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Azerbaijan Snubs the West

By **JOSHUA KUCERA**

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On Dec. 26, authorities in Azerbaijan raided the local bureau of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a U.S. government-funded service, seizing computers and ordering the office shut down. Earlier that month, police had arrested Khadija Ismayilova, a RFE/RL reporter and the country's most prominent investigative journalist, on dubious charges of inciting someone to commit suicide. (The alleged victim has since recanted the accusation, but Ms. Ismayilova remains in jail.)

These events have been reported abroad largely as marking a further constriction in Azerbaijan's already tiny space for alternative points of view. And they are that. But they also suggest a dramatic change in the geopolitics of the volatile Caspian Sea region: the Azerbaijani government's growing hostility toward Washington.

Azerbaijan is in a prime location, wedged between Russia and Iran on the oil- and gas-rich Caspian Sea. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it has been a strong partner of the United States. It has worked with Washington to break Russia's energy monopoly in the region by supporting the construction of oil and gas pipelines to Turkey. It is a key transit point for military cargo to and from Afghanistan. And the government in Baku has forged close ties with Israel, based primarily on the trade of weaponry and oil.

A 2009 U.S. diplomatic cable described Azerbaijan's foreign policy as characterized by "pragmatism, restraint and a helpful bias toward integration with the West." Baku's orientation toward the West was always in service of two priorities: maintaining its grip on power and taking back the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, which Azerbaijan lost to ethnic Armenian separatists in the early 1990s. But as Russia's dramatic new foreign policy changes the strategic landscape across Eurasia, Baku appears to be recalculating whether its ties to the West really are advancing its own goals.

The attack on RFE/RL followed months of extreme anti-Western rhetoric. Top Azerbaijani government officials have accused the United States ambassador to Baku of "gross interference" and former Foreign Minister Carl Bildt of Sweden of being an American spy. In early December, the president's chief of staff, Ramiz Mehdiyev, published a 13,000-word article claiming that the C.I.A. was contriving regime changes in the post-Soviet space (the so-called color revolutions). It also called Azerbaijan's human rights activists a "fifth column" of the United States.

The dominant criticism is that Washington, acting through NGOs and human rights groups, is trying to destabilize the Azerbaijani government. In fact, human rights activists have criticized American and European governments for being too soft on Baku. Washington has called the raid on RFE/RL merely "cause for concern." In spite of Azerbaijan's dismal human rights record, it has been awarded prestige projects like the chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in 2014, and it will be hosting the European Games this summer.

Anti-American rhetoric from Baku is not unheard of, but its recent intensity, seemingly unprompted, and its reliance on Kremlin talking points suggest a shift toward Moscow.

Russia has a collective security agreement with Armenia, maintains a large military base there and provides the country with discounted weaponry. It's never been clear how Russia might intervene in a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, but Baku's repudiation of America makes Russia less inclined to get involved in a fight against Azerbaijan.

The United States, for its part, will never intervene militarily on Azerbaijan's side. And the payoff for Baku of putting up with Washington's hectoring on democracy and human rights shrinks as the West loses influence worldwide. It's a measure of the Azerbaijani government's disdain of Washington that the raid on RFE/RL was conducted just days after Secretary of State John Kerry spoke with President Ilham Aliyev on the phone.

In an interview in December, Ali Hasanov, a top presidential adviser, was asked why the government began to so sharply criticize the United States but not Iran or Russia. "Because they don't criticize us, that's why," he said. "Russia, Iran, and China, too, deal with us on the basis of noninterference in our internal affairs."

Washington, meanwhile, increasingly judges partner nations according to their opposition to Russia. At her confirmation hearing in September, the new United States ambassador to Uzbekistan — one of the most repressive governments on the planet — praised the country as "an increasingly important partner," thanks to "its deliberate, reliable resistance to Russian pressure." Azerbaijan's mimicry of Russian rhetoric and rapprochement with Moscow is an implicit threat to Washington: Give us what we want, or we'll go over to Russia.

The United States doesn't need to give in to this blackmail. Yes, the stakes are high: As Washington works to isolate Russia economically, Azerbaijani natural gas has become an even more important alternative to Russian gas for European customers. And Baku's geopolitical shift could upset the fragile balance that has kept tensions over Nagorno-Karabakh from turning into a full-scale war.

But it would be short-sighted for Washington to sacrifice its principles just to shore up support against Russia. Moscow's current geopolitical moment is only temporary. While the pro-Russia forces in Baku appear to be ascendant for the time being, other powerful blocs favor closer ties to the West.

Failing to stand up for human rights and democracy, including the rights of its own RFE/RL, would make the United States look weak and sap its supporters. Expecting to be arrested, Ms. Ismayilova herself asked foreign governments to speak loudly in defense of the dozens of political prisoners in Azerbaijan. "I don't believe in human rights advocacy behind closed doors," she wrote. "People of my country need to know that human rights are supported."

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