
MEPs must explain trips to Azerbaijan

Some MEPs appear to have indulged in electoral tourism.

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Crass stupidity or petty venality seem to be the only plausible explanations for a member of the European Parliament choosing to go to Baku as an unofficial observer of Azerbaijan's sham presidential election last week.

There might be some high-minded MEP who would pay his or her own way, obtain unfettered access and report back to the Parliament and/or voters in enlightening terms. But we have yet to discover this rare breed of MEP and we are still waiting to read his or her report. Instead, what we publish today is a list (probably incomplete)

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visit and to stay in a plush hotel at somebody else's expense.

It might be funny if the regime in Azerbaijan did not have such a poor record in respecting human rights and democracy. Yes, this is a country that is blessed with a wealthy abundance of oil, but that does not mean members of the European Parliament should collude in cheapening the value of elections.

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Azeri government interests.

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Did these innocents genuinely believe that their quiescent presence at the elections would not be used in some way by President Ilham Aliev and his supporters? The milk-and-water report from their front organisation bears feeble testimony to the so-called independence of these MEPs.

Estonian liberal MEP Kristiina Ojuland was quoted in the Azeri media praising the government, but refuses to say who paid for her trip.

The official report from the official European Parliament delegation to the elections is embarrassing enough. But at least that delegation travelled in an official capacity at the European Union's expense. Those MEPs who went at the expense of others must explain themselves to their voters and do them the courtesy of

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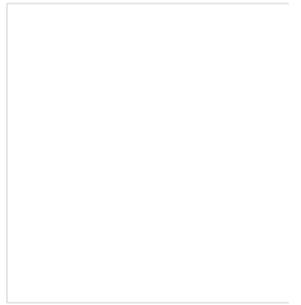
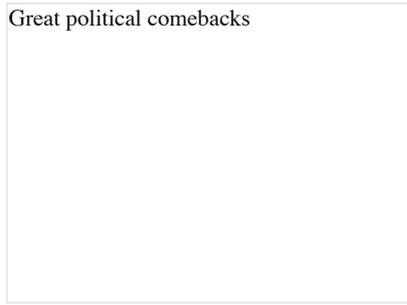
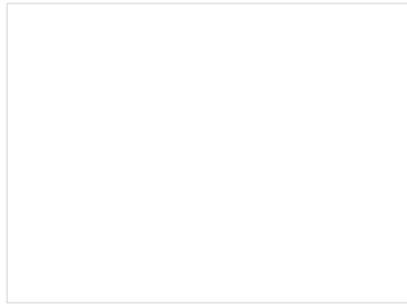


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clarifying how a trip to Azerbaijan was more important than attending the Parliament's plenary session.

The shambles over sham election observation comes, ironically enough, just seven months before the elections to the European Parliament. At those elections, Europe's cross-border political parties will be staking their claims to represent voters Europe-wide. Yet the number of MEPs disappearing off to Azerbaijan raises serious questions about the capacity of some of those political parties to speak for anyone. On this evidence, the ALDE group is an ill-disciplined, ill-managed rabble. The leadership cannot keep its own MEPs in order, so why should voters support so-called ALDE candidates for the presidency of the European Commission or any other job?

It is an axiom of democratic politics that an elected representative should have the freedom to go anywhere, see anything and say anything. We are not questioning that general principle. But that axiom stems from the presumption that in democratic politics voters will have the chance to deliver their verdict on how the elected have used such freedom. Those MEPs who went to Azerbaijan should be held to account by their parties and their voters. Those who cannot explain themselves do not merit re-election. Otherwise, European parliamentary democracy is little better than the Azeri version.



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