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## My Friend's Enemy is my Friend: Armenian Foreign Policy between Russia, Iran and the United States

By Mikayel Zolyan, Yerevan

### Abstract

The nature of Armenia's relationship with the USA is quite complex. For years Armenia had to cope with a serious dilemma in defining its foreign policy. On the one hand, ever since its independence Armenia has closely cooperated with Russia, on which it is heavily dependent in such areas as security and economy. Armenia's good neighborly relations with Iran are also vital from the point of view of Armenia's economy and national security. On the other hand, Armenia is also striving to forge close contacts with the West, including the USA and Europe. While the Armenian government has repeatedly stated that it is not planning to apply for NATO membership, it is closely cooperating with NATO, and the level of this cooperation is comparable to those of Armenia's neighbors. This policy of simultaneously advancing relations with Russia and the West is called "complementarism," a term associated with Vardan Oskanian, the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1998 to 2008. However, though the term "complementarism" originated in the late 1990s, the idea behind it has been the main paradigm of Armenian foreign policy since its independence.

### Balancing between Americans and Russians: Armenia's "complementarism" policy

Armenia and Armenian issues have never been among the major priorities for American foreign policy. However, from the point of view of the United States, Armenia has a significance somewhat disproportionate to its small size, scarce resources and low level of economic development. This significance can be attributed to two main factors: Armenia's geopolitical location in an important borderland between Europe, Central Eurasia and the Middle East and the existence of an influential Armenian Diaspora in the US.

The first time Armenia became a foreign policy issue for the US was during World War I, when American diplomats did whatever was possible to save the Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire from extermination by the Ottoman government. Throughout the two years of its existence (1918–1920), the Republic of Armenia received humanitarian aid and political support, earning President Woodrow Wilson consideration as a friend of Armenia and Armenians. At one point Wilson's administration even had plans to put Armenia under the government of the United States as a "mandate territory," but these plans were soon abandoned. American assistance to Armenia, which remained mostly within the limits of humanitarian aid, could not save the short-lived republic from being occupied and divided by the Turkish Kemalist movement and the Russian Bolsheviks. During the Soviet years, Armenian political parties and organizations, banned in Soviet Armenia, thrived on American soil. During the first years after the break-up of the

USSR, the USA offered massive humanitarian assistance to Armenia, which was ravaged by the 1988 earthquake and suffering from the war with Azerbaijan and the economic blockade imposed by Turkey.

Throughout the 1990s global and regional settings seemed to favor the Armenian "complementarism" policy. Through the 1990s relations between Russia and the West were mostly constructive: while Russia cooperated with the West on many global issues, the West did not explicitly challenge Russia's influence in the post-Soviet countries. However, in the beginning of the 2000s the nature of the relations between the USA and Russia began to change, due to multiple factors, ranging from the transition to a more authoritarian regime in Russia to the American occupation of Iraq. Russian–American relations were further complicated by "the colored revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine and the warm welcome that these revolutions found in the USA. The American support for the "colored revolutions" was perceived by the Russian elites as a direct encroachment on Russian interests, and the competition between the two global powers intensified, which complicated matters for Armenia and put in doubt the future of the "complementarism" policy. The latest test to Armenia's complementarism doctrine came in August 2008 with the Russian–Georgian war. Armenia, however, managed to avoid choosing sides in the confrontation and even successfully resisted the Russian pressure to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

One of the most interesting aspects of "complementarism" is Armenia's security policy. Armenia is a mem-

ber of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization and hosts Russian military bases. However, even here Armenian authorities have sought to balance Armenia's extensive cooperation with Russia in the sphere of security by steps in the direction of cooperation with the USA and NATO. Although these steps have been largely symbolic, they were quite significant as they sent an important message of openness for cooperation. One of these steps was the participation of an Armenian regiment in the NATO peace keeping operation in Kosovo. Another example of that cooperation is Armenia's decision to dispatch an Armenian non-combat unit to Iraq. In spite of the relatively small scale of the mission, this has been quite a significant step, when measured against the general context of Armenian foreign policy, and especially the existence in some countries of the Middle East (including Iraq) of large Armenian communities vulnerable to terror and radicalism. A new affirmation of Armenia's determination to cooperate with the USA came in late 2009, when the Armenian government sanctioned the participation of a small Armenian military regiment in the peace keeping operation in Afghanistan.

Another test of the policies of "complementarism" is Armenia's relationship with Iran. While historically Iran has often been perceived as a threat, today Armenia enjoys a close relationship with the country. Reconciling the need to maintain good relations with Iran and Armenia's partnership with the USA was relatively easy in the 1990s, when moderates and reformers like Rafsanjani and Khatami dominated Iranian politics. However, the balancing act became more difficult when relations between Iran and the US (and the West in general) deteriorated under Bush and Ahmadinejad. In general, though, the West has viewed Armenia's cooperation with Iran with understanding, since Armenia's geopolitics and conflicts with Turkey and Azerbaijan make good relations with Iran a strategic necessity for Armenia. In its turn the Iranian leadership has been keen to preserve the good relationship with Armenia and resisted calls from some radicals to openly support Muslim "brothers" in Azerbaijan against Armenia in the Karabakh conflict. Of course, Iran has a number of unresolved issues in its relationship with Azerbaijan that influence its policies in the South Caucasus.

### **The USA as a Mediator: Turkish-Armenian Relations and the Karabakh Conflict**

One of the most important issues from the point of view of American policy vis-a-vis Armenia and the region in general is the issue of Armenian-Turkish relations. The

US has been involved in efforts to break the ice in Armenian-Turkish relations for a long time. Complementing calls on both sides to normalize relations, the US intervention included unofficial mediation efforts and track two diplomacy, as in the case of the American-sponsored Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Committee (TARC), an informal group that consisted of former diplomats from Armenia and Turkey. Since 2008, especially in the wake of the Russian-Georgian war in August, the USA actively supported the so-called "football diplomacy" and the Armenian-Turkish normalization process. When Barak Obama visited Turkey in April 2009 he made a reference to Armenian-Turkish relations and called for opening the border that had been sealed by the Turkish government in the early 1990s. The April 23, 2009, Armenian-Turkish statement about the existence of a roadmap for normalization came about in part thanks to the serious involvement of American diplomacy, including a late night telephone call Serzh Sargsyan received from Vice President Joe Biden. Similarly, when in October 2009 the signing of Armenian-Turkish normalization protocols was under threat, the mediation by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton together with her Russian colleague Sergey Lavrov, was instrumental in securing the signatures of both Armenian and Turkish sides.

