGOs have been caught up in the widening net of repression. These actions demand a response.*

For years, Belarus's leader Alexander Lukashenka has been called Europe's last dictator, although Vladimir Putin is giving Lukashenka a run for his money, amidst the worst crackdown on human rights in Russia in decades. And now we might also add another leader in the region to the list: President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan.

After an accelerating series of arrests, Aliyev's government now holds nearly 100 political prisoners, roughly double the number in Belarus and Russia combined. Beyond the raw numbers, Azerbaijan's authorities are also getting more thuggish in their handling of critics, journalists, and opposition figures—as well as Westerners.

Statements of concern and criticism from Western and international officials and organizations have fallen on deaf ears in Baku. Even President Obama's recent criticism of Azerbaijan's treatment of NGOs made no impact. To the contrary, there are now credible reports that the Azerbaijani authorities plan to arrest investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova when she returns to Baku from a trip abroad. The best way to try to reverse this disturbing trend is to impose penalties on the Aliyev regime for its outrageous treatment of its own people.

Among the most egregious abuses are the July 30 arrests of civil society activists Leyla and Arif Yunus, accused of spying for Armenian secret services—implausible charges linked to the decades-old dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. On August 20, journalist Ilgar Nasibov was savagely beaten into a state of unconsciousness while he was in the office of a rights organization in the Naxcivan region. Several leading opposition figures—including Ilgar Mamedov of the opposition movement REAL and Tofiq Yakublu of Musavat—languish in prison on unsubstantiated charges.

American citizens and organizations are not immune from Azerbaijan's heavy-handed intolerance of dissenting voices. Said Nuri, an American citizen of Azerbaijani origin, was recently blocked for nearly a week from leaving Baku, after visiting his ailing father. The local offices of several American and international non-governmental organizations have been raided and/or their bank accounts frozen, and their employees harassed including IREX, the National Democratic Institute, Transparency International, and Oxfam. Several grantees of the National Endowment for Democracy have been arrested, and numerous others have had their accounts frozen.

Azerbaijan's smear campaign has included U.S. officials, too. Recently departed U.S. Ambassador Richard Morningstar was subjected to various personal attacks by Azerbaijani government representatives, including the Chief of the

Presidential Administration, Ramiz Mehdiyev. Senate staffers during a visit to Baku earlier this year were called “dogs” by a prosecutor and “spies” by a parliamentarian after meeting with Khadija Ismayilova.

Any individual or organization that criticizes Aliyev or promotes democracy is viewed as hostile. Mehdiyev has characterized independent media as “anti-Azerbaijani forces” financed from abroad.

The Council of Europe’s human rights chief, Nils Muiznieks, slammed the Azerbaijani government earlier this month for the “totally unacceptable” human rights situation, which, he said, “flies in the face of the human rights obligations undertaken by Azerbaijan” as a member of the Council. In August, several UN human rights envoys said they were “appalled” by the growing number of abuses and arrests of rights activists “on the basis of trumped-up charges.” The “criminalization of rights activists must stop,” they declared, calling for the release of the Yunuses and others.

For years, Azerbaijan’s oil and gas reserves insulated the country from exposure for its abysmal human rights record. The West’s attention lately has been focused on the Russia-Ukraine crisis and the challenge of the Islamic State, giving the Aliyev regime a sense that it can get away with its crackdown. To be safe, at last month’s NATO summit it offered to take part in investment and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, betting that contributions to the allied effort would buy it a pass on its internal situation. Azerbaijan has also thrown around lots of the money it has earned from energy exports to buy influence and friends in the West.

Azerbaijani authorities often argue that they live in a tough neighborhood—sandwiched between Russia and Iran and with an unresolved conflict with Armenia—and that this should excuse them for their behavior. Geopolitics, however, shouldn’t shield Azerbaijan from criticism for treating its citizens and Western organizations as criminals.

It’s time, therefore, for the United States to apply a law modeled on the 2012 Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law and Accountability Act to authorities in Baku. A number of Azerbaijani activists have called for such measures. Given the reported assets the Aliyev family and its circle hold overseas, freezing their assets and denying them access and travel to the West might just do the trick. The State Department should also issue a travel warning to American citizens alerting them of the surveillance, harassment, and possible detention they might face in Azerbaijan.

At a time when Vladimir Putin is continuing Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, some will argue that, for geopolitical reasons, this is not the time for the United States to get tough on Azerbaijan. There is never a good time to take such steps, but the situation inside Azerbaijan demands a response now. Further Western expressions of “concern” or characterizations of the situation as “unacceptable” would sound increasingly hollow. The Aliyev regime must understand that there are consequences for its abuses.