

WOMEN IN AZERBAIJAN DEMOCRACY VERSUS ENERGY

Pointing out that Western economies have a strong interest in the region's oil and gas resources, this article points out that current developments in Azerbaijan suggest that energy is being bought at the cost of Western principles and values. In light of recent developments that suggest deterioration of Azerbaijan's democratic credentials, this article argues that the women in Azerbaijan's civil society should be supported more in their struggle for democracy. It also makes the point that development aid to Azerbaijan will be more effective if more women are actively involved in economic activities.

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As of the summer of 2009 women in Azerbaijan who are committed to their country's development and democratic values hesitate before using their home computers or saying their names on the telephone when answering a call from abroad. Human rights in Azerbaijan are deteriorating regardless of the ten years of development cooperation and technical assistance that has been provided by international organizations.

The EU is at the same time promoting the New Eastern Partnership for its neighboring countries, including Azerbaijan, with a focus on civil society development, stressing the principle "more for more".¹ Recent developments in Azerbaijan beg the question: Is it more like "more dictatorship for more oil and gas"?

A recent incident demonstrates the realities of Azerbaijan today: two well-known national civic activist/bloggers were held for two months of pre-trial detention, following a closed door hearing on the charge of "hooliganism" because of a fight which witnesses indicate they did not start. These two bloggers –now political prisoners²– had been active for several years in Azerbaijan and abroad, promoting democracy, tolerance, non-violence and better education for Azerbaijani people. They are critical towards the government and encourage the population to get actively involved for better living conditions and civil rights for all citizens. Via the internet their messages reached a broad audience every day.

This incident has shocked the nation and has a particular impact on those women who started being active for the civil society development within the country, and whose commitment is key to achieve this. Many young women studied abroad following one of the activists' campaigns to provide scholarships for foreign universities from the country's oil revenues – which was later decreed by the Azerbaijani government.³

These women who returned to Azerbaijan educated, intelligent, convinced of democratic values and motivated to work for the development of their country are now discouraged and fearful for their families' welfare. Only women from traditionally privileged families, or those who are backed by an important international player, enjoy the freedom to work on the country's democratic

¹ The new Eastern Partnership stresses the principle of "more for more" meaning that partners can only expect to get more from the EU, if they, themselves give more of a sustained commitment to reform, http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/index_en.htm, 7 May 2009.

² "Two jailed bloggers face additional charge", <http://www.rfs.org>, 25 August 2009.

³ Fariz Ismailzade, "Study abroad becomes a new priority for Azerbaijani Government", *CACI Analyst*, <http://www.cacianalyst.org>, 12 December 2007.

development. The average woman in Azerbaijan feels forced to make a choice between her family's subsistence and active commitment for the country's democratic development.

Women in Azerbaijan, representing more than 50 percent of the country's population⁴, have a crucial role to play in the sustainable development of the country; however this role is regularly hindered. Women face considerable social pressure and discrimination.⁵ Though they nominally enjoy the same rights as men, the last data provided by the Azerbaijani government in 2007 shows that "traditional social norms and lagging economic development in the country's regions continued to restrict women's roles in the economy, and there were reports that women had difficulty exercising their legal rights due to gender discrimination."⁶ Also, violence against women, human trafficking and prostitution remain huge problems in Azerbaijan.⁷

In addition, Azerbaijan's social system, health system and legal system remain extremely weak even after many years of development aid and technical assistance.⁸ According to a World Bank summary the remaining key policy challenges include:⁹

a) Effectively managing the country's finite oil and gas reserves: [...] The government will need to ensure that public spending is well-targeted for the benefit of all citizens.

b) Strengthening governance: [...] enhancing the ability of citizens and communities to utilize information and hold the government accountable, strengthening the relatively weak legislative and judicial branches of government, and ensuring orderly electoral processes at all levels.

c) Improving living standards and tackling poverty: about 20 percent of the population still lives in poverty, social services and infrastructure need to be improved, employment needs to be generated, and the non-oil economy developed.

⁴ "Population in Azerbaijan about 9M", *UNDP Azerbaijan Development Bulletin*, <http://www.un-az.org/undp/bul-news73/H1.php>, July 2009.