While American involvement in Turkish-Armenian relations has mostly an indirect and informal character, in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the USA officially plays the role of mediator as one of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group. Both sides have criticized the mediators in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process and sometimes have blamed them for the fact that no political solution to the conflict has been reached so far. However, it is difficult to deny the positive role of the mediators in preventing the conflict from reemerging as a full-scale violent confrontation. The US government position on the Karabakh issue is quite complex. On the one hand, US diplomats have often repeated that the US does not consider Nagorno-Karabakh an independent state and recognizes Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, something that invites criticism in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as within the Armenian-American community. On the other hand, the US has offered millions of dollars in humanitarian aid to Nagorno-Karabakh, in spite of protests coming from Azerbaijan.

### **Armenian Americans: Realities and Myths**

As noted above, one of the factors that determines Armenia's significance for American foreign policy is the existence of an important Armenian-American community.

Though relatively small compared to some other ethnic communities within the USA (estimates usually put the number of Armenians in the USA at over one million), the Armenian community is well-organized and vocal in the defense of its interests and priorities. The Armenian community's significance is boosted by the fact that Armenians are one of the most established and well-integrated ethnic communities of the US. The roots of the Armenian American community go back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when thousands of Armenians fleeing massacres in the Ottoman Empire found refuge in the USA. Since then generations of Armenians have successfully integrated into American society while keeping a strong attachment to their historical homeland. Large numbers of Armenians can be classified as middle class, and some Armenians have successfully entered the top levels of American government, business and culture. The Armenian community in the USA maintains close connections with Armenia. The idea that contributing to the historical homeland is a moral obligation for American Armenians is quite widespread. While in most cases these contributions take the form of financial assistance and charity, there have also been certain cases, when prominent Armenian Americans relocated to Armenia, as did Raffi Hovannisian, a lawyer from California, who became the first minister of foreign affairs of independent Armenia and who is an influential figure in contemporary Armenian politics.

For decades the focus of American Armenians has been winning official recognition by the US government that the extermination of Armenians by the Ottoman government in 1915 constituted an act of genocide. This campaign usually focuses on two main goals: ensuring that the US president uses the term in his address to Armenian Americans on April 24, the day when Armenians around the world remember the victims, and passing a Congressional resolution, which would officially recognize the mass killings of 1915 as genocide. Though Ronald Reagan used the word "genocide" in referring to the Armenian genocide in 1981, most US presidents have avoided the term since then. A constant source of bitterness for American Armenians is the fact that virtually all successful presidential candidates have given the promise to recognize the genocide during the election campaign in order to gain the votes of American Armenians, and later reneged on that promise, fearing an angry reaction from Turkey.

During the latest election campaign, Barak Obama issued several strong statements advocating the need to recognize and condemn the genocide officially. Although it can be argued that Obama has come closer to fulfill-

ing his promise than most of his predecessors – in his April 24, 2009, address to the Armenian community, he announced that his views on the issue are on the record and have not changed and used the Armenian term *Eghern* (literally – "a great crime, a man-made catastrophe"), which is comparable to using the Hebrew term "Shoah" to describe the Holocaust – many American Armenians were bitterly disappointed by Obama's decision to avoid the use of the English (and international) term *genocide*.

The issue of official recognizing the genocide has long since gone beyond being an issue that concerns only American Armenian voters and the American government. Turkey has reacted angrily to the genocide recognition campaign and repeatedly warned that the damage done to American-Turkish relations by the recognition would be irreparable. Moreover, the Turkish government spends millions of dollars in awareness campaigns and lobbying in an effort to counter those carried out by American Armenian organizations. Ironically, contrary to the hopes of the Armenians and fears of the Turks, an official recognition of the genocide by the American government is unlikely to have any immediate practical effect, while the ongoing genocide recognition campaign is an effective tool of spreading awareness about the genocide and putting pressure on the Turkish government to come to terms with its country's past. In any case, the activities of the Armenian community are among the factors that, along with geopolitical considerations, have influenced the US government's interest in the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations.

However, it would be wrong to overestimate the influence of the so-called "Armenian lobby" over the formulation of American policy towards Armenia and the region. Besides, it is important to remember that on certain issues there are important differences and divisions between the government of Armenia and some Diaspora organizations, as well as between different segments of the Diaspora itself. A recent example of these differences is the mixed reaction with which Diaspora Armenians reacted to Serzh Sargsyan's initiative of normalizing relations with Turkey and the signing of the Armenian-Turkish protocols. Sargsyan, who visited Los Angeles prior to signing the protocols, faced a cold reception from some influential Armenian American organizations and massive street protests by local Armenians. While some American Armenian organizations, such as the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA) have cautiously supported the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, others, such as the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), have criticized the Turkish-Armenian process and the American government's role in it.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the nature of the relationship between Armenia and the USA has been quite complex. Armenia has managed to combine an alliance with Russia and good relations with Iran with a close partnership with the USA and a drive to participate in European integration. Global and regional trends, as well as internal developments might influence Armenia's policy, pushing it from one side of this spectrum to the other. The current trend of "reset" in the relations between the USA and Russia offers certain hopes that Armenia's "complementarism" policy might bear fruit. Normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations is one of those issues, in which

the positions of the American and Russian governments largely coincide, at least at this point. Armenia's "complementarism" policy is also dependent on the future of Iranian-American relations: the fate of the Obama administration's initiatives on Iran and the outcome of the post-election struggle in Iran will certainly influence Armenia's position between Iran and the West. However, even taking into account all these factors, the long term foreign policy strategy of Armenian elites is unlikely to change. Armenia's history, geopolitics and current situation suggest that for years to come Armenian foreign policy will be dominated by the need to find a balance between stronger neighbors and global powers.

### *About the Author:*

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### *Recommended Reading:*

Alexander Iskandaryan, "NATO and Armenia: A Long Game of Complementarism," *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 5, April 16, 2009.

## US Policy towards the South Caucasus: How To Move Forward\*

By Fariz Ismailzade, Baku

### Abstract

Since the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, many in the South Caucasus, as in the rest of the world, wonder what the new administration's vision and policy toward their respective region will be. The reset of US-Russian relations and the seemingly soft foreign policy of President Obama raise concerns among South Caucasus citizens that the United States is gradually distancing itself from this strategically important region. Although the US legitimately has other foreign policy priorities, such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, disengagement from the South Caucasus/Caspian region would offset the geopolitical, economic and energy gains made in the past decade as well as leave the South Caucasus nations in a security vacuum.

