

ON RELATIONSHIPS OF RUSSIA WITH COUNTRIES OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AT THE CURRENT STAGE

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Relationships of Russian Federation with countries of the South Caucasus take one of the priority places amongst directions of its foreign policy towards the South. For some historical period the countries of the South Caucasus were connected to Russia not only politically and economically, but also culturally and from the religious viewpoint firstly within Russian Empire and then Soviet Union. All this influenced the relationships of Russia with South Caucasian countries at the current stage. After gaining of complete independence in the beginning of 90s the relationships between Russia on one hand and Azerbaijan and Georgia on the other hand were not developing smoothly due to complex and contradictory processes underway in the region.

The most complex and tense relationships exist between Russia and Georgia, moreover these processes are worsening. The huge negative roll in this had the factor of Russian influence in Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, emerged and developed not without participation of Moscow. There are well-grounded opinions in Georgia that many years long mediation of Russia worsened the situation and the peacekeeping mission of the northern neighbor didn't promote the settlement of these conflicts. After OSCE Istanbul Summit (1999) the contradictions in the relationships with Georgia started to grow with rate never seen before. According to Georgians, the decision on withdrawal of two from four of military bases in Akhalkhalaki and Batumi, taken in Istanbul is being delayed without any reason. On the other side, the economic development of the country in general, including the development of transport communications, especially the construction of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export pipeline, enabling Georgia to have a genuine economic independence, as well as close contacts with the USA and NATO, guaranteeing the sovereignty and national independence of this country force Russia to leave its former positions in this country. At the same time, it should be noted that Georgia considerably depends on import of carbohydrates from Russia, moreover, one third of its export is aimed at the northern neighbor.

Georgia, which is the only South Caucasian country which has access to Black Sea takes a very strategic position in the region. Tran Caucasian transport itineraries – railways and highways, as well as main pipelines pass through the territory of this country. Territory of Georgia provides the shortest cut to Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea for Azerbaijan and Caspian countries of the Central Asia, which cannot be blocked neither by Russia nor by Iran¹. This country takes an open pro-West orientation especially after the “revolution of roses” and its membership in CIS is of symbolical character. It is remarkable that the Georgian President didn't attend the celebration of 60th anniversary of Victory over fascism held in Moscow.

In the last years Georgia expresses an active interest in the settlement of the long-lasting conflicts at its territory and in this connection it pins its hope not on Russia but on West. At the same time, Georgians are aware of the proved methods of Russia to press its adversaries through others, for instance, stipulating of conflict situations at their territories. The most evident case to that is thorough military and political support of Moscow rendered to Abkhazian and Ossetian separatists since the very beginning of these conflicts. Moreover, in case of “disobedience” of Georgia, Russia may create another center of tension in the Armenian-populated Javakhetia district of Georgia. This district of Georgia borders to Armenia. Initiation of this conflict would involve Armenia as well, which hosts in

¹ A. N Abbasbayli, Foreign policy of Russian Federation in XXI century – Baku, 2005, p.118 (in Russian).

Gumri the largest Russian military base in the South Caucasus. Despite of reiterated meetings at the different levels, including on the top level, numerous memorandums and joint declarations of Russia and Georgia, yet the relationships between these countries has improved. Actually, Russia doesn't have feasible and adequately accepted by world community means to preserve its former influence in Georgia, especially in the light of intensification of the USA and NATO in the South Caucasus. Only the USA in 2002 granted a few millions of USD for training and education of Special Forces in Georgia. Later, in March 2003, the parliament of Georgia has ratified the agreement on cooperation in the field of defense between Georgia and the USA. This agreement guarantees for US military servicemen a no-visa entrance to the territory of Georgia and free travel with full armaments. While evaluating this fact, the formed commander-in-chief of Military Forces of RF, army general A. Kornukhov declared that this US-Georgian agreement "will largely deteriorate the situation at the southern borders of Russia."²

In spring 2005 Georgian-Russian relationships became more tenser in connection with demand of Georgia to accelerate the withdrawal of Russian bases from its territory. In 10 March 2005 the Georgian Parliament has adopted a decree and in fact it put an ultimatum to Russia, demanding definition of deadline of the withdrawal of its bases from Georgia till 15 May. Otherwise, Georgia would declare these bases out of law and would take appropriate measures to block their activity. In particular, Ministry of Foreign Affairs would cease to issue entry visas for Russian military servicemen, Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense would control their movement at the Georgian territory, the bases would be prohibited to update and modernize their military machinery and carry out exercises.

