

Geopolitical Turbulence in the Caucasus

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If at the mention of Azerbaijan its delicious lamb and rice national dish plov comes to mind, or the equally tasty vinegret salad in the case of Georgia, that certainly would not be the wrong association. Lamentably, however, both countries – as well as the entire Caucasus region where they are key strategic players – are increasingly becoming notable for reasons far less innocuous than outstanding gastronomy.

To put it very simply, after Syria the Caucasus – barely 800 miles to the northeast – is literally Russia's second line of defense, its "soft underbelly," to use a worn but apposite phrase. Quite understandably, Russia is in Syria, among other reasons, precisely to make sure that it would not have to fall back to the aforementioned defense line. Its geopolitical opponents, however, are doing their utmost to see to it that it does. Hence the intense turbulence and maneuvering between Baku and Tbilisi, and beyond.

NATO Flags in Tbilisi. On a recent day, the main street of Georgia's capital of Tbilisi was awash with American flags. Like neighboring Azerbaijan, Georgia is another strategically positioned former Soviet republic in the Caucasus. The occasion for the flag display was the visit of US lieutenant-general Frederick Hodges, commander of US forces in Europe, who arrived on a special mission, ostensibly to commend the performance of Georgian troops who were undergoing combat training at the US military base in Oberpfalz, in Germany. But as it turns out, the US is also constructing a new military facility in Georgia.[1] According to Georgia's defense minister Levan Izoriya, the base is expected to open before the end of this year.

It takes little imagination to appreciate that the training Georgian soldiers are currently undergoing could, at some point in the future, come in handy for hypothetical operations such as, for instance, raising tensions on the border with Abkhazia or again, as in 2008, South Ossetia. True enough, with Saakashvili's unregretted departure Georgia now seems to have a leadership that is disinclined to become involved in such reckless adventures. It is also true, however, that the US military presence in Georgia is not confined to maintaining just a special forces training facility. A slew of foreign operated antennae, radar installations, and other surveillance facilities in Georgia attests to that. The US and NATO, Georgia's prospective membership in the latter is again becoming an active conversation topic, apparently are committed to some long-range goals in this particular part of the world.



Georgian and NATO flags on top of the Sakrebulo (local government) building in Tbilisi. (Photo by Nino Alavidze/Agenda.ge)

The scope of observable foreign activities would be incomprehensible on the theory that

they are designed to serve no more than purely regional ambitions. Their true goal is more likely to be significantly broader: to extend US and NATO presence beyond the Caucasus. In that context, Georgia is no more than Washington's stepping stone, a forward post. At a recent meeting with Georgia's foreign minister Mikhail Janelidze, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson promised "full US support."

"The US is ready to back Georgia in any situation," Janelidze gloated ominously after the meeting. Ominously, because backing Georgia means getting involved in its myriad border disputes and internal separatist issues.

A bit of recent Georgian political history could come in handy. During the post-Soviet period Georgia had four presidents. The first, the poet Zviad Gamsahurdia, wanted Georgia to be neutral, a goal which the prosaic realists in NATO and Washington, bent on occupying the post-Soviet space left vacant by Moscow's withdrawal, found utterly repugnant. The more cooperative successor whom they subsequently installed, Eduard Shevernadze of *perestroika* memory, attempted a two-track policy. On the one hand, he signed agreements allowing the construction of Western-sponsored pipelines in his country. On the other, in 1994 he made Georgia a member of the post-Soviet grouping, Commonwealth of Independent States (SNG).

After the wavering Shevernadze was thrown under the bus, his successor Mikhail Saakashvili pursued a clearly delineated and radical pro-Western policy, presumably more likely to impress his overseas backers. During Saakashvili's presidency diplomatic relations with Russia were broken off. Borders between the two countries were closed for a long period. Saakashvili did his best to drag Georgia into NATO.

"Our presidents are continuously dashing off to the US and other Western countries as mere vassals. We are subservient to the West. For at least nine years we have had nothing resembling our own independent policy," laments Georgian political analyst Hatuna Lasagidze.

"Balanced politics," Azerbaijani style. For the West, Azerbaijan is a strategically important country, capable of supplying the European Union with gas while bypassing Russia. It can also become a staging area for access to other Central Asian energy supplies. As a result, Azeri leadership has had little choice but to maneuver continuously between the various power centers while implementing the so-called "policy of balance." That is no easy task, particularly at a time when the competing interests of Russia and the West seem more polarized than ever.

