

# Armenia Joins Europe

What Council of Europe Membership Will Mean for Armenia and Azerbaijan

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers passed a resolution on November 9 accepting Armenia as a full member of the 41-nation pan-European democratic and human rights organization. The Armenian flag will be raised outside the organization's headquarters in Strasbourg in January when the CE Parliamentary Assembly, which had also voted in favor of accession in June (see AIM July 2000) formally ratifies the decision.

Armenia's Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian thanked the Committee in Strasbourg for their "vote of confidence in Armenia" and said: "In the past few years we have attempted to maintain a steady course in

preparation for our Council of Europe membership. I am truly honored and privileged to be here today and take this invitation for Armenia's membership back home." Since its membership application in 1996, admission to the Council of Europe has been one of the important goals of Armenian foreign policy, especially as it enables further integration into European structures.

In his address to the Committee of Ministers, Oskanian explained Armenia's challenges and reiterated Yerevan's "commitment to democracy, rule of law and the principles and provisions" of the Council. "Our democracy, we understand, is still in its infancy," he continued. "We have a long

way to travel. And today we have a clear blueprint which will guide us, lead us on this path. We have problems, shortcomings and flaws not only domestically, but also in our region. We have differences with our neighbor Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh. We have differences with our other neighbor Turkey on how we interpret history and our common past. We will not bring these problems to the Council; we simply want to use the Council and its values to address these issues. We believe that the more democratic, open and transparent our societies become, it will be that much easier for us to address those most contentious political problems. We believe we

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Azerbaijani soldiers smile near the entrance of a polling station during parliamentary elections in Baku, Azerbaijan. The poster in Russian at right reads: 5th of November 2000, Day of the Election. This was Azerbaijan's second parliamentary election since the country gained independence after the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union.

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can, together with our neighbors, transcend these problems.”

The crucial vote was taken after weeks of uncertainty. First, the decision that was to have been made in June was postponed to November in order for Azerbaijan to hold its scheduled parliamentary elections. As a result, the decision on Armenia was also postponed since the CE insisted on admitting Armenia and Azerbaijan simultaneously. Any election-related fiascos could have derailed Yerevan’s chances for accession and they almost did.

Following the elections, Baku was criticized by the international community for massive violations and fraud. As a result, Azerbaijan’s accession was in the air. In the end, both countries were accepted as full members although the CE’s Committee of Ministers asked Baku “to submit, within a month, a report responding to the criticisms voiced by the international observer mission... and to rectify the instances of reported fraud.” A monitoring group has been set up for this purpose which will present a report by January 17.

During the long deliberations and discussions which preceded the vote, the Republic of Turkey insisted on the “simultaneous admission policy” and on instituting a similar monitoring mechanism for Armenia. CE decisions are based on consensus, which means each member state has veto power.

“Turkey is aware of the large differences between Azerbaijan and Armenia, in terms of their qualifications and preparedness, and was concerned that Azerbaijan might fall short of qualifying. Thus,



Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev casts his ballot at a polling station during parliamentary elections in Baku.

Turkey insisted on keeping the membership admission of the two together,” explained Christian Der Stepanian, Armenia’s representative to the Council of Europe, in a telephone interview with AIM from Strasbourg.

While Turkey accorded full support to Azerbaijan, Greece was a most vocal advocate for Armenia. The Greek representative to the CE made it clear that the mem-

bership of the two states should be “uncoupled.” The Greek minister stated that on January 17 Armenia’s dossier should be discussed separately and on its own merits.

“There should not be any problems for full admission of Armenia in January,” says Ter Stepanian, adding, “In the end, I believe Azerbaijan will concede to the demands of the Council.”

Indeed, in the end, Turkey’s request was rejected and the final statement said monitoring for Armenia shall be set up only “if necessary.” Instead the statement made certain recommendations for both members-to-be, although Armenia’s list is slightly shorter. It did affirm, for example, that Yerevan and Baku “must step up their joint efforts to secure a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.” It called upon the Vienna Commission to provide assistance in legal reforms. Both countries will also have to encourage the development and evolution of media outlets, independent of government control. Civil service legislation is required, as are regulations controlling the electoral process.

The first obstacle Azerbaijan must overcome is the record of its most recent elections. Observers point out that since President Aliyev scored a major victory in his country’s parliamentary elections and achieved his political goal, he will fulfill the recommendations for admission and even allow some opposition parties into parliament. Already, since the November 5 polls, the government has called for new elections in several districts. Having come so near to membership, failure to meet the