The State Duma of RF has reacted very roughly to this demand of the Georgian party. In the appeal to the president V. V. Putin dated 12 May 2005, the parliamentarians pointed out that these demand "lead the Russian-Georgian relationships to the dead-end, threaten the national interests of Russia as well as the security of the region in general"³. Moreover, the parliamentarians considered that such a threat to the vital interests of Russia enables Russia to take adequate measures. State Duma of RF proposed to the President and the Government to call its Ambassador to Tbilisi back to Russia in such cases, immediately stop the issuance of visas to the citizens of Georgia, coming to Russia, and restrict the measures for deportation of Georgian citizens at the territory of Russia which have problems with registration. Along with this, parliamentarians proposed to impose economic sanctions against Georgia, namely – envisage export of carbohydrates to this country on the prices of world market and reduce the volume of export⁴. All these facts demonstrate the ultimate tension existing in the Georgian-Russian relationships at the present stage. In contrary to Georgian-Russian relationships, the relationships between Russia and Armenia are of allied character. Playing a special strategic role in the light of Russian politics in this region, Armenia is a traditional ally of Russia in the South Caucasus. Moreover, this country is the main base inhibiting the penetration of Turkey to the South Caucasian region. In the geostrategic chain – Moscow – Erevan – Tehran Armenia is the most important strategic unit linking together Russia and Iran and isolating Turkey from Central Asian space to some extent⁵. Military-political union between Russia and Armenia started to emerge when Armenia declared amongst the first about its withdrawal from the USSR. In 15 May 1992 Armenia became the member of the Agreement on Collective Security within CIS. Later, in 1998 a bilateral agreement on military union was signed between Russia and Armenia that promoted turning of Armenia into military-political outpost of Russia in the South Caucasus. In this country, in Gumri and Erevan the largest 102 military base of Russia is deployed, as well as air defense units, border troops, rocket launch systems and other mobile means of quick response. Russia assumes the main mission for protection of land frontiers and air space of Armenia. Russia generously supplies Armenia with all necessary armament without compensation. In mid-90s some military and political circles of

² *Ibidem*, p.119.

³ <http://mail.ru/fil./C./Documents.13.05.2005>.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ A. Dugin, *Basics of geopolitics*. Moskva, 1999, p. 243 (in Russian).

Russia secretly from State Duma supplied Armenia with tremendous volume of modern armament the sum total of which was 1 billion USD, which in fact signified the initiation of aggressive aspirations of Armenia against Azerbaijan⁶. In its turn, Armenia has to sign agreements on assignation of many power production and industrial objects to Russia in order to pay back its debts. In fact, Armenia turned into the second enclave of Russia, coming after Kaliningrad region. The further approval of strategic Russian-Armenian interaction was expressed in the Joint Declaration on strategic interaction between Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia, signed in 26 September 2002 in Moscow, which says that: "On the eve of the XXI century, Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia will build their relationships on the basis of large-scale strategic cooperation."⁷ Large-scale strategic Russian-Armenian cooperation was approved in the expansion and deepening of the military cooperation of two countries. While visiting Armenia in November, 2003, Russian Minister of Defense S. Ivanov stated that "equipment of this contingent (Russian troops, deployed in Armenia) with military machinery is not satisfactory for us. For this purpose we will rearm and re-equip the base of 102 Army of Russia deployed in Armenia"⁸ further, Russian Minister of Defense informed about intention of establishment of united Russian-Armenian military units. In general, the military presence in Armenia is called to provide the domination of Russia in the South Caucasus. As it was remarked by former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of RF B. Pastukhov, the Armenian-Russian agreement "settles the problem of the Russian presence in Caucasus for 25 years ahead."⁹