The Eastern Partnership project seeks to link six former Soviet republics - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldavia, Ukraine, and Belarus - as closely and inextricably to the EU as possible. Three of those countries, Georgia, Moldavia, and Ukraine, signed EU Association Agreements in 2014. As far as Azerbaijan is concerned, its adherence to "European values" has been proceeding somewhat less smoothly. Azerbaijan refused to sign the Association Agreement so as not to undermine its good relations with Russia. So says, at least, Azeri parliament deputy Azay Guliev.

Azeri public opinion for the moment seems dead set against an overtly pro-European policy and is calling upon President Ilham Aliyev not to rush to coddle the arrogant Europeans, whose perceived double standards with regard to the Nagorno Karabakh dispute with

Armenia many find irritable. For over twenty years Azerbaijan has been in a state of frozen conflict with Armenia on the Karabakh issue. More than a million Azeris have been expelled and have found refuge elsewhere (which is a little known fact). There is armed conflict from time to time. In April 2016 it intensified to the point that a genuine four-day war was fought between Azeri and Armenian forces.



Ilham Aliyev with his first lady during the [Moscow Victory Day Parade](https://www.kremlin.ru/photography/photos/1431047), 9 May 2015 (Source: [Kremlin.ru / Wikimedia Commons](https://www.kremlin.ru/photography/photos/1431047))

Azerbaijan is at a delicate stage in the transition process. Government overreaction to criticism is far from rare. Nepotism is rampant. Azeri president Ilham Aliev appointed his wife the country's first vice-president. According to the constitution, the first vice-president is slated to take over the reigns of government if the president is incapacitated.

In the meantime, apathy reigns in Azerbaijan and citizens are showing little interest in politics.

A compromised opposition. While the story line in the West increasingly is that "non-government organizations" are experiencing hard times in Azerbaijan, political sources in Baku, on the other hand, maintain that this is not the whole truth of the matter. They point out that, while pursuing their strategic interests, several European countries and the US are, in fact, generously funding Azeri "NGO's". Those outfits are, in turn, obliged to earn their keep.

In that regard, it is also relevant to point out that since the Aliev clan (the current president Ilham and his predecessor in the office, Geydar) have been in charge of the country, Azerbaijan has been conducting an evenhanded, neutral foreign policy. There is no indication of that changing any time soon at the top levels of the government. Against such a background, radical Islam has been gaining strength in the country and is rapidly turning into a major internal problem and source of instability. With encouragement and financing from the Saudis (as well as "all the usual suspects"), Wahabbi ideas are being aggressively disseminated throughout Azerbaijan. In the process, Islamists have been using internal political conditions skillfully to their advantage. The opposition is gradually gathering under the Islamists' banner notwithstanding the fact that, as in other Central Asian post-Soviet

republics, the authorities are doing their best keep it as confined as possible.

US ambassador in Baku Robert Cekuta has been working hard to broaden the ranks of the secular at the expense of the clerical opposition. Washington has apparently awakened to the fact that the greatest threat to its strategic interests locally comes precisely from the Islamist factor. Nevertheless, perhaps as a reflection of the West's less than entirely coherent current policy of keeping the Azeri government just enough off-balance to be cooperative but not so much as to push it off the cliff just yet, last year Islamists who were being held in confinement in Azerbaijan were for the first time officially listed by EU as having the status of "political prisoners."

Those with reasonably good memory will recall that in the past such dilettantish experiments with opening the Pandora's Box not a few times have blown up in the faces of the mad scientists attempting them, often with devastating consequences for the luckless countries selected to serve as their laboratory.

So far this year, Western financial support to the Azeri opposition is said to exceed 60 million dollars. Most of the funding originates from the US, Great Britain, Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Most of the money is funneled through Georgia, which for all practical purposes has been turned into a staging area for exerting political influence in Azeri affairs.

That is quite unsurprising because Georgia has been for some time the springboard of Western hegemonism for expanding Western political and ideological influence throughout the region. On Saakashvili's watch, Georgia was made to take the Azerbaijani opposition under its wing. Nothing changed in that regard after his departure. As a result, the Azeri underground continues to feel quite at home in Tbilisi. This subversive pattern is literally cut-and-paste of how in the year 2000 the Western-backed "Otpor" opposition in Yugoslavia was logistically and financially supported from neighboring Hungary against the sovereign-minded Milosevic government.

