



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITY
Centre for Russian
and Eurasian Studies

International symposium

“# protestBaku. Is Azerbaijan next in line for a democratic revolution?”

May 21, 2013

On May 21 the UCRS organized a research symposium at Museum Gustavianum funded by Uppsala Forum for Democracy, Peace and Security and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. In the light of a number of popular protests that have taken place in Azerbaijan earlier this year the purpose of the symposium was to promote a discussion on the theme of political mobilization and activism in Azerbaijan and beyond. Through the presentations the audience got an idea of who is protesting, the methods used and more generally about the circumstances under which these protests arose.

Dr. Anette Månsson from Uppsala Forum Steering Group spoke in her keynote speech about the Arab Spring and democratization "from below" in a Middle Eastern context. This was followed by an introduction by Dr. Sofie Bedford, UCRS, describing the protests that some have referred to as a possible Azerbaijani Spring. She talked about how the current Azerbaijani government's preference of "controlled democracy" is colliding with the requests for genuine democratic reform and change that are more and more often voiced by the country's young people. In her presentation Shahla Sultanova, a journalist from Azerbaijan, illustrated the Azerbaijani democratic opposition. Initially she described a number of established opposition parties with less and less influence in society and largely lacking other political platforms than regime change. After this, she talked about the emergence of a younger generation of democracy activists and the organizations they represent. Finally, she noted that young activists, who are often seen and heard more than traditional dissidents, have come to be seen as the greatest threat to the regime which has resulted in a high degree of repression against them. Dr. Katy Pearce, researcher in communication studies at Washington State University, discussed the importance of social media for political mobilization in Azerbaijan, but concluded that because Internet use among the general population is so low one should not overestimate the digital influence. According to her it is a small, primarily male, more "elitist" part of the population that uses social media to act against the regime and organizing various protest events. The final speaker, Adnan Hajizade is a democracy activist from Azerbaijan and in his speech he talked about how humor is often used as a political tool by opposition groups in Azerbaijan, both historically and today especially through social media. He also gave examples of how pro-regime forces use Internet humor as well to "fight back" against the opposition. In addition, he noted that online activism today often face offline consequences in so far that digital anti-regime humor in many cases have been severely punished. Adnan described how he himself had been sentenced to prison after taking part in a satirical YouTube video making fun of the president of Azerbaijan. The symposium ended with a concluding summary by Professor David Smith from the UCRS. There were about around twenty participants in the audience that posed interesting and engaged questions to the panelists during the discussion. In conclusion, the organizers are very pleased with the symposium's outcomes. The discussions on developments in Azerbaijan were informative and inspiring. The organizers also established very good contacts with the speakers that are valuable for the UCRS further work on the Caucasus region.