
Russia and Armenia : A psychological easing of tensions

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On 20 October 2008 Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev visited Yerevan. At first glance (at least from outward appearances), the Russian president's visit is not all that different from the usual visit of a head of state to the capital of a friendly country. We note the entirely traditional package of events for a trip to the Armenian capital: a visit to the Tsitsernakaberd memorial complex dedicated to the genocide of Armenians during the Ottoman Empire, the ceremonial opening dedication of Russian Square in Yerevan, the signing of documents on cooperation (which will be inscribed, of course, into the overall context of a strategic alliance), and a press conference summarizing the results. However, the situation surrounding the Russian leader's visit is far from routine.

We begin with the purely psychological aspects. Dmitriy Medvedev's two-day trip to Yerevan marks his first official visit to Armenia as the Russian head of state. Since the beginning of this year visits to Armenia have been made by Viktor Zubkov (who was serving as prime minister at the time) and State Duma Chairman Boris Gryzlov. And whereas Armenian President Serzh Sarkisyan visited Moscow immediately following his victory in the presidential election (his visit took place in late March 2008 and constituted his first foreign trip), Dmitriy Medvedev's schedule of trips prior to October did not include Yerevan. We recall, however, that the Russian Federation president had already visited Azerbaijan. In the Southern Caucasus, such visits (like all movement and positive signals towards "the likely strategic enemy") are perceived with extreme jealousy. Many political figures and experts in Yerevan have been saying, most often in private, that the Russian Federation president promised to visit Yerevan as one of the first on his calendar of visits to CIS capitals. However, his trip to this country, which Moscow is accustomed to calling a strategic ally, was only scheduled for October. The Russian head of state travelled to Baku in early July 2008 within the framework of his trans-Caspian tour. During the course of this visit, Medvedev made no secret of his interest in developing bilateral relations with this Caspian state. "Azerbaijan is our strategic partner in the Caucasus. We are linked by virtue of an ages-old history and the special nature of our current partnership, which are helping to resolve the most diverse problems," Dmitriy Medvedev stated in Baku. During the course of Medvedev's July visit, the Declaration on Friendship and Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan was signed.

Not everything has been simple in the perception of actions by Yerevan and Moscow following the events of the "five-day war." Russia has embarked upon recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia but has done nothing to promote the interests of Nagornyy Karabakh. Moreover, Moscow continues to pursue a special approach with respect to the NKR [Nagorno Karabakh Republic]. Nagornyy Karabakh was not included on the list of de facto states that could be viewed as examples for application of the "Kosovo precedent." The NKR has not been mentioned in Duma declarations indicating possible conditions for official legal recognition. There have not been any particular presidential or government directives with respect to this republic. However, all this was prior to the establishment of the precedent for revision of the inter-republic borders, which became interstate

borders at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. After 26 August 2008, the distinct dissatisfaction in Yerevan with the Kremlin's "special approach" towards the NKR intensified. Naturally, we are not talking about publicly expressed dissatisfaction. But who said that the whole of Armenia's policy is confined to the complex of government buildings? Or even to Armenian territory proper? The opposition, the diaspora, and Karabakh are also factors that cannot be brushed aside. Such sentiment is reinforced by Moscow's growing interest in Azerbaijan. A significant role here was played by the September visit of Azerbaijani President Ilkham Aliyev to Moscow and by the elections of the head of state that took place 15 October of this year in the Caspian republic.

In the opinion of a whole host of experts both in Azerbaijan and in countries of the West, the presidential elections in Azerbaijan have turned into a competition among politicians in the Russian Federation and United States for support of the existing authority. Certain Armenian information agencies view with alarm the commentary and statements of Russian officials. The Internet publication "ArmeniaNow" has examined an interview given by Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov to Rossiyskaya Gazeta in which the minister states specifically: "Armenia has essentially been blockaded as a result of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Armenia has tremendous difficulty communicating with the outside world. It is in the fundamental interest of the Armenian people that this blockade be removed as rapidly as possible. There are truly very few geographical and political solutions." In the view of the Internet publication, "Moscow did not indulge in such a tone when Robert Kocharyan was president." The Armenian news media have also been greatly distressed by the words spoken by Aleksey Ostrovskiy, chairman of the State Duma Committee for the CIS, with respect to the principle of territorial integrity as a governing principle of international law. And here again we should focus attention on the asymmetry of perceptions. That which is considered insignificant commentary in Moscow (aimed at the Western audience or comprising a kind of diversionary PR designed to demonstrate a "constructive position") is perceived in Armenia pretty much as a concise ideological demarche. In this regard, the distinct warming of relations between Moscow and Baku is causing alarm in Yerevan (especially as it relates to Karabakh). The convergence of positions between Ankara and Moscow is a separate topic. But the fears and phobias here are less foreboding, if only because Yerevan itself has undertaken measures to draw closer to Turkey. Nonetheless, fears of "behind-the-scenes games" and "secret diplomacy" (in the manner of Ataturk and Lenin) are present in Armenia (there being a historical basis for such thinking).

