

# Azerbaijan balancing strategic interests

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The newly reelected President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, was sworn in for a second term last month after winning the October 15<sup>th</sup> election with 89 percent of the vote.

Opposition parties boycotted the election, and monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe criticized the poll's shortcomings, especially during counting and tabulation.

But whatever the shortcomings of the election, President Aliyev enjoys enormous popularity in his own country, according to Paul Goble, Director of Research and Publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy in Baku. Speaking with host Judith Latham of VOA News Now's International Press Club, Goble says, even if the election had been fully free and fair with all the major parties taking part, the Azerbaijani President would still have been reelected with a significant majority.

## The Azerbaijan perspective

Mr. Aliyev's election victory cemented his family's long grip on power in Azerbaijan. He was elected in 2003 following the death of his father, Heydar Aliyev, who himself dominated politics in the country for 30 years. Paul Goble says that stability has been an important factor in one of the most dangerous and unstable parts of the world. A key reason is Azerbaijan's strategic position on the pipeline carrying crude oil from the Caspian Sea through Georgia and Turkey. Goble notes that Azerbaijan sits at a unique juncture of a north-south, and an east-west, axis of influence. Therefore, he says, Azerbaijan almost has to pursue what President Aliyev has called a 'balanced' foreign policy, taking into account the views of Russia, Iran, Central Asia, Turkey, Europe, and the United States. And as Goble points out, the recent war in Georgia demonstrated that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is not absolutely secure.

## A Georgian Perspective

Georgian journalist and political analyst Ghia Abashidze in Tbilisi agrees. Abashidze says the war with Russia in August made the issue of energy supplies in the Caucasus abundantly clear to everyone. According to the latest reports, Abashidze says, the pipeline is not working at its full prewar capacity, and it is unclear when it will. And that's not only because of the world economic crisis but also because of the aftermath of last summer's war. There are still Russian troops on Georgian soil, so investors are reluctant to restart the pipeline at its full capacity, Abashidze says.

Nonetheless, Ghia Abashidze says the Georgian leadership sees Azerbaijani President Aliyev's reelection in a positive light. People there remember how Azerbaijan helped Georgia in recent years when Russia cut off gas and energy supplies, he says, so Georgians expect that friendly relations with Azeris will continue.

## An Armenian Perspective

However, relations between Baku and Yerevan are fraught with tension because of a long-standing struggle between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Paul Goble, Moscow has not played a very helpful role there, despite the new Russian President's overtures to both sides.

The reality is that the Russian government has not wanted an agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Goble says. He suggests that President Dmitri Medvedev may have invited the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan to go to Moscow last month for negotiations partly as a way of demonstrating Russia's preeminent position vis-a-vis the other Minsk Group countries. Goble says that, if Moscow decides it is in its greater interest to back Azerbaijan, there will be in his words a 'possibility of movement.' But, he adds Russia's geopolitical calculations in the southern Caucasus have clearly changed.

Emil Sanamyan, Washington editor of the Armenian Reporter, agrees with Paul Goble that the Kremlin might have ulterior motives in last month's meetings. Sanamyan says Russia's brokering of talks does not necessarily aim at resolution and agreement, but rather is an attempt to recapture the dominance it used to have in the region. And in fact Armenian President Serge Sarkissian made the point that, after Georgia failed in its recent attack on South Ossetia, Azerbaijan would probably think twice about using military options in Nagorno-Karabakh. Sanamyan suggests that factor alone may improve the prospects for a peace deal.

#### U.S. Policy Perspective

According to Paul Goble, Azerbaijan is critically important to Washington as well as to Moscow. First, he says, there is an interest in access to oil and gas. Second, he notes there are strategic considerations and making sure that Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia understand that the 'east-west line' is more beneficial to them. And third, Goble cautions, progress toward democracy in the region should not be sacrificed in the name of geo-strategic or economic interests.

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