Azerbaijan’s President Criticizes Western Hypocrisy at COP29 Opening; Lauds Fossil Fuels

In a bold and unorthodox move, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev launched a scathing critique of Western nations during his opening address at this year’s COP29 climate conference, which his country is hosting.

Aliyev, often described as a petrostate autocrat, did not mince words as he condemned what he termed the “double standards” and “political hypocrisy” prevalent among certain Western governments, NGOs, and media outlets. “Unfortunately, double standards, a habit to lecture other countries and political hypocrisy became kind of modus operandi for some politicians, state-controlled NGOs and fake news media in some Western countries,” he declared.

This approach marked a departure from the typically measured and cooperative tones of opening speeches at COP gatherings. Aliyev openly defended Azerbaijan’s oil and gas industries, referring to these resources as “a gift of God” comparable to any other natural resource. He argued that nations should not be criticized for possessing and marketing fossil fuels, emphasizing the essential role they play in meeting global energy demands. “Countries should not be blamed for having them and should not be blamed for bringing these resources to the market because the market needs them. The people need them,” he asserted.

This year marks the second consecutive time that a nation heavily reliant on fossil fuels has hosted the COP climate talks. Last year, the United Arab Emirates held the conference, presenting a more tempered stance by acknowledging the ongoing necessity of fossil fuels for the global economy.

A significant portion of Aliyev’s address targeted European nations, particularly those that have increased their purchases of Azerbaijani gas following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. He attributed these deals to the European Commission’s initiative rather than his own. Recalling a meeting with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in July 2022, Aliyev stated, “They needed our gas due to the changed geopolitical situation and they asked us to help.” A spokesperson for the Commission did not respond to requests for comment on the president’s remarks. The European Union continues to advocate for COP29 to reaffirm and enhance the agreement made last year to phase out fossil fuels.

Azerbaijan’s economy remains heavily dependent on oil and gas, which accounted for nearly half of its GDP and 92.5 percent of export revenue in 2022, according to the U.S. International Trade Administration. Despite this reliance, Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan is committed to the green transition. “As president of COP29, of course, we will be a strong advocate for green transition and we are doing it,” he said. “But at the same time, we must be realistic.”

The president also took issue with U.S. media labeling Azerbaijan as a “petrostate,” arguing that his country is the world’s leading oil and gas producer. Additionally, Aliyev addressed criticisms from civil society groups calling for a boycott of COP29 due to Azerbaijan’s government policies and its significant fossil fuel industry. Responding to these calls, he highlighted the substantial international participation in the conference. “I have bad news for them,” Aliyev stated, receiving applause from the audience. “We have 72,000 registered participants from 196 countries. Among them 80 presidents, vice presidents and prime ministers. So the world gathered in Baku, and we say to the world: Welcome to Azerbaijan.”

The European Union remains steadfast in its efforts to steer the global conversation towards reducing fossil fuel dependency, seeking to balance the immediate energy needs with long-term sustainability goals. As COP29 progresses, the interplay between fossil fuel interests and environmental advocacy continues to shape the discourse, underscoring the complex challenges in addressing climate change on a global scale.