### Evolution of US Policy towards the South Caucasus

Warm relations with Russia characterized the early years of post-Cold War US Presidents. Both President Bill Clinton and George W. Bush embraced their Russian counterparts and genuinely attempted to find a common language of cooperation with the Russian Federation. During the early Clinton years, a "Russia First" policy, actively pursued by Deputy Secretary of State

Strobe Talbott, even prevailed in the foreign policy agenda towards the post-Soviet space.

Yet, as the Caspian region emerged as a strategically important region with vast energy resources, the US administration began to become actively engaged in this area, working with the newly independent states of the Former USSR in pursuit of regional development, economic growth and political stability. During those times, the US government was instrumental in helping the South Caucasus countries to strengthen their independence, halt regional conflicts, revive their economies and integrate into Euro-Atlantic political

\* The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the official policy of the Academy.



and economic structures. Significant US help ensured that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Supsa pipelines and many other regional transport and energy projects were implemented and that the vast hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian were opened to Western markets. US oil companies were among the first to enter the region, bringing much needed investment and political clout.

After the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, cooperation between the US and South Caucasus nations further expanded, particularly in terms of bilateral and multilateral partnerships in the fields of security, fighting terrorism, conducting peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and sharing intelligence. Military training received special attention, especially in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which prohibited US government aid to the government of Azerbaijan was frozen. President Bush became the first US President to visit the South Caucasus region and the region was subsequently declared to be of strategic importance for US national interests.

### Areas of Common Interest

The US's active engagement in the South Caucasus/Caspian region gradually, but steadily, increased over time for a number of reasons. Foremost was the important geographic location of the South Caucasus, at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Middle East, between Iran and Russia. Having a firm stronghold in this vital region was, and remains, an important goal for the overall US Foreign Policy agenda. It is through the South Caucasus that access to Southern Russia, the Middle East, Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan widens.

Second, the rich hydrocarbon resources of the region attracted US investments and thus political interest to the region. The Caspian region plays a very important role in diversifying world energy supplies as well as ensuring the energy security of Europe and Israel. Oil and gas projects have brought in significant US investments to other sectors of the South Caucasus economy, such as services, construction, IT, transport and communications.

Finally, US interest in this region, as in other regions of the post-Soviet space, was driven by the shared values of democracy, a market economy and strengthening the sovereignty and independence of the post-Soviet republics. US politicians were convinced that by helping these newly independent countries, they were helping to establish long-lasting peace and stability in the region and preventing the emergence of another USSR.

### The Current Situation

The last few years, however, have seen decreasing US interest in the region. This is evident in many areas, starting with the Georgian-Russian conflict, in which the US took a very passive stance and failed to protect its proclaimed ally Georgia, and finishing with the lack of a coherent vision for this region by the Obama Administration. The US Government, in contrast to the 1990s, distanced itself from the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, a major regional transportation project which is being built with the support of the Turkish and Azerbaijani governments and is planned to connect the railway systems of greater Eurasia, so that goods and people can pass all the way from London to China and back. The US Congress, influenced by the Armenian lobby, passed a bill to prohibit US funding for this project.

In another case, the US administration still shows weakness and passivity in lobbying for the Nabucco pipeline, which is important for the transportation of Caspian gas to EU markets. US Special Envoy for Caspian Energy Ambassador Richard Morningstar has even welcomed Russian participation in Nabucco, thus further showing signs of weakness on the part of the US in supporting this project. Without strong political backing from Washington and Brussels, it will be very hard to overcome the Russian opposition and build this pipeline.

Finally, on the issue of regional conflicts, the US administration, despite being involved in both the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia's conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has failed to achieve a major breakthrough in their resolution. Moreover, analysts in the region believe that the US, bogged down in economic and security problems of its own, pays less and less attention to these conflicts and further opens the door for the Russian Federation to take the initiative in the field of conflict resolution. When in March 2008 the US voted against the UN General Assembly resolution on the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, many in the Azerbaijani capital took it as a stab in the back and insult after all the assistance that Azerbaijan has been providing in support of US national interests, including sending peacekeeping troops to Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq and sharing intelligence information on counterterrorism.

Moreover, President Obama's push for the opening of the Armenian-Turkish border without the consideration of Azerbaijan's national interests and the liberation of occupied Azerbaijani territories by Armenia caused a major backlash in Azerbaijan and seriously damaged bilateral Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, the backbone of

the strategic partnership between the West and Azerbaijan. In many ways, this policy by the US Administration was poorly designed, rushed and brought more divisive lines to the region instead of trying to unite it. Suspicion towards this policy in Azerbaijan remains high and much of the blame goes to the US, co-chair of the Minsk group, which is perceived to be behind the initiative, in order to please the Armenian lobby in that country.

Analysts in Georgia are increasingly talking about the decreasing amount of attention paid to this country by the new US Administration. It is true that Vice President Biden visited Tbilisi in an effort to assure Georgians that the US is still behind their country. But the visit had more of a consoling purpose than signaling a strategic commitment to this country.

### Recommendations for US Policy Makers

Although understandably Washington has other priorities in the world, the South Caucasus remains a strategically important region, where constant geopolitical power games are taking place and competition for energy resources and strategic influence are never ending. Under these circumstances, ignoring the region, putting it on the backburner or sacrificing it for the sake of better US-Russian relations will not serve US national interests. In many cases, the South Caucasus and the strength of US influence here also directly affect the success of US policies in other priority zones, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Central Asia.

Good, understandable and stable US-Russian relations are important for the South Caucasus. They will bring less competition and more cooperation in the area of conflict resolution and reduce the overall level of tension in the region. The South Caucasus needs a strong reset in US-Russian relations, but Washington must make sure that this reset does not turn into another "Russia First" policy in which it sacrifices the interests of the small Caucasus nations. Instead, healthy dialogue and support for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia should always be a priority in US-Russian relations.

In terms of domestic developments, the US, after the vivid failure of the color revolutions, should be less supportive of rapid, street-led revolutionary changes and focus more on long-term, institutional development and grassroots democracy. Education, public awareness and institutional capacity building are key for sustainable political and economic reforms in these countries. Pushy policies and harsh dictates on the issues of governance, democratization and internal reform will provoke a stubborn reaction on the part of South Caucasus

nations and further antagonize the pro-reform segments of these societies. It is important in Washington to realize that nation- and state-building processes require a long, painful path, that demands significant risks and long-term investment.

