BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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Defining Strategic Direction

Azerbaijan and the New Regional Geopolitical Configuration

Gulshan Pashayeva

More than two years have passed since the Second Karabakh War ended and the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement was signed. This essay presents the main priority areas for Azerbaijan of the initial phase of the post-conflict period for which the specific work is currently underway. It then examines the impact of the evolving regional geopolitical landscape to the ongoing normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Five Cornerstone Areas

Within the foregoing strategic context, Azerbaijan has identified five cornerstone priority areas, each of which has been advanced in 2022. *First*, Baku has continued decisively its large-scale post-conflict recovery, reconstruction, and restoration efforts in all conflict-affected territories. The ultimate aim of this priority area is to enable hundreds of thousands of IDPs to return to their homes in safety and dignity with all deliberate speed.

Numerous infrastructure projects have also been launched—some almost days after the war came to an end. A number of these projects have already been completed and many others are in the pipeline. Today, the construction of new highways, railways, airports, schools, hospitals, residential settlements, and so on are in full swing in the Karabakh and East Zangezur economic regions of Azerbaijan. The First State Program on the Great Return to the Liberated Territories, approved by presidential decree on 16 November 2022, is also being successfully implemented. In fact, a first group of Azerbaijani IDPs returned to Aghali in July 2022. This settlement, located in the liberated Zangilan district (the south-western tip of mainland Azerbaijan), was rebuilt in accordance with "smart village" principles and international best practices; according to Azerbaijani authorities, about 16,000 people will return to various rebuilt settlements in the Zangilan district by 2026.

Azerbaijan has identified five cornerstone priority areas, each of which has been advanced in 2022.

At the same time, as Azerbaijan's president, Ilham Aliyev, had said during a wide-ranging interview given to Azerbaijani television channels on 10 January 2023 that this year, former IDPs from the city of Lachin and villages of Zabukh and Sus will return to their homes very soon, adding that extensive construction and restoration work is already underway.

Azerbaijan's *second* priority area is mine clearance: significant work continues to take place, which is an important part of the recovery of the liberated territories. Unfortunately, the contamination of the liberated territories, which are estimated to hold at least 1 million anti-personnel and anti-tank mines as well as other unexploded or abandoned munitions left behind by Armenian forces, coupled with Yerevan's unwillingness to provide accurate mine maps of these areas, not only creates a serious impediment to post-conflict reconstruction but is also directly responsible for new Azerbaijani deaths and injuries. In fact, according to data received from the Mine Action Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (ANAMA), in the period between the signing of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the Second Karabakh War and the end of 2022, 279 people became mine victims, including 45 fatalities (of these, 35 were identified as civilians).

Compounding this challenge is the fact that Armenians continue to plant new mines in the liberated Azerbaijani territories. As Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov stated at the OSCE ministerial meeting held in Poland in December 2022, "in total, 2,728 landmines, made in Armenia in 2021, have been

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found in the sovereign territories of Azerbaijan." These mines were transferred from Armenia into Azerbaijan via the Lachin road, which Bayramov stated on the same occasion constitutes "a blatant abuse of this road, which was envisaged for humanitarian purposes only." Echoing this statement, Deputy Foreign Minister Elnur Mammadov tweeted on 5 January 2023 that "since Aug 2022, over 2,700 Armenia-produced landmines have been discovered in Azerbaijan. We have evidence that these were manufactured by Armenia in 2021, and that Armenia used the humanitarian Lachin Corridor, the only route from Armenia to the liberated territories, to transport mines and weapons."

Armenians continue to plant new mines in the liberated Azerbaijani territories.

The *third* priority area is the peace process with Armenia. Aliyev has repeatedly stated that Azerbaijan is ready to turn the page of enmity and conclude a peace treaty with Armenia. The Azerbaijani Government submitted a proposal containing five basic principles for the normalization of relations to Armenia, which was publicized in March 2022. They include mutual recognition of respect for each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity, inviolability of internationally recognized borders, and political independence; mutual confirmation of the absence of territorial claims against each other and acceptance of legally-binding obligations not to raise such a claim in future; obligation to refrain in their inter-state relations from undermining each other's security, from any threat or use of force both against political independence and territorial integrity, and in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the UN Charter; the delimitation and demarcation of the state border, and the establishment of diplomatic relations; and the unblocking of transportation and other communications , building other communications as appropriate, and the establishment of cooperation in other fields of mutual interest. Then, on 31 March 2022, the Armenian prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, expressed his country's readiness to sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan and to immediately launch talks on the text of a peace treaty.

The Azerbaijani proposal and the subsequent Armenian statement gave further legitimacy to the Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization process that has been underway through distinct initiatives led by Russian and EU intermediaries. France and the United States have also increased their diplomatic support in this context. Three top-level meetings have been held through Russian facilitation (11 January 2021; 26 November 2021, and 31 October 2022), and four top-level meetings have been organized under the auspices of the President of the EU Council, Charles Michel (14 December 2021; 6 April 2022; 22 May 2022; and 31 August 2022). In addition, Aliyev and Pashinyan met in a one-off quadrilateral format with Charles Michel and French president Emmanuel Macron in Prague on 6 October 2022 on the margins of the first summit of the European Political Community. An agreed readout of this meeting indicated that Armenia and Azerbaijan "confirmed their commitment to the Charter of the United Nations and the Alma Ata 1991 Declaration through which both recognize each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty."

The Azerbaijani proposal and the subsequent Armenian statement gave further legitimacy to the Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization process that has been underway through distinct initiatives led by Russian and EU intermediaries.

Furthermore, at their 31 October 2022 meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Aliyev and Pashinyan "agreed to refrain from the use of force or the threat of its use, to discuss and resolve all problematic issues solely on the basis of mutual recognition of sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of borders, in accordance with the UN Charter and the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration." Moreover, a trilateral working group co-chaired by the deputy prime ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on the unblocking of all economic and transport communications based on the provisions of the 11 January 2021 tripartite statement has held 11 meetings so far, although an outcome remains elusive.

The *fourth* priority area for 2022 is characterized by increasing face-to-face contacts as well as bilateral meetings between cabinet ministers and senior officials of the two states. For the first time after the end of the Second Karabakh War, such interaction between high-level offi-

cials from Azerbaijan and Armenia (i.e., Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan Hikmet Hajiyev and Secretary of the Security Council of Armenia Armen Grigoryan) took place in the framework of their trip to Brussels on 30 March 2022. During the substantive discussions, which were facilitated by Toivo Klaar, the EU's Special Representative for the South Caucasus, the participants focused on preparations for the upcoming meeting between EU Council President Charles Michel, President Aliyev, and Prime Minister Pashinyan on 6 April 2022. Incidentally, during a separate bilateral conversation between Hajiyev and Grigoryan, a press report indicated that they "reviewed the political and security situation and the full spectrum of issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan as a follow-up to the understandings reached during the meeting of leaders of both countries and President Michel, held in Brussels on 14 December 2021."

In 2022, Azerbaijan demonstrated both a will and a readiness to engage in direct negotiations with Karabakh Armenians.

Moreover, on 11 April 2022, the first direct phone conversation in roughly three decades occurred between the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers, Jeyhun Bayramov and Ararat Mirzoyan. They discussed matters relating to the future peace treaty, humanitarian issues, and the establishment of the Joint Border Commission. Three official bilateral meetings have taken place between the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan and Armenia during 2022. Some elements of the peace treaty that will cover future inter-state relations were discussed during the last two such meetings, which were held in Geneva on 2 October 2022 and in Washington on 7 November 2022. Three meetings were also held within the framework of the Joint Border Commission without any intermediaries.

The *fifth* and final priority area for 2022 was a demonstration of Azerbaijan's will and readiness to engage in direct negotiations with Karabakh Armenians residing in the part of the territory of Azerbaijan where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed.

Without providing many details, Aliyev has indicated on several occasions that such discussions have taken place at various levels. One such example is the joint

work of a group from Azerbaijan's water management authority, the Azerbaijan Amelioration and Water Farm (OJSC), with local Karabakh Armenian experts in regard to the Sarsang reservoir—one of the six hydroelectric dams that are located in the part of the territory of Azerbaijan where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed. This group inspected the Sarsang reservoir on 22 August 2022 in order to conduct technical monitoring of the reservoir and to get acquainted with the current situation. At the same time, the issues of water distribution and restoration of water supply to irrigated lands were also discussed. The participants came to an agreement to regularly hold such meetings and inspections of the reservoir in the future.

Vardanyan has been trying to prevent the continuation of dialogue between Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijan whilst presenting himself as the only "savior" of the Karabakh Armenians.

Another positive case was the construction of a connecting section 4.8 kilometers in length of a new road bypassing Lachin city by the Azerbaijani State Agency for Automobile Roads. This was done in consultation with the local Armenian community living in Karabakh. The road measures 32 kilometers in total length, with 10 kilometers passing through Armenia's territory. It became fully operational on 25 August 2022. This new Lachin road is considered one of the most important infrastructure projects that has been carried out in Azerbaijan's Karabakh and East Zangezur economic regions.

The point is that these and many other instances demonstrate that Azerbaijan is ready to reintegrate Karabakh Armenians "into its political, social, and economic space, guaranteeing the same rights and freedoms with all the citizens of Azerbaijan. The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan provides the solid legal framework in this regard," as Foreign Minister Bayramov stated at the December 2022 OSCE ministerial meeting.

Monkeywrench

These initial steps towards the reintegration of Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijan were interrupted in fall 2022 after the arrival of Ruben Vardanyan, an

until-recently Moscow-based Russian-Armenian oligarch to the part of Karabakh where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed. He has been involved in several large corruption scandals in Russia, including a huge money laundering network. Vardanyan renounced his Russian citizenship and stated that he came to Karabakh as a citizen of Armenia, which he acquired in 2021. He gave his reasons in a video that he posted on his Facebook page on 1 September 2022. Although he said that his move is a patriotic gesture, one can speculate that his motives can also be linked to the international sanctions that have currently been imposed on Russia.

After his appointment as "state minister" in early November 2022, Vardanyan has been trying to prevent the continuation of dialogue between Karabakh Armenians and Azerbaijan whilst presenting himself as the only "savior" of the Karabakh Armenians. Despite his desire to enter into negotiations with representatives of Azerbaijan, he has been unable to achieve this goal so far. According to Parvin Mirzazade, Ambassador-at-Large in the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry, Baku "long ago stated that it will not hold any talks with [him and others like him], because these obscure individuals are not representatives of the Armenian population of Karabakh, but criminals illegally present in the territory of Azerbaijan, who have grossly violated the laws of the country and are subject to criminal prosecution."

Among other negative consequences, Vardanyan's appearance also resulted in the commencement of the peaceful protests of Azerbaijani eco-activists and NGOs, which have been underway on Lachin-Khankendi road since 12 December 2022. The main reason for these protests was the inadmissibility of Azerbaijani experts to monitor the illegal exploitation of the Gizilbulagh gold deposit and Damirli copper-molybdenum deposit, both of which are located in the part of Karabakh where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed.

It should be underlined that this group of experts from the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, the State Property Service under the Ministry of Economy, and AzerGold CJSC, was going to begin the preliminary monitoring in accordance with the illegal exploitation of the aforementioned two mineral deposits, as well as examine emerging environmental and other consequences. This had been agreed in talks with the

Russian peacekeepers' command that had taken place on 3 and 7 December 2022. The agreement included provisions to inspect the environmental conditions at the two deposits, monitor various areas, organize cadastral property records, and assess potential risks and threats to the environment and underground and surface water sources. However, the planned initial inspection and monitoring did not take place due to the provocation of some radical Karabakh Armenians who blocked the way to the mineral deposits. Consequently, Azerbaijani specialists were unable to complete their task.

Vardanyan has blamed Azerbaijan for the alleged blocking of Lachin-Khankendi road and trying to persuade the world that there is a risk of a "humanitarian crisis"

At the same time, since 12 December 2022, Vardanyan has blamed Azerbaijan for the alleged blocking of Lachin-Khankendi road and trying to persuade the world that there is a risk of a "humanitarian crisis" (note that the Armenians still call the latter by the name Stepanakert, which was imposed in 1923 by the Soviet authorities in homage to Bolshevik revolutionary Stepan Shaumian, nicknamed the "Caucasian Lenin"). However, the unhindered passage of supplies and humanitarian vehicles has repeatedly demonstrated that this road has not been blocked in any way. Vehicles belonging to the Russian peacekeepers and numerous cars and trucks belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as other humanitarian vehicles, continue to pass freely through the peaceful protest area on a daily basis. Simultaneously, as Bayramov said in a phone conversation with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried, there are no obstacles to the free passage of Armenian residents of Azerbaijan's Karabakh region through the Lachin-Khankendi road.

Thus, Azerbaijan continues to abide by the terms of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement, whereby it "guarantee[s] the safety of citizens, vehicles and goods traveling along the Lachin corridor in both directions." The point is that the road should be used for the humanitarian purposes only. As quite

correctly indicated by my colleague Farid Shafiyev in his article entitled "Azerbaijan's Lachin Road Conundrum" published in *The National Interest* on 27 December 2022, "under the current circumstances, […] it seems that the main problem over the Lachin road is not only the illegal extraction of resources or environmental damage but also its use (or misuse) for non-humanitarian purposes." In this context, the illegal transfer of landmines produced by Armenia as late as 2021, Armenian military personnel, and various types of munitions are the most disturbing aspects of this conundrum, as discussed above.

The Lachin road issue was also mentioned by Aliyev during the aforementioned 10 January 2023 interview. He noted in particular that landmines produced by Armenian in 2021 were discovered in Saribaba, Girkhgiz, and other directions and questioned how they crossed into Azerbaijani territory, who carried them there, and who is responsible of this situation. Aliyev also added that the Russian peacekeeping forces have not been able to answer such and similar questions to this day.

These latest developments raise several unresolved matters, which are connected with each other with regards to the Lachin road. Two will be mentioned in this essay. *First*, the issue of establishing standards regarding the entrance and exit into that part of Karabakh where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed should be further investigated. Corresponding regulations, such as the establishment of Azerbaijani customs and border check points, should be arranged in the future in coordination with the Russian peacekeeping contingent. This would avoid the misuse of the Lachin road for non-humanitarian purposes.

The year 2022 can thus be characterized as consisting of both positive trends and insufficient progress.

Second, more consistent contacts and interaction should be set up between the Azerbaijani state structures, the Russian peacekeeping contingent, and local Karabakh Armenians in the coming years. Due to the fact that the territory where the Russian peacekeeping contingent has been temporarily deployed is part of Azerbaijan's Karabakh economic region, the Azerbaijani government should be able to conduct various post-conflict recovery and reconstruction activities in the future without any preconditions. This includes the aforementioned monitoring of the Gizilbulagh gold and Damirli copper-molybdenum deposits. The Russian peacekeeping contingent should support these activities because it has an obligation to strictly observe the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in all cases. At the same time, one might hope that Karabakh Armenians will demonstrate their good will in this process too.

Regional Tectonics

In the context of Azerbaijan's main priority areas with respect to the overall regional peace and normalization process with Armenia, the year 2022 can thus be characterized as consisting of both positive trends and insufficient progress. Incidentally, the fate of Karabakh's ethnic-Armenian population also occupies a particular place in this context. Baku's point is reasonable: it is paramount for Armenia to concentrates on its own internationally-recognized sovereign territory and recognize all of Karabakh as an integral part of territory of Azerbaijan—particularly the part of the territory in which the Armenian population lives. The Armenian establishment should also give an unambiguous answer to the question of the extent to which the question of Karabakh remains the main priority issue for Armenian political and state identity.

The balance of power in the region, which has been drastically changed following Second Karabakh War, has also led to a sharp increase in Armenia's dependence on external actors.

This remains difficult—not the least of which due to opposition in the Armenian parliament from members of previous governments now in opposition; other Armenian nationalists; organized Armenian diaspora communities in the U.S., France, and elsewhere; and the most vocal Karabakh separatist representatives. Differences aside, what binds them together is irredentism: the unwillingness to accept the consequences of the defeat experienced in the Second Karabakh War. They would like to delay progress on the peace agenda in the hope that Armenia could, in the future, recover some of the formerly-occupied territories. Thus, former Foreign

Minister of Armenia Vardan Oskanyan called on Pashinyan "never be pressured in terms of time and not to rush on the road towards a comprehensive solution to the issue."

Moreover, the balance of power in the region, which has been drastically changed following Second Karabakh War, has also led to a sharp increase in Armenia's dependence on external actors. In fact, the positioning of Armenia as an integral element of the relationship between global and regional powers has always been very characteristic of Armenian socio-political thought. However, such an approach a priori turns Armenia into a hostage of the geopolitical and geo-economic contradictions of the leading actors, which, of course, does not contribute to the process of normalization of relations with Azerbaijan (and, for that matter, Türkiye).