Leaders of the Azeri opposition such as R. Ibrahimbegov and E. Namazov (National Council of Democratic Forces), A. Kerimli (Azeri National Front), N. Jafarli, and A. Gajili (Musavat Movement), as well as their close associates, are regular visitors in Tbilisi. In the Georgian capital they maintain regular contacts with their Western mentors from the Prague *Democracy Center* [2] as well as other notable "democracy" heavyweights such as *The Human Rights Watch*, *Freedom House*, *People In Need*, [3] and the *National Democratic Institute*. Meetings of Azeri opposition figures with high-ranking US and Dutch diplomats are also becoming more frequent. A veritable "perfect storm" of democratic activism is taking place. The Azeri government would be ill-advised not to take note off, including evidence of its ultimate provenance.



Map of the Caucasus (Source: Wikivoyage)

To cover their operating costs, on their visits to Tbilisi Azeri opposition leaders have been receiving significant sums of money that are ultimately traceable to such “pro-democracy” outfits as NED, IREX, [4] and the Heinrich Boell Foundation.[5] Notably, such pow-wows are known to take place on the eve of opposition events scheduled in Azerbaijan. Allegations have been rife that opposition leader Ali Kerimli was recently awarded the tidy sum of \$100,000 by some Western embassies. Of this sum, Kerimli distributed around about \$30,000 for political activities, while keeping the remaining \$70,000 for himself, according to Baku investigative journalist Maksud Talibili. By all accounts, Western sponsorship of protest operations and attempts to corrupt principal opposition leaders in Azerbaijan are in full swing.

Azerbaijan may not be a paradise... Azerbaijan is far from being a paradise, according to Samed Seidov, chairman of the foreign relations committee of the Azeri parliament. But it is also far from being a hell-hole, he is quick to add. He is critical of what he calls the double standard of Western politicians and journalists:

“There are abuses in Azerbaijan, but they can also be found in Armenia and Georgia. Except that they draw attention only when they occur in Azerbaijan. Then they are investigated, analyzed, and take the form of resolutions. But not when such things are happening elsewhere.”[6]

To be fair, Azerbaijan has been through some economic hard times, but it has managed to overcome the consequences of the global financial and economic crisis relatively painlessly. In 2001 poverty was estimated to affect about 50% of the population, while currently it stands at 7.6%. Economic growth has continued steadily thanks to oil and gas revenues. But in order to keep up the current pace of growth the government will have to diversify the economy. The Azeri market has also proved attractive for German firms. About 80% of Germany’s trade with South Caucasus is with Azerbaijan.

The Azeri economy can benefit from the transit of goods and raw materials, inasmuch as the country happens to be located between Russia and Iran. On the strategic level, Azerbaijan's current relations with Russia are satisfactory, though not without tensions. Trade volume is on the rise. There is a high level of mutual political trust, which is reflected in continuous dialogue and increasing contacts. Business and trade cooperation between the two countries is on the rise, according to Fariz Ismailzade, vice-rector of Baku's prestigious ADA University.[7]

"We do not want to be Western puppets. They are exerting pressure in order to undermine our relations with Russia and to make us choose between Russia and the West," observes Azay Guliev, chairman of the "NGO Support Council" in the office of Azerbaijan's president.

Significantly, Azerbaijan's parliament recently voted not to join the "Eastern Partnership" program. Disobedience has a price, and the machinations we have described are designed to make Azerbaijan pay it. Political rumblings in the Caucasus are about much more than gastronomic rivalry, *plov* versus *vinegret*. Stay tuned.

Notes

- [1] <https://report.az/en/region/us-to-build-military-base-in-georgia/>
- [2] <https://democracyctr.org/about/>; as for the Center's funding, see here: <https://democracyctr.org/about/funding/>
- [3] <https://www.clovekvtisni.cz/en>
- [4] <https://www.irex.org/about-us>
- [5] <https://www.boell.de/en>
- [6] A case in point: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/amnesty-condemns-arrest-of-another-human-rights-activist-in-azerbaijan/40538014>
- [7] <http://www.ada.edu.az/en-US/Pages/home.aspx>

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