A strong focus should remain on the conflict resolution efforts. Both in the case of the Georgian and Armenia-Azerbaijan conflicts, the role of US can be huge and even a minor success could significantly bolster the US image in the region. Minor, but achievable success could be in the area of liberating a few Azerbaijani regions from Armenian occupation, repealing Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, arranging direct dialogue between Russia and Georgia and finally, clearly pushing for the parallel opening of the Turkish-Armenian border and the de-occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. Repealing Section 907 will have significant moral and political implications rather than financial consequences for Azerbaijan, a country that is rich in cash these days.

President Obama, despite his love for green energy, should not give up on major regional energy projects and must actively push for Nabucco, as a way to get Caspian gas to European markets. Only with the help of US lobbying and political support can the countries of the Caspian commit to this project. Otherwise, they are more likely to sell their gas to Russia and thus avoid confrontation with this powerful neighbor.

Washington should commit itself to the on-going regional transportation and infrastructure projects, providing know-how and bolstering the regional integration of the South Caucasus and Central Asian countries. These countries need help in integrating into the world economy, European and Euro-Atlantic economic and political institutions, and the World Trade Organization. The US's help in this regard could be enormous. Turning the Caspian region into the hub for Eurasian transport and communication projects would benefit both the US national interests and strengthen the independence and sovereignty of these countries. Such goals can be achieved in partnership with the European Union. Strong US support for the East-West transportation, energy and communication corridor is necessary in order to sustain the high level interest of these countries in this project. Otherwise, insecurity and lack of attention from Washington will push them in another direction.

Finally, the United States should seriously invest in public diplomacy efforts in this region, in order to prevent its image from spiraling downward. High level visits by US officials, especially from Congress, quick appointment for the empty ambassadorial positions, and regu-

lar media and civil society programs are a must in sustaining the positive image of the US.

Finally, more important than all of these actions, the US must develop a coherent, long-term and clear vision

for its policies in the South Caucasus and thus commit to this region in a sustainable manner.

*About the Author:*

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## Obama and Georgia: A Year-Long Awkward Silence

By George Khelashvili, Oxford

### Abstract

The Obama administration is struggling to make sense of Georgia's place in US foreign policy. So far, this has turned out to be a rather uneasy task as it is difficult for Washington to explicitly admit that Georgia only has a limited strategic value for US interests, especially after years of massive political and economic assistance to Tbilisi under the Bush administration. Georgia is important only in the regional context of Caspian energy and security in the Caucasus. Therefore, Washington's strategic activity in Georgia has been rather low-key and is likely to remain such for the foreseeable future. The US might consider strengthening its role in the region either because of energy security considerations or some large-scale disturbance caused by aggressive Russian actions, aimed at enhancing Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet space.

### Introduction: Setting the Scene

After the rather dynamic development of the US-Georgia relationship under the Bush presidency, current relations seem to be stagnating as the Obama administration is quite cautious in providing explicit political support to the Georgian government. The question is whether the toning down of the rhetoric also means a real change in the substance of cooperation.

Since Obama took office a year ago, the two sides continued to implement the existing agreements that had been in place under the previous US administration. The last most significant agreement signed under Bush was the "Charter on Strategic Partnership". Despite the grand title, the charter is anything but "strategic" as it does not go beyond a mere declaration of the readiness to cooperate in various fields of mutual interest. The latest meeting under the auspices of this charter, in January 2010, envisaged the encouragement of "people-to-people and cultural exchange programs", ostensibly leaving aside any questions pertaining to the most vital of Georgian national interests – security and territorial integrity.

Moreover, official meetings between the Georgian president and US diplomats and politicians have been largely devoid of any strategic sense and could be said

to have been meetings for the sake of meetings. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in September 2009 and Vice-President Joe Biden in July 2009 reiterated US support for Georgia's independence and territorial integrity, but things have not really moved further than this.

### Putting the "Chill" in Context

There are a few possible answers as to why Washington is keeping relations with Georgia on a backburner. The most obvious pertains to the US economic crisis and the stretching of US political and military resources, which apparently also prompted Washington to "reset" relations with Moscow. Indeed, the harsh and Cold-War like rhetoric sometimes applied by the Bush administration vis-à-vis Russia now seems a thing of the past. This attitude towards Moscow in fact follows a policy line as proposed by Henry Kissinger already in Summer 2008, just before the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Georgia, who strongly advocated a US rapprochement with Russia against the background of the leadership change in Moscow.

Alternatively, US caution could have been caused by a more prudent approach towards Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, whose credentials have been



strongly shaken after his mishandling of the military conflict with Russia in August 2008. Moreover, the Americans may have had little clue of what to do with regard to Georgia at this stage. Therefore, keeping things low-key served a dual purpose – to avoid Moscow's irritation and also to make it clear that Washington did not betray Saakashvili. There is also a possibility that the representatives of the US administration and President Saakashvili find it rather hard to come to agreement on certain issues of mutual importance, as Saakashvili had enjoyed a much more loyal treatment from the US under the previous Republican administration and would find it difficult to settle for less. Moreover, ideological collusion between the US neoconservatives and Saakashvili is over. Saakashvili has little to share with the current administration ideologically. Therefore, it must be rather difficult for the representatives of the Obama administration to understand, let alone agree to the Georgian leader's points of view on the most outstanding issues of world politics, first of all US-Russian relations.

The most plausible explanation for the current "chill" in US-Georgian relations is probably the absence of real issues for cooperation. Apart from Georgia's military support for the US mission in Afghanistan, there are no fields of cooperation with real substance. In the sphere of business, American companies have been very reluctant to invest in Georgia, especially after the double shock of the ongoing world economic crisis and the August 2008 war. American aid to Georgia continues as before, but the extent of the military cooperation became relatively low-key and the aid package of approximately \$1 billion sought to stabilize Georgia's war-shattered economy, rather than promote promising new cooperative initiatives.

This uncertainty about cooperation may be exacerbated by the new administration's indeterminate policy towards the wider post-Soviet space and the issues associated with this region, first of all, Caspian energy transportation and democracy promotion. The grand designs of getting Central Asian oil and gas through the Caucasus to the world markets have at best been delayed. With this, Russian cooperation over Afghanistan became more precious as Afghanistan came to the fore of Obama's security strategy. The dimming prospects for grand futures among the fledgling "colored democracies" have slowly but surely crumbled and dreams of rapid democratization in the post-Soviet space have long dissipated.