This aspect has gained particular importance against the backdrop of the war raging in Ukraine, which is accompanied by an unprecedented deterioration in relations between Russia and the West. In fact, instead of persuading Armenia to abandon its revanchist aspirations and move further toward sustainable peace in the region, some external powers have recently increased their support for Armenians' vindictive behavior that undermines the likelihood of success in the ongoing normalization process.

One such external power is France. Back in November 2020, immediately after the end of the Second Karabakh War, both the Senate and the National Assembly of France adopted several harsh, anti-Azerbaijani resolutions that, inter alia, called on the government of Emmanuel Macron to recognize the ethnic-Armenian separatist regime in Karabakh. In the wake of the September 2022 escalation on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, the French Senate (on 15 November 2022), followed by the country's National Assembly (on 30 November 2022) adopted new resolutions directed against the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Azerbaijan. Although, as reported, the latter document was approved unanimously, only 256 out of 577 members of National Assembly were present, which is only about 44 percent of the total number of representatives. Even though the country's Foreign Ministry once again stated that these resolutions do not represent the official position of France, some statements by Macron indicate the opposite. In particular, in an interview with French television channel France2 that was broadcast literally a week after the quadrilateral meeting in Prague, the French president claimed that Karabakh was an internationally unrecognized and disputed territory and even accused Moscow of destabilizing the situation in the region.

In response, Azerbaijan's president called his French counterparty's statement "insulting, unacceptable, false, and provocative." Aliyev also mentioned that biased statements were also made against the Russian Federation, specifically that, as he characterized the French president's words, "Russia played the Azerbaijani game." Azerbaijan's president firmly condemned and rejected these statements and noted that, taking into account the biased attitude of the French government, he no longer sees a "possibility for France to play a role in the normalization of Azerbaijan-Armenia relations." After these events, Armenia's attempt to turn the next trilateral meeting, which was to be held in Brussels on 7 December 2022, into a quadripartite meeting with the mandatory participation of Macron, was rejected by Azerbaijan.

The visit of a delegation of Karabakh's ethnic-Armenian separatist regime to Paris for meetings with members of the French Senate and National Assembly and pro-Armenian politicians in December 2022, as well as Arayik Harutyunyan's interview on the state television channel France 24, together with a press conference organized by the government-controlled Agence France-Presse, showed once again that France not only speaks from a pro-Armenian position, but also actively supports the ethnic-Armenian separatist regime in Karabakh and directly intervenes in Azerbaijan's internal affairs. This clearly does not represent conduct becoming of a state that purports to presents itself as an impartial mediator or facilitator to the ongoing peace process.

Aliyev touched upon what he belies is behind France's actions on this path and shared his insights during the aforementioned 10 January 2023 interview. He stated that the current situation is the result of the incumbent French government, adding that France and Azerbaijan have always cooperated and valued each other's friendship in the previous period. More than ten of the countries' cities were twinned, there were exchanges, presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande visited Azerbaijan, and so on. However, the current situation is completely different, he noted, concluding that he maintains hope that a government that values relations with Azerbaijan will be formed in France in the future.

Iran remains another external actor interested in strengthening its influence in the South Caucasus. It is no secret that contradictions have arisen from time to time in relations between Azerbaijan and Iran since the former regained itself independence as the Soviet Union was collapsing. A continuous irritant has been the position of Tehran, which has maintained close ties with Yerevan despite the Armenian occupation of sovereign Azerbaijani lands. This closeness has remained in the wake of the Second Karabakh War—and has been accompanied by several unprecedented deeds that have been interpreted by Baku as being provocative.

On numerous occasions Azerbaijan's president has made statements attributing responsibility to tactical deteriorations in relations with Iran at Tehran's doorstep. On 25 November 2022, for instance, while speaking at an international conference organized by ADA University's Institute for Development and Diplomacy, Aliyev said that

> everything happening between Iran and Azerbaijan now was not generated by us. We are only responding and will respond to any anti-Azerbaijani steps, whether in words or actions. […] We were not the generator of this situation. We want this situation to end sooner than later. We want peace and friendly relations with all our neighbors, but at the same time, we will always defend our dignity, independence, and lifestyle. We will not allow any foreign player to impose its standards and will on our government and our people.

In his remarks, Aliyev added that it was hard to understand the geopolitical reasons behind Tehran's stance. He gave the example of military exercises. During the occupation of a 132-kilometer-long section of the Azerbaijani border, he noted, the Iranian armed forces never held any military exercises near the border with Azerbaijan, whereas since the liberation "two exercises within several months [were held] on our border, [accompanied by] words full of hatred and threats to Azerbaijan."

The Azerbaijani president also noted that "Iranian officials, including very high-ranking personalities, said that Armenian territorial integrity is a red line for Iran. Why [did] none of them said the same about us? For 30 years, our territory was under occupation. Did anyone hear from Iranian officials that Azerbaijan's territorial integrity is a red line? No." At the same time, official Tehran has indicated that it will not tolerate "geopolitical changes in the map in the Caucasus," although it is unclear what "geopolitical changes" in the region are implied. Most probably, the Iranians are referring to the situation mandated by Article 9 of the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the war, namely the establishment of what Baku calls the Zangezur Corridor that would reestablish a direct transportation link between mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave, ending three decades of Armenia's blockade.

In Armenia, Tehran's ambiguous posture has led to the appearance in the socio-political space of unsupportable ideas about the possibility of Iran turning into a guarantor of the security of transport communications through the territory of Armenia, even "up to a direct military presence in the region," as one Armenian commentator recently put it. However, to any observer familiar with the realities of the South Caucasus, it is clear that Russia, Armenia's strategic ally and partner in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military-political bloc, is the guarantor of the inviolability of that country's borders.

To date, Russia has tried to keep an equidistant position in regard to both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It is also necessary to touch on the position of another external actor in the context of ongoing regional tectonics: the CSTO, an organization in which decisions are made by consensus and which includes six former Soviet republics: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. This is not the first time that Yerevan has been trying to involve the CSTO in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, including during the Second Karabakh War. At its last summit, held in Yerevan in November 2022, the prevailing position of the CSTO on this issue was voiced by the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko: "We want a peaceful resolution of the conflict between two neighboring states that are friendly to us" and "the CSTO acts in such a way as to please one without harming the other." However, Pashinyan did not agree with this approach; he demanded that the CSTO recognize the actions of Azerbaijan as aggression and, having been rebuffed, refused to sign the CSTO summit's concluding document.

Furthermore, amidst rising tensions between Yerevan and Moscow, Pashinyan announced

during a press conference on 10 January 2023 that he saw no reason for the CSTO to stage military drills in Armenia in 2023. In fact, CSTO holds annual military drills hosted by one of its members, and this year Armenia was due to host the drills. At this same press conference, he also stated that "Armenia expected concrete actions from its Russian partners and other partners in the field of security," and also called on Russia to initiate a multinational mission via the UN Security Council if it is unable to ensure the security of the Armenian people in Karabakh. However, according to the Spokesperson for the Russian president Dmitriy Peskov, "the topic of sending UN peacekeepers to Karabakh has been on the agenda more than once, but any missions can only be involved with the consent of both sides—both Baku and Yerevan."

To date, Russia has tried to keep an equidistant position in regard to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although Armenia hosts a Russian military base and Moscow has been the country's key strategic ally, Russia maintains warm ties with Azerbaijan—especially after both countries signed a Declaration on Allied Interaction on 22 February 2022.

While speaking at a press conference on European security issues, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that Armenia has put Moscow in a difficult position by asking it to make a choice between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, when the neutral position of Russia does not suit Armenia, it attempts to actively involve other external actors in the process by, for example, inviting observer missions from the EU and the OSCE.

In fact, the readout of the quadrilateral meeting that took place in Prague on 6 October 2022 (discussed above) stated that "there was an agreement by Armenia to facilitate a civilian EU mission alongside the border with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan agreed to cooperate with this mission as far as it is concerned." This EU observation mission started its activities in October 2022 and came to an end on 19 December 2022. The aim of this short-term mission was to build confidence and, through its reports, to contribute to the work of the Joint Border Commission that was established earlier in the year.

America continues to be closely engaged in supporting Armenia and Azerbaijan in the process towards reaching a peace treaty.

But, as it turned out, this was not the end of the story. The Azerbaijani president touched upon this issue during the aforementioned 10 January 2023 interview. He said that the EU mission ended in two months, in accordance with the agreement reached in Prague. "But on 20 December, the [EU] sent a new mission," he said. "This is just manipulation. Representatives of the new mission are in Armenia now, where they are holding meetings with high-ranking officials. According to the information we have, they will be sent there again in February [2023] with a large delegation. Again, without our agreement."

Furthermore, he stated that

> after the 'passing away' of the Minsk Group, the European Union started to play its role, and we supported it. I personally made a statement about it several times. I said that we appreciated it. However, if such games [note: a reference to the foregoing initiative] will go behind our backs, then the future of this format will be in doubt. France has virtually isolated itself from this process. America and Russia remain. In other words, this is how we see the negotiation at the moment. Of course, [the EU] can be there, but if, I say again, it treats us fairly.

This meant, presumably, that talks had already been underway on the deployment of a new EU civilian mission in Armenia. On 23 January 2023, a final decision on its deployment was made by the EU Council. It is unclear to what extent the Azerbaijani side's "assessments, expectations, and concerns" were taken into account prior to this new deployment, or whether sufficient consideration was given to the argument that the "engagement of [the] EU in Armenia through a [new] mission must not serve as a pretext for Armenia to evade from [the] fulfillment of undertaken commitments (the cited text refers to language contained in the Foreign Ministry's 24 January 2023 press release). If the Prague meeting is an indication, then the EU ought to have made such decisions in agreement with not only Armenia, but Azerbaijan as well.

This shift in the EU's posture—undertaken, one suspects, at the initiative of countries like France—is to be contrasted with the steadfast approach of the United States. America continues to be closely engaged in supporting Armenia and Azerbaijan in the process towards reaching a peace treaty. Both U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake

Sullivan have provided support and encouraged high-level government officials of both states to resolve outstanding issues at the negotiation table.

For its part, and despite some ups and downs, and, admittedly, even some moves designed to tactically undermine progress on some aspects of this multifaceted process, the Russian Federation continues to be the leading mediator in the process of normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For better or worse, the peace process' chief agreements have been reached through the mediation of the Kremlin, as evidenced in four tripartite statements: 10 November 2020, 11 January 2021, 26 November 2021, and 31 October 2022. Read together, they cover almost all aspects of the post-conflict normalization process. However, Armenia's foreign minister refused to participate in a tripartite meeting with his Azerbaijani and Russian colleagues that had been scheduled to take place in Moscow on 23 December 2022. The situation on the Lachin road was cited as the reason.

In response to a question posed during the 10 January 2023 interview about whether the Armenian side is simply flagrantly disrupting the process of negotiation by having refused to attend the aforementioned ministerial trilateral meeting, Aliyev indicated agreement. He also emphasized that it is not only enough to "articulate the issue of peace in the daily agenda, but also to convince the public and work on an actual peace agenda" on a daily basis.

Interestingly, Pashinyan held his own press conference on the same day. He touched upon some important aspects at the core of Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization process. Two statements can be highlighted here. *First*, he said that

> the fact is that both today and yesterday the entire international community perceived [Karabakh] as a part of Azerbaijan. The fact is that maybe we are not so pragmatic, and it seemed to us that the four resolutions of the UN Security Council are just texts written on paper, which we can ignore. It has been an approach that we have to think about. In general, I said that legitimacy should be at the heart of our actions. We have to face the facts.

Second, Pashinyan emphasized that it is not the "government of Armenia that should decide the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nagorno-Karabakh relations, but the Nagorno-Karabakh people should decide and be in communication with the authorities of Azerbaijan. The issue should be decided in this context."

Consider, in this context, the statement Aliyev made during his meeting with Dirk Schuebel, the EU's Special Envoy for the Eastern Partnership in November 2022, at which he underlined the necessity of having two tracks: *one*, the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process; and *two*, issues related to the Armenian minority in Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and concerning their rights and security.

From Aliyev's perspective, on the one hand, "statements from Armenia are very controversial. They say they recognize our territorial integrity and sovereignty. Not only say but they signed under that in Prague and Sochi." On the other hand, representatives of Armenia sometimes make statements indicating they want to incorporate issues related to the ethnic-Armenian minority residing in Karabakh into the overall peace agreement, which is clearly a non-starter for Azerbaijan. Hence Aliyev's conclusion as stated to Schuebel: "a very clear position from the Armenian government about their agenda" is needed.

On the other hand, Aliyev has underlined that Azerbaijan is ready to continue engaging with local Armenians residing in the Russian peacekeeping zone about rights and security, but "not with those who have been sent from Moscow hiding in their pockets billions of stolen money from the Russian people, like this person called [Ruben] Vardanyan who was transferred from Moscow there with a very clear agenda." In the remarks quoted above, Aliyev added that such talks have started, and if not for the external interference and attempts to block this process from some countries, it could have had better dynamics." The overall point is clear: a considerable and steady efforts need to be made for the gradual reintegration of Karabakh Armenians into Azerbaijani society.

Today, in short, a lot depends on how all such and similar moves in various Armenian circles play out in the time to come. This is a distinct set of variables in the overall normalization of relations equation between Yerevan and Baku.

If winning peace is a priority for the Armenian government, then a peace treaty can be signed with Azerbaijan that will lead to the establishment of full

diplomatic and friendly relations based on the common interest of both countries It will also improve regional security and unlock new opportunities for the whole region. This will also contribute to the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations, too.

External players may come and go, and their influence can increase or decrease; but at the end of the day, a geographical constant remains: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye are neighbors. It is precisely because of this fact that there is simply no alternative to the process of normalizing relations between them. This is the only way to lay a solid foundation for the future peace, stability, and development of the South Caucasus and the rest of the Silk Road region. BD

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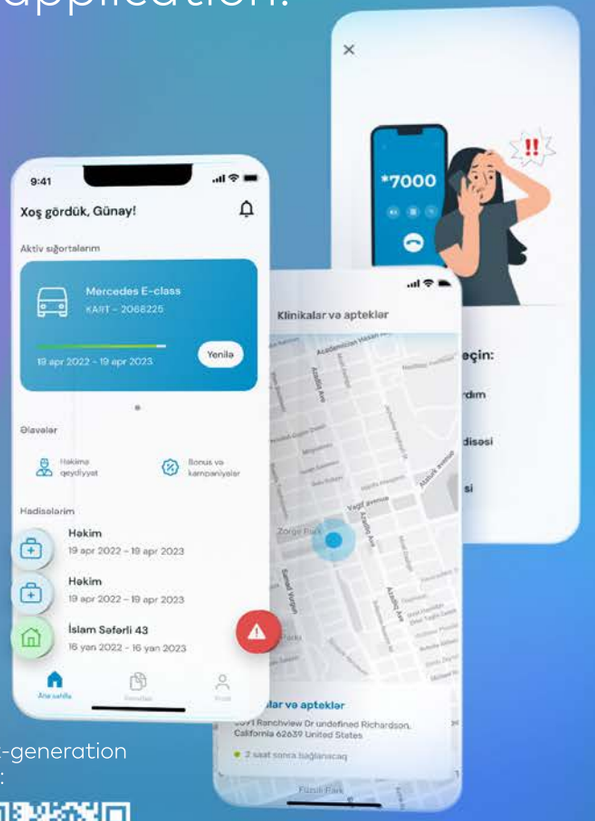

