

Double Standards in EU's Annual Human Rights Assessments: The Cases of Azerbaijan and Belarus Compared

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Two different vocabularies for EU policy

The European Union's annual human rights [report](#) is more than a list of abuses. Its wording also shows how Brussels understands the seriousness of these abuses: what it chooses to mention in detail, what it describes in general terms, whom it identifies as responsible, and how it describes a government itself.

In this respect, the EU's 2025 entries on Belarus and Azerbaijan are strikingly different. The issue is not whether Belarus deserves strong condemnation; it clearly does. The question is whether similar forms of authoritarian repression are described with the same precision in the case of Azerbaijan. The answer is clear: They are not.

Geopolitics is almost certainly the cause of this difference. Belarus and Azerbaijan occupy very different positions in the EU's foreign policy, and the language of the report appears to reflect this distinction.

This comparison also has implications for how Azerbaijani democratic forces should understand the relationship between European human rights commitments and European geopolitical interests.

The contrast begins with the first sentences. For Belarus, the EU writes:

"In 2025, the human rights situation in Belarus remains of very high concern."

For Azerbaijan:

"In 2025, the human rights and democracy situation in Azerbaijan continued to present significant challenges."

A similar pattern continues throughout the two assessments. The Belarus section uses much more direct language. It speaks about a "widespread and systematic state-led campaign of repression," the "arbitrary use of force against civilians," and the "institutionalization of repressive practices." In the Azerbaijan section, on the other hand, the language is more institutional and diplomatic. The "governance environment remained restrictive"; civil society organizations "operated under restrictive conditions"; "serious concerns" regarding judicial independence "persisted"; and courts "continued to be perceived as lacking sufficient independence in politically sensitive cases." Belarus has "political prisoners." Azerbaijan has "persons detained in politically sensitive cases."

The Azerbaijan section is not entirely devoid of strong language. It states, for example, that legislative, administrative, and judicial frameworks "continued to severely restrict the exercise of fundamental freedoms." Yet even here, responsibility is framed institutionally and impersonally. On political imprisonment, the attribution of responsibility, and the characterization of repression, the language remains notably less direct than that used for Belarus.

The difference is not only in the adjectives. It is also about who is presented as responsible. In Belarus, there is a "state-led campaign of repression." In Azerbaijan, there is a "restrictive governance environment." In the Belarus section, repression is something that the state does. In the Azerbaijan section, the government itself often disappears from the sentence.

The contrast is also clear in the multilateral sections. Regarding Azerbaijan, the EU “continued to address,” “delivered statements,” “supported mechanisms,” “maintained engagement,” and “contributed to discussions.” Regarding Belarus, the EU made statements “condemning the ongoing human rights violations.”

The verbs used for Azerbaijan mainly describe diplomatic activity. The verbs used for Belarus express judgment. Taken together, this is difficult to see as accidental.

Does Azerbaijan have political [prisoners](#)?

The clearest example is political imprisonment. The Belarus section states directly:

“At the end of December 2025, Belarus had still more than 1,100 political prisoners arbitrarily detained.”

It also provides detailed quantitative information. The reader therefore immediately understands the scale of political imprisonment in Belarus.

Nothing similar is provided for Azerbaijan. Instead, the report refers to “individuals detained in politically sensitive cases” and later to “individual cases of persons detained or banned from exiting the country for exercising their fundamental rights.”

This difference in terminology is important. A “political prisoner” clearly identifies the nature of the human rights violation. A “person detained in a politically sensitive case” does not. It describes the circumstances around the case but avoids saying directly that the imprisonment itself is political.

The result is a very different picture. In the Belarus section, political imprisonment is clearly named and counted. In the Azerbaijan section, it becomes a much more ambiguous category. This is one of the clearest examples of how word

choice can change the political meaning of a human rights report.

Belarus released human rights defenders and political figures while Azerbaijan released none

The contrast becomes even sharper when we look at developments during 2025. The EU report states that around 360 persons were released in Belarus during the year, including prominent human rights defenders and political figures. At the same time, it immediately points out that some of these releases were accompanied by forced deportation, uncertain legal status, harassment and other abuses.