⁵ The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), *Azerbaijan Gender Profile*, available at <http://www.ifad.org>

⁶ U.S. State Government, *Human Rights Report Azerbaijan, 2008*, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/eur/119068.htm>, 25 February 2009.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2008*, www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2008/

⁸ World Bank, *Azerbaijan Country Brief*, <http://www.worldbank.org.az> April 2009; Kenan Aslanli, "Oil wealth could meet social needs", *Country by Country – Azerbaijan Report*, <http://www.socialwatch.org>, 2007

⁹ World Bank, *Azerbaijan Country Brief*, <http://www.worldbank.org.az> April 2009.

These policy challenges are intimately linked to the controversial detainment incident and the issue of women's rights in Azerbaijan:

a) In view of public spending and corruption, the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index of 2008 places Azerbaijan 158th out of 180 countries evaluated.¹⁰ Corruption is one of the detained activists' main points of criticism.¹¹

b) The free exercise of civil rights, i.e. engagement in the political process, and holding of the government accountable are prerequisites for a sustainable development and gender equality. Yet, playing this role effectively can cost people their job or force them to end up in jail for political reasons as the recent incident shows.¹²

c) Women bear the main burden of weak social services, general public service, and infrastructure. Because the highly traditional social pressure dictates that women nurture their families, ensure their livelihood and make provisions for medical care and loss of earnings. The family is the only social net, hence each family member without income –be it due to illness, detention or any other reason– causes considerable additional cost, in particular since bribes are ordinarily requested in the case of hospitalization or imprisonment.

An additional problem related to this policy problem is that only those on good terms with the government can set up a prospering business. According to the World Bank gender statistics on labor force 50.7 percent of men but only 32.7 percent of all women salary workers in Azerbaijan had a paid employment job. The other 49.3 percent of economically active men and 67.3 percent of women respectively are listed as self-employed.¹³ Women are underrepresented in high-level jobs¹⁴ and women in rural areas in particular are at a disadvantage to men: according to the UNIFEM discussion paper on gender equality for development

¹⁰ Transparency International, *Corruption Perception Index, Azerbaijan*, <http://www.transparency.az/newsurvey.html>

¹¹ Olesya Vartanyan, "In Azerbaijan, a Donkey Suit Provokes Laughs and, Possibly, Arrests", *NY Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com>, 14 July 2009.

¹² Reporters without Borders Freedom of Press Ranking: Azerbaijan is ranked 150th out of 173 countries evaluated, <http://www.rsf.org>, August 2009.

¹³ "A contract that gives them a basis remuneration that is not directly depending on the revenue of the unit for which they work.": World Bank, *Azerbaijan Gender Statistics, Labor Force in 2007*, <http://go.worldbank.org/4PIIORQMS0> April 2009.

¹⁴ U.S. State Government, *Human Rights Report Azerbaijan*, 2008, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/eur/119068.htm>, 25 February 2009

aid effectiveness in the CIS “[...] the transition to market-based economies has had a differential impact on women and men. Female unemployment increased in rural areas with the declines in investment in social infrastructure. [...] Women are increasingly obliged to take poorly paid jobs [...]”¹⁵ Under the combination of these circumstances women have less of choice to stand up for their rights or encourage others to do so; they are instead forced to remain loyal to their government.

Azerbaijan’s average gross domestic product growth has been 21 percent over the past five years.¹⁶ According to the “Doing Business 2009” report¹⁷ Azerbaijan is a top reformer in improving business regulations among 185 assessed countries. Also, facing the economic crisis the Azerbaijan National Bank was able to respond quickly and appropriately¹⁸ to the situation so that the impact on Azerbaijan’s financial sector was limited. However, in other sectors, progress is lagging or developments are rather regressive. The disparity of development levels in the different sectors is striking and calls into question aid effectiveness.

Azerbaijan has signed almost all relevant international conventions and treaties¹⁹ and yet disregards basic human rights and democratic values. Following a referendum held on 18 March 2009, the constitution was changed so that the President can now unlimitedly run for reelections.²⁰ According to the new visa regulations, visas cannot be issued at the border anymore but must be issued by the State Migration Service.²¹ Though the parliament rejected a proposal for a restrictive NGO legislation, the initiative as such was another alarming development.²² Donors and international players must accordingly reconsider their aid strategies. Otherwise, the chances are that the EU’s principle of “more for more” will amount to little in Azerbaijan.