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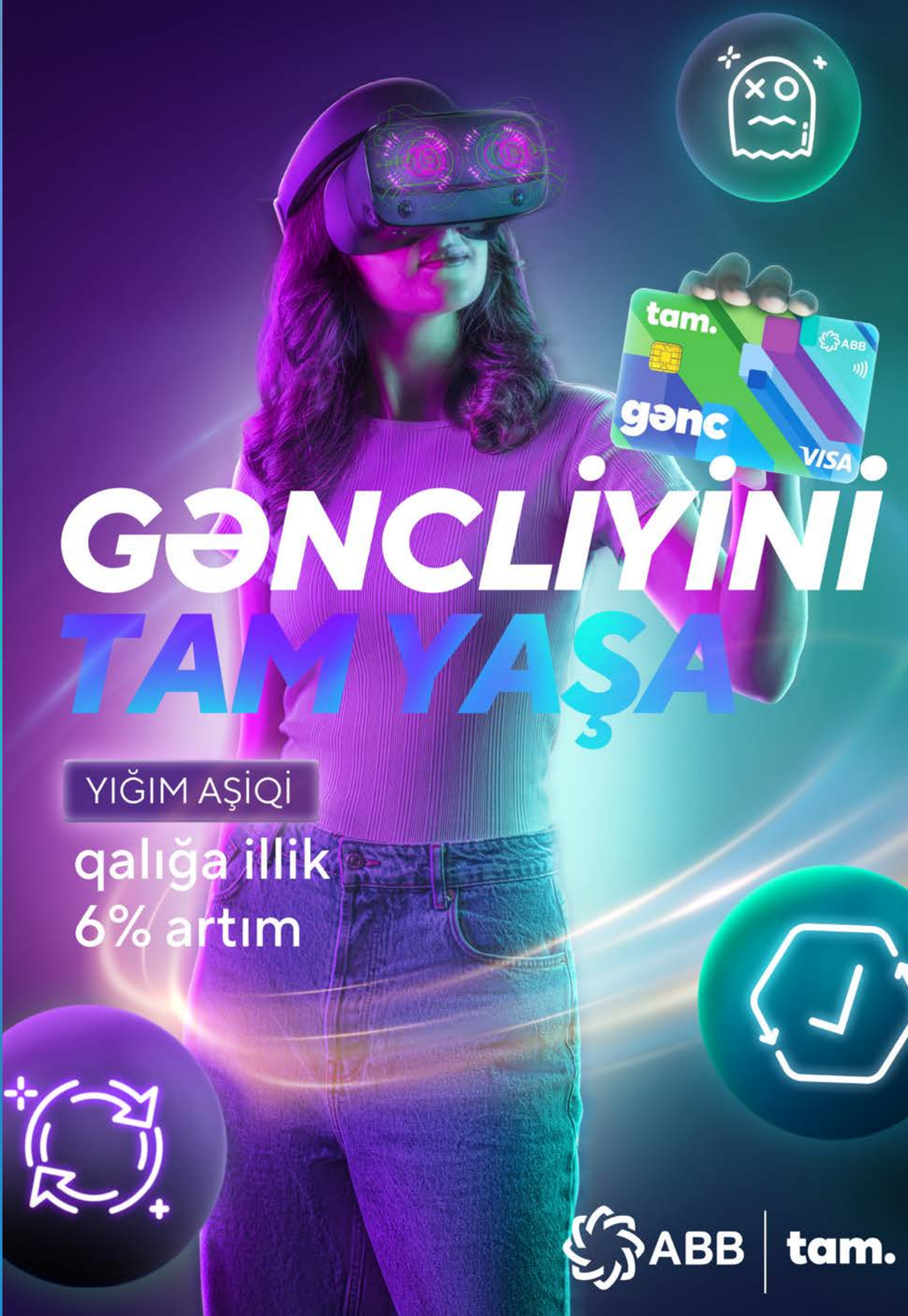

The Iceberg Melted

The Enhanced Visibility of Strategic Ties Between Israel and Azerbaijan

Arthur Lenk

The strategic depth of the relationship between the State of Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan may surprise many people. Each has found a discreet partner in the other that offers key, unique resources allowing both to respond successfully to some of their primary geopolitical challenges. The two small countries are both squeezed in complicated, unpeaceful neighborhoods; both have long-term simmering conflicts with challenging neighbors; and both see themselves as rational actors often needing to deal with unfair media and diplomatic treatment. They have quietly come together to partner in core areas like energy and security over a now significant amount of time while widening their cooperation to spheres like tourism, education, and investing in startups.

The recent announcement that Azerbaijan will open an embassy in Israel removed one of the few outstanding limitations to consolidating fully the deep, strategic relationship between the two countries. Baku's decision was warmly welcomed by Israel's then Prime Minister Yair Lapid and President Isaac Herzog, together with public figures and foreign policy experts across the political divide in Israel. Azerbaijan's parliament passed legislation on 18 November 2022 to approve funding for embassies in Israel, Albania, and Kenya along with a representative diplomatic office in Palestine, which was signed by President Ilham Aliyev into law a few days later. It is expected that the new embassy will be inaugurated in Tel Aviv some time in 2023.

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A Discreet Relationship

For most of the thirty years of the bilateral relationship, a certain quietness and circumspection determined Azerbaijan's public actions regarding Israel. While Israel was one for the very first countries to open an embassy in Baku in the shadow of the breakup of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan refrained from an official presence in Israel. A quick look at the complicated map of the South Caucuses region offers a clear understanding for such a policy. Azerbaijan shares long borders with both Iran and Russia and remains engaged in a protracted conflict with Armenia, which often demanded support from a majority of countries at the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and other international fora. All of these were solid considerations for Azerbaijan to choose to avoid the risk of standing out on potentially controversial issues such as the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

The strategic depth of the relationship between the State of Israel and the Republic of Azerbaijan may surprise many people.

Nevertheless, from Israel's perspective, encouraging Azerbaijan to open a permanent mission was a priority. In the time leading up to my term as Israel's fourth ambassador to Azerbaijan (2005-2009), it was emphasized to me by my superiors that it was to be seen as the primary "ask" from our side. However, quickly after arriving in Baku, I came to a different conclusion. I believed that if we in Israel saw Azerbaijan through the prism of a majority-Muslim country bordering Iran rather than a post-Soviet state bordering Russia, its strategic importance for us would appear dramatically different and that our priorities should change.

I advocated within the Israeli government for a realistic, pragmatic partnership that deemphasized grievances and differences in exchange for finding paths to partnership where Azerbaijan would allow. Soon enough, colleagues at Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other key government agencies came around (along with friends of Israel from around the world) to seeing the uniqueness and importance of Azerbaijan for Israel. Senior government officials,

such as then Deputy Minister of Defense Efraim Sneh, Minister of National Infrastructure Binyamin Ben Eliezer, and, later, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, were all leading advocates in Israel for this relationship for many years, all speaking out on this perception of what Azerbaijan could be for Israel.

In addition to geopolitical and trade considerations, Azerbaijan's small, fascinating Jewish community—together with some 70,000 former Azerbaijanis who have etched out a sizable diaspora in Israel—form a natural constituency, on both sides, for the deepening of the relationship, both at government and people-to-people levels. For example, when meeting with Azerbaijan's first lady (now Vice President) Mehriban Aliyeva, she told me about a teacher of hers who emigrated to Israel and remained close to her heart. Similarly, the Azerbaijan community in Israel has formed an association called "Aziz" (their Russian language Facebook page has over 5,000 followers), which hosts regular cultural events in Israel and keeps close ties with friends and family in Azerbaijan.

These grassroots, people-to-people ties highlight an important side of Azerbaijan, coexistence, which genuinely honors its small minority communities and different faiths. At the highest levels, Azerbaijan has emphasized its respect for its small Jewish and Christian minority communities. For both Israelis and Jews from around the world—who have grown despondent with deepening antisemitism and prejudice—discovering a Muslim-majority country that consistently sends the opposite message has been exciting.

Even though a majority of Azerbaijani citizens are of Shia background, its leaders prefer to deemphasize sects and labels that often divide within Islam, rather calling themselves as simply Muslims—a message of unity from which Israelis, and others around the world, might learn. In fact, in recent years, Israel showcased this shared value of coexistence by sending to Baku the outstanding Christian Arab diplomat, George Deek, to serve as its current ambassador.

For most of the thirty years of the bilateral relationship, a certain quietness and circumspection determined Azerbaijan's public actions regarding Israel.

While I, and everyone speaking for Israel, never stopped

mentioning the embassy issue, the more vital aspects of the relationship quietly and steadily developed and became key pillars of growing ties. Central priorities were focused on deepening cooperation on the core matters of energy and security, both topics serving primary national interests for each side.

In energy, Azerbaijan has long been one of Israel's largest suppliers of crude oil. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, a future-altering project for Azerbaijan, was started in the late 1990s (and completed in 2006) with the significant encouragement of the United States. While Azerbaijan was able to export crude through Russia before the pipeline, that project offered the country dramatic independence from its neighbors. Many others have written about how this pipeline brought Azerbaijan closer to Europe and its energy market.

In terms of security, the benefits of a trusted ally for Israel in such a complex neighborhood is clear to anyone who looks at a map.

This is even more true for Israel, which until relatively recently (when it discovered natural gas off of its coast) had great concerns to safeguard its energy purchase mix. The BTC conveys Azerbaijani crude oil from the Caspian Sea to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean coast, located less than 300 nautical miles north of Israel. Azerbaijani figures have long placed Israel as the second-largest consumer of its exported oil, after only Italy. Popular estimates reckon that the total amount of oil from Azerbaijan currently meets about 40 percent of Israel's total needs.

In terms of security, the benefits of a trusted ally for Israel in such a complex neighborhood is clear to anyone who looks at a map. During my time in Baku, I often warily quipped that I was the Israeli diplomat closest in the world to Tehran. While this may no longer be true today (Ashgabat, where Israel more recently opened an embassy, is a little closer), the proximity of Azerbaijan to Iran is obvious to all, starting with the need to carefully protect Israeli diplomats who have been threatened more than once. In 2009, the Los Angeles Times reported that Azerbaijani police arrested, put on trial, and then convicted two Hezbollah militants in possession

of explosives, guns, cameras, and reconnaissance photos who were preparing an attack on my embassy in the spring of 2008. This reality repeated itself a number of times over the years and deepened the cooperation between security officials on both sides. Of course, proximity does not only bring dangers but also, potentially, significant opportunities.

In parallel, Israel has offered Azerbaijan a successful path to its own national defense considerations through sharing its experience and know-how. During my time in Azerbaijan, some of the seeds were sown with, in those days quite discrete, bilateral defense cooperation agreements. By December 2016, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Azerbaijan, President Aliyev was quoted by Haaretz newspaper as saying:

> So far, the contracts between Azerbaijani and Israeli companies with respect to purchasing defense equipment have been close to $5 billion. More precisely, $4.85 billion. The biggest part of these contracts has already been executed and still we continue to work on that. And we are very satisfied with the level of this cooperation.

Wikileaks Tells the Story

For better or worse, the infamous 2011 Wikileaks diplomatic cable dump made public thousands of secret U.S. State Department diplomatic reports, a few of which reported on aspects of the Israel-Azerbaijan relationship. One such report was a 13 January 2009 cable from the U.S. Embassy in Baku, then classified as "secret," titled "Azerbaijan's Discreet Symbiosis with Israel."

The cable reported that I had shared background information with my American colleagues about the state of the relationship with Azerbaijan, including details of conversation that had taken place in May 2008 between the Azerbaijani president and Israel's then Agriculture Minister Shalom Simhon and me, in which Aliyev compared our bilateral relationship to "an iceberg; nine-tenths of it is below the surface."

In the same leaked cable, the U.S. Embassy in Baku then offered its own conclusion regarding the relationship between the two countries:

> Israel's relations with Azerbaijan are based strongly on pragmatism and a keen appreciation of priorities. Israel's main goal is to preserve Azerbaijan as an ally against Iran, a platform for reconnaissance in that country and as a market for military hardware. In order to preserve those goals, the Israelis have keenly attuned themselves to the GOAJ's needs as an OIC member and as a state (like Israel) wedged between large, powerful, and unfriendly neighbors. They forgo the option of pressuring the GOAJ on secondary issues to secure the primary ones. It is apparent to us that for now, both sides are well satisfied with the bilateral state of affairs.

At the same time, the relationship was never really a secret. Visits of cabinet ministers in both directions have long been regular occurrences, highlighted by visits to Azerbaijan by Israel's President Shimon Peres in June 2009 and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in December 2016 and nearly every Azerbaijani minister to Israel. Key Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Committee, AIPAC, and the World Jewish Congress have all sent senior delegations over the years to Azerbaijan to deepen ties. Direct flights have long been a feature of the relationship, literally showing the short distance (under three hours by air) between the countries.

In my view, two events in recent years caused Azerbaijan to decide to open an embassy in Israel.

The two states later established a ministerial bilateral commission that regularly met to give added substance and impetus to the relationship. In recent years, Azerbaijan's Minister of Economy, Mikayil Jabbarov, has proven to be a continuously energetic and stabilizing force in guiding Azerbaijan's official relationship with Israel, even as repeated elections changed the Israeli point of contact. For instance, Jabbarov inaugurated a trade and tourism office in Tel Aviv in July 2021—an act that, in retrospect, clearly represented a tangible step towards the establishment of an Embassy of Azerbaijan in Israel.

A Change in Policy

In my view, two events in recent years caused Azerbaijan to decide to open an embassy in Israel. The first event was Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War, which included the liberation of the historic city of Shusha. The country's military success is perceived to have been achieved in part thanks to the use of Israeli technology. In her excellent article on this topic titled "Israel's Role in the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War

and Its Implications for the Future," Brenda Shaffer concluded: "this [category of] cooperation had a significant impact on the outcome of the Second Armenia-Azerbaijan War and is expected to grow in its wake."

Interestingly, during the 2020 war, when Azerbaijan's second largest city, Ganja, was bombarded with Armenian missiles, it saw a significant parallel to Israel's need to protect itself from Palestinian missiles and rockets from Gaza. Media reports have indicated that Azerbaijan has been one of the first countries to purchase Israel's Iron Dome missile defense technology.

Perhaps the ultimate sign that Azerbaijan was fully ready to make public its defense cooperation with Israel was the October 2021 photograph of a smiling Ilham Aliyev posing with his right hand on a Harop drone—an Israel Aerospace Industries loitering munition that was often successfully deployed by Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War. The photo was taken at a newly-built military base in the liberated Azerbaijani town of Jabrayil, located only 15 kilometers north of the border with Iran.

Many viewed the photograph as a targeted and purposefully sharp response from Aliyev to repeated belligerent statements from Iranian officials criticizing Azerbaijan's relations with Israel. But far beyond the message to Iran, Azerbaijan's president was telling his own people and the world at large that he saw security cooperation with Israel and the use of advanced Israeli technology as key to Azerbaijan's military success. As he posed with the drone, without however specifically mentioning Israel or Iran, Aliyev told journalists: "No one can interfere in our internal affairs. It is our own business to establish relations with any country. After all, we do not sue countries that have close and friendly relations with Armenia."

The second cause of Azerbaijan's decision to open an embassy in Israel was, perhaps ironically, the Abraham Accords. It has been interesting to watch all the well-deserved excitement in Israel and around the world to the Abraham Accords, which established and rapidly developed relations between Israel and three Muslim-majority countries (Morocco, the UAE, and Bahrain)—as if it was something that had never happened before. A normalization process, slower and quieter than the others, has also taken place with Sudan. Azerbaijan watched with interest as the UAE and Bahrain quickly opened embassies and Morocco reopened its liaison office in Tel Aviv.

Naturally, the Azerbaijanis, like many around the world, noted how these relationships quickly developed without much significant pushback against those countries. In fact, it seems that all three of them, as well as Israel itself, have benefited economically and diplomatically from the implementation of the Accords. The active American role in the negotiations and signing of the agreements—and then taking ancillary actions such as recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara or approving new defense cooperation agreements with the UAE—touched on topics that had resonance for Azerbaijan. It thus seems likely that the success of those new relationships also served as a catalyst for Baku's recent decision to open an embassy in Israel. On the other hand, it is equally true that Azerbaijan actually served as a predecessor and a model for the Abraham Accords due to having successfully developed a long-term, strategic relationship with Israel whose origins go back to the early 1990s.

New Economic Opportunities

In the years since I left Israel's foreign service in 2017, I have had quite a few conversations with Azerbaijani officials and friends on the topic of opening an embassy in Israel. Over time, my own message evolved: I began increasingly to emphasize how Azerbaijan was missing out on achieving many of its own international goals by not being present diplomatically in Israel. My basic point was that that there were advantages for Azerbaijan's representatives in being in Israel and that there were negligible risks associated with such a step, given the range of global developments in recent years. In fact, it was clear that Israel was taking full advantage of the relationship with an

And now, with the November 2022 announcement, Azerbaijan is well placed to seek to deepen those ties and actively promote its diplomatic goals in Israel. There is much to build on. Today, undoubtedly, the "iceberg" that Aliyev had described back in 2008 has melted to clearly reveal a clearly visible mountain of strategic, economic, and cultural ties.

active, fully-fledged diplomatic mission in Baku, which meant that it did not necessarily need (although, obviously it wanted it) an Azerbaijani presence. In other words, my argument was that the central side that would gain by opening an embassy in Israel would be Azerbaijan.

And now, with the November 2022 announcement, Azerbaijan is well placed to seek to deepen those ties and actively promote its diplomatic goals in Israel. There is much to build on. Today, undoubtedly, the "iceberg" that Aliyev had described back in 2008 has melted to clearly reveal a clearly visible mountain of strategic, economic, and cultural ties. Cooperation has diversified in recent years to educational partnerships, such as the introduction of world-class innovative educational methodologies like the teaching of STEM, cyber security and entrepreneurship, and the signing of an MOU for student exchange and joint research between the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Baku State University in biotechnology and agriculture. There has also been significant development in sharing Israeli innovations in water management techniques and precision agriculture, along with the rapid development of bilateral tourism.

ORT Israel, Israel's largest scientific-technological education network, calls its educational philosophy "start-up education." With 241 middle schools, high schools, and vocational colleges, it has become a leader in teaching hundreds of thousands of young Israelis the skills to work in Israel's knowledge-based, innovation economy. ORT has worked with Azerbaijan's Ministry of Science and Education since 2018 and has already shared its unique methodologies and philosophy with hundreds of Azerbaijani teachers and made an impact on thousands of Azerbaijani students. The current joint project, which began in 2022, involves the establishment of a small number of ORT-style public schools in Azerbaijan. This project is a pilot initiative designed to guide the Azerbaijani education system away from a post-Soviet style of frontal education to a more project-based learning approach that offers twenty-first-century lifelong learning skills.