Therefore, it seems there is really very little about Georgia that Americans could employ for yet another "grand regional strategy" so far. The previous two phases

– the scenarios of replaying the "Great Game" in Central Asia in the late 1990s, and the "color revolutions" of the mid-2000s are difficult to replicate and it is even more difficult to invent something new along the same scale. With the absence of a comprehensible American "grand strategy" towards the post-Soviet space, Georgia has been left out in the cold.

### US-Georgian Relations: A Reappraisal

The relative thaw in the antagonistic rhetoric between Washington and Moscow set Georgia back to its original "geopolitical" point of departure. Georgia only makes sense in the context of wider US interests in the Central Asian region. These interests include exploitation and transportation of regional energy resources to the world markets with participation of American (as well as European) capital; and the preservation of a durable peace in the region, which has actual and potential security problems of its own, and also borders with the hotbeds of instability – Afghanistan and the Middle East.

None of these two major groups of interests at the current stage involve Georgia as a key factor. In the last few years, Russia (but increasingly also the Chinese) confidently outperformed the US administration in securing access to Central Asia's oil and gas. While in the longer run Central Asian energy may not necessarily be lost to the West, in the next few years the Obama administration has very limited chances of wresting local riches out of Russian control. Only Azerbaijani oil and gas (in more and more limited quantities) is available for transportation through Georgia. The required infrastructure for transporting Azerbaijani energy is already in place – the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines. Agreements over the putative Nabucco pipeline are only in a nascent stage. Even if actually signed, the realization of Nabucco agreements will still depend on the successful resolution of wider geopolitical issues in Central Asia – not least the question of to what extent Turkmenistan's and Kazakhstan's energy will flow to China. In either case, Georgia's place in this game is marginal.

Equally questionable is Georgia's importance for the US military campaign in Afghanistan. Having reached tentative deals with Russia over NATO supply lines to Afghanistan, Georgia has only a limited role in the logistical infrastructure of the Afghan war. The Georgian military deployment in Afghanistan, helping the NATO troops, is loudly appreciated, yet little related to the overall political calculations regarding Tbilisi's importance to Washington.

Denial of the immediate Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia by NATO in April 2008 also put the

issue of Georgian importance for Euroatlantic security structures under a big question mark. From the perceived potential provider of security in the turbulent region of the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, Georgia quickly turned into a strategic liability after the war with Russia in August 2008. Georgia remains a liability for the Alliance to this day and seems to be such for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the only interest the US may have towards Georgia at this stage is making sure Georgia does not turn into a new political headache for the current US administration.

However, despite the above argument, much depends on Moscow's future actions in Russia's immediate periphery. A continued thaw in US-Russian relations cannot be guaranteed. In case of an international crisis involving both the US and Russia, the old mistrust can resurface rather quickly, which would create fertile grounds for resuming the fervent US political and military support for the Georgian government. However, this support may only rest on ideological grounds, fed by a common US-Georgian rejection of Russia's pretensions of securing its "sphere of influence" in the former Soviet space.

### **Conclusion: A Skeptical Outlook**

Unless some large-scale crisis erupts (akin to the Cuban missile crisis or September 11 terrorist attacks), the US is unlikely to undertake any major initiatives in the former Soviet region during Obama's first presidential term. Even in case of a Republican comeback in the US Congress in November 2010, it is highly unlikely that Georgia will gain prominence in Washington's foreign agenda. Therefore, US policy toward Georgia depends more on

two factors exogenous to the domestic politics of US foreign policy making – Russian behavior in the post-Soviet space and the degree of stability in Georgia itself.

An evaluation of the prospects for US-Georgian partnership cannot be made in isolation of the Russian factor. Much depends on how Russians react in the future to certain unwelcome developments that may occur on their periphery. So far, Georgia's setbacks and the expectations of a new president in Ukraine kept Moscow contently vigilant. Yet, one is tempted to see Russians only grudgingly accepting the status quo and holding their anti-American rhetoric at bay. Any regional crisis with Russian political intervention that could also involve American interests – over sovereignty, territorial integrity, or the trading rights of the peripheral post-Soviet space – may elicit a new cycle of US-Russian rhetorical confrontation. How far will Moscow go on the path of expanding its influence over the domestic affairs of Russia's neighbors is the real question here. Any American resistance, even purely rhetorical, is likely to reverse the resetting trend in US-Russian relations.

The Georgian leadership's attitude is important as well. It is likely that Saakashvili will continue his gamble to capitalize on American-Russian contradictions. This is likely even if his grip on political power in Georgia is jeopardized, or the American-Russian "truce" holds. So far, it seems that Saakashvili is waiting for the opportune moment to resume his "special relationship" with Washington and will probably come up with new initiatives on his own. However, unless a major geopolitical earthquake happens in the post-Soviet space, it is unlikely that US-Georgian relations will gain new momentum.

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## Attitudes Toward the West in the South Caucasus

By Therese Svensson and Julia Hon, Tbilisi and Seattle

### Abstract

This article examines the population's attitudes in the three South Caucasus states Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia towards Western states and organizations, drawing on opinion polls conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center. The results show that there is generally a positive attitude toward the West in the South Caucasus, with the Georgian respondents consistently expressing the most positive attitudes. In all three countries, both economic and political cooperation with Western countries and institutions is valued highly. Culturally, people seem to be comfortable about personal relationships with their Western counterparts, but also appear concerned about retaining their countries' cultural distinctiveness.

### Looking Westward

The West's presence is felt in the South Caucasus in many spheres: from the construction of oil and gas pipelines to the presence of Western NGOs to the "if, when and how" of NATO and EU membership. The question of whether the South Caucasus countries are orienting themselves toward the West became especially acute after the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict. But what do people in the South Caucasus really think about their countries' political, cultural and economic relations with the West, in particular with NATO, the U.S. and the EU? And how much do these attitudes vary by country? Findings from the 2007 and 2008 national Data Initiative (DI) surveys conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia offer detailed answers to these questions.\*

### Economic Cooperation

All three countries desire a fairly good economic relationship with the U.S. and the EU, with Georgians showing the most positive attitudes. In 2007, respondents were asked to rank the extent to which they thought their country should cooperate economically with a number of countries and organizations on a scale from "1" (no cooperation) to "10" (full cooperation). Seventy-one percent of Armenian respondents placed their wish for economic cooperation with the U.S. in one of the top five ranks, with 38 percent choosing the highest category. In Azerbaijan, attitudes were similar: 71 percent rated their wish for economic cooperation in one of the top five ranks, out of which 32 percent wanted full cooperation. In Georgia, these numbers were higher: 80 percent approved of economic cooperation (i.e. rating it in one of the five top ranks), and more than half of the

respondents (53 percent) were for full economic cooperation with the U.S.