However, it should be noted that such politics of Russia in this region leads to the change of force balance and strengthening of militarization in the region, inhibiting the settlement of the stability in the South Caucasus. In general, Armenia became the main threat to the international security in the South Caucasus. There is no doubt that such military and political cooperation between Russia and Armenia, as well as the support, rendered by Russia to local separatist in the South Caucasus, played a crucial role in the tragically event that took place in Georgia and Azerbaijan in the first half of 90s that put their territorial integrity under question. Without direct and hidden support of Russia Armenia would never occupy some 20% Azerbaijani territory, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia would never undertake attempts to move away from Georgia. All this makes Azerbaijan and Georgia to seek for reliable partners outside the South Caucasus and CIS in order to counter balance the axis of Russia-Armenia-Iran, stimulating them to cooperate with the leading countries of the West, first of all with the USA and NATO. Moreover, collision of interests of the three contiguous states – Russia, Iran and Turkey – and more globally, those of the West and Russia provides these countries with quite wide spectrum of political maneuvers.¹⁰

As for Russian-Azerbaijani relationships in the course of the last one and half decades, it should be noted that after gaining of independence by Azerbaijan these relationships experienced some evolution. In the course of 90s Moscow displayed the politics of double standards towards the Republic of Azerbaijan, using force pressing and different methods of blackmail. The main reasons deteriorating these relationships were connected to free of charge supply of Russian armament to Armenia, which was in war condition with Azerbaijan. Suffice it to say that during his presidential activity, B. N. Yeltsin has never visited the Republic of Azerbaijan. At the same time, after coming of V. V. Putin to power in the Russian Federation, the elements of realism became apparent in the foreign policy of Russia. In the course of the first official visit of the President of RF V. V. Putin to Azerbaijan 9-10 January 2001 and the negotiations with H. Aliyev, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, a Baku Declaration was signed reflecting the main parameters of the all-round cooperation between two countries in the coming years. This document says the following: "Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan are firmly resolved to improve their bilateral relationships to the new, higher level of strategic partnership on the basis of the principles of mutual respect of

⁶ S. I. Chernavsky, *New way of Azerbaijan*, Moskva, 2002, p. 316.

⁷ A. N Abbasbayli, indicated work., p. 121.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 121-122.

⁹ Cited from: k. S. Hajiyev, *Geopolitics of Caucasus.*, Moskva., 2001, p.315.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 305.

their state sovereignty and independence, equity and non-interference to the internal affairs of each other, non implementation of force or threat of its use, territorial integrity, inviolability of borders and peaceful settlement of the disputes.”¹¹ As for all-Caucasian problems, the Declaration underlines that “Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan are ready to develop the cooperation for turning Caucasus into the region of peace, neighborliness and prosperity.”¹² In the course of this visit many problems were settled on the state level, for instance, the problem of sectors of the Caspian Sea. It enabled them to sign a document on the sectorial division of the ground of Caspian Sea in the course of the visit of the President of Azerbaijan Republic Heydar Aliyev to Moscow in 23 September, 2002.¹³ Stressing the importance of the documents signed in Moscow, H. Aliyev emphasized that “development of relationships with Russian Federation in all spheres is of utmost importance. It doesn’t hurt our relationships with other countries neither strikes their interests.”¹⁴

In the last years the Russian-Azerbaijani relationships have developed more than ever. Pointing out the importance of the development of Russian-Azerbaijani relationships, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said in the Yalta Summit of CIS, held in September 2004 that “Russian-Azerbaijani relationships take the priority place in our foreign policy.”¹⁵ In general, current trends in the foreign policy of Russia enable us to say that soon it will be oriented to rapprochement and equal cooperation with Azerbaijan. Analysis shows that there are sound forces in Russia, interested in the development of multilateral relationships and in the participation in global economic projects in the region and ready to build relationships with Azerbaijan on the mutually beneficial basis. As it was mentioned by Russian scholar K. S. Hajiyev, “it is easier for Russia to deal with uniform, integral and stable Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Outlet of these countries from social and economic troubles and passing to the rails of the sustainable development, as well as material well-being of the peoples of this region meets the interests of Russia.”¹⁶

Taking into account the aforementioned, it should be noted that the relationships between Russia and the countries of the South Caucasus in the future will depend on its well-balanced politics and feasible help for the settlement of the conflicts existing in this region.

¹¹ Diplomaticeskij vestnik (Diplomatic Bulletin), 2001, no. 2, p. 46-47.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 48.

¹³ Newspaper “Azerbaijan”, 2002, September 24 (*in Azeri*).

¹⁴ Newspaper “Azerbaijan”, 2002, September 25 (*in Azeri*).

¹⁵ Newspaper “Azerbaijan”, 2003, September 20 (*in Azeri*).

¹⁶ K. S. Hajiyev, *op. cit.*, p. 295.