

PM+: EU must define clear strategic partnership with Azerbaijan

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Opinion Plus

Recent eastern partnership summit tainted by ambiguity over EU's Caspian partner, argues Azerbaijani parliament member Azay Guliyev.



On the eve of Last month's Riga summit, Azerbaijan expressed its strong desire to sign a strategic partnership with the EU, while some other eastern partner countries chose to join the Russian-led Eurasian Union.

Despite this goodwill, the summit failed to deliver any concrete results, leaving a legacy of double standards and ambiguity.

The Riga declaration lacked ambition, focusing on technical issues such as cooperation on aviation, visa facilitation and our participation in EU programmes.

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Although EU leaders referred to 'the territorial integrity of Ukraine', they failed to mention that for over 25 years 20 per cent of Azerbaijan's territory has been occupied by Armenia.

This illegal occupation ignores resolutions from the European parliament, UN, Council of Europe and OSCE which have all called for the immediate withdrawal of Armenian troops and for the return of more than a million refugees and internally displaced people.

Azerbaijan is situated in a geopolitically difficult region, bordering countries such as Russia and Iran and is of great strategic importance to the EU.

This is not just because of its geopolitical location, but also due to its key role for European security and energy diversification, its advanced trade and economic relations with the EU and its secular state structure.

Despite regional tensions and the mounting threat of radical Islam, Azerbaijan continues to serve as a model of geopolitical stability in the South Caucasus, actively fighting terrorism and religious fanaticism.

Being a strategic ally of the West, Azerbaijan has contributed to peacekeeping operations in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, playing a vital role in the repatriation of NATO peacekeepers from Afghanistan.

Contrary to the commonly held belief that Azerbaijan is solely an oil and gas driven economy, the non-oil GDP of sectors such as ICT, financial services, transportation, construction, shipbuilding, tourism and agriculture account for more than 65 per cent of the overall Azerbaijani economy.

The approval of the trans-Adriatic and trans-Anatolian gas pipelines along the southern corridor connecting Caspian gas deposits to Italy through Turkey, marks an important step towards increased cooperation and the sharing of energy resources.

The EU needs to build on Azerbaijani relations in order to diversify its energy resources and to reduce its dependence on Russian supply.

Located at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan is home to a moderate Shia population, which peacefully cohabitates with the Sunni minority, a small Jewish community and numerous Christian confessions.

Baku, which will be hosting the first European Games this summer, is not only a strategic ally of the EU but also a symbol of secularism in an increasingly radicalised EU neighbourhood.

For the reasons mentioned above, I am convinced that the EU and Azerbaijan must build closer ties based on mutually beneficial terms.

Given the growing security and radicalisation challenges in the European neighbourhood, the EU

should take concrete steps to define a clear strategic partnership with Azerbaijan.

We are eager to work closer with the EU to make the next summit more ambitious than Riga, and this could be accomplished through increased engagement with Baku on areas of mutual interest.

If the EU is keen on maintaining a continuous, open and constructive dialogue with Azerbaijan, it should send a positive and unifying message to the country rather than negative messages through unsubstantial and unjust resolutions or statements. The European Games would provide an excellent opportunity to do this.

In order to achieve this, the assistance and cooperation of the European parliament within the framework of the Euronest parliamentary assembly would be highly valued by Azerbaijan.

The European parliament should use this platform effectively. If it fails to do so, it would risk undermining its strategic interests in the region and damaging relations with its eastern partners.

About the author

Azay Guliyev is a member of the Azerbaijani parliament, chairman of the council of state support to NGOs and vice-chair of the OSCE parliamentary assembly's committee on political affairs and security

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