These recent examples beyond the security or energy sectors show that the partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan has grown to be significantly more than one that is centered on geopolitics, although that interest remain clear.

Azerbaijan certainly has a way to go, but its government understands that human potential—far beyond the country's limited yet still significant energy resources—is the path to growth and success in the decades to come. Israel's success in this sphere is a model from which to learn and emulate. The partnership with ORT seems to directly offer a significant response to a recommendation from a September 2022 World Bank report on Azerbaijan, which emphasized that, "in the long term, the priority is to develop a skilled and effective cadre of teachers. It will be critical to improve teaching in the education system as global evidence shows that teachers are the most important drivers of learning."

In early 2022, Mekorot, Israel's national water company, signed an agreement to develop a national master water plan for Azerbaijan's agriculture sector. The plan will focus on eliminating water loss, increase efficiency in using limited water resources in Azerbaijan's different regions, allow for the monitoring and maintenance of water use, and utilize cutting-edge technologies. This project will take advantage of Israel's world leading experience in water management, including recycling and perhaps even desalination.

Another fascinating strategic partnership is the financial commitment of the Azerbaijan Investment Company, a government-owned entity focused on impacting the non-oil sector in Azerbaijan, to make a number of significant investments in Israeli startups via Our Crowd, the Israeli venture investing platform. The shared goal, beyond the obvious target of profitability, is to encourage young Israeli technological companies to build interactions in Azerbaijan and make an impact on Azerbaijan's innovation ecosystem through local activity. The success of this project could mean a deepening of Israeli-Azerbaijan cooperation in technologically-advanced ventures, resulting in both experience-sharing and job creation. The project also aspires to develop mutually-profitable markets for the relevant companies in places like Türkiye, Russia, and Central Asia, where Azerbaijan has historic economic, cultural, and linguistic ties.

New Strategic Opportunities

These recent examples beyond the security or energy sectors show that the partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan has grown to be significantly more than one that is centered on geopolitics, although that interest remain clear. There is now a shared history of cooperation and relationships that have developed far beyond one individual or party over decades.

In the Winter 2021-2022 edition of Baku Dialogues, Michael Doran wrote a thoughtful article titled "Azerbaijan in the Struggle for Eurasia" in which he made a convincing case that Western countries, especially the United States, had shared interests to stand with Azerbaijan. He saw Azerbaijan as an important partner in the advancement of key regional and global American interests against some of its biggest challenges. He colorfully described how Israel has understood this interest clearly for quite a while, even explicitly conveying its importance in high places in Washington.

Over the past year, the Americans have internalized that message regarding Ukraine—certainly in light of Russia's aggression and Iran's active support of Russia's weapons needs. The intense level of cooperation and support was highlighted in December 2022 with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's speech before a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress. In the aforementioned article, which was published just before the Russian invasion, Doran recognized a symbiosis between Ukraine and Azerbaijan that could resonate for the West. The massive economic and political support from the U.S. and its NATO allies for Ukraine has been based upon the moral and strategic imperatives of defending not only Ukrainians from aggression but future dangers in the region, understood broadly. The formal requests from Sweden and Finland for accession to NATO constitute an obvious, direct result of those regional dangers.

It can certainly be argued that Azerbaijan has many similarities within its neighborhood and that both Azerbaijan and the United States have strategic interests in connecting within the same Western alliance. The same potentially challenging countries—specifically Iran and Russia—might be pushed back through closer ties to Azerbaijan. Recent developments in the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which involve a variety of competing mediators, also emphasizes this point. Although, like

for Israel, NATO membership is not a goal for Azerbaijan, a closer and constructive relationship certainly makes sense for all sides.

While Israel and its friends have often spoken up for Azerbaijan in Washington, one prospective opportunity is learning from Israel's bipartisan success in developing its relationship with the United States. Even for Israel, this has been a challenge in recent years—and there may be renewed difficulties for the new right-wing government in Israel; still, historically, bipartisan political support has been the secret sauce for Israel in the United States.

Perhaps, in the wake of the onset of the war in Ukraine and the strong leadership role played by the Biden Administration in rallying the West to the cause, there could be an opening for facilitating a development of relationships and understanding between Azerbaijanis and pragmatic leadership from the Democrats, along with some of the newer Republicans in Washington.

Like many Americans who support both Israel and positively support ties with the Palestinians, there could be a similar opening for the South Caucuses: to preserve historic, positive ties with Armenia along with a look towards developing a constructive, strategic outlook involving the deepening of bilateral ties with Azerbaijan. The strengthening of positive relations with both Azerbaijan and Armenia could offer opportunities, as peace negotiations hopefully move forward and rethinking the shared regional development of the South Caucasus could become possible. This would, of course, be compatible with existing bipartisan goals in Washington with regards to the discussion regarding Georgia's membership perspective in both NATO and the EU.

Israel and Azerbaijan have grown to appreciate that unlike some other bilateral ties each have, this one is truly founded on mutual benefits and interests that has stood well during times of test and challenge. Both sides, more than ever, see the other as an ally and a fellow traveler. Just as both states have worked together to deepen their bilateral relationship under the radar for the first thirty years, the future seems bright with wide opportunities to climb higher mountains together out in the open. BD

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The France-Azerbaijan Relationship

Realities and Misunderstandings

Maxime Gauin

The bilateral crises of 2020 and 2022 between Paris and Baku have provoked more emotional reactions than either dispassionate analyses or detailed projects to attempt to lastingly resolve the issue. This is not to say that relations between Azerbaijan and France are anywhere near where they should be—far from it; but supporters of what the relationship has been and could be again, to say nothing of those seeking to understand its present or wanting to shape its future course in a more agreeable direction—in accordance with the national interests of both Baku and Paris—have been done a great disservice by those who, intentionally or not, distort or misinterpret the speeches and deeds of either state's decisionmakers and influencers.

The main aims of this essay are to explain the origins of the current problems and (this is inextricably linked) to challenge the misunderstandings, misconceptions, and myths accumulated on both sides. This makes it necessary to start by providing the necessary historical background, in part because a misleading version of this past is presented today. And this misdirection itself has become an obstacle for the restoration of mutual understanding, to say nothing of warm and friendly relations. The second part of the essay will examine more recent events (1988-2017). The third and final part is devoted to the contemporary period (the Macron era), with its missed opportunities, and to some discussion of possible ways to bring an end to this litany of errors.

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Centuries Back

Although this article focuses on France-Azerbaijan bilateral relations, some words of explanation are warranted about the French position on the Armenian issue in general and its Ottoman components in particular. All attempts to create a pro-Armenian movement in France from 1862 to 1895 failed miserably. The "pro-Armenian" speeches in the French parliament in 1896 and the activities of the short-lived France-Armenia Committee (1897) were mostly the result of domestic political attacks by left and right opponents of the centrist cabinet of Prime Minister Jules Méline (a remarkably similar tactic was used in 2020, as discussed below, the main difference being that the Méline cabinet remained unmoved by attempts to use the Armenian issue against him). Georges Clemenceau, one of the most important pro-Armenian figures during Méline's premiership, never made use of the Armenian question in his dealings with the Ottoman Empire when he served as prime minister in 1906-1909. Back in power from 1917 to 1920, he went so far as to state, in 1919: "We have had enough of the Armenians!"

The bilateral crises of 2020 and 2022 between Paris and Baku have provoked more emotional reactions than either dispassionate analyses or detailed projects to attempt to lastingly resolve the issue.

The main reasons for this exasperative statement were twofold: one, the repeated demands for a Greater Armenia whose territory would stretch from Karabakh to Mersin; and two, the crimes committed by the Armenian Legion in the French occupation zone of Türkiye, which was headquartered in Adana. In particular, Brigadier General Jules Hamelin, who commanded the French troops in the Near East in 1918-1919, reported that the Armenians are "a people not second to the Turks and Kurds in barbarity when they dispose of force, who have provoked century-long hatreds by their spirit of lucre, who dreams of revenge only, who are themselves deeply

divided by internal rivalries, [and] who count on the inexhaustible resources of France, to which they shows no gratitude, and will never show."

Hamelin was succeeded by General Henri Gouraud, who was equally hostile to Armenian nationalism and who believed that France "knew during the [world] war [only] one chivalrous enemy"—namely the Turks. Gouraud cumulated his functions with those of High Commissioner in Beirut. In his civilian functions, Gouraud's second man was Robert de Caix, the theorist of French domination in the Near East. De Caix saw this domination as based on the support of Christian Arabs and consolidated by a Turkish alliance, but as having nothing to do with the Armenians, who "seem to me bypassing the other Orientals in the art to distort, conveniently for them, the sense of the words told to them. So far, I never had, for my part, a conversation with an Armenian, including men living in Europe such as [Archag] Tchobanian or [Boghos] Nubar Pasha, without having seen them distort—with a bad faith so perfect that I wonder if it is not ingenuous—the meaning of my words." (This is evidently a harsh judgment, but it is representative of what French officers, officials, and journalists from the 1850s to the 1920s wrote about Armenians—the judgment is so harsh, in fact, that one would be hard-pressed to find anything quite so disparaging in the contemporary pronouncements of even the most extreme anti-Armenian of any nationality or political tint.)

The Armenian Legion was suppressed in 1920, several Armenian criminals were summarily executed by the French army the same year, and then the occupation zone was evacuated from November 1921 to January 1922 as a result of the Ankara agreement signed on 20 October 1921.

Concerning now the Caucasus, the first turning point was January 1920. Indeed, the Clemenceau cabinet had bet against the Bolsheviks, putting their chips, as it were, on White Russian General Anton Denikin, whose army collapsed at the end of 1919. Clemenceau himself resigned in January 1920, with the new French government immediately showing an interest in Azerbaijan. The cabinet endorsed the September 1919 report of a certain Captain Pivier about his mission in the Caucasus—particularly its conclusion that an independent Azerbaijan protected by France would be a choice "of the highest importance," because of its own resources (oil and manganese primarily) but also because it could open the way to Central Asia and its oil fields, as yet unexploited. Azerbaijan, the conclusion read, is ruled by "men having the sense of realities." Even after the Soviet conquest of April 1920, Prime Minister Alexandre Millerand refused to severe ties, hoping that the Baku government would keep a certain form of autonomy.

Contrary to what is sometimes believed, the voice of the Azerbaijanis regarding the conflict over Karabakh was heard in France, with fair assessments published in the country's press as early as 1988.

Meanwhile, relations with the Republic of Armenia and its ruling party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF-Dashnak), deteriorated. Damien de Martel, appointed as France's High Commissioner for the Caucasus (Tbilisi) reported in July 1920 about the destruction of forty "Tatar villages" by the Armenian army, with the expulsion "by cannon shots" of 36,000 civilians to Türkiye and the killing of 4,000 others, "without exception for women and children, drowned by the Armenian soldiers in the Arax River. It did not seem to me unnecessary to report these details, which show that this is not always 'the same ones who are massacred.'" Such ends de Martel's document (in another, written a month later, he mentions the expulsion of the Muslims from the Lake Sevan region).

The exasperation of the Quai d'Orsay towards the Armenians is visible in at least two contemporaneous articles appearing in its mouthpiece, *Le Temps*. The first is about the massacres and expulsions of Muslims by Armenia (the estimate given for just the number of killed is "several dozens of thousands"); the second is about the assassination by the ARF of Fatali Khan Khoyski (a former prime minister of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic) and Hasan-bey Aghayev (a former vice-president of its parliament).

Ultimately, no French weapons were delivered to Armenia in 1920, and only one Parisian daily protested when the Dashnak-ruled Armenian state collapsed. Two years later, the correspondent of *Le Petit Parisien* in Türkiye, Jean Schlickin, published a book in which he described the "systematic plan of extermination of the Muslim populations" of Armenia, which, he said, had been "savagely

carried out" by "the Armenian gangs." Schlickin added that "fifty villages" in Karabakh were burned and their Azerbaijani inhabitants massacred. The most remarkable thing, in the context of this essay, is that this book was issued by a publishing house that was, at that time, completely controlled by the French general staff.

The foregoing logically leads to an explanation about the difference of treatment accorded to the two delegations after the collapse of their respective states. The Comité France-Orient, established in June 1913 under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry, begins its rapprochement with exiled Azerbaijani leaders (e.g., Alimardan Topchubashov, Jeyhun Hajibeyli) in 1923. In 1927, an alliance is formed between the Comité, the Azerbaijani leaders in exile, and their Georgian and Ukrainian counterparts. Pierre-Abdon Boisson, the most active leader of the Comité, stated that "this moral independence of a truly free—because it intends to remain so— people, even by taking their homes away, is a fine example of courage and sublime patriotism." Far from being limited to speeches of praise and admiration, the Comité's support included the collection of funds for exiled Azerbaijanis in need. The first event of this kind is placed under the chairmanship of General Gouraud (mentioned above) and of Marshal Louis Franchet d'Espèrey—the former Commander of the Allied Army of the Orient that liberated the Balkans from its German, Austro-Hungarian, and Bulgarian occupiers at the end of World War I. This alliance culminated with the establishment of a section of the Comité entirely devoted to Azerbaijan.

It is oftentimes forgotten that in 1993, France voted in favor of each of the four UN Security Council resolutions, which remains a strong international legal basis for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, the delegation of the exiled Republic of Armenia exasperated the French authorities for a number of reasons, including because they engaged in the illegal sale of "passports" without value and also due to a series of bloody clashes between Dashnaks and communist Armenians on French territory. The ARF also tried to create an Economic Armenian Center as a cover for supporting in various ways some French politicians for

its claims, but the Quai d'Orsay neutralized the initiative at its beginning.

The More Recent Past

Contrary to what is sometimes believed, the voice of the Azerbaijanis regarding the conflict over Karabakh was heard in France, with fair assessments published in the country's press as early as 1988. It is true that Armenian nationalists residing in France tried to hide the expulsion of the Azerbaijani population from Armenia with their campaigns on the earthquake in Armenia, but it would be an exaggeration to say that they succeeded completely: *Le Monde* was one of the newspapers that reported on Armenia's ethnic cleansing campaigns on several occasions. Similarly, although the Armenian nationalists residing in France tried to present a completely distorted narrative of the bloody events that took place in Sumgait in February 1988, this version was not the only one presented in France, and the Khojaly massacre in February 1992 was reported without understatements.

Ilham Aliyev's first visit abroad after being elected President of Azerbaijan was to Paris, not Moscow. Given the seriousness with which such decisions are taken in Baku (both then and now), it seems highly unlikely that this decision can be attributed to chance.

At a more political level, it is oftentimes forgotten that in 1993, France voted in favor of each of the four UN Security Council resolutions, which remains a strong international legal basis for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The same year, President Heydar Aliyev went to Paris and signed on 20 December a bilateral treaty of friendship. The treaty was ratified in 1998, a year of particularly intense but, in this regard, ultimately unsuccessful Armenian nationalist lobbying in the French Parliament—proving the limits of the effectiveness of such actions. The report of the French Senate on the ratification noted that "it is not surprising that this 'Black January' [1990] left a lasting memory for a population traumatized by the violence of the Soviet troops." The same year, both a Joint Economic Commission and an Association of the Friends of Azerbaijan were established. Four years later (in

2002), the first scholarly book on Azerbaijan since the independence was published. Written by Antoine Constant, it honestly treated all the sensitive issues, including the Baku massacres (March 1918), and the various ethnic cleansing campaigns against Azerbaijanis (committed by independent Armenia in 1918-1920, Garegin Nzhdeh's "Republic of Mountainous Armenia" in 1921, Soviet Armenia in 1987-1991, and those during the First Karabakh War).

This is the favorable backdrop against which the newly-elected President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, undertook his first visit abroad in January 2004—even before traveling to Moscow in February 2004. Given the seriousness with which such decisions are taken in Baku (both then and now), it seems highly unlikely that this decision can be attributed to chance.

There is an interesting anecdote from this period of the bilateral relationship that Aliyev recounted during a recent interview to Azerbaijani television outlets. I reproduce his words, which speak for themselves:

> We must remember how France became the co-chair of the Minsk Group. I know this very well because my father [Heydar Aliyev] told me about that. At the time, French President Jacques Chirac insisted on this. Heydar Aliyev repeatedly objected. Later, even Jacques Chirac told me this story many times. He treated my father with great respect, and quoting my father, Chirac told me that Heydar Aliyev was not against him but against France's co-chairmanship. Because Armenians had an immense influence on Chirac and thus would influence his policies. Chiraq told me, "I convinced him that we would always be neutral," and Heydar Aliyev agreed. That was indeed the case. And it was only natural that they remained unbiased. Or they may have been impartial because the issue was left unresolved. I cannot say for sure.