The comparison with Azerbaijan is striking. The Azerbaijan section might have been expected to address this issue because the Azerbaijani government had announced a large-scale amnesty. Yet, despite the so-called amnesty, [none of the imprisoned](#) journalists, civil society activists or opposition figures were released. On the contrary, those individuals continued to be imprisoned during 2025, adding to an already substantial number of political prisoners.

In the Belarus section, therefore, even the release of human rights defenders and political figures is immediately followed by discussion of the abuses connected with or following their release. In the Azerbaijan section, the further deterioration of the situation receives much less emphasis.

There is another important difference. The Belarus section follows political opponents even after their release. It discusses deportation, vulnerability, continuing pressure on released individuals and their families, restrictions on movement and threats of re-detention. The Azerbaijan section, however, does not address the intensified transnational repression by the Azerbaijani government during this period: sentences delivered in absentia, physical attacks against government critics on European streets, and court sentences related to such attacks. The Belarus section indicates that

two political prisoners died in prison, but the fact that the young member of the opposition Popular Front Party, Ellbayi Karmili, also died in prison is not mentioned in the Azerbaijani part of the report.

The Belarus section states that “the arbitrary use of force against civilians persists” and that “the security sector was reinforced as part of the institutionalisation of repressive practices.” The same patterns are also evident in Azerbaijan. However, when addressing Azerbaijan, the report suddenly avoids the direct and explicit language used in the Belarus section.

Closed Land Borders: An Extraordinary Restriction Overlooked

The Belarus report recognizes restrictions on movement as part of its analysis of repression in Belarus. It refers to continuing pressure and harassment against released individuals and their families, including “restrictions on movement.” The Azerbaijan section also mentions targeted exit bans. It says that EU discussions included individuals “banned from exiting the country for exercising their fundamental rights.” But even this issue appears in the section describing diplomatic engagement. It is not featured as an important part of the human rights assessment itself. Moreover, the Azerbaijan section does not mention that family members of political prisoners have also faced different forms of pressure from the Azerbaijani authorities, including travel bans.

I would like to highlight one further issue related to freedom of movement which, in my view, should have been addressed in the annual human rights report but was not: Azerbaijan’s prolonged [closure of its land borders](#) to regular land crossings. These restrictions were introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and have been maintained under the “special quarantine regime” long after the acute phase of the pandemic ended. For Azerbaijani citizens, this is not a minor

administrative matter. It constitutes a serious restriction on freedom of movement.

For several years now, Azerbaijani citizens have been living under a regime in which ordinary international travel by land is severely restricted. Regardless of the various security-related or political arguments put forward by the Azerbaijani government to justify keeping the borders closed, the continuation of a pandemic-era emergency regime for such a prolonged period is clearly a human rights issue.

To illustrate how the closure of the borders has restricted the movement of Azerbaijan's population, I would like to draw attention to one fact. Georgia's official statistics show that while Azerbaijani citizens made approximately [1.53 million](#) visits to Georgia in 2019, before the pandemic, this figure was approximately [292,000](#) in 2025. In other words, the number of visits by Azerbaijani citizens to Georgia in 2025 was approximately 81 percent lower than in 2019. This comparison illustrates the scale of the restriction on freedom of movement and its potentially significant economic and social consequences.

Property rights

One of the most important omissions of the report concerns property rights. The report fails to address the [demolition](#) of privately owned homes in Baku in the course of large-scale redevelopment and construction projects, the forced displacement of residents, and longstanding disputes over inadequate compensation. In some cases, the affected properties are buildings of historical and architectural significance, making their destruction an issue of both individual rights and cultural heritage. The forced acquisition or demolition of private property without adequate compensation, transparent procedures, and effective legal remedies raises serious [human rights concerns](#) and deserves explicit attention in any comprehensive assessment of the

human rights situation in Azerbaijan.

This omission is significant for the same reason as the report's treatment of political imprisonment and freedom of movement. When serious rights concerns are left outside the assessment, the problem is no longer only one of diplomatic vocabulary, but also of selective attention.

Davos and the paradox of political legitimacy

The different treatment of the two authoritarian systems can also be seen beyond the report itself. The 2025 World Economic Forum in Davos provides a good example. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya [attended as the Leader](#) of the Democratic Forces of Belarus, representing the political alternative to Alexander Lukashenko's government. At the same gathering, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev [participated](#) as the internationally recognized head of state and met with political and business leaders.