The respondents' support in all three countries for economic cooperation with the EU is nearly the same as that for the U.S., with a slightly higher overall percentage in favor of full cooperation (i.e. "10" on the scale). Fifty-eight percent of the Georgian respondents wish to see full economic cooperation with the EU, in comparison to 43 percent in Armenia and 31 percent in Azerbaijan.

Personal business connections with Americans also received positive evaluations (DI 2007). In both Armenia and Georgia, 86 percent of the respondents approved of doing business with U.S. citizens, with Azerbaijanis somewhat behind at 72 percent. The 2009 EU survey conducted in Georgia echoed these results: Eighty-eight percent of Georgians would approve of people of their ethnicity doing business with Americans, placing Americans at the top of the list of nationalities with whom Georgians like to do business.\*\*

### Political Cooperation

Attitudes toward political cooperation with the U.S. and the EU follow a similar pattern as attitudes toward economic relations. Sixty-six percent in Armenia and 72 percent in Azerbaijan placed their support in one of the five top ranks of the ten-point scale, with 34 percent and 35 percent, respectively, seeking full cooperation. Georgian respondents were slightly more interested in a good political relationship: 78 percent were positively inclined (placing their attitudes to political cooperation with the U.S. in one of the five upper categories), and as much as 53 percent were fully supportive. The support for political cooperation with the EU is nearly the same. (see Diagram 1 on p. 13)

\* For information on the DI survey methodology and access to the datasets, see the CRRC's website ([www.crrccenters.org](http://www.crrccenters.org)).

\*\* The 2009 "Attitudes Towards European Integration," carried out by CRRC in Georgia. See [http://epfound.org/index.php?article\\_id=106](http://epfound.org/index.php?article_id=106) for more information.

The 2009 EU Survey on Georgians' attitudes toward European integration again highlights the Georgians' orientation toward the West. Eighty-three percent said that it is quite important or very important for the Georgian government to strengthen ties with the U.S. Furthermore, 71 percent agree that Georgia should have close political cooperation with the U.S., placing the U.S. at the top of a list of countries and organizations with which Georgia should have close political cooperation. Sixty-five percent agreed Georgia should have close political cooperation with the EU, and 54 percent said the same about Russia.

The 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict made the U.S.'s political involvement in the Caucasus a subject of intense interest, both in the region and the rest of the world. Data from the DI 2008, carried out shortly after the war ended, show that the opinion that the war was in the interest of the U.S. government is much more prevalent in Armenia and Azerbaijan than in Georgia. Seventy-one percent of Armenian respondents agreed that the Russia-Georgia war was in the interest of the U.S. government, followed by 40 percent of the respondents in Azerbaijan, but only 19 percent thought so in Georgia.

### Attitudes Toward NATO

NATO cooperation and accession figure prominently in debates about the South Caucasus' relationship with the West. Respondents' attitudes toward NATO membership vary considerably between the three countries: Armenians have the most skeptical attitude, while in Azerbaijan and Georgia respondents are much more enthusiastic. In 2007, respondents were asked to assess their support for NATO membership on a five-point scale, ranging from no support at all to full support. In Armenia, 21 percent of the respondents said they did not support NATO membership at all, while 15 percent gave their full support. In Azerbaijan, however, the amount of full support was almost double (39 percent), with only two percent completely withholding support. Even more Georgians approved of NATO membership: 47 percent gave their full support, whereas only 3 percent gave none.

In 2008, the support for NATO membership decreased in all three countries. Georgians remained the most positive, despite NATO's lukewarm response to the Georgia-Russia conflict, with nearly half of the respondents saying they were fully in favor of membership (42 percent), and only four percent showing no support at all. The Armenian respondents were again the least enthusiastic about NATO, with 10 percent fully

in favor of membership and 20 percent fully against it. In Azerbaijan, support for NATO accession dropped to 21 percent (and 3 percent totally opposed). (see Diagram 2 on p. 14)

### Culture and Relationships

On a more micro level, people from the South Caucasus countries tend to be congenial about personal relationships with individuals from the U.S., with Georgians expressing the most positive attitudes. The DI 2007 showed that 87 percent of the Georgian respondents approve of being friends with Americans, followed by 83 percent in Armenia and 70 percent in Azerbaijan.

As for a willingness to be friends with European nationalities, the respondents' attitudes are also quite positive. For example, a high amount of the Georgian and Armenian respondents would approve of being friends with Greeks (90 percent and 81 percent, respectively). However, some attitudes toward personal relationships seem to be colored by religious and geopolitical factors – for example, only 52 percent of Azerbaijani respondents approve of being friends with Greeks. And while 94 percent of the Azerbaijani respondents and 76 percent of the Georgians respondents approve of being friends with Turks, only 27 percent of Armenians do.

Concerning the idea of marriage to other nationalities, the approval rates are much lower than for friendship. Armenians have the most positive views of marrying Americans, with 42 percent approving, closely followed by the Georgian respondents at 38 percent. Approval among Azerbaijanis trails behind at 18 percent. Despite having a positive view of cooperation with the U.S. in foreign policy or commerce, support among Azerbaijanis is lower for personal relationships with Americans, perhaps due to greater perceived cultural or religious differences.

Moreover, in 2008 the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement that their country's culture is increasingly threatened by Western cultural influences. There is a significant difference in responses between the three countries. Twenty-four percent of the Georgian respondents strongly agree or somewhat agree with this statement, in comparison with 63 percent in Azerbaijan and 64 percent in Armenia. Only 19 percent of the Georgian respondents also say that globalization has a positive impact on Georgia, in comparison with 32 percent in Armenia and 40 percent in Azerbaijan – all numbers that suggest that people are still keen to retain a high degree of cultural distinctiveness. (see Diagram 3 on p. 14)

## Conclusion

In general, the findings show that citizens in the South Caucasus view the West in a generally positive light. They tend to be interested in both economic and political cooperation, and this support has remained stable over the past years. While the figures from the respondents in Georgia are usually the highest, there are no serious indicators of troubled relations between NATO, the EU

or the U.S. and the South Caucasus countries. Instead, there are areas of relations in which the degree of cooperation desired with one of these institutions or countries is slightly higher or lower. Moreover, while many citizens across the South Caucasus feel a cultural affinity to the West, they want to maintain their distinctive cultures in a context of multilateral political and economic cooperation.

