

Why was Charles Michel among the first to congratulate Ilham Aliyev?

ARVAK Center comment, 14.02.2024

On 08.02.2024, the President of the European Council Charles Michel was among the first to congratulate Ilham Aliyev on his victory in the presidential elections, even though the official results of these elections will not be vowed until February 17.

Michel called Aliyev personally, and then he himself informed the European public by a post on his page in the social network “X”: *“Congratulated Ilham Aliyev on his re-election as President of Azerbaijan and conveyed best wishes on his new mandate. We also discussed relations and cooperation between Azerbaijan and the European Union, including in the energy sector”*.

Such a rush of congratulations and the European Council’s most positive press release on the occasion raised a lot of questions in the European media and several political circles. In recent years, Aliyev's Azerbaijan has already managed to establish an image in European structures as a country with an authoritarian regime, unscrupulous foreign policy, and openly corrupt methods of lobbying its interests on various international platforms. On the eve of the last elections, a series of scandals broke out in Europe. These included the conviction of German MPs who had been bribed by Baku, Aliyev’s ban on the participation of the PACE monitoring group in the observation of the presidential elections in Azerbaijan, and the European Parliament’s refusal to observe upcoming presidential elections.

Against this background, the initiative of Michel, who heads one of the most authoritative structures of the European Union, has acquired the character of an absolute political anomaly, taking into account the fact that at that moment none of the leaders of European states considered it necessary to congratulate Aliyev. Michel preferred to be on the same list with the leaders of the key Turkic countries, Pakistan and regimes that, to put it mildly, “do not enjoy the political sympathy of the European Union”.

However, Charles Michel himself partially revealed the motives for his move mentioning the word “energy” in his post on the social network “X”. Obviously, in the global geopolitical situation that has developed because of Ukraine and the new round of confrontation between the West and Russia, the problems of Europe’s energy security have become existential for its economy and security, and that is why liberal Michel has to literally fawn before the Azerbaijani dictator, being confident that even the gas “crumbs” supplied by Azerbaijan to Europe are of great importance for it. Even if the most of this gas is actually Russian.

There is, although, another reason for Michel's zeal. Several analysts believe that it hides in the forthcoming elections of the President of the European Council. The fact is that Michel is preparing to run for re-election to this post again, and to guarantee success in the fall elections he should add some major political achievement to his “assets”. In this case, we are talking about the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace treaty, the signing of which Charles Michel still sees under his “aegis” and in Brussels. According to experts, with his hasty congratulations, the President of the European Council bargained for Aliyev’s consent to continue negotiations with Pashinyan in Brussels. The press release of the European Council confirmed the fact of an exchange of views on the matter during the phone talks, as well as the promise of I. Aliyev to fly to Europe to meet with N. Pashinyan.

This version is quite plausible in view of the wide awareness of the experts expressing it. At the same time, however, one should not ignore the above-described methods of lobbying, which are traditionally preferred in Baku, and which, as reality shows, are unfortunately favored by some European politicians.