Chiraq's term in office (1995-2007) was followed by that of Nicolas Sarkozy. A highlight of that period was the agreement in 2011 to establish the Lycée Français de Bakou—such and similar improvements in bilateral ties were largely driven by networks in the French diplomatic establishment and, more generally, in the high administration in Paris; together with their counterparts (and higher-ups) in Baku, they were the ones who championed the decision to engage in a rapprochement with Azerbaijan. Probably the most fruitful period in the France-Azerbaijan bilateral relationship, however, was probably the presidency of François Hollande (2012-2017). In spite of his (exaggerated) reputation of having a pro-Armenian bias, Hollande's term in the Élysée Palace was marked by unprecedented agreements and contracts.

Some words of context are indispensable to understand these five years. In 2012, the Armenian nationalists in France suffered a major blow with the decision of the Constitutional Council censoring entirely the Boyer bill on the "denial of genocides recognized by law" in the name of freedom of expression. The next year was even worse for them, by every aspect. In April 2013, the Council of State blocked a criminalization draft presented by the cabinet on the "denial of genocides." For reasons that would be too long to elaborate here, it is safe to assume that the cabinet could surmise what the Council of State would end up saying (and that it was not unhappy with the result). Correspondingly, Hollande did not attend any 24 April ceremony that year.

Probably the most fruitful period in the France-Azerbaijan bilateral relationship was the presidency of François Hollande and was marked by unprecedented agreements and contracts.

Be that as it may, the most devastating pieces of news for the Armenian nationalists in 2013 were the *Perinçek v. Switzerland* decision of the European Court of Human Rights and the conviction of former Armenian Revolutionary Federation leader Laurent Leylekian for having defamed a French citizen of Turkish origin. And the most direct effects on the relationship with Azerbaijan were produced by the last-minute refusal of Armenia to sign an enhanced Association Agreement with the EU in September 2013 and its decision to pursue membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union instead. Even worse was the subsequent support for Russia provided by the Armenian government concerning the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea.

All that explains the success of Hollande's historic visit to Baku in May 2014 and Aliyev's reciprocal visit to Paris in October of the same year. A decision to establish the Université Franco-Azerbaïdjanaise (UFAZ) was made, and two space satellites were sold—officially for civilian use, but the French side

knew well that they were to be transferred to the military after only a few months: one was for high-resolution observation purposes, the other for secure communication. The protests staged by Armenian associations and others concerning the Paris visit did not have the slightest effect. On the contrary, the satellites contracts were followed in 2015 by the sale of French military material worth for €157 million.

Another visit by Hollande to Baku was made the following year. In the same interview quoted above, Aliyev recalled its significance:

> On 24 April 2015, President François Hollande visited Armenia. Only four leaders went to Armenia on that day, and it was Armenia's yet another fiasco and the debacle of its historical forgery. But he went there, and I went to Çanakkale, Türkiye. President Hollande came to Baku from Armenia on the same evening, arriving even earlier than me. Our event in Türkiye took longer than expected. I arrived, President Hollande was already in Baku, and we met the next morning, on 25 April. What does this mean? It shows the conduct of a politician. It showed what France was and that it respected both that capacity and us. Therefore, he came to Azerbaijan to maintain this balance. I highly appreciated it.

The foregoing helps to draw a clear contrast between the two other co-chairs of the (now defunct) OSCE Minsk Group and France. The U.S. Congress adopted in 1992 the infamous Section 907 of the United States Freedom Support Act, which banned any kind of direct United States aid—even of humanitarian kind—to the Azerbaijani government. Since 2001, the U.S. president has been empowered to provide a waiver for the implementation of its provisions, and this has happened on an annual basis ever since. Still, Section 907 continues to hang over the bilateral relationship like a sword of Damocles: the provision has never been formally stricken from the lawbooks, and this inactivation has never resulted in any significant sale of U.S. military material to Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, Russia not only sold weapons to Armenia (in addition to Azerbaijan) but provided considerable quantities to Yerevan for free or at a steep discount. France has not sold a single box of arms to Armenia since 1919 and never gave any weapon to Yerevan for free. Last but not least, Bulgaria is the only other EU member state that exported to Azerbaijan a similar number of weapons during the 2010s (for instance, the UK's arms exports to Baku amount to a paltry €1.8 million. Of course, this is not the entire story, but it is an important element.

The end of Hollande's term as president and the start of the Macron era in 2017 was not marked directly by spectacular events concerning the bilateral relationship. Yet the partisans of Armenian nationalism, including those living in France, suffered two more major blows on the 1915 issue in front of the Constitutional Council, in January 2016 and January 2017—in addition to their crushing defeat in front of the European Court of Human Rights in the form of the *Chiragov and others v. Armenia* judgment.

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Bitter Paradoxes

It is simply incorrect to assert that Macron arrived in power with prejudices in favor of Armenian nationalism or against Turkic peoples, including Azerbaijanis. He actually was the first French head of state since Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974 to be elected without any background of contacts with the Armenian nationalists residing in France. His business-friendly campaign platform, and his expressed desire to turn the page on the old practices of the old parties, were considerable advantages for both Baku and Ankara.

Although the Armenian nationalists residing in France tried to take advantage of the rapidity of his political party's formation (it took barely a year) to influence and infiltrate its growing ranks and affect the formulation of its policy positions, but at least according to their own assessments, the short-terms effects were negligible. Dashnaks operating in France, for instance, were particularly disappointed by the choice of an obscure MP of Armenian descent to chair the France-Armenia friendship group in the National Assembly (they later attacked him for not being sufficiently anti-Turkish, according to their standards).

More generally, their impression during the first months of the Macron presidency was that the new French government was uninterested in the "Armenian

cause" and was undertaking a "profound disengagement" with Armenia—to quote the words of Harout Mardirossian, the man who runs France's Dashnak organ, *France-Arménie*.

Even more relevant is the fact that the opposition of the Armenian nationalists residing in France to the negotiations (2017-2019) for the sale of the ASTER-30-SAMP/T (medium/long-range) and Vertical Launch-MICA (short-range) air-defense missile systems, as well as Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) 90, were ineffective. (It must be noted here that this is exactly the set for which Ukraine has asked with insistence for nearly a year—the green light was eventually given by Paris and then Rome at the end of 2022 before Washington accepted to provide its Patriot system.) Meanwhile, Russia's S-300 and even the S-400 systems were seen as insufficiently effective. An Israeli system was eventually chosen by Baku, at least in part due to *one* unfortunate statement made by Macron concerning an Azerbaijani domestic policy at a particularly sensitive moment in the talks. The timing could not have been worse: it resulted in an Azerbaijani decision to bring the arms sales negotiations with France to an end.

However understandable this may have been—given the circumstances—in retrospect it can be understood to have been erroneous from the standpoint of France-Azerbaijan bilateral relations. Why? Because French diplomacy and its external trade are largely based on big contracts, and such contracts are never without effect on media coverage—something Greece, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia (to give only three examples) have understood perfectly. Cancelling the air defense contract and indefinitely postponing the naval contract, instead of, say, asking for a written promise to refrain in the future from any damaging presidential and ministerial statements in exchange for the finalization of the sales, deprived Azerbaijan of the most powerful leverage it could have obtained from France.

By comparison, Türkiye knew how to handle carrot *and* stick in economic terms during the crises provoked by the Armenian nationalists residing in France in both 2006 and 2011-2012. Aided in part by a well-conceived and well-executed communication strategy, the result of this economic diplomacy was that the Masse bill (supposed to criminalize the "denial of the Armenian genocide") was blocked by successive French cabinets for five years, moved procedurally back and forth between the National Assembly and the Senate (2006-2011) before eventually being rejected by the Senate in May 2011. Then, to obtain the vote of the Boyer bill (similar), Sarkozy had to wait until the Christmas season to obtain a vote at the National Assembly (he did not trust his own majority, for excellent reasons), and then there ended up being more MPs to sign the application to the Constitutional Council against this bill in January 2012 than MPs that had voted for it in December 2011.

To make the situation more problematic, the Association of the Friends of Azerbaijan (established in 1998, as noted above) stopped being effective by 2017. The defeat of its chair, Jean-François Mancel, at the June 2017 legislative elections, surprised everybody; but this hardly explains why his successor was only named in October 2021. Meetings on the Karabakh issue with French deputies and senators conducted under its auspices also ended in 2017. The content of the Association's website still remains the same as it was nearly six years ago, and its Twitter account (it has around 1,200 followers) is notable for its modest output.

Additional structural problems in France-Azerbaijan relations can be highlighted through three examples. First, France is arguably the only country in the world where, in spite of a strong Jewish population and an important interest in both Azerbaijan's Jewish community and the country's ties with Israel, links between Azerbaijani and Jewish organizations in France are minimal, ineffective, and uncertain. Relatedly, the decision to name journalist Jean-Pierre Allali as vice-chair of the Association of the Friends of Azerbaijan was suboptimal. "He never introduced us to a single Jewish leader," Ayten Mouradova—a former member—told me. Allali's very modest actions on behalf of Azerbaijan pale in comparison to his tireless campaign for the "recognition of the Armenian genocide."

In addition, after 2013 no French-language book that could remotely be defined as being sympathetic to Azerbaijan has been released. The sole exception being the translation of an expanded version of Rahman Mustafayev's doctoral dissertation in 2019—he was at the time Azerbaijan's ambassador to France—but the lack of ties to academic circles (and the choice of publisher) diminished both its visibility and impact.

Lastly, the lack of an active and organized Azerbaijani diaspora in France has made it easier for officials to ignore Azerbaijani issues. One can estimate that there are about 50,000 Azerbaijanis residing in France (in addition to ethnic Azerbaijanis from Iran, many of whom came to France in earlier waves of immigration; they are said to have been largely neglected by their ethnic kin from Azerbaijan since around 2010). And yet, a protest organized in front of the National Assembly in November 2022 against its latest resolution in support of the Armenian position was attended by less than 50 persons in total, at least some of which were non-Azerbaijani in origin (i.e., were of Turkish descent).

Such outcomes and results can hardly be expected to be seen as an effective counterweight to Armenian diaspora activities. Whatever influence they may still have on French public life has virtually gone unopposed by the Azerbaijani diaspora community during the Macron era (at least until very recently)—if not earlier. Naturally, this domestic situation has had an impact on French government policies.

But simply pointing an accusatory finger at Macron and his officials represents a failure to acknowledge that he bears no responsibility in this absence of the active involvement of Azerbaijanis residing in France. The situation is entirely different, for instance, in Canada, where, in spite of much stronger prejudices (as exemplified by the 2020 ban on exporting Canadian-made electronic components to Baykar), ethnic-Azerbaijanis—whatever their country of origin—are united, active, and closely connected to the Ukrainian and Jewish associations.

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The symbolism of one-sided resolutions by a legislative branch that has little oversight, much less any effectual control over the conduct of French foreign policy, can be contrasted with concrete actions in the domestic arena undertaken by the government in the Macron era. For instance, *all* "charters of friendship" signed by various French municipalities with their counterparts operating within the framework of the ethnic-Armenian secessionist entity in Karabakh ("Artsakh") have been canceled at the request of the government by the French administrative tribunal system. The legal argument made by official Paris was always the same: a municipality cannot pursue its own diplomacy and since France has never recognized "Artsakh," then no formal ties at any level can be legally established.

The campaign to gain some sort of recognition of "Artsakh" through the basement, as it were, was almost certainly an orchestrated one, which involved coopting local French municipal authorities. The first case involved the town of Alfortville, a suburb of Paris located just to the south of the city zoo that is populated by a sizeable ethnic-Armenian community. Its authorities had signed such a document with Lachin's occupation administrators in 2017-2018—i.e., during the bilateral talks on the sale of missiles and ships. In 2019—i.e., after the talks were canceled—this became systematic, but ultimately unsuccessful. Some of the coopted French municipalities abandoned their efforts right after the French administrative tribunal system delivered its first-instance judgments; others appealed and lost in 2021; and one filed a further appellate application to the Council of State, which was also rejected (in March 2022).

In this affair, the Azerbaijani embassy wisely chose to engage the services of the law firm of Olivier Pardo, whose record of success was reported in both French and Azerbaijani media outlets. All protests by Armenian nationalists residing in France were in vain and found, until 2020, no echo in the mainstream media.

It is only against such a background that we can appropriately turn to an examination of the most sensitive issues, namely the crises of 2020 and 2022. The first one was open by utterly wrong statements made by Macron on 1 and 2 October 2020. In his first statement on this matter, he said that France

> today possesses information that indicate with certitude that Syrian combatants have left the theater of operations, that jihadist combatants have transited through Gaziantep to enter the Nagorno-Karabakh theater of operations. This is a very grave, new fact that changes the equation.

The next day, Macron said that France

> has established, on the basis of our own information, that I can confirm, that 300 combatants have left Syria to reach Baku through Gaziantep. These combatants are known, traced, identified, [and] they come from jihadist groups operating in the Aleppo region. This is an established fact and other intelligence agencies are preparing similar reports. I will not tell you today that this is a red line, because it has been crossed. It is crossed. And when I give a red line, […] I bring to bear a response. I say, 'it is unacceptable.'

These two statements, which he explicitly indicted were pronounced on the basis of information acquired by the French intelligence community, should deservedly come to be categorized by historians as an analytic error equal in magnitude only to the type made by several Western intelligence agencies in late 2021 that Russia was not preparing its invasion of Ukraine.

In any event, Macron never repeated the absurdities he uttered only on those two occasions. But several French parliamentarians did. One was Danièle Cazarian, who until her 2017 election to parliament was president of the National Center of Armenian Memory (she did not run for re-election in 2022). One instance took place in the French parliament on 13 October 2020, as part of a question she posed to Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. On that occasion, she also indicated her belief that France's "position of strict neutrality is no longer tenable."

Le Drian's response was clear, the substance of which went a long way to mitigate Macron erroneous statement, cited above. Refuting Cazarian, the French foreign minister also defended, as he put it,

> the exigency of impartiality of France in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. We would no longer be legitimate if we were to take the side of one or the other country. And I think that we would do a disservice to the quality of our bilateral relationship with Armenia if we were to hold an unbalanced posture, as this would call into question the role we play.

A contemporaneous initiative by France at the UN, which involved the circulation of a draft resolution that Azerbaijan saw as one-sided, was also unhelpful. It failed thanks to the support Azerbaijan enjoyed amongst the

member states of the Non-Aligned Movement, which it chaired (and still does, until the end of 2023).

On the other hand, in that same year (2020), France also issued licenses to French companies to export €117.5 million worth of guidance systems equipment to Azerbaijan, ignoring calls to cancel the contracts. In 2020, Macron's political opponents in the Senate (they constituted then, as now, a vast majority) orchestrated a campaign to embarrass the government by asking for what they knew to be impossible—i.e., the "recognition of Artsakh"—as a capstone to that year's anti-Turkish crisis. The electoral defeats of 2017, the debacle at the EU Parliament elections in 2019 and, in the case of the conservatives, the emerging scandal of the illegal funding of Nicolas Sarkozy's 2012 presidential campaign, all resulted in the traditional parties entering into a vicious circle of failure and bitterness, which was detrimental to the articulation of a clear vision of French national interests. The Armenian nationalists residing in France did not manufacture these domestic disturbances, but they certainly did exploit them for their own ends.

By the second half of 2021, anti-Turkish hostility had become much less fashionable. France's ambassador to Azerbaijan, Zacharie Gross, was given permission by the Quai d'Orsay to visit the liberated city of Aghdam, which he did in November 2021. The trip pleased Baku. Somewhat less symbolic was the sale of French electronic components to the Azerbaijani navy, worth €880,000.

Various attempts were made to provoke a new bilateral crisis between France and Azerbaijan in the spring and summer of 2022. In some cases, these were enflamed by known pro-Russia agitators. A typical example of the latter was the publication of a book edited by Éric Denécé and Tigrane Yegavian titled *The Black Book of Karabakh*. But success was not forthcoming—at least not immediately. The *Le Monde* newspaper, which had considerably softened its tone concerning Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War came to an end, continued to avoid the publication of provocatively pro-Armenian articles, retaining a more or less neutral editorial line.

As summer transitioned into autumn, the voices and machinations of Armenians nationalists residing in France grew stronger and more assertive, with no effective response coming from the Azerbaijani side. Admittedly, I cannot here provide a detailed description of all the moves

and maneuverings that ultimately produced the most recent crisis in bilateral ties, which is still ongoing. But two incidents that took place in November 2022 stand out. The first involved a draft of the outcome document of a Francophonie ministerial meeting that was, by all accounts, in violation of the rules and concocted by Armenian and French diplomats—and only watered down after intense behind-the-scenes negotiations.

