

## **The West shows Aliyev the “stick”**

### **ARVAK Center comment, 28.04.2024**

On 25.04.2024 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on human rights violations in Azerbaijan, calling on the European Commission to suspend energy cooperation with Azerbaijan and to make any future cooperation with this country conditional on the release of political prisoners and an improvement in the overall human rights situation. The resolution also mentions the International climate conference COP29 to be held in Baku. The EU's Supreme legislative body demands to deprive Baku of the right to host this significant event in Azerbaijan if its authorities continue the policy of infringing on the dissidents' rights and practice repressive methods of struggle against political opponents.

The document adopted by the EP does not imply direct sanctions against Azerbaijan by the EU's executive structures and is of recommendation character to call attention of the European Commission to the situation with democratic values in Azerbaijan. According to the regulations, the European Commission itself should decide on the choice of the doctrine of actions against Baku, but it is obliged to consider the opinion and dispositions of the parliamentary body.

Thus, it can be assumed that the fact of the adoption of an extremely unfavorable, but at the same time purely declarative document indicates that the EU is demonstrating preventive measures against Baku. It is more likely that these measures are rather related to geopolitical factors than to a sincere concern about the legal crisis and authoritarian methods of governance in Azerbaijan, which the West has stubbornly ignored for three decades.

It could be the European community's fear of a possible drift of Aliyev's Azerbaijan towards Russia, or at least its attempt to sit on “two sliding chairs” and extract maximum dividends from the Russian-Western antagonism in the “Erdogan's way”.

From this point of view, it is not a coincidence that the EP Resolution was adopted immediately after Aliyev's visit to Moscow on April 22. According to the Russian and Azerbaijani media, I. Aliyev and V. Putin reached an agreement on a wide range of problems and harmonized their positions on many issues of the international agenda. In particular, one of the main topics of their talks was the issue of joint investments in the project of the North-South Continental Route along the North Sea–Caspian–Persian Gulf axis. They also discussed the issue of Baku's possible participation in the creation of new road-energy communications from Russia to China. It is also possible that after the change of the *status quo* because of the violent settlement of the Karabakh problem, the agenda of the talks included the issue of joint measures to prevent the strengthening of the collective influence of the West in the South Caucasus.

The EU has claims on all these points, because if they are realized, a paradoxical situation will arise: Azerbaijan, to whose Karabakh aggression and authoritarianism Europe turned a blind eye for a long time, to which it gave the opportunity to lay its oil and gas pipelines to the Old World and which it enriched with its contracts, is showing clear signs of rapprochement with RF, IRI and PRC, which are antagonistic to the West.

Aliyev's speech on April 23, 2024, at the COP29 International Forum in Baku, in which he actually blamed the current and former Ukrainian authorities for the launching of a bloody war with Russia, hardly escaped the attention of the European politicians. And this, even though today the position on the Ukrainian conflict is considered a marker of sympathy towards one or another global power center. In this context, it should be noted that such a “bold” assessment and identification of those “guilty” in the person of the pro-Western Ukrainian authorities had not been seen before with I. Aliyev.

In any case, there are specific reasons for the EU's caution. They make it nervous and signal Baku's readiness to resort to sanctions. It is highly probable that the same motives can explain Washington's precautionary measures against the Aliyev regime. The only difference is that the US authorities reminded Baku of the possibility of starting the process of its punishment not after Aliyev's visit to Moscow, but before it. Obviously, Washington knew in advance about the agenda of the Putin-Aliyev negotiations and tried to influence the latter's drift towards the Iranian-Russian format.

It should be recalled that recently the US authorities, through the opposition Azerbaijani journalist Alex Raufoglu, organized a “leak” of confidential information that a bipartisan group of American congressmen will draft a bill on personal sanctions against 40 Azerbaijani officials and military officers. These individuals are accused not only of supporting the authoritarian regime of I. Aliyev, but also of committing war crimes against the peaceful Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. The list includes army officers from generals to lieutenants, border guards, and intelligence officers, employees of Aliyev's office, prosecutors, and judges.

Thus, the “carrot” from the West is being replaced by the “stick”. So far, the stick has only been demonstrated, waiting for Aliyev's reaction, on which, in fact, the vote of the deputies will depend.