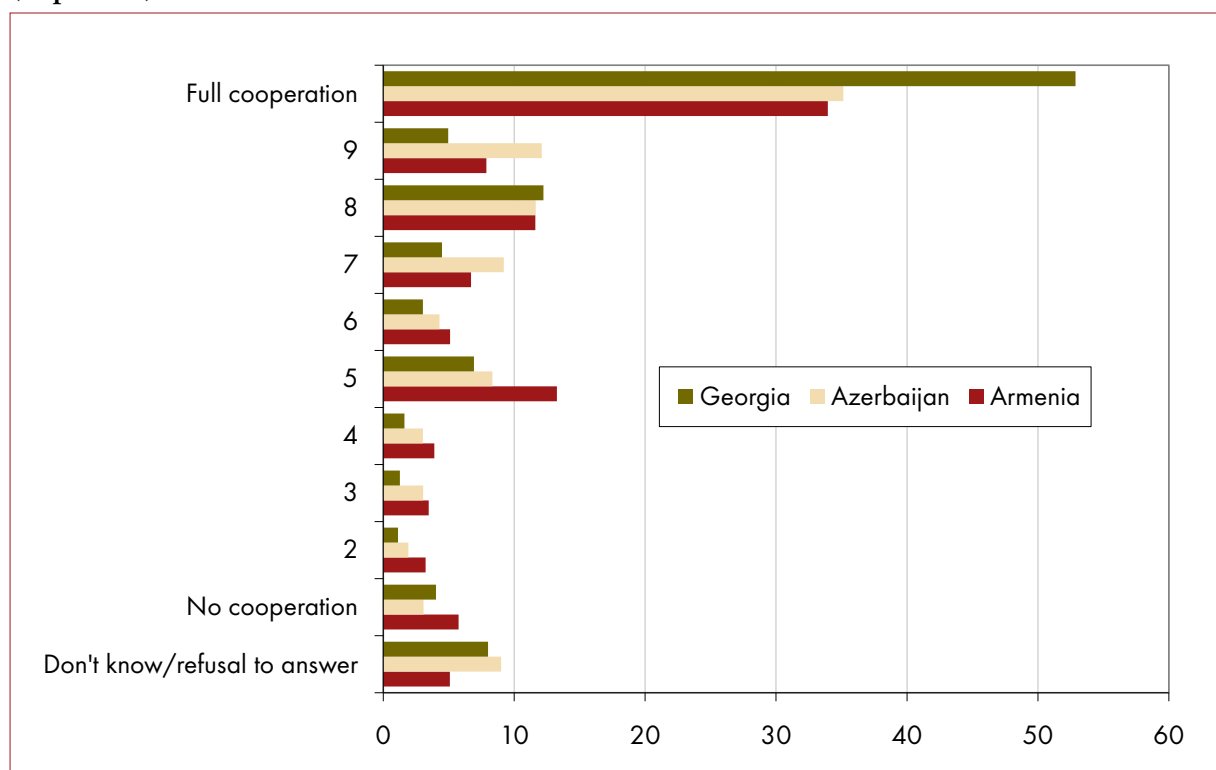
### About the Authors

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## Diagrams

### Public Attitudes towards the Relationship with the West in the Countries of the South Caucasus

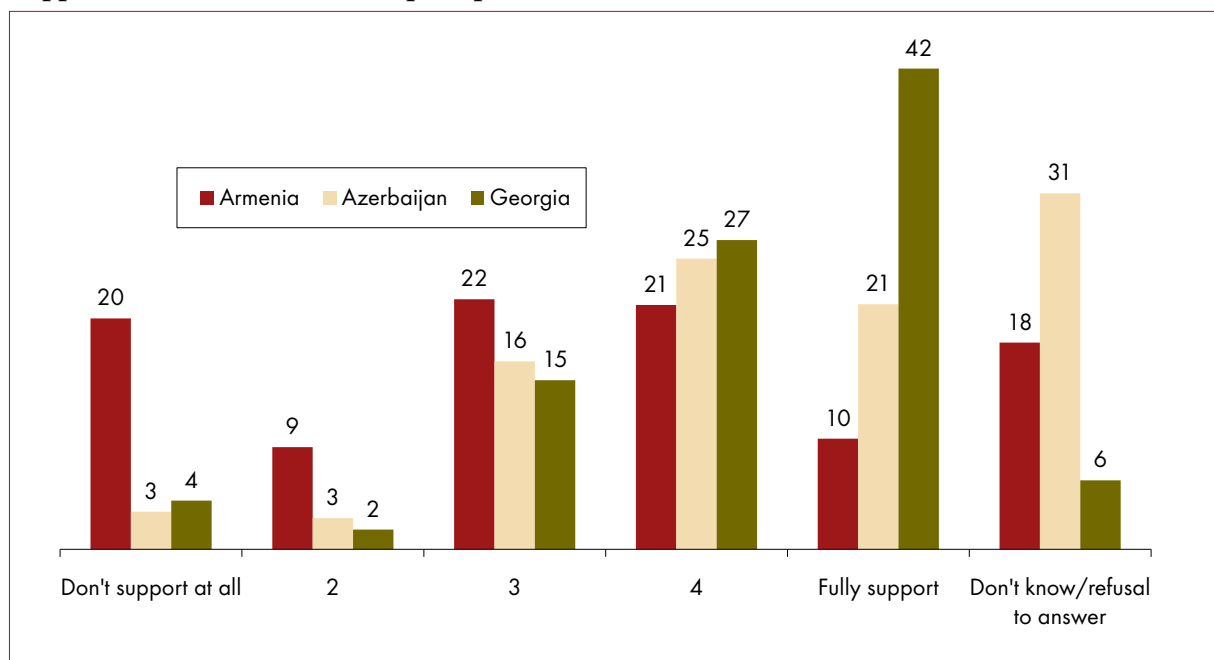
#### Respondent's Perception of Political Relations with the U.S. (in percent)