The second was more substantive and weightier, in that it involved Macron personally. No one would seriously contest that the French president's attempt to insert himself into what had been, by all accounts, a fruitful trilateral negotiation process, led by President of the EU Council Charles Michel, was an evident misstep. The EU was in some ways in the driver's seat, somewhat displacing the Kremlin—at least on some aspects of the negotiation process. This much is clear. Uncovering the explanation for what stood behind Macron's misstep, which took place in November 2022, is another matter altogether. But looking at the outcome suggests this was neither in the French national interest nor the interest of the European Union. Certainly, the goal shared by the Dashnaks and the Kremlin (each for their own distinct reasons) was achieved as a result: the suspension of the EU's facilitation of the talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan. What is equally clear is that the crisis could have been avoided.

And it will not be as hard as one might imagine at first blush to avoid the next one—even to put an end to all future crises. To understand this, one must begin by crushing a longstanding myth once and for all: the Armenian nationalists residing in France are neither strong enough by themselves nor particularly united to do lasting damage to Azerbaijan's standing in that country. For much of the twentieth century, they were bitterly and deeply divided until a laborious process of unification took place in the 1990s. But even this did not last. Again, they are divided, and they have been especially so since the "velvet revolution" brought Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to power in Yerevan in 2018 and, of course, the loss of the Second Karabakh War in 2020.

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And again, some detail is needed. Pashinyan openly supports an Armenian diaspora alternative in France to the traditional Armenian nationalist establishment, grouped in the Coordination Council of France's Armenian Associations (CCAF). This is one element of the disunity. Another is the factionalism inside the CCAF itself. There, the Hunchak party is in conflict with the ARF and former spokesman for the terrorist Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), Jean-Marc "Ara" Toranian, who is now a Co-chair of the CCAF. In spite of his tactical alliance with the ARF, since at least 2003, Toranian has had severe disputes with his cousin Franck "Mourad" Papazian (the ARF's leader and another Co-chair of the CCAF)—the latest concerns the attitude the CCAF should adopt towards Pashinyan.

After their failures in 2011 (the Masse bill) and 2012 (the Boyer bill), the established Armenian nationalist groups based in France often complained that the majority of French elites at best perceive their ethnic group as being composed of rug merchants and the like. Since then, they have lost prominent ethnic-Armenian public figures, including Charles Aznavour (their main pillar of support in show business, deceased in 2018), Anahide Ter Minassian (their main pillar of support in academic circles, deceased in 2019) and Patrick Devedjian (the only high-profile French politician of Armenian descent, who died after contracting COVID-19 in 2020). This is one reason to emphasize that the inflammatory statements made in the 2020-2022 period should not be taken at face value. They are largely due to electoral calculations. Ethnic-Armenian citizens of France who serve as staffers, or pro-Armenian "friends," prepare a text for an MP to read, which is calibrated to be provocative; and then, the MP reads it. This has been the most common scenario.

The core of Armenian and pro-Armenian activism in French media is made of a small group of persons. One is Gaïdz Minassian who works at Lemonde.fr. A former Dashnak who was arrested in 1986 for illegally protesting in support of Armenian terrorism, he later broke ties with the ARF and reversed his approval of their violent methods—but without renouncing his overt hostility toward Ankara and Baku; he may have more recently returned to the ideas of his youth, at least

partially. A second is Valérie Toranian, who works at *Le Point* and who in the past helped her then-husband, the aforementioned Jean-Marc "Ara" Toranian, to publish ASALA's newspaper, *Hay Baykar*. A third is Jean-Christophe Buisson at *Le Figaro*; and a fourth is award-winning travel writer Sylvain Tesson.

Marginalizing the influence these activists and their fellow travelers have in the French media may not be easy or straightforward, but it is not rocket science, either. States with objectively much more serious, deep-seated challenges and disagreements with the Élysée, the Quai d'Orsay, and the two houses of Parliament than Azerbaijan have been able to overcome them. An integral part of the answer lies in devising and then executing a truly effective public relations and communication strategy, which includes hiring the right sort of agency. The obvious example is what Türkiye has been able to accomplish, but there are other success stories as well.

As important as the cultural dimension may be for changing French hearts and minds, more of the same will not overcome the broader challenge. In other words, simply intensifying Azerbaijan's cultural diplomacy will not produce the expected result. Rather, a much more targeted approach is needed—one that focuses directly on Armenia's nefarious alliances with both Iran and Russia, but also on longstanding Armenian antisemitism and the fierce anti-Catholicism of the Armenian Apostolic Church. If Armenian nationalism can be exposed for what it is, public and, in turn, political support for the "Armenian cause" in France would decrease significantly.

If Armenian nationalism can be exposed for what it is, public and, in turn, political support for the "Armenian cause" in France would decrease significantly.

The pragmatic presentation and contextualization by Azerbaijani media of the recent (and unnecessary) visit by the President of the National Assembly, Yael Braun-Pivet, to Armenia—particularly her negative reply concerning the "recognition of Artsakh"—is an encouraging sign. But more important than anything else in this regard is the choice to appoint the Foreign Ministry's former Spokesperson, Leyla Abdullayeva, as Azerbaijan's ambassador to France. In just the first few weeks since she assumed her post in November 2022, she helped put together a friendship group in the National Assembly and has both deepened and multiplied Azerbaijan's contacts.

I can think of no better conclusion—no better expression of what the French posture has been and could be again—than to refer to a sentence written by Charles Escande, General Secretary of the French administration in Adana, in March 1921: "We had to do Armenophilia from a humanitarian point of view, but we had to be careful not to fall into political Armenophilia." Extricating itself from "political Armenophilia" will require France to restore its fidelity to what we can call the Le Drian posture: the "exigency of impartiality." Otherwise, the country's role and influence risks being more than simply being called into question, as Le Drian rightly foresaw.

It is high time to put an end to the litany of errors, and France will need to make the first move. As Ilham Aliyev stated on 10 January 2023, "if there is an idea to normalize this situation [with France], we will not be the ones initiating it." We should take him at his word. BD

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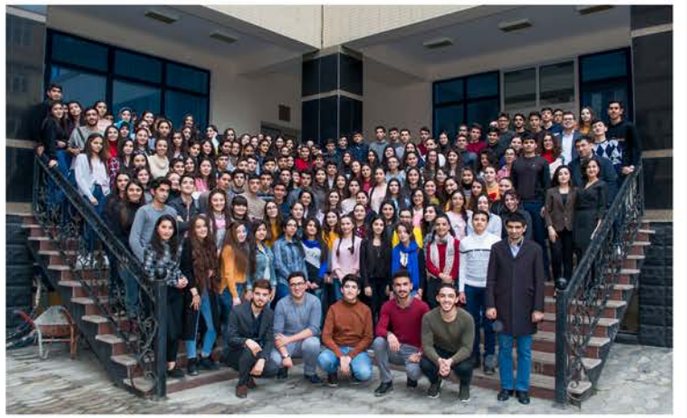

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Time for an EU Foreign Policy Update?

The EU and the Silk Road Region in Wartime

Samuel Doveri Vesterbye

The European Union has a short history of handling foreign policy when compared to other political actors on the international stage. Most others have a foreign policy tradition that dates back several decades, hundreds of years, or longer. The EU thus remains a paradox. This can be seen by contrasting two characteristic sets of facts. *On the one hand*, it has established 140 embassies ("delegations") worldwide and states that it is the single-largest global donor of international development aid. The EU is China's second biggest trade partner (and America's biggest trade partner), and its 447-million population continues to set many of the world's trade and regulatory standards (it is not without cause often described as a "regulatory superpower"). *On the other hand*, the EU's foreign policy administration, known as the European External Action Service (EEAS), has existed for barely a decade and a half. In fact, its competences in international relations only date back to the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, while its instruments, strategies, and external budgets remain less than two decades old. With the exception of the EU's enlargement policy, the EU's foreign policy strategies—the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Global Strategy—only date back to 2004 and 2015, respectively. It is within this context that we must understand and analyze both the successes and challenges that the EU's nascent foreign policy faces today.

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This essay first describes what is generally understood to be the EU's foreign policy, including policies, strategies, and instruments. This is followed by an analysis of how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed the EU's geopolitical and geo-economic thinking and thereby also its inherent foreign policy positions and interests. The third part briefly analyses how certain policies—namely the accession policy in the specific case of Türkiye and the Eastern Partnership (EaP)—face serious challenges as a result of the geopolitical impact of the conflict over Ukraine and the gradual decoupling of Russian energy-supplies and transportation corridors. The fourth part briefly examines how the EU is likely to inevitably reposition itself, in geographic terms, as a result of the ongoing war and its effects. This policy is likely to support a united EU that aims to fulfill its internal energy needs while obtaining sustainable access to rare-earths as well as relocated supply chains. The final part outlines how portions of a new EU foreign policy can potentially support this new geopolitical reality by establishing a more security-focused, sustainable, and geographically diversified foreign policy.

This essay leads up to an assessment of how portions of a new EU foreign policy can potentially support the new geopolitical reality as it applies to the Silk Road region.

What is EU Foreign Policy?

What is commonly referred to as "EU foreign policy" is essentially the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that was established by the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. Since the 1990s the core competences, budgets, and instruments of the EU's CFSP have been strengthened, notably though the Lisbon Treaty that came into force in 2009. The CFSP is best understood as the overarching EU foreign policy entity, which contains a range of features, notably the EEAS itself and its delegations abroad, as well as the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European

Commission (High Representative or HRVP). One can also include the EU's Common Commercial Policy, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and other regulatory frameworks, development aid, enlargement, as well as the EU's many strategies and policies under this umbrella. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), with its southern and eastern sub-divisions, known as the Eastern Partnership (EaP), also fit into this category. Important additional components of the EU's foreign policy include the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) mechanism, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the European Development Fund (EDF), and the European Defence Agency (EDA), as well as all the strategies and intra-institutional meeting platforms that derive from these policies like, for example, the Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union (COREPER).

For the purpose of this essay, however, I will limit myself to simply describe the EU's ENP, Global Strategy, and Strategic Compass, as well as specific cases related to its enlargement (in the next sections) and EaP policies, followed by the CSDP. The reason for this limitation is due to the fact that the foregoing components of the EU's foreign policy apparatus are *particularly* relevant within the context of the new challenges that the EU is facing as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The EU's foreign policy towards the geographies that fall within the analytical purview of this essay has been largely shaped by the establishment of the ENP IN 2004 followed by the establishment of its eastern dimension in 2009, known as the EaP.

The ENP dictates the EU's relations with its southern and eastern neighbors. It aims to encourage stability, prosperity, and security for its immediate neighbors, some of which have been seeking candidacy to become EU member states. The EaP consists of the EU's eastern neighbors, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. For over a decade, the main official goal of the EaP has been to "strengthen and deepen the political and economic relations between the EU, its member states, and six Eastern European and South Caucasus partner countries." A vital component of the EU's ENP, including the EaP, has been to strengthen resilience, economic relations, foreign and security bonds, as well as socio-political ties, and climate priorities in the aforementioned countries.

Additional elements of the EU's foreign policy are best understood when looking at the chronological timeline between the ENP (2004), the EaP (2009), and subsequent key additions like the review of the ENP in 2015 (ENP Review), as well as the 2016 Global Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass.

As Steven Blockmans of the Centre for European Policy Studies wrote soon after its public release, the "essence" of the 2015 ENP Review consisted largely of an acknowledgment of a more geopolitical neighborhood—one that that placed "greater emphasis on stability (in security and economic terms); [provided for] more differentiation in relations with neighboring countries (i.e., doing more with 'partners'); and [gave] greater emphasis on shared interests rather than on the Union's own values."

One concrete example was the removal of the annual package of country reports to measure progress in reforms and its replacement by a stronger emphasis on security, energy, migration management, and climate priorities. Similarly, the 2016 Global Strategy echoes many of the 2015 ENP Review concepts, which were shaped by extensive consultations with stakeholders and civil society across the EU and the ENP. It famously put a major emphasis on the concept of fostering "resilience" while also prioritizing strategic autonomy, principled pragmatism, and existential threats to the EU. While maintaining a socio-political framework that continued to be built around the idea of resilience and reinforcing the capabilities of the EU's neighbors in dealing with migration, social issues, and instability, 2016 Global Strategy nevertheless took a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy.

The following passage from the document that announced the 2016 Global Strategy encapsulated the political sentiments at the root of this policy shifts:

> We need a stronger Europe. This is what our citizens deserve, this is what the wider world expects. We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity, and democracy, is being questioned. To the east, the European security order has been violated, while terrorism and violence plague

North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Europe itself. Economic growth is yet to outpace demography in parts of Africa, security tensions in Asia are mounting, while climate change causes further disruption.

The latest addition to EU foreign policy took place on 21 March 2022 with the publication of the Strategic Compass. Inconveniently, this strategic EU foreign policy document was conceived and largely finalized in the lead up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which—in hindsight—has led to criticism, since the document was immediately perceived as being outdated by virtue of not having properly taken into account the new geopolitical and geo-economic realities resulting from the onset of the war.

The Strategic Compass emphasizes that the world has entered into a new era of "realism" in which all the assets of globalization will be "weaponized" and in which interconnectivity—including multilateral trade—will be put in the service of geopolitical interests and result in a lower degree of respect for multilateral rules, institutions, and international arbitration. It equally affirms that "the return of war in Europe" is governed by classical great power competition views and puts an emphasis on the securitization of infrastructure, technology, markets, and corridors—including land, air, sea, space, and digital.

In practice, the EU's Strategic Compass document aims to reinforce the CSDP through external missions and allowing for more flexible mandates, including rapid decisionmaking and faster deployment of military and civilian staff. Additionally, the use of a broader range of military support is given pride of place, with the document calling for more harmonized control centers, better multi-use military mobility, more interoperability, and the establishment of an EU Rapid Force consisting of 5,000 troops. Importantly, the Strategic Compass is supposed to be revised on a three-year basis and also contains calls for investments in defense innovation hubs, hybrid tools, Coordinated Maritime Presence, and a Comprehensive Space Strategy.

It is worth noting that during the past two decades, the EU has increased its traditional-military capabilities under the CSDP. In terms of peacekeeping operations and conflict prevention, the EU today includes both military and civilian components as part of its foreign policy apparatus, which helps guide the EU's seven ongoing military missions and 11 civilian missions around the world. The EU's missions abroad engage primarily in monitoring, capacity building, security sector reform, border management, judiciary support, and police trainings. As of 2023, there have been 37 active EU missions around the world with all of them focusing on Ukraine and Africa, the Western Balkans, and the Middle East.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has had a deep impact on traditional EU foreign relations in economic, diplomatic, energy, and security terms.

Game-Changer

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has had a deep impact on traditional EU foreign relations in economic, diplomatic, energy, and security terms. In 2021, the EU was dependent on Russia for over 50 percent of its natural gas imports. EU member states that were the most gas-dependent on Russia (pre-2022) included Austria (86 percent), Bulgaria (79 percent), Finland (75 percent), Slovakia (68 percent), Greece (64 percent), Hungary (61 percent), Slovenia (60 percent), Czechia (55 percent), Poland (50 percent), Germany (49 percent), and Italy (38 percent).

This war rendered such levels of gas dependency politically unsustainable, due to the ongoing and coordinated U.S.-EU sanctions policy against Russia. As a result, the EU has chosen to diversify the sources of its import of gas away from Russia at historically unprecedented speeds. This energy transition has forced the EU to rely, in part, on high imports from European energy exporters like the Netherlands and Norway while simultaneously seeking new and diversified sources of energy from Algeria, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Qatar, and the United States, among others. This has resulted in the need for the EU to reposition itself internationally and prioritize new geographical regions and countries. It is yet to be determined, however, whether such repositioning will turn out to be of a tactical (temporary) or strategic (more lasting) nature in the context of each of the foregoing nations.

One important grouping of countries—which has historically received less EU attention—includes the states that make up the core of what the editorial statement of *Baku Dialogues* calls the Silk Road region, namely Azerbaijan,

Armenia, and the Central Asian republics. These countries face growing pressure from Russia whilst having assumed increasing importance for the EU's energy demands and supply chains. This, in turn, calls for increased investments by the EU in the enhancement and protection of energy infrastructure, including natural gas and renewable sources. It is therefore paramount, from the perspective of the EU, for Brussels to place more focus on multi-modal interconnectors to harmonize energy markets and their infrastructure, both inside and outside the EU, with a new and deeper focus on Türkiye, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

In addition to energy, the Russia-Ukraine war has also fundamentally disrupted the EU's traditional trade corridors (via land) and supply chains, including for rare-earths and nuclear-material importation.

In addition to energy, the Russia-Ukraine war has also fundamentally disrupted the EU's traditional trade corridors (via land) and supply chains, including for rare-earths and nuclear-material importation. The closing of the Europe-Asia land-trade route (Northern Corridor), which goes through Russia, is fast-impacting trade and transport capacity. One noticeable example is the EU's very high dependence on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for nuclear material, which had previously been imported through the Russian land route (the EU imports 21 percent of its nuclear material from Kazakhstan alone)—this has had a particularly large impact on France. Another example is trade volume between China and the EU, which depends on rail-routes across Eurasia for specific types of goods.

