
AZERBAIJANI PRESS: THE GEORGIAN PRIME MINISTER IN BAKU - WHAT KIND OF REACTION WILL THERE BE AGAINST TBILISI'S PRO-ARMENIAN POSITION?

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Yeni Musavat (12 March 2018)

On 11 March, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili was to visit Azerbaijan. At his official meetings in Baku, he was expected to discuss regional projects being implemented jointly by Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as prospects for development of bilateral relations.

The Georgian prime minister's visit to Baku [on 12 March] led to a series of discussions. This is due to the fact that the Georgian government have recently come to terms with Armenians and are ignoring countries like Azerbaijan and Turkey that they considered close to themselves.

The refusal of Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili to pay tribute to the memory of the victims of the 26 February Xocali (Khojaly) genocide at a meeting with a group of ethnic Azerbaijanis in (Georgia's) Borcali [Marneuli District] on the same day and his subsequent visit to Yerevan, where he laid a wreath at the so-called "Armenian genocide" monument and described Armenia as a "friendly country" have caused serious dissatisfaction.

At the time of these discussions, the 9 March visit of Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria followed by the country's [Georgia's] prime minister to our country raised some questions. Opinions have been expressed that the Georgian government are aware of their mistake and want to somehow "please" Baku.

Expert view

Political analyst Nazakat Mammadova touched on several important points that led to a rapprochement between Georgia and Armenia: "For example, the trade turnover [between Armenia and Georgia] increased by 24 per cent last year. I think, first of all, Armenia's signing a partnership agreement with the EU has had a major impact on these issues. Armenia has found certain opportunities, for example, to offer Georgia using the advantages of the free trade zone on the border with Iran. Thus, Georgia can export its products to Iran. New geopolitical realities have emerged recently. This manifests itself in the form of Armenia's rapprochement with Europe to some extent; Georgia's softening its hostility against Russia, the lifting of sanctions against Iran, and Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and distancing from the West. As a result, Armenia and Georgia, which are under the influence of separate geopolitical power centres, have to come closer. Armenia's signing an agreement with the EU creates conditions for Georgia's advancement as the most pro-Western Caucasus state."

According to the political expert, Georgia's incumbent government is not pursuing a unilateral pro-Western policy: "Joint regional projects involving Azerbaijan and Georgia were the result of this. The incumbent government claims having good-neighbourly relations with all the regional countries of the region as the Shevardnadze government did. However, another important point that affects the situation is that after the pro-western liberal Saakashvili, businessmen were brought to the Georgian leadership.

"The incumbent prime minister of Georgia is a former banker. The new president of Armenia, Armen Sargsyan, is a businessman, who organised the British HSBC Bank's operations in the Caucasus. Apparently, the representation of businessmen in the political elite of the two countries may have a certain impact on this rapprochement. The Russian factor can also play a role here. The West's positions in Georgia are already weakening. For example, according to a poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute, 29 per cent of Georgians are against integration in NATO. They are worried that the 2008 Georgian-Russian war could flared up again, and that the West would again leave Georgia alone in the face of Russian threat and that the Georgian Orthodox Church will face a threat from Catholic Europe."

The political expert said it was important to continue interstate relations with Georgia at the current level: "The refusal of the Georgian president to pay tribute to the memory of the Xocali genocide victims is the result of all these developments. However, if the prime minister's visit to the fictional 'genocide' complex in Yerevan was envisaged by the protocol rules, it would have been known to Georgia, which is currently pursuing a balanced policy, that the move would cause dissatisfaction in Azerbaijan and Turkey. Azerbaijan is pursuing a very strong lobbying policy in Georgia, and this is admitted by Georgian and Armenian politicians, as well as Russians.

"As of now, Azerbaijan's Georgia policy can be regarded as satisfactory, and Azerbaijan is doing its best to maintain its positions in Georgia. It is exactly a result of this that Armenia cannot enter Georgia. Azerbaijan is both in a dominant position in Georgia's energy market, and uses this country as a transport and transit corridor. It would be wrong to assume a tough position during the Georgian prime minister's visit, since the Georgian side can say that they are a sovereign country and as an independent nation, they have the right to maintain relations with any country, including neighbouring Armenia.

"Therefore, Azerbaijan should not pay much attention to the protocol rules like paying tribute to the so-called 'genocide' monument by the Georgian president, and should continue pursuing its

traditional policy and not give up its position with regard to Georgia as an important partner in the transit and energy market. Armenia's access to the external world through Georgia should be as restricted as possible.

"If the level of relations is reduced due to the protocol rules, for a visit to the so-called genocide memorial, many presidents visit this complex when in Armenia. Given this, Turkey and Azerbaijan would have to suffer diplomatic tensions with a number of countries around the world. We even know that some of the leaders of the Turkic-speaking Central Asian republics have also done so. Georgia has not officially recognised the Armenian genocide, and paying tribute to the so-called monument represents no threat. This is an ordinary protocol rule."

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