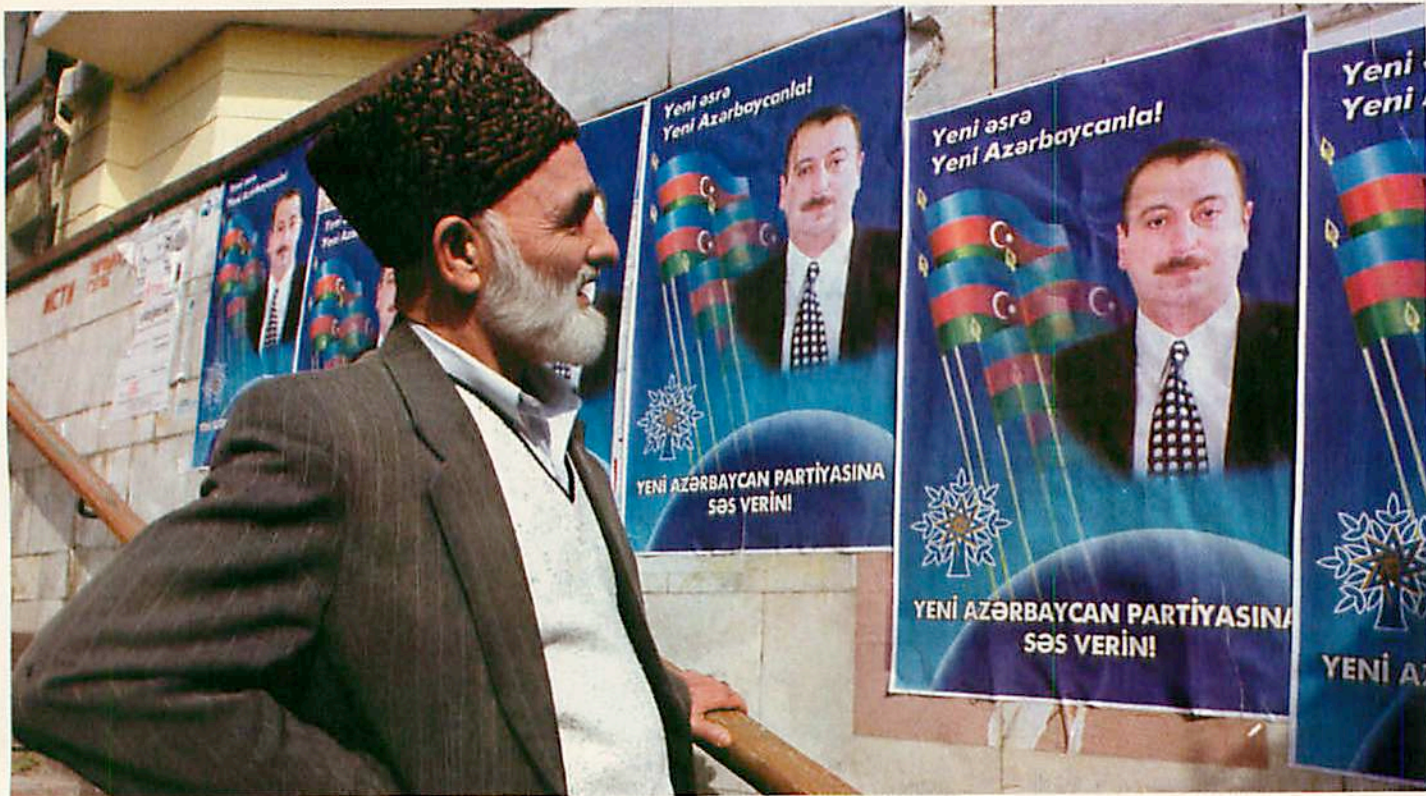
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expectations of the Council would make it very difficult for Azerbaijan to get back on track. On the other hand, CE insiders are convinced that if they leave Azerbaijan out, then they will have no leverage for instituting and monitoring legal reforms in the country.

Still, until January 17, behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts will continue, both by Yerevan and Baku, to make sure the "political decision" made by the Committee of Ministers is sealed with full membership in the organization.

President Heidar Aliyev and his Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) scored a massive victory in the oil-rich nation's second parliamentary elections, as expected. But all reports indicated that the poll was marred with widespread violations, ballot box stuffing, fraud, and heavy-handed government meddling in the process.

Opposite page: An Azerbaijani man looks at election posters of candidate of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party Ilkham Aliev, son of Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev, on the eve of parliamentary election in Baku, November 4, 2000.

"We expected to witness some falsifications during the vote count, but not so flagrant and on such large scale," said Gerard Studman, head of OSCE/ODIHR delegation. While noting improvements over previous elections in Azerbaijan, Andreas Gross, head of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly delegation, said: "We haven't seen anything like this before." US-based National Democratic Institute's Nelson Ledsky observed that "the violations that were witnessed... raise doubts as to whether the final results will reflect the will of the people," adding that the poll did not even meet "the minimum international standards."

Azerbaijani opposition parties had similar complaints. Over 20 opposition parties said the elections were neither valid nor legal and should not be recognized. "It is not possible to tolerate this any longer," stated angry Lala Shovket Hajiyev, leader of the Liberal Party of Azerbaijan. "The people have been deprived of land, bread, water, gas and light, and now the time has come to deprive them of their vote," she said, urging the opposition to form an alter-

native parliament.

Officially, only two parties were successful: the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party, with 70 percent of the vote, and the reform-minded faction of the Popular Front (see AIM October 2000), which barely met the minimum six percent threshold with 6.4 percent. The rest of the parties, according to election officials, gained less than five percent of the vote. However, long before the elections, the political objective of the Azerbaijani administration had become quite obvious: the "transfer of power" from 77-year-old President Aliyev to his 38-year-old son Ilham, who is expected to become Speaker of Parliament, the second most important position in the country. According to Azerbaijan's Constitution, the Speaker assumes the duties of the president in the event he is incapacitated or dies. But, President Aliyev, despite his health problems, is far from retiring. "My presidential term runs through 2003 and the people are going to elect me once more in the next presidential election," he said confidently. ■

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