It is important to note that two additional (current) important barriers to the transportation of goods across the Northern Corridor also include international companies not being willing to operate on Russian territory due to the restrictions imposed by the West-led sanctions regime, the risk of corporate images being tarnished, heightened insurance premiums, and grassroots opposition (e.g., protests on the borders with Poland and the Baltic countries).

As a result, trade in goods and rare-earths have become dependent on maritime container shipments, which are equally increasing in price and being disrupted, as well as on the only remaining land-sea-transit-route via Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye or across the Black Sea. The latter is known colloquially as the Middle Corridor route and is driven by various EU and non-EU strategies, policies, and mechanisms—e.g., the Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACERA), the Southern Gas Corridor, Global Gateway, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), and the Belt and Road Initiative).

A careful balancing act is essential in this case to avoid suffocating already vulnerable South Caucasus and Central Asian countries' economies, since they are at least somewhat dependent on Russia for transiting goods. However, the EU must simultaneously provide for fast-paced and large-scale investments together with the private sector in order to guarantee a functioning Middle Corridor ahead of entirely terminating the Northern Corridor through upcoming sanctions packages.

In terms of security and regional prioritization, this poses multiple policy needs as well as conundrums for the EU. The first—and most obvious—need is that the EU must inevitably consider deepening its relationship with countries that form the core of the so-called Middle Corridor (i.e., Türkiye, the three South Caucasus states, and the five Central Asia republics). However, beyond a simple prioritization of the Middle Corridor region for investments in rail, ship, and road in infrastructure—the 2023 EBRD Impact Assessment notes that major investments in rail, land, and sea infrastructure will be needed in order to fill the Middle Corridor's transport capacity needs—it is equally important for the EU to take into account the security risks associated with redirecting its supply chains.

This is particularly the case for critical raw materials and goods, which risk bottlenecks as well as digital or offline disruptions as a result of instability in the region. The most noticeable example is the ongoing multifaceted dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which risks jeopardizing the EU's strategic prioritization of the South Caucasus and Central Asia as reliable partners for energy, trade, and rare-earths.

For the past two years, the EU—led by European Council president Charles Michel—had engaged actively and successfully with both Baku and

Yerevan, before suffering a setback in the wake of Prague summit that inaugurated the European Political Community. It is against this background that on 23 January 2023, the EU Council decided to deploy a European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) as a follow up to last year's temporary, short-term EU "monitoring capacity" in Armenia that had been deployed in October 2022. The Council portrayed this as part of its ongoing effort to keep playing a constructive role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process.

But things have not exactly gone smoothly, notwithstanding Armenia's laudable intention to distance itself from having to rely exclusively on Russian security guarantees: Azerbaijan has indicated that the EUMA has been planned without involving Baku (unlike the previous mission).

It is clearly in the EU's interest to undertake measures to regain the confidence of both Armenia and Azerbaijan through the renewal of the trilateral engagement mechanism. Otherwise, the EU risks being marginalized or even shut out of the peace process.

It is clearly in the EU's interest to undertake measures to regain the confidence of both Armenia and Azerbaijan through the renewal of the trilateral engagement mechanism. Otherwise, the EU risks being marginalized or even shut out of the ongoing Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process, leaving the United States and Russia as the sole interlocutors acceptable to both parties.

The security risks are also heightened in other parts of the Middle Corridor area, namely in Georgia, where Russia continues to illegally occupy South Ossetia and Abkhazia with a high risk of re-escalation. Similarly, across Central Asia, other risk factors include water management issues, border disputes, domestic tensions, and public protests. Finally, it should be noted that Türkiye also faces the risk of internal instability as a result of the upcoming elections and the ongoing conflict with the PKK inside Türkiye, as well as in Syria, Iran, and Iraq.

If the EU intends to protect its supply chains, rare-earths, energy supplies, and the general stability of its closest neighbors and strategic partners during this heightened period of

global geopolitical instability, it is important for the EU and EaP countries' policymakers to take into consideration available CSDP tools, including civilian and military missions for monitoring, security sector reform, and other forms of training.

Is the EaP Outdated?

Several parts of the EU's traditional foreign policy are bound to face fundamental challenges in 2023 and perhaps beyond. Such challenges are linked to the effectiveness and geopolitical functionality of the EaP. Similarly, the EU's current enlargement process and Türkiye's increasing geopolitical role in the neighborhood equally remain challenging. Other issues also remain, including the EU's lacking civilian or military missions in key areas of interest (e.g., supply chains) and the overall lack of political attention and budgets dedicated towards the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The reconfiguration of the EaP is high on the agenda among policymakers in Brussels and in the capitals of EU member states.

As described above, the new, post-2022 geopolitical reality is forcing the EU to rethink its external partnerships and regional priorities to secure sustainable and diversified supplies of energy, critical raw materials, and non-disrupted supply chains. The recent EU candidacy bids of Ukraine and Moldova have also added a disrupting element to the traditional EaP format, which now risks rendering that foreign policy platform redundant.

The reconfiguration of the EaP is high on the agenda among policymakers in Brussels and in the capitals of EU member states for at least two reasons. *Firstly*, since Ukraine and Moldova—and prospectively Georgia—are placed in the EU's accession policy basket, it automatically implies that those three countries no longer form a meaningful part of the EaP. This essentially leaves Armenia and Azerbaijan as the only two EaP states (Belarus officially remains a part of EaP, but due to its strengthened relationship with Russia, it is fair to say that Minsk no longer plays a meaningful role inside EaP). This conundrum affects the EaP by questioning under which policy umbrella or set-up the remaining two EaP countries ought

to be categorized. *Secondly*, it also places additional strain on the EU's relationship with existing membership candidate countries in the Western Balkans. It similarly adds a fundamental question mark as to what will happen with Türkiye's longstanding EU candidacy status.

With regard to Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is logical that a new structure will be needed, partly due to the vacuum created by the EU candidacies of Ukraine, Moldova, and—potentially—Georgia. In turn, the new geopolitical and supply chain realities caused by the conflict over Ukraine calls for the EU to re-engage differently with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as with Türkiye and the Central Asian republics, as noted above.

It is therefore advisable that the EU reconsider its current EaP relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as its accession relationship with Türkiye, while envisioning a new focus on establishing a strategic-alternative-platform for these countries to tackle their common practical needs in the security sphere. Such a relationship could be based—to start with—on geographically-diversified relations, an increased emphasis on security, and a greater push on sustainability issues. It could equally be focused on harmonizing foreign and security policies in critical sectors like energy, raw materials, digital connectivity, transport infrastructure, renewable sources, migration, and cyber and digital policies. The digital and cyber components are particularly relevant, since they cover everything from disinformation and regulatory frameworks surrounding access to information, technology, and satellites.

An existing framework for such potential cooperation is the European Political Community, which equally has the potential to be linked to the EU's CSDP, thereby fulfilling some of the previously mentioned needs for the EU to expand its civilian and military missions in the region at stake. This could serve as a starting point for EU cooperation on equal footing with countries like Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the five Central Asian republics.

An EU approach grounded in security, energy, and supply chains will inevitably provide a much-needed *security guarantee* for countries that are facing a more volatile and less economically-viable Russian neighbor, while simultaneously restructuring an increasingly redundant EaP and the Turkish accession process.

Rethink, Restructure

The war in Ukraine has opened a Pandora's box; the ineffectiveness of certain EU policies merits a serious re-think: there is a real potential to restructure the EU's policies and investments directed at Türkiye, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. And it is in the EU's interest to do all it can to seize this opportunity on offer.

This essay has suggested that the EU take a more security-oriented policy vis-à-vis its neighbors in the Silk Road region (Middle Corridor area, as you like), focusing primarily on the harmonization of foreign and security priorities, as well as energy, rare-earths, supply chains, migration, cyber policy, renewable policy, and digital policy. It called into question the sustainability of the current EaP format, as well as the Turkish EU accession process, while providing an overview of the geopolitical and geo-economic impacts of the ongoing conflict over Ukraine on EU supply chains, energy, and rare-earths. This paper also recommended that the EU renew parts of its foreign policy by prioritizing multiple corridors (diversification), including the Middle Corridor, while focusing on security issues (CSDP) and strengthening its relationship with Türkiye, its neighbors in the South Caucasus, and what political scientists Sieglinde Gstöhl and Erwan Lannon have called the "neighbors of the neighbors" across Central Asia. BD

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The Turkish Gas Hub Project

A Pivotal Putin and Erdogan Arrangement

Rahim Rahimov

Russian-Turkish relations have gone through a significant transformation under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Initially characterized as a Putin-Erdogan partnership, now the bilateral relationship has evolved into a strategic partnership between the two states. Uniquely, NATO member state Türkiye has effectively and, so far, successfully dealt with Russia and Ukraine amidst the ongoing war between them. However, contemporary contradictions, imperial pasts, a legacy of conflict and wars, and related mutual distrust and suspicion continue to linger in the background and, one could say, just below the surface: characterizing the ties that bind Ankara and Moscow is, thus, hardly a straightforward endeavor.

This essay looks not only to the historical record but also explores the perspectives of the Turkish-Russian partnership within the framework of an increasingly important thread of the relationship in the time ahead: Putin's Turkish gas hub proposal, which he made in late 2022 in response to broader developments in the conflict over Ukraine. A major conclusion is that Ankara and Moscow are set to take forward their bilateral relations despite their historical baggage and current geopolitical and geo-economic circumstances. In this context, the Turkish gas hub project represents a pivotal idea for the future trajectory of this important bilateral relationship.

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Past-Present

The leaders of Russia and Türkiye are aware of the centuries of history that form the background to the present-day relationship between the two nations. Taking a quick look at the past is helpful in grasping the sources of current vulnerabilities and strengths of Russian-Turkish relations. There were the wars of the nineteenth century—a dynamic that changed with the demise of the Russian and Ottoman Empires and establishment of the Soviet state and the Turkish republic in the wake of World War I. In particular, conspicuously Marxist and historicist materialist inclinations dominated Soviet thinking while anti-imperial sentiments took hold of intellectuals and members of the ruling elite of the newly-established Republic of Türkiye. These and other factors contributed to Ankara and Moscow coming closer to each other than their respective *anciens régimes* ever could.

Ankara and Moscow are set to take forward their bilateral relations and the Turkish gas hub project represents a pivotal idea for the future trajectory of this important bilateral relationship.

And so, through the efforts of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founders of the Soviet state and Turkish republic, respectively, the two nations witnessed a considerable thaw and rapprochement in bilateral relations during the inter-war period.

However, with Stalin's expression of territorial claims on Türkiye in 1945—which had much to do with a Soviet desire for control of the Turkish Straits—the rapprochement came to abrupt end. Referring to Stalin's moves during that pivotal year in a speech before the Plenum of the Central Committee in June 1957, Nikita Khrushchev made this point explicitly: "We terminated the friendship treaty and spat in their faces. [...] It was stupid. We ended up losing friendly Turkey." Yet the Turkish ban on the Communist Party also contributed to deterioration of relations. Some went further in seeking an explanation. For example, the Soviet Union's ambassador in Ankara (1922-1923) Semyon Aralov attributed the deterioration in bilateral ties to Ankara's sharp pro-Western turn following Ataturk's death, which took place in 1938—predating the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the onset of

World War II by nearly a year (infamously, Türkiye chose to stay out of it).

Ultimately, the two countries found themselves on opposite sides throughout the Cold War—certainly due at least in part to Stalin's territorial claims. Nonetheless, a few attempts were made to improve relations. Various actions by Ismet Inonu and maneuvers by Adnan Menderes—two diametrically opposite Turkish leaders—are cases in point; but none produced sustainable results.

Traumatized nationalist sentiments also represent an obstruction on both sides to advancing the bilateral relationship between the two rival and neighboring former imperial nations. History has shaped a path dependency over Russian-Turkish relations from the Crimea to the South Caucasus and the Black Sea regions and elsewhere.

In particular, the Crimean topic is very sensitive for both Russia and Türkiye. They fought bloody wars over Crimea in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a point most outsiders fail to adequately take into account in the present-day context. The Ottomans had acquired suzerainty over the Crimean Khanate in the late fifteenth century and lost it as a result of the aforementioned wars with Russia, having held the territory for several hundred years. This loss represented a powerful blow to the authority and reputation of the Ottoman Empire and the institution of the Sultan—in a way, much more so than the loss of the empire's Balkan provinces in the nineteenth century (the final blows landed in the early twentieth). This string of defeats led Muslims to question the Sultan's legitimacy and the Ottoman Empire's power as the defender of Islam: the state's prestige as *the* caliphate of the Muslim world began to be called into question in the subsequent period. The Porte's final loss of Crimea in 1783 was seen as a sign of the weakening of the Ottoman Empire, which in turn led to its further diminishment: that event is interpreted by some as marking the start of the empire's slow but steady demise. In that light, the Ottoman loss of Crimea to Russia remains a painful and sensitive matter for Turks, particularly in nationalist and religious circles.

Apart from the conflict over Ukraine, Türkiye and Russia are on the opposite sides of the frontlines in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere. Their relationship on issues having to do with the South Caucasus—particularly with regard to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict—is

quite uneasy, from both contemporary and historical perspectives. Russo-Turkish interests collided in 1918, as Ottoman troops came to the assistance of the then newly-established Azerbaijan Democratic Republic for the purposes of ridding Baku and other Azerbaijani regions of allied Russian Bolshevik and Armenian Dashnak forces. But Ottoman forces had to leave Azerbaijan and neighboring territories after only a few months in the wake of the Armistice of Mudros. Its departure contributed to the forced incorporation of the South Caucasus into the USSR. And now Türkiye is back, having developed a comprehensive strategic alliance with Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, the Caribbean crisis of 1962 is oftentimes referred to as the Cuban Missile Crisis and viewed through a Cuba-centric lens. However, for many Russians and Turks, it was and is still regarded rather as a Turkish crisis in terms of substance.

The mainstream Western narrative is that the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba triggered the crisis and brought the world to the edge of annihilation. But the Russian narrative is that the Soviet deployment was the Kremlin's response to the U.S.'s 1959 deployment of nuclear weapons in Türkiye (one year before the 1960 military coup in the country that overthrew the Menderes government in part allegedly because of his plan to seek rapprochement with the Soviet Union, largely for economic reasons).

A 2009 Russian documentary titled "Nikita Khrushchev's Cold War" perfectly illustrates one aspect of this narrative. The film's narration underscored the point that the Soviet military had a limited capacity to launch rockets to hit deep into American territory at the time; reciprocally, until 1959 the U.S. military also had a limited capacity to hit the USSR; but the deployment of nuclear missiles in Türkiye (1959-1961) raised the U.S.'s capacity by several times to hit every major Soviet industrial center, including Moscow. The Americans had gained a strategic advantage right on the Soviet border. Hence the Kremlin's decision to send its nuclear missiles to Cuba, in America's backyard, in the wake of Fidel Castro's seizure of power (these were removed by the U.S., secretly, in April 1963, as part of the deal with the Soviets).

Such historical contexts underlie the Russian depiction of Türkiye as an unreliable partner and even as an Anglosphere proxy against Russia. Many Turks recip-

rocate such sentiments and the resulting distrust. Thus, the narrative of mutual distrust has been in place for decades and still remains significant—it is not the whole story, obviously, but it is an important element whose influence on the overall situation should not be underestimated.

Incidentally, this helps to explain why Alexander Dugin's advocacy for a Slavic-Turkic alliance (as part of his Eurasianism theory) never resonated particularly well within Russian elite circles; it was, in fact, received as a rather unwelcome contribution. In any event, the idea of a Slavic-Turkic alliance has effectively faded away, whereas the Russian-Turkish partnership still sounds appealing to Ankara and Moscow.

The ongoing conflict over Ukraine represents a litmus test for the partnership between Russia and Türkiye, in light of Ankara's unique play with Kyiv and Moscow.

As their pragmatic partnership takes shape and indeed deepens, bilateral *distrust* has shifted to *mistrust* and may now be in the process of being replaced with something resembling *trust*. Consider Putin's statement in 2015, pronounced amidst the tension over the downing of a Russian fighter jet by the Turkish Air Force, in which he noted that he had personally invested advancing relations with Türkiye; consider also Erdogan's subsequent letter to Putin. That episode was a clear manifestation of the onset of the aforementioned shift. Eventually, Russo-Turkish relations grew stronger out of the 2015 crisis, although the incident also reinforced the mistrust tendency. Moreover, Putin's response to the July 2016 attempted coup against Erdogan also helped raise the level of trust. This helps to explain why the relationship has weathered various episodes in the ongoing Libyan conflict, the Second Karabakh War, and so on—notwithstanding the fact that Ankara and Moscow did not back the same sides.

Yet the ongoing conflict over Ukraine is another major challenge: it represents a litmus test for the partnership between Russia and Türkiye, in light of Ankara's unique play with Kyiv and Moscow, which is widely and internationally acknowledged. This is a captivating narrative and needs to be examined in some detail.

