

# REGIONAL GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION IN SOUTH CAUCASUS: POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN AZERBAIJAN

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While Russia gradually withdrew from the South Caucasus due to the geopolitical transformations in the Caucasus in the 1990s, pro-American views began to increase in the region directly and indirectly. With Georgia became the locomotive of anti-Russian and pro-American geopolitical orientation, Armenia converged with Russia. Azerbaijan, on the one hand, continued its relations with Moscow, on the other hand, tried to develop cooperation with Western countries. In this context, even though Azerbaijan is the only South Caucasus country that targets neutrality policy and achieves this goal to a certain extent, the recent regional and global developments seem to have caused some changes in the stance of Azerbaijan on this issue.

The speech made by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev at the 100th anniversary of the foundation of Baku State University on 26 November 2019 was interpreted by many

observers as the first sign of a serious “axis” change in this regard. This speech, unlike those in the previous years, showed the tendency to the shift towards a new anti-European conservatism that emerged in the current power of Azerbaijan. It is noteworthy that Aliyev accused Europe of having anti-Islamic attitudes and thoughts. In addition, Aliyev remarked that despite Turkey is the oldest candidate country, its European Union membership has not been accepted just because it is a Muslim country. Aliyev, who defines Azerbaijan as “a country built on traditional values,” said henceforth there could be no talk of integration with the EU.

The spread of ideas about Europeanization, Westernization and popular Western culture among Azerbaijan youth seems to have led to the search for a new ideology in the current government. Aliyev’s above-mentioned statements underline that it is not possible for



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Azerbaijan to maintain its existence outside of traditional thought and that the young generation should realize this. It is also extremely meaningful that Aliyev made these statements at a meeting with university students.

The fact that anti-European statements were made after the meeting between Aliyev and Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov has a special meaning. In this context, Aliyev's expressing his admiration for Vladimir Putin in this meeting clearly suggests that he could not find what he hopes for Europe in the regional geopolitical competition. The rewarding of Ilham Aliyev's wife, as well as Vice President Mehriban Aliyeva with the Order of Friendship by Putin, during her visit to Moscow in November 2019, was perceived as a search for a new geopolitical beginning between the two countries.

Azerbaijan has been following the policy of opening up to the world since the 1990s aiming for integration into the international liberal system, although it was thought that a more apolitical social structure will emerge as ideological political separations lose their meaning day by day. However the mass protests and the increase in dissident voices in 2019 showed that this was not the case. And this process played an impulsive role in initiating a reform program especially in line with the demands of the youth. The first step in this direction was the resignation of the 81-year-old Ramiz Mehdiyev, who has been serving as the Chief of Staff of Azerbaijan Presidential Administration since 1995 and also known as one of the intellectual fathers of the Aliyev government, at the end of October. Subsequent resignations of older generation politicians such as Deputy Prime Ministers Ali Hasanov, Hacibala Abutalıbov and President

of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences Akif Alizade can be seen as a result of the quest to rejuvenate the country's politics and bring the cadres who are more sensitive to the demands of the new generation into management.

One day after Aliyev's address to the youth on 28 November 2019, at the request of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (NAP), parliament applied to Aliyev to dissolve the current parliament and hold an early general election. Upon this, President Ilham Aliyev, who dissolved the parliament on 5 December, decided to hold the early general elections on 9 February 2020. Considering the words of Deputy Prime Minister

Ali Ahmadov, who said that he believes the new parliament will consist of "modern-patriotic youth", were understood that this decision is a link of the new chain of regulations initiated by Aliyev, who is seeking support among the younger generation.

### **Azerbaijan Foreign Policy in Russia, EU and USA Triangle**

President Aliyev's anti-European statements and subsequent structural reforms are unlikely to lead to a serious change in Baku's foreign policy in its short and medium term. Although some regional experts consider these developments as the "axis shift" in Azerbaijan's foreign policy, it demonstrates that this new approach is a step towards domestic politics rather than foreign policy. Since unlike the

economic and humanitarian relations between Baku and Moscow, the two countries have different priorities in their military-political sphere.

As it is known, in the 1990s, in parallel with the dissolution of the USSR, the Eurasian system entered into the disintegration process.

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However, with the 2000s when Vladimir Putin came to power, a rapid return has taken place and Putin, who has begun to deal with the nearby geography, has put into effect a systematic policy to implement Eurasian integration.

Similarly, the changes that occurred in Turkey's foreign policy in the 2000s are also important in terms of geopolitics of the Caucasus. The failure of the pan-Turkism policy pursued by Turkey during the 1990s removed one of the obstacles to Russia. Such a development of events destroyed the plans of Russia's geopolitical rival in the Caucasus, NATO, which hoped to be present in the region through Turkey.

Throughout the 1990s, Ankara and Moscow became two actors that mutually excluded each other in the Caucasus. Therefore, Azerbaijan's foreign policy at that period faced serious tests based on the choice of "either Moscow or Ankara". However, in the past 15 years, when Turkey's cooperation with Russia began to develop, Azerbaijan should no longer choose between the two.

