
Georgia Lessons For Azerbaijan

By Barcin Yinanc
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Azerbaijanis have witnessed something of a first at this year's Armed Forces Day celebrations. A military parade was held for the first time in the relatively short history of Azerbaijan. The military parade, last June where the new heavy armaments were displayed, was undoubtedly a show of force against Armenia. Sparing no expense for the modernization of his army, Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev, was -- I hope -- aware of the fact that while defying the Armenians, he was also challenging the Russians. If he was not, then after the Georgian experience, he should have realized that his proud statements that Azerbaijani defense budget is twice that of the total Armenian budget won't scare Yerevan. It can only make Russians happy.

'Hell will break loose':

Rumor has it that when İlham's father, Haydar Aliyev, was in hospital in Turkey, he told his doctors, "You should make me live. Otherwise hell will break loose." At the end of the day, hell did not break loose after his death. But the fact remains that personalities matter, as the faith of the states in the Caucasus and Central Asia are still dependent on their ruler. Georgian leader Saakashvili made a terrible mistake. He and his country are paying heavily for this mistake. He and his countrymen should be thankful if the cost is limited to the irreversible separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

İlham Aliyev carries a heavy responsibility in his shoulders. Russia has Armenia under its control. It dealt a heavy blow to Georgia. Compared with the last two, Azerbaijan poses a more serious threat to Russian energy interests. And just like it has done with the Georgian president, I am sure Moscow is waiting patiently for a faux pas by Aliyev in Nagorno Karabagh.

Breaking Russian monopoly:

Aliyev should realize by now that he cannot recapture Nagorno Karabagh at gunpoint. And no matter how contradictory it may sound, Turkey, which is contributing to the modernization of the Azerbaijani army, should tell Aliyev to stay away from military solutions. Russian dominance in the region can only be broken through the solidarity and cooperation among the Caucasian states.

Many experts argue that the recent tension in the region has strengthened the hands of the Russians in the big energy game, dealing a heavy blow to the projects like Nabucco aiming to break the monopoly of Russia. But the reverse could be true as well. Russian stance has one more time underlined the necessity of having alternative energy routes. The exclusion of Armenia so far from various energy cooperation schemes might have served Turkish and Azerbaijani interests. It might be one the reasons behind the Armenian president's more flexible attitude towards Turkey.

But it might be about time to review the policy of isolating Armenia.

Gul's visit to Armenia:

Obviously I am not suggesting that Ankara and Baku should naively lend a hand of peace and friendship and forget about its illegal occupation of Azerbaijani territories and its claims against Turkey. Yerevan might misread the situation and endorse a maximalist policy. There is always that risk. The need to read the signals coming from Armenia is more important than ever. In the absence of diplomatic relations, this proves to be quite hard. Ankara could ask its Western allies to exert pressure on Armenia so that it sizes the opportunity and endorse a reconciliatory policy with both Ankara and Baku.

In this respect, President Gul's visit to Armenia has gained more importance. His visit to Yerevan will facilitate his contacts with his Western interlocutors. A Turkish leader who has held direct talks with the Armenian leadership in Yerevan will be listened much more carefully, and his words will carry much more weight.

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