The contrast is striking. In the case of Belarus, European and international actors clearly distinguish between the authoritarian government and the democratic forces opposing it. In the case of Azerbaijan, the authoritarian government itself remains an accepted geopolitical partner with whom European leaders discuss energy, economic, security and regional issues.

This difference makes the language of the EU human rights report easier to understand: Belarus is approached by distinguishing between the authoritarian regime and its democratic alternative, while Azerbaijan, despite its authoritarian political system, remains a strategic partner.

“Engagement” with Azerbaijan, “accountability” for Belarus

The bilateral sections make this difference particularly stark. For Azerbaijan, the report states:

“The EU maintained regular exchanges with Azerbaijani

authorities throughout 2025.”

It lists meetings with state institutions and discussions on judicial reform, media freedom, detainees, religious minorities, gender equality and corruption. The section concludes:

“While dialogue channels remained open, progress on structural reforms was limited.”

The main approach is therefore engagement with the existing government.

For Belarus, the report states:

“In 2025, Belarus was high on the EU’s agenda.”

It discusses restrictive measures, political prisoners, democratic forces and civil society. It also mentions meetings with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the high-level conference entitled “Building Foundations for Democratic Change.”

The contrast is clear. In the case of Azerbaijan, the EU continues to engage with the incumbent government despite limited progress. In the case of Belarus, EU policy includes restrictive measures, support for democratic forces and efforts to hold perpetrators of human rights violations accountable.

Geopolitics is not an incidental explanation

The comparison becomes more politically uncomfortable when geopolitics is brought into the picture. The difference in language corresponds too closely with the EU’s very different geopolitical relations with Belarus and Azerbaijan to be ignored. This is where a double standard can emerge without ever being officially declared.

When relations with a government are already confrontational, the diplomatic cost of explicit condemnation is much lower.

Officials can speak directly about perpetrators, call prisoners political prisoners, describe repression as state-led and demand accountability. They can also openly support democratic forces challenging the government. This is what we see in the Belarus section.

With Azerbaijan, the relationship is different. The EU has geopolitical interests connected with energy, regional stability, transport corridors, Central Asia and the South Caucasus. These are legitimate elements of foreign policy. But a human rights report has a different purpose.

This is how geopolitical double standards can take shape without any written instruction to apply them. They become visible not only in vocabulary but also in the selection of facts and the general political framing.

If restrictions on movement are recognized as part of repression in Belarus, while Azerbaijan's multiyear land-border restrictions are not examined, the difference becomes difficult to explain only through human rights considerations. If important forms of repression against Azerbaijani government critics outside the country are also omitted, then the problem is not only about language. It is also about which facts are included and which are left out.

The EU cannot credibly maintain that human rights are universal while allowing the language used to describe violations to depend on the geopolitical usefulness of the government committing them. Universality does not mean that the EU must have the same foreign policy toward every country. But comparable violations should at least be examined according to comparable standards.

If strategic partnership affects whether political prisoners are called political prisoners, the credibility of human rights reporting is damaged. If repression by an adversarial government is quantified while repression by a partner government is described through general formulations, the

reader receives a different picture of two authoritarian systems.

So, this is not an impartial human rights report; it is also a geopolitical tool. It may be politically effective, but presenting it simply as a human rights report is immoral when one takes into account the real human suffering and the fates of those directly affected by the situation.

Conclusion

For Azerbaijani democratic forces, this comparison also carries a political lesson. If European governments conduct their Azerbaijani policy according to realpolitik, Azerbaijani democratic forces should not blindly subordinate their own struggle to European geopolitical priorities, as they have done so far.

The Azerbaijani democratic opposition has its own political interest: the establishment of a liberal-democratic system in Azerbaijan. The primary adversary of this interest is Azerbaijan's authoritarian regime. Unlike Belarusian authoritarianism, however, Azerbaijani authoritarianism is not a political adversary of the European Union.

Azerbaijani democratic forces should therefore pursue their own interests while taking this reality into account. If European governments follow their own geopolitical interests, Azerbaijani democrats also have the legitimate right to pursue their struggle with the same political realism.