On the other hand, there are areas where the interests of Baku and Moscow overlap, but their conflicting areas are much more. One of the main problems preventing the relations of the two countries from turning into a strategic cooperation is the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Although Moscow is the only actor that can solve the Karabakh issue, it does not take any step in this direction against the occupying Armenia because it does not comply with its own interests. Instead, Russia is doing everything to include Azerbaijan in Eurasian integration, especially in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Russia seeks to connect directly to Iran and the Persian Gulf by land. Therefore, this Kremlin strategy is important for Russia's long-term geopolitical interests in the North Caucasus.

According to Moscow's official discourse, the inclusion of both Azerbaijan and Armenia in CSTO will reduce the risk of armed conflict

between the two countries due to the Karabakh conflict. However, such an intermediate formula, which only guarantees Russia's interests in the region, is not sufficient to liberate the occupied Azerbaijan lands. If Azerbaijan becomes a member of the CSTO at the request of Russia, the Karabakh conflict will freeze at best. This means that the status quo in the region will continue. Therefore, Moscow will take the concrete step that will change the current situation in Karabakh only if Baku is under Russian geopolitical influence.

There is no doubt that Moscow will continue its determination to maintain its alliance relationship with Yerevan, otherwise Russia is aware that Armenia will shift to the West. Moscow, who does not want a third war to take place in Karabakh, knows that the loser will be itself in any case, regardless of how the war would end. Consequently, Moscow, which will have to be a party to its ally Armenia or Azerbaijan in the event of war, does not prefer this situation. Therefore, the Kremlin, who is very pleased with its current "moderator" role, tries to maintain equal relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Moscow, which maintains its balance policy between Azerbaijan and Armenia, will change its current strategy in the South Caucasus only if new geopolitical conditions arise in the region.

On the other hand, Baku's biggest trade partner is the EU, whose investments in Azerbaijan have reached \$ 20 billion do. The trade volume between them is at \$ 5 billion. 70% of the EU's total trade in the South Caucasus is with Azerbaijan.

However, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement negotiations between Azerbaijan and the EU, which have been going on for years, are constantly bogged down. The most important reason behind this is Azerbaijan's requirement of compliance with the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as the fact that this should be clearly indicated in the signed agreement. The EU opposes this condition. In fact, the EU Parliament went

even further; in the Azerbaijan country report published in 2015, it criticized the Azerbaijani Government for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict particularly for the human rights violations that took place in the event. In addition, 23 of the 27 EU member states by 2020 have ratified the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, signed in 2017. These and similar practices by Brussels clearly reveal the double standards implemented by the EU between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

On the other hand, military and commercial cooperation between the USA and Azerbaijan is increasing every year. Although the trade volume between the two countries is around \$ 1 billion, the USA has an investment of \$ 13 billion in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijan State Oil Fund has invested \$ 20 billion in USA's economy. More than 250 USA-based companies operate in Azerbaijan.

At the same time, the USA, which has geopolitical and geo-economic interests in the Caspian region, is trying to establish an alliance with Azerbaijan against the Russian-Iranian alliance. This is important for NATO allies' energy security and commercial, economic and strategic partnership of the region with Western countries.

The USA is trying to improve its military cooperation opportunities with Baku through military aid and organizing joint military exercises. In this framework, regular high-level meetings are held between the two countries. For example, Azerbaijani Defense Minister Zakir Hasanov and USA Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who met in the framework of the NATO Defense Ministers Meeting held in Brussels on 28 October 2019, negotiated bilateral cooperation between Washington and Baku in the fields of military-technical, military education and military medicine. In this context, in the period of 2018-2019 alone, the USA provided \$ 101 million to Azerbaijan to fight terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking, and to improve the Caspian coastal infrastructure and military intelligence.

The USA allocates a significant amount of financial resources with the goal of spreading the Western "democracy model" in Azerbaijan. However, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) states that since 1991, it has not been able to achieve the targeted goal, despite providing \$ 1.3 billion in financial and technical assistances to Azerbaijan for this purpose.

## Conclusion

Today, there are two geopolitical strategies carried out on the South Caucasus: Russian-led Eurasianism, and US-led Atlanticism. The South Caucasus states are forced to choose between the two poles, as their geopolitical positions and power capacities are not enough to develop their own geopolitical strategies.

In this context, it is not possible to say that the South Caucasus is a geopolitical whole. While Armenia shows a close stance to Russia, Georgia is the leader of the pro-US and anti-Russian geopolitical movement in the region; Azerbaijan tries to develop good relations both with Russia and the Western states by following a neutrality policy. However, recently, Ilham Aliyev's accusation of the EU exercising a double standard and his critics regarding the moral values in Western countries, have strengthened the forecasts that Azerbaijan's interest in Eurasian integration will grow in the coming period.

Analysing the reform process that started in Azerbaijan right after Aliyev's anti-Western statements, shows that all these changes orient towards its domestic policy rather than foreign policy. On the other hand, some problems in the region, especially in Nagorno-Karabakh, are the most vital element for the strategic partnership of Azerbaijan with both Russia and Western countries, because the desire to liberate the occupied lands continues to be one of the most important foreign policy goals of Azerbaijan.