¹⁵ UNIFEM Discussion paper, “Gender Equality for Aid Effectiveness, National Development Planning in the CIS”, January 2008, p. 3.

¹⁶ World Bank, *Azerbaijan Country Brief, Economy – Development since independence*, <http://www.worldbank.org.az>, April 2009.

¹⁷ World Bank and IMF, *Doing Business 2009*: <http://www.doingbusiness.org>

¹⁸ International Monetary Fund, “Azerbaijan—Aide Mémoire for the 2008 IMF Staff Visit Discussions, 10-17 December 2008, Baku”, <http://www.imf.org>, 16 December 2008

¹⁹ Permanent Mission of Azerbaijan to the United Nations, “Participation in multilateral treaties”, <http://www.un.int/azerbaijan/mt.php>

²⁰ Berit Lindeman, “Referendum in an atmosphere of intimidation and fear”, The Norwegian Helsinki Committee, www.nhc.no, 19 March 2009.

²¹ State Migration Service, Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the application of the “Single Window” Principle in migration management, www.migration.gov.az, 4 March 2009.

²² Jessica Powley Hayden, “Azerbaijan abandons controversial NGO amendments”, www.eurasianet.org, 1 July 2009.

Development aid generates better results and is more sustainable when women are involved.²³ Findings have shown that gender equality is a core development issue to strengthen countries' abilities to grow, reduce poverty and govern effectively.²⁴ The "EC/UN Partnership on Gender Equality for Development and Peace" thus promotes the integration of gender equality in the international assistance agenda.²⁵ The World Bank, the EU and the UN integrate gender issues into their country work, yet mostly in close cooperation and after consulting with the government only.

Moreover, Western economies have a strong interest in the region's oil and gas resources. In terms of energy Azerbaijan is considered the key partner that could help the EU diversify its oil and gas supplies. Yet Azerbaijan is keeping close relations in particular also with Russia, Iran and its Central Asian neighbors that are therefore major EU competitors on the energy market.²⁶ However, current developments in Azerbaijan suggest that its energy is being bought at the cost of Western principles and values. The country's energy resources, however, are finite²⁷ and the increasingly restrictive policy regarding civil society gives reason to fear that benefit from the country's economic growth will not spread to much of the society.

Against this background, the EU and its member states should strive to avoid further decline in their reputation as supporters of democracy. On the EU level, more hard power²⁸ and only conditional economic cooperation with Azerbaijan would be a justifiable response. Furthermore, the women in Azerbaijan's civil society should be supported more in their struggle for democracy. According to the issues briefs of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Network on

²³ World Bank, *Azerbaijan Country Brief*, <http://www.worldbank.org.az>, April 2009; UNFPA "Gender Equality a Cornerstone of Development", <http://www.unfpa.org/gender>

²⁴ A World Bank Policy Research report, "Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice", January 2001.

²⁵ EC/UN Partnership on Gender Equality for Development and Peace: *Working together on Gender Equality* http://www.europa-eu.un.org/articles/en/article_7302_en.htm

²⁶ Borut Grgic, "Rethinking Azerbaijan – In terms of energy, Azerbaijan is the partner that Europe needs the most", <http://www.europeanvoice.com>, 08 May 2009.

²⁷ Seven billion barrel in Azerbaijan, peak oil production expected for 2010, cf. <http://de.statista.com>, end 2008; for oil and gas cf.: Energy Information Administration, "Azerbaijan Official Energy Statistics from the U.S. Government", <http://www.eia.doe.gov>, December 2007.

²⁸ The concept of "hard and soft power" was elaborated by Prof. Joseph Nye in the early 1990s: hard power is the approach of carrots (inducements) and sticks (coercion) making efforts to persuade others; whereas soft power rather attracts people than coerces them. Joseph S Nye, Jr., "Soft power: the means to success in World Politics", *NY Public Affairs*, 2004.

Gender Equality²⁹, certain governments have taken the initiative to stronger support work on gender equality and women's empowerment, channeling funds directly through innovative women's organizations.³⁰ These funds can reach small local organizations directly for enhanced prospects of success and improved aid effectiveness.

²⁹ DAC Network on Gender Equality, *Issues Briefs 1-3*, www.oecd.org/dac/gender, July 2008.

³⁰ Mama Cash, <http://www.mamacash.org>
