



# KOSOVO

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## Trouble in Nowhere Land

By Simon Tisdall, The Guardian

When Ganimat Zahidov, editor of the independent Azadlyq newspaper, arrived for work one day this month in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, he was accosted on the pavement by a young woman he had never seen before who started cursing and shouting at him. Moments later "an athletically built young man popped out of nowhere and began beating me", he said. "I defended myself as best I could."

Within hours, Zahidov had been arrested, charged with "hooliganism" and sentenced to two months' pre-trial detention. If found guilty, he faces five years in jail. He joined eight other Azerbaijani journalists in custody after criticising or otherwise annoying the government of President Ilham Aliyev.

According to Idrak Abbasov of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, organisations including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) say Zahidov was the victim of a staged provocation, part of an assault on free speech and press freedom. The US state department agrees. This month it called on the Baku government to "comply with its stated commitments to respect the rule of law and support the development of independent media".

But overall, outside criticism has been muted - and ignored by Aliyev. Azerbaijan's importance to Washington and the EU as a producer and conduit of Caspian oil and gas, as a Nato-friendly ally bordering Iran, and as a foil to Russia overshadows human rights and democracy concerns.

And Aliyev's secular government, presiding over a majority Muslim nation, also skilfully plays on US "war on terror" fears. It made much this month of alleged plots by Wahhabi extremists to attack the American and British embassies and possibly blow up the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.

Yet keeping things under wraps in Azerbaijan and in neighbouring Armenia and Georgia is likely to prove ever harder in 2008. All three will hold presidential elections next year that, on past performance, will bring accusations of fraud or other wrongdoing and may turn violent. Azerbaijan and Armenia, locked in dispute over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (the spur for a war in the early 1990s that claimed 35,000 lives), are engaged in a furious arms race. And Caucasus-wide tensions are certain to grow if the US moves towards military confrontation with Iran.

This is the region that author Thomas de Waal dubbed "Nowhere Land", caught between the Black and Caspian seas, Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam,



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authoritarianism and democracy - and alternately neglected and exploited by the great powers. "The US and Europe have plenty of agendas in these countries... but show no evidence of having an overall strategy or a vision for the region's future," De Waal wrote in the Wall Street Journal.

According to the independent Caucasus-Caspian Commission, currently examining closer EU ties with the area, new security arrangements are needed to prevent "frozen conflicts" reigniting. Europe's financial clout and its experience of "competitive politics, good governance, sustainable development and media freedom" should be brought to bear, it said.

The Brussels-based International Crisis Group warned this month about renewed fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh. The 1994 ceasefire had not been turned into a peace deal, Azerbaijan and Armenia were engaged in belligerent rhetoric and military build-ups, and mediators were not exhibiting sufficient urgency, it said. "Oil and gas pipelines would likely be among the first casualties of a new war, something Europe and the US have an interest in avoiding."

As if all this were not enough, a new explosive trigger for increased Caucasus instability looms in the shape of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia, expected by January. So far Europe's focus has been on the impact on Bosnia's Serbs and Macedonia's Albanians, who may follow suit. But the eastwards impact of Kosovo on Georgia's breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia could be more significant, especially if Russia decided to egg them on.

"Whatever western governments choose to say, [Kosovo] will strengthen the confidence of the Caucasus separatist territories that time is on their side and that facts on the ground will eventually be recognised in perpetuity," De Waal warned.

And if Nato's April summit formally places Georgia, a former Soviet republic, on the road to membership, Moscow's fury will blow coldly through the southern Caucasus.