There is simply a fear in Armenia that the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be paid for (or bought - however you want to look at it) by "handing over" Karabakh. Modest Kolerov, former head of the Department of CIS Affairs of the president's administration, notes quite correctly that you can only hand over that which you actually have (and Russia does not have control over the NKR, as is the case with Abkhazia and South Ossetia), but in Armenia (as in any other republic of the former USSR) people have a tendency to overestimate Russia's resources - as they do the geopolitical machinations which may not be taking place in reality. Under conditions of the absence of international support for the policy of recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow simply cannot ignore the Azerbaijan factor and must not facilitate the growth of anti-Russian phobias there. Otherwise, room for manoeuvre in the Southern Caucasus, already quite limited, will inevitably become narrower still.

At the same time, it is also true that the Kremlin does not understand a certain objective, underlying aspect of Yerevan's actions. Armenia has refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and has not entered into conflict with neighbouring Georgia. At a summit meeting of the ODKB [Collective Security Treaty Organization] on 5 September 2008,

Armenia merely acknowledged the illegitimacy of Tbilisi's measures of force against South Ossetia. On the other hand, republic President Serzh Sarkisyan paid a friendly visit to Tbilisi on 30 September. The Armenian head of state was awarded a Georgian decoration and received compliments from the Georgian leader. It seems that many in Moscow believe that Mikhail Saakashvili's words addressed to the Armenian president came as a knife through the heart. Saakashvili stated literally: "We highly value the position of the Armenian leadership in connection with its steadfast support of Georgia's territorial integrity. Like many countries, like practically all other countries in the world and those of the immediate region, Armenia has expressed its unambiguous and unswerving support for the territorial integrity of Georgia, its unity, and the peaceful settlement of conflicts. I am convinced that unity with respect to all these issues will remain forever in the memory not only of our governments, but also of our peoples." Naturally, representatives of the domestic opposition are striving in every possible way to present the extremely complex relationship with Georgia in the context of a change in Armenia's foreign policy (seemingly referring to a reorientation on the West). It is entirely likely that influential Russians are just as unenthusiastic about Yerevan's contacts with the European Union, NATO, and the United States as they are about Armenia's constructive relations with Georgia.

However, despite all the complexities in Russian-Armenian relations, it should be acknowledged that there is a positive dynamic here as well. More than 1,000 Russian enterprises are operating today in Armenia. More than 70 Russian oblasts and republics are engaged in cooperative effort with Armenia, and the trade volume in the past several months alone has grown by almost 20 per cent. In the meantime, we cannot attribute the entire complexity of bilateral ties to the "Procrustean bed" of economic statistics. It is simply that both Moscow and Yerevan must be more realistic in their assessment of one another's motives and reject heightened expectations (so as to avoid terrible disappointment). Today we must accept as a given the fact that Moscow does not recognize the independence of the NKR, and Yerevan will not recognize the independence of the two former Georgian autonomies. The Kremlin will not decline to cooperate with Baku and will not make a definitive choice between the two Transcaucasian states. But neither will Yerevan reject advantageous cooperation with the West and with Georgia (across whose territory almost two-thirds of all of Armenia's foreign trade passes). Finally, the United States is actually closing its eyes to Armenia's cooperation with Iran (but what else can you do given the complicated political geography?). In this manner, the overriding mission of Dmitriy Medvedev's visit could be the clarification of complex aspects of the relationship, the disavowal of mutual phobias, fears, suspicions, and misunderstandings. The entirety of such actions may be classified as a unique kind of psychological easing of tensions.

Over the 17 years that have transpired since the collapse of the USSR, both countries have gained a great deal from mutually advantageous cooperation. The main goal today is to shore up these gains, discarding unnecessary jealousy and emotion and focusing on the true motives of each partner - and naturally taking into account the restrictive factors that objectively exist for both the Russian Federation and Armenia.

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