
AZERBAIJAN AND GEORGIA: INTERDEPENDENCE CANNOT BE RISKED

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The connection between Georgia and Azerbaijan is a unique model of cooperation in the region. Considering Transcaucasia as a transit zone for big projects and investments, one can say that the region is also a field of power projection for the neighboring states such as Iran, Russia and Turkey. However, besides the foreign interventions in the region, the relationship between three sovereign states of the region matters as well. Georgia stands with Azerbaijan in big economic investments and energy projects while its territory -- Javakheti -- is claimed by the Armenians. The same goes for Azerbaijan in that the countrys Karabakh region is still under Armenian occupation and Azerbaijan cooperates with Georgia for gaining access to the Black Sea and Europe. However, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Georgia has recently become strained with the opening of a bust of Mikhail Avagyan [1], an Armenian war criminal in the Upper Karabakh War, on Jan. 20, 2019, in the Georgian village of Bugashen.

The current socio-political environment in Georgia should be appreciated well in order to make sense of the sudden escalation in tensions in between two peaceful neighbors. Georgians headed to the polls on Oct. 28, 2018 to cast their ballots for the last time to elect their president since the next election, slated for 2024, will be held by the 300-member Electoral College due to the constitutional changes. Salome Zourabichvili, an independent candidate backed by the party in power, the Georgian Dream, was elected as president of the country. Salome Zourabichvili is best remembered with her criticism of the former president Saakashvili for giving Georgian passport to Turks [2] and she, in turn, faced criticism herself for doing that in the region of Armenian voters, which can be seen as an attempt to exploit ethnic tensions for political purposes during an election period.

The strength of the Georgian Dream is in the center of attention since the party chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili, the richest man of the country, clearly dominates the socio-political life of the country. His personal wealth gives him ultimate power to determine the political scene of the country. In contrast with the other post-Soviet countries, Georgia has a mono-oligarchic system whereas other countries have poly-oligarchic systems to maintain balance to continue supporting various ideological groups. Many consider the pressures on Mamuka Khazaradze, one of the oligarchs and the former owner of the TBC Bank, as a political move. Khazaradze was accused of financing the protests in May-June 2018 against the government and his fierce move to run the Anaklia Port --

one of the greatest economic projects of Georgia -- along the company from the U.S. was in the center of the discussion about the possible economic rivalry against Ivanishvili. However, after pressures on Khazaradze and his resignation from the board of the TBC Bank [3], there is no one to challenge the power of Ivanishvili, which enabled him to bring Zurabishvili to presidency easier than expected. Currently, the former president Saakashvili stands as the only person who can contest Ivanishvilis political power of by using his personal charm and popularity. But the developments regarding the uncontested power of the Georgian Dream and Ivanishvili can negatively affect the balance between the West and Russia in Georgia, which would most certainly impact all of Transcaucasia.

Georgia is a homeland for both Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities, where the former is the largest minority community of the country. Even if Georgians did not take part in the Upper Karabakh conflict, it is no surprise that the Armenian minority of Georgia is lobbying in Tbilisi and continuing their ideologically parallel line with Armenia on the issue of hostility against Azerbaijan. For a simple example, it is enough to look at the monument raised for Avagyan in Akhalkalaki, the Armenian minority region. The monument resulted in protests by the Azerbaijani community and a massive rally in front of the Georgian Parliament [4] in Tbilisi on Feb. 8, 2019. Both Baku [5] and the Azerbaijanis living in Georgia stated that the monument was a clear provocation and disrespect towards the massacred civilians in Karabakh. Protestors also condemned the attendance of Levan Izoria, Georgias minister of defense, at the 27th anniversary of the Armenian Armed Forces, celebrated in Georgia by the Armenian Embassy on Jan. 28, 2019.

Salome Zourabichvili made her first official visit to Baku on Feb. 27, 2019, and in her statement after meeting with President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, she made a strong emphasis on the territorial integrity of both countries [6]. Mentioning border security and concerns against occupation of sovereign territories, Zourabichvili also praised the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and economic ties between the regional countries. However, critics said that Zourabichvilis speech was politically correct and merely diplomatic, and therefore will not result in any serious action regarding the issue of occupied territories [7].

However, the bust was erected by the municipality, and not the central government, and it is not a secret that the Armenian minority has de facto control over the Javakheti region. Furthermore, the monument was not removed, but the protests stopped. The main problem for Azerbaijanis is that their representatives fall short of strongly lobbying for their rights and especially empowering local governance as Armenians do. The voices from Azerbaijan against the monument crisis and the general stance of Georgia on this issue were mainly negative, Georgia is being blamed for being simply ungrateful. No matter the size of the Azerbaijani investments in Georgia, Azerbaijan needs Georgian friendship as much as vice versa. From the Azerbaijani perspective, it can be dangerous to push Georgia deliberately towards Armenia and Russia even if the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral relationship is seen as a guarantor of peace and stability in the region.

Despite the increased tensions between communities, Georgian president made it clear that Azerbaijani-Georgian relationship cannot be risked or confronted with a fait accompli. She simply described the relationship between the two countries as Excellent! Excellent! Excellent! [8] which gives hope for the future of an extremely important relationship despite border tensions, Armenian provocations, and the occupied territories.

* Opinions expressed in this article are the authors own and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Anadolu Agency.

[1] <https://jam-news.net/unveiling...>

[2] <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/...>

[3] <https://www.finchannel.com/soc...>

[4] <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu...>

[5] <https://www.azernews.az/nation...>

[6] <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/art...>

[7] <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/blo...>

[8] <https://twitter.com/Zourabichv...>

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