

Europe Wants Action From Azerbaijan on Human Rights

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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TBILISI — Azerbaijan must uphold European human rights standards and move from promises to real promotion of basic freedoms, the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights said.

Azerbaijan, which has been governed by President Ilham Aliyev since he succeeded his father in 2003, has been courted by the West because of its role as an alternative to Russia in supplying oil and gas to Europe.

Rights groups accuse the Azeri authorities of muzzling dissent and jailing opponents, charges the government denies.

Nils Muiznieks, commissioner for human rights for the Council of Europe, said he had seen no progress toward greater freedom of expression since a visit to the oil-producing Caspian Sea state in November.

"I am concerned by reports of increasing repression and restrictions on basic human rights," he said Monday in an e-mailed response to questions. "It appears that the authorities are seeking to muzzle civil society and independent thinkers."

The 47-nation Council of Europe promotes common principles on human rights and democracy.

Police fired water cannons and rubber bullets on March 10 to disperse a crowd demonstrating against violence in the military in the capital, Baku, and detained dozens of protesters.

Last week, a court sentenced Avaz Zeynally, editor of the Khural daily, to nine years in prison for extortion, a charge he says is a baseless government reprisal for a story criticizing senior officials.

"I regret to see this abrupt setback," Muiznieks said of the sentence, which followed the release of some jailed journalists.

Muiznieks said he had held constructive talks with the authorities, including on freedom of expression, during a November visit to the South Caucasus nation. "I haven't seen any progress so far," he said.

The government says the country's 9 million people enjoy full freedom of speech and access to a lively opposition press.

"There is democracy in Azerbaijan and rallies are allowed but in specific places and not in the center of Baku, as this leads to the violation of public order," said Eldar Ibrahimov, a lawmaker from the ruling New Azerbaijan Party.

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