
Azerbaijan & Europe: Toward closer integration?

By Fariz Ismailzade

Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, DC

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Azerbaijan's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures is going much slower than in Georgia's case, mainly due to fear of Russia and Iran. Yet the Azerbaijani government seems to have decided the opportunity has come to turn words into action and seriously knock at Europe's doors. The time is perfect, considering the tensions between Russia and Azerbaijan over gas prices. If Azerbaijan does not shift its foreign policy, EU will not help, as its interest into Azerbaijan is determined exactly by the degree of the latter's interest in the EU. Seeking and obtaining EU and NATO membership is the only real chance for Azerbaijan to achieve political stability and economic prosperity and resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The chance should not be missed.

BACKGROUND: In December, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev traveled to Brussels to meet with EU and NATO officials, and to sign the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan. This agreement has started a new chapter and is aimed at further deepening relations between Azerbaijan and the EU and the integration of the country into European structures. Similar agreements have been signed with Armenia and Georgia, and Azerbaijan's Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO is already under implementation. President Aliyev also signed with EU officials an agreement about the export of Azerbaijani gas from the Shah-Deniz field to the European markets.

It seems that Azerbaijan is slowly but steadily moving towards closer relations with EU structures, and is fully intending to deepen its integration with the EU, even up to the level of seeking NATO and EU membership down the road.

Yet experts in Baku, familiar with both IPAP and ENP, believe that both documents contain only symbolical activities, that do not in real practice deepen the integration of Azerbaijan into European institutions. They explain this with the reluctance of the Azerbaijani government to conduct the kind of real political and economic reforms that are a requirement for any move toward the prospect of membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Thus delays in Azerbaijani's integration with Europe is caused by a desire by strong forces among the authorities to perpetuate the domestic status quo.

Azerbaijani government representatives, meanwhile, take a rather careful approach to the issue of Euro-Atlantic integration, and claim that Azerbaijan is making real steps towards it but within the frames of the "balanced foreign policy" that Baku officially pursues. At the moment, Azerbaijan indeed enjoys warm relations both with the West and Russia and Iran, thus trying to satisfy the interests of all regional powers. Unlike neighboring Georgia, Azerbaijan does not make strong statements towards EU and NATO integration and tries not to anger the Kremlin.

Yet lately, Russian-Azerbaijani relations have entered a difficult

period mainly due to competition on the gas markets and the eviction of Azerbaijani labor migrants from Russia. Gazprom and RAO-EES have increased export prices of Russian gas and electricity to Azerbaijan, and sharply reduced volumes to be shipped. Baku responded by threatening to stop the usage of the Russian pipeline for the export of Azerbaijani crude oil, to increase the price for the Gabala Radio Station, currently leased by the Russian Ministry of Defense, and to shut down Russian TV stations in the country.

IMPLICATIONS: The consequences of the fallout in Russian-Azerbaijani relations are likely to be a strong shift in Azerbaijan's foreign policy, towards the EU. This is a unique opportunity, occurring at an opportune moment, and which will test the skills and determination of both Azerbaijani and European policy-makers.

As Azerbaijan starts extracting its own offshore natural gas fields in 2007, it will gradually grow much more independent from Russia than has ever been the case. By supplying gas to Georgia, Baku will also contribute to saving its neighbor and strategic partner from Russian pressures. Together, they can pave a new path of integration towards Euro-Atlantic structures.

Yet, in order for that to happen, Azerbaijani officials need to learn from their Georgian counterparts on tactics to build solid and deep relations with the EU and NATO, and alter their own course of action.

Slow, symbolic steps towards Europe do not produce real and effective results for Azerbaijan's integration into the EU. The myth that the EU needs Azerbaijan more than the other way around, which is present in Baku, is neither helpful nor correct. The EU, preoccupied with its internal problems and the digestion of already admitted members, is certainly not considering another round of enlargement. Neither does NATO. Azerbaijani officials and public are mistakenly thinking that the integration of Georgia into EU and NATO will inevitably draw both Azerbaijan and Armenia into the same path. Yet, the experience of Cyprus shows the opposite: while the Greek part of the island was admitted into EU, the Turkish part remained effectively outside the club.

In order to put Azerbaijan into the radar screen of EU and NATO officials, it is Baku that will have to take action and not the other way. This entails passing through the same path that Poland, Hungary and other East European countries took in 1990s -knocking at the EU's doors, raising interest in Azerbaijan, actively seeking partnership and cooperation, and more importantly, conducting genuine political and economic reforms at home. The most important areas of reforms include reform of police force, economic monopolies, and not least the judicial system and the courts.

Words that are not followed with actions produce what one Brussels-based analyst termed the "Kuchma effect", referring to a situation where EU officials do not see real actions behind the words of a government, thereby raising doubts regarding their interest in integration into the EU.

In this context, another important strategic shift can be observed, which lies in the sphere of marketing. The semantics of the EU integration of the South Caucasus is gradually being changed from the "South Caucasus' integration into EU" to "the Black Sea region's integration into EU". To EU officials, the latter concept appears much warmer, closer and more important than the former, associated mainly with trouble in the form of conflict and corruption.

EU officials have repeatedly stated that their level of interest and cooperation with Azerbaijan is determined and developed by the policies of Azerbaijan itself. The more Azerbaijani authorities pursue European integration, the closer and more realistic it will be.

Without greater commitment to reform, Azerbaijan will in spite of its energy resources not be able to move closer to Europe. As such, it would continue to persist in a position of limbo between competing regional powers. Only European integration will in the long term guarantee political stability at home, and economic development and prosperity in the region. Moreover, it will drastically increase the chances for a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

CONCLUSIONS: The time seems ripe for the Azerbaijani government to shift gears and take more active steps towards Euro-Atlantic integration. As the government appears increasingly inclined to do so, the opportunity is better than ever. President Aliyev and his party is unchallenged in the country, and this foreign policy move is unlikely to face domestic resistance. Internationally, Azerbaijan is becoming more secure, and its independence and sovereignty are consolidated, in spite of renewed Russian pressures. Finally, the Georgian experience shows that in reality there is not much Russia can do to prevent the integration of the South Caucasus into the EU.

It is now up to Azerbaijan's leaders to close the gap with Georgia.

Otherwise, Georgia is likely to move toward closer integration with the EU and NATO, while Azerbaijan and Armenia could continue to remain bogged down in domestic stagnation and ethnic-territorial conflict. In this context, the renewed strong interest in Azerbaijan in Tbilisi is a welcome development. President Saakashvili and his close advisors seem increasingly aware of the need to embrace Azerbaijan and support its efforts to develop ties with the West. In this context, the prospect of stronger Georgian-Azerbaijani cooperation vis-à-vis Europe could turn into a major development of 2007.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Fariz Ismailzade is a Baku-based freelance writer.

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