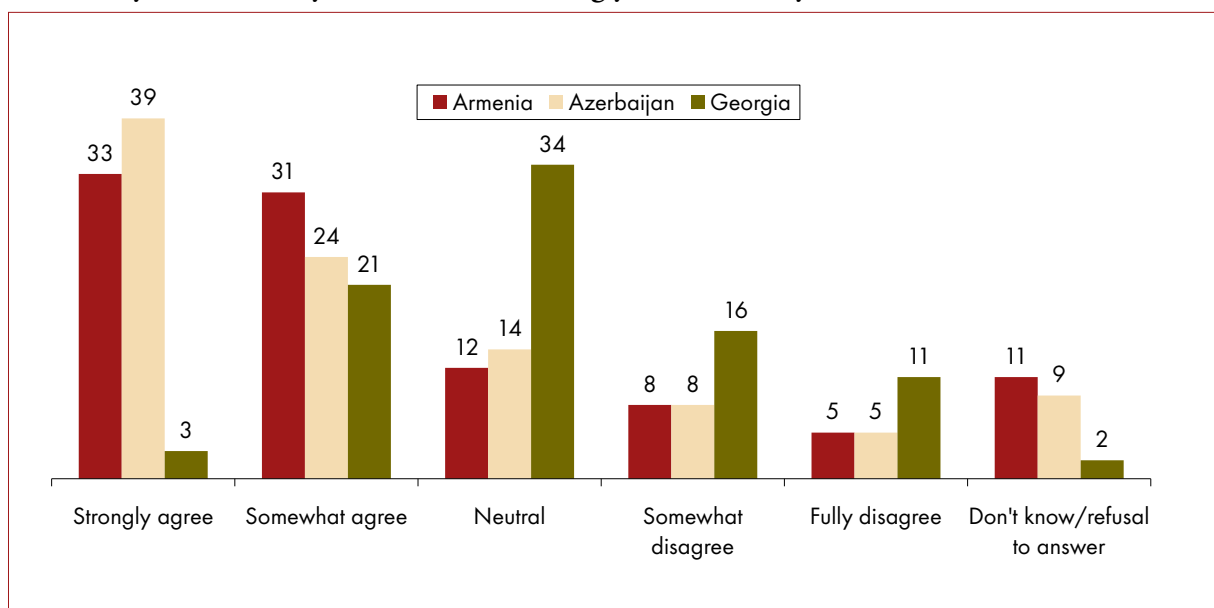
Source: representative opinion poll conducted by CRRC, DI, 2007



### Support for NATO Membership (in percent)



### “These days, our country’s culture is increasingly threatened by Western cultural influences”



Source: representative opinion poll conducted by CRRC, DI, 2007

## Chronicle

### From 19 January to 10 February 2010

19 January 2010	Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze meets with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in Tehran
19 January 2010	Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri visits Egypt
19 January 2010	The European Commission includes Azerbaijan on the list of countries that can export black caviar to the European Union
20 January 2010	Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan says that an Armenian court's reference to the mass killings of Armenians during World War I as "genocide" could harm the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement process
20 January 2010	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili meets with Estonian President Thomas Hendrik Ilves in Tallinn, Estonia
20 January 2010	Former Armenian President Robert Kocharian meets with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Iran Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in Tehran
20 January 2010	Azerbaijan commemorates the 20th anniversary of the 20 January tragedy when civilians were killed after the Soviet army attacked Baku
22 January 2010	Leader of opposition movement Alliance for Georgia Irakli Alasania calls on Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to convene a session of the National Security Council over allegations of meddling by Georgian senior officials in Ukraine's presidential elections
23 January 2010	A Georgian parliamentary delegation led by Parliament speaker David Bakradze visits Brussels for meetings with NATO and the European Union
25 January 2010	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev agree on the preamble to the "Madrid principles" that constitute the outline for a potential Karabakh peace agreement during a meeting in Sochi with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev
26 January 2010	Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri visits Armenia
28 January 2010	Georgia unveils a strategy on Abkhazia and South Ossetia
28 January 2010	Negotiators during the ninth round of the Geneva talks fail to make progress on a potential agreement on the non-use of force and international security arrangements
28 January 2010	Two Azerbaijani soldiers kill four officers and then turn their weapons on themselves during a shooting incident at an Azerbaijani military base near the border with Armenia
28 January 2010	Georgian ambassador to Azerbaijan Ivane Noniashvili resigns two months after his appointment to the position
29 January 2010	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili offers the United States a transit route for weapons and supplies to Afghanistan through Georgian territory
29 January 2010	At least one person is killed and seven wounded during a mine blast in the Gali district of Georgia's break-away region of Abkhazia
2 February 2010	Georgia accuses Eutelsat of censorship for taking Georgia's Russian-language Caucasian channel off the satellite
2 February 2010	U.S. National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair writes in testimony to a U.S. senate committee that he sees an increased chance of a Karabakh conflict because of the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement
2 February 2010	Dozens of small-business owners protest in Georgia's capital of Tbilisi against a new tax law in which small businesses could be fined for failing to provide receipts and invoices
3 February 2010	The Council of Europe's Venice Commission visits Georgia to meet with representatives of the state commission on constitutional reform
6 February 2010	A U.S. congressional panel schedules a meeting in March to vote on a resolution to label the mass killings of Armenians by Turkish forces during World War I a "genocide"
8 February 2010	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili says that "Ukrainian democracy has won" after Ukraine's presidential elections and Georgia and Ukraine would remain strategic partners no matter who is elected as the new Ukrainian president
9 February 2010	Former Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli's party Movement for a Fair Georgia and Russia's United Russia party sign a cooperation agreement in Moscow
9 February 2010	Georgian officials criticize France's decision to sell a warship to Russia
10 February 2010	Georgian investigative journalist Vakhtang Komakhidze asks for asylum in Switzerland citing "aggressive threats" coming from the Georgian authorities

## About the Caucasus Analytical Digest

Editors: Iris Kempe, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Lili Di Puppò

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The Heinrich Böll Foundation, affiliated with the Green Party of Germany, is a legally independent political foundation. The regional office for the South Caucasus was opened in 2003. Its main objective is to contribute to the forming of free, fair and tolerant societies in the region. The Foundation supports and facilitates cooperation of individuals and organizations throughout the region who, based on the principle values of human rights, search for the change of undemocratic and intolerant attitudes in societies and politics, for the transformation of ethno-political and territorial conflicts into the direction of fair and non-violent solutions and for the sustainable development of people and communities. The Foundation encourages critical public debate to make processes of decision-making democratic and transparent.

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### Resource Security Institute

The Resource Security Institute (RSI) is a non-profit organization devoted to improving understanding about global energy security, particularly as it relates to Eurasia. We do this through collaborating on the publication of electronic newsletters, articles, books and public presentations.

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