Unique Postures

Türkiye's unique play in the war between Ukraine and Russia is based on a perspective predicated on not regarding the two directions of its foreign policy as being mutually exclusive. Ankara views both Ukraine and Russia as being important to Türkiye—each in its own way. Accordingly, Ankara strives to avoid getting embroiled in having to take a binary position in the conflict over Ukraine, managing to stand aside from the related geopolitical polarization that has become a characteristic of international relations in a manner unprecedent since the end of the Cold War.

Türkiye's unique play in the war between Ukraine and Russia is based on a perspective predicated on not *regarding the two directions of its foreign policy as being mutually exclusive.*

Then, as now, the main pillars of Transatlanticism (i.e., the United States, NATO, the EU) have demonstrated a strong united front against what they perceived as a direct threat emanating from the Kremlin. Thus, Russia and the collective West again find themselves on diametrically opposite sides of the polarization, just as they did during the Cold War. Yet the borders of the polarization overlap only in some respects with those of the Cold War period. A conspicuously and at the same time unique exception here is Türkiye. To understand this, we need to recall that starting in October 1950, a 5,000-man strong "Turkish Brigade" fought in the Korean War as a permanent attachment to a U.S. division. Less than two years later, Türkiye became a NATO member state. And in 1962, as noted above, Türkiye became an epicenter of the Cuban Missile Crisis between the NATO and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. No analogous, much less equivalent string of events is observable today.

The conflict over Ukraine is the riskiest West-Russia crisis since the confrontation over Cuba. However, unlike during the entirety of the Cold War, in which Türkiye followed a staunchly pro-Western foreign and security policy whose contours were largely set abroad, Ankara today has succeeded in engaging with both sides in the current confrontation. As a result, Türkiye has effectually become the sole effective communication channel between the two warring nations and related blocs and has also achieved

positive, tangible outcomes in its mediation efforts. Three examples illustrating Türkiye's role will suffice: brokering deals between Ukraine and Russia on exchanging prisoners of war, ensuring grain and fertilizer exports, and hosting meetings between Russian and American intelligence chiefs.

Paradoxically, Türkiye neither shies away from supplying Kyiv with popular Bayraktar drones nor expressing a commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity; yet it does this without succumbing to pressure to join the Western sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia. In fact, Ankara continues simultaneously to advance its strategic partnership with Moscow and is even bolstering both its political and economic ties with that country. Even more paradoxically, neither Kyiv nor Moscow fails to express their appreciation to Türkiye for the singular role it is playing.

A complex set of factors and interests of a strategic, political, and economic nature underpin Türkiye's relationship with Russia and Ukraine. And this has helped Moscow to apply a pragmatic approach to the discrepancies between Ankara and its NATO allies. A complex set of factors and interests underpin Türkiye's relationship with Russia and Ukraine, helping Moscow to apply a pragmatic approach to the discrepancies between Ankara and its NATO allies. That context allows us to understand the strategic nature of the evolving Russian-Turkish relations. As does the fact that Türkiye has the longest-running EU accession process: it officially received candidacy status way back in December 1999. Yet there is no sign on the horizon that it could ever be admitted to the European Union. This has significantly shunned Ankara away from the West.

A complex set of factors and interests underpin Türkiye's relationship with Russia and Ukraine, helping Moscow to apply a pragmatic approach to the discrepancies between Ankara and its NATO allies.

Western sanctions on Türkiye and Russia over past years have led Moscow and Ankara to further their cooperation and rapprochement, not least because of their pragmatic approach to the bilateral partnership. Moscow properly evaluates the Turkish-Western frictions, and has engaged in advancing cooperation with Ankara. Russia also acts as an alternative to the EU market for Türkiye. Indeed, Russia is a large and profitable market for Turkish goods while Turkish companies continue to be active in the Russian construction sector. Moreover, Türkiye is a favorite destination for millions of Russian tourists. This factor played an important role in Russian-Turkish reconciliation following the 2015 fighter jet crisis. All of this is, however, less important than the cooperative relationship they have forged in the energy sphere. Despite Western objections and sanctions, Ankara and Moscow completed the TurkStream gas pipeline project to deliver natural gas from Russia to Türkiye via the Black Sea in early 2020. And Russian gas deliveries to Türkiye have continued unabated ever since.

Apart from the above directions, nuclear energy and military spheres are two other major partnership avenues that underlie the strategic and long-term character of the evolving ties between Ankara and Moscow. For decades, Western allies—the United States, in particular—have not been supportive of Turkish efforts to develop a nuclear power plant, whereas Ankara and Moscow were able to come to terms and launch construction of Türkiye's first nuclear power project, Akkuyu. The first phase of the project is slated for completion by the end of 2023 and the remaining phases several years thereafter.

Moreover, the two countries reached a deal on the supply of S-400 air defense systems to Türkiye in December 2017; the equipment has since been delivered and appears to be in use. In contrast, the United States and some of Türkiye's other NATO allies turned down Ankara's requests to supply such air defense systems. Alongside the issue of the Russian air defense system, the issue of fighter jets represents another friction between Ankara and Washington. Although Washington has recently agreed to modernize and supply F-16s, Ankara is also considering the purchase of Eurofighter Typhoon jets from the UK in case the deal with the U.S. fails to materialize. Yet Turkey has also suggested that it may consider purchasing Russian SU-35 fighter jets instead—again, if the deal with the U.S. fails or comes with unacceptable conditionality.

There are also two political issues that continue to hugely affect the Turkish posture towards its Western allies and, apparently, Moscow has taken careful note of them: the Kurdish issue and the Gulenist issue. Ongoing Western

support for Kurdish groups, which Türkiye has declared to be terrorist organizations, is a matter of huge dispute between Türkiye and its Western allies—particularly the United States. The Kurdish issue has spilled over into the Syria theater in the context of Türkiye's relations with Russia, too; but Ankara and Moscow have been able to keep their disagreement from spilling over into other areas of cooperation. This has not been the case in terms of Turkish relations with the Western powers that have chosen to play a role in the ongoing Syrian civil war—again, most notably the United States.

The other political issue concerns the so-called Gulenist movement, which has also been designated by Türkiye as terrorist organization. For years Türkiye has demanded from the United States the extradition of Fethullah Gulen, the leader and founder of the aforementioned organization and its various affiliates around the world. Ankara has also made the extradition of suspected Gulenists an explicit condition for its approval of Norway's and Finland's respective candidacies for membership in NATO. The rationale is simple—in Erdogan's words: "no one can deny Turkish support for European security and well-being, but we cannot forget that Europe has left Türkiye alone in the fight against terrorism." The fact that Erdogan suspects that the Gulenists were intimately involved in the July 2016 attempted coup makes the situation more clear-cut, from Ankara's perspective. Be that as it may, Moscow long ago designated the Gulenist movement as a terrorist organization, which is banned in Russia (not at Türkiye's request but for its own reasons). Thus, Ankara is happy with the Kremlin's posture and correspondingly unhappy about that of the West.

It is noteworthy that there is a mismatch between Türkiye's trade turnover with Russia and Ukraine. In 2021, the trade turnover with Russia reached $34,7 billion, in contrast to the figure of $7,4 billion with Ukraine. This means that Ukraine's importance for Türkiye in terms of trade and economic ties is hardly comparable to that of Russia. That said, certain activities between Türkiye and Ukraine still matter economically and otherwise. Türkiye builds Ada-class corvettes for the Ukrainian navy in addition to supplying Bayraktar drones. (Ankara and Kyiv have even agreed to build a Bayraktar drone factory in Ukraine.) A few weeks before the Russian invasion, Erdogan and his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, signed a free trade deal to boost trade to $10 billion per year. Even if this goal is achieved, it would still represent less than one third of the amount of annual trade Türkiye conducts with Russia.

Politically, Ankara supports Ukraine's territorial integrity (as noted above) as well as Kyiv's NATO membership ambitions. At the same time, there is also a level of ambiguity observable in Ankara's formulation of its position on the terms of peace that sooner or later will need to be agreed with the Kremlin. Illustrative are Ankara's statements that an end to the conflict over Ukraine should take Russian interests into account—an alternative formulation used by Turkish officials is that the terms of peace will need to be acceptable to Moscow. In any event, this is seen as an equivocation by those who advocate total victory by Kyiv, or who pay no heed to the fact that Russia has annexed nearly one quarter of Ukrainian territory: Donetsk, Kherson, Lugansk, Zaporizhzhia, and, of course, Crimea. A peace acceptable to Moscow will have to accommodate this fact in one way or another.

Ukraine is a significant factor in Ankara's ability to pursue a policy of strategic hedging towards Russia as well as the West.

Nonetheless, Kyiv appreciates Ankara's voicing of support for Ukraine's membership ambitions not only to NATO but the EU as well—and also for what Ukrainian experts and politicians describe as Ankara's dealing with Moscow with the "language of force."

Although Ukraine is less important to Türkiye politically and economically than is Russia, Ukraine is a significant factor in Ankara's ability to pursue a policy of strategic hedging towards Russia as well as the West.

Strategic Value

Türkiye's ambitions to achieve an unprecedented level of strategic autonomy coupled with Russia's view of Türkiye's strategic value represent a broader but also more specific angle from which to draw a more illustrative and informed picture of the bilateral relationship. Russia and Türkiye are increasingly driven by pragmatism in relation to each other's vulnerabilities and strengths. Against such a backdrop of vulnerabilities, strengths, controversies, and a history of mutual dis-

trust, Russo-Turkish relations have seen an unprecedented boom in the Putin-Erdogan era. The former's seeking a multipolar world with Russia taking its "deserved" historic place and the latter's seeking strategic autonomy from NATO in the same sought-after multipolar world has reshaped the context of the bilateral relationship, now filled in with new geopolitical colors.

The Kremlin regards Ankara's strategic value as being more important than its export of drones and military equipment to Kyiv and Türkiye's support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Türkiye's strategic value for Russia is connected to its NATO membership. Yet this value is enhanced by Ankara's seeking a strategic autonomy from NATO. Without NATO membership, Türkiye's strategic value for Russia would be less appealing to Moscow. Erdogan knows that very well—and he sees the achievement of strategic autonomy within the context of retaining membership in the Atlantic Alliance as the best of both worlds.

No wonder Ankara's NATO allies oppose this Turkish ambition. As former U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton put it in a recent essay published by the *Wall Street Journal*: "Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but it isn't acting like an ally." Earlier, Toni Alaranta from the Finnish Institute of International Affairs had already concluded that "Türkiye's strategic interests have increasingly diverged from the rest of the Alliance, likely leading to a more permanent intra-alliance opposition position." This assessment encapsulates the situation quite well: Türkiye will not abandon its strategic autonomy ambition whereas the rest of NATO will never agree to legitimize it; and yet, such a dichotomy will not lead to a divorce between NATO and Türkiye and this will, in turn, cause the latter to remain within the former in a state of permanent opposition to the rest of the bloc.

Putin and his ministers, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, have repeatedly stated that Russia and Türkiye are partners, not allies. Russian pro-government media sometimes refers to Russia and Türkiye as "fellow passengers" on a train rather than partners—let alone allies. Yet for the Kremlin, good relations with NATO member state Türkiye also represents good optics for its domestic audience: Russia gets along well with Türkiye, whose army is the second largest in NATO and which has not joined the Western sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia. To Moscow, this is a practical manifestation of Turkish strategic autonomy.

In that light, Moscow had apparently accepted the present reality in which an integral part of Ankara's strategic posture towards the Ukrainian theatre involves the provision of technologically sophisticated weapons to the Kremlin's adversary: Bayraktar drones. Incidentally, these same drones played a significant role in Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War against Russia's historical ally Armenia; Ukraine has now become a battlefield for Turkish and Iranian drones fighting on the opposite sides in the conflict over Ukraine (the CEO of the company that makes the Turkish drones, Selcuk Bayraktar, has made it clear that his firm will not sell its drones to Russia).

Moscow and Ankara tend to give precedence to overlapping interests, which are more intersected *than* shared. *The fresh idea of establishing a natural gas hub in Türkiye is a case in point.*

One reason why Russia has had to accept such a suboptimal reality is its determination not to lose Türkiye as a partner with a good strategic value. Yet Russian leaders and its expert community believe—quite correctly—that the United States and its Western allies are fervently opposed to a fully-fledged alliance between Russia and Türkiye. Ankara, too, understands this very well.

The view of Türkiye is thus not unambiguous among those Russians that matter. Loosely, two ways of thinking have emerged. One depicts Ankara as unreliable and sees the deepening of ties with Türkiye as being risky for Russia since it remains, at the end of the day, a "Western proxy." In making their arguments, this first Russian way of thinking emphasizes the historical record of wars and conflict in the imperial period, the Turkish downing of a Russian fighter jet in 2015, the provision of Bayraktars to Ukraine, etc.

In contrast, the other way of thinking paints the picture thusly: advancing the partnership with Russia carries risks for Türkiye itself, too, since the U.S.-led Western bloc disapproves of the Russian-Turkish rapprochement. Furthermore, this other Russian way of thinking registers the fact that the Turks are unhappy with Russia's links with or support for

groups in Syria and Libya that are hostile to Türkiye. At the moment, this second way of thinking holds sway in the Kremlin's calculations.

The foregoing indicates that Moscow and Ankara tend to give precedence to overlapping interests rather than frictions that could impede the pursuit of their more central interests, even though those interests are more *intersected* than *shared*. The fresh idea of establishing a natural gas hub in Türkiye is perhaps the most important case in point. Moscow and Ankara tend to give precedence to overlapping interests, which are more intersected than shared. The fresh idea of establishing a natural gas hub in Türkiye is a case in point.

The Gas Grab

The Russian-Turkish gas hub idea was voiced by Putin on 12 October 2022 during his keynote address to the Russian Energy Week conference in Moscow. He proposed to "make Türkiye the main route for the supply of our fuel—our natural gas to Europe—and to create a major gas hub for Europe in Türkiye, if, of course, our partners are interested in seeing this happen." The next day, Putin and Erdogan spoke in Astana about this idea. Less than a week later, Erdogan accepted his Russian counterpart's proposal, identifying Thrace as the location of the future gas hub.

In remarks made in mid-December 2022, Erdogan indicated the scope of Türkiye's ambition: "we aim to transform our country into a global [distribution] center, where the natural gas reference price is determined, as soon as possible." Notably, this proposal came in the wake of the sabotage of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines, with the West and Russia each accusing the other of being the perpetrator. Putin has also stated that the Russian security services had prevented an "attempt to blow up" the TurkStream pipeline on its territory (TurkStream is a pipeline system that carries Russian natural gas to Türkiye and Europe via the Black Sea.)

To repeat: so far, both the Türkiye-Russia strategic partnership and the Erdogan-Putin relationship have remained steadfast, notwithstanding the start of the Russia-Ukraine war and the imposition of the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime on Russia.

Having passed this test, Russia and Türkiye both appear willing to upgrade the partnership to a new level, as evidenced by Ankara having welcomed Russia's gas hub proposal—incidentally, this was not a new idea: in 1997, Ankara had suggested turning Türkiye into an international gas hub. In any event, this proposed mega-project would include the construction of additional gas pipelines and the establishment of a mechanism to form or regulate gas prices. That is to say, the proposed Turkish gas hub is intended not only to serve as a transit hub, but also to feature as an exchange-like mechanism to regulate the price of gas. It therefore carries implications for other potential and actual suppliers, including Azerbaijan, which is set to play a more active role in delivering gas volumes to Europe in accordance with the terms of the historic July 2022 Memorandum of Understanding signed by the country's president, Ilham Aliyev, and the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen.

The proposed Turkish gas hub is intended not only to serve as a transit hub, but also to feature as an exchange-like mechanism to regulate the price of gas.

In the best-case scenario, the inauguration of the Turkish gas hub project is years away: neither has the financing been secured nor construction commenced. In fact, a feasibility study is still in its nascent stage. Still, Moscow and Ankara may bet on some immediate effects.

For instance, just voicing the idea might reassure Gazprom's shareholders, since the company faces a decline in revenues and an uptick of risks given that the EU has made it a political priority to cease the import of all Russian gas by 2027, the fact that Nord Stream 1 and 2 have been put out of commission, and so on. On the other hand, a recent article published by the TASS News Agency argues that Gazprom's shareholders face a new serious turn in the fate of the company that is connected to the costly Turkish gas hub megaproject. Furthermore, the proposal may also be intended to compel the West to reconcile with Russia's position on Ukraine and continue the existing energy partnership with Russia. Finally, it may be that the gas hub proposal is designed to demonstrate that Moscow has other choices and that it is still capable of acting decisively in terms of its positioning in the global energy market.

The immediate political and economic effects for Ankara are

more easily discernable. According to media reports, Türkiye is in discussions with Russia on whether discounts on gas supplies to Türkiye and extensions for outstanding debts payment for already supplied gas volumes are possible. These issues will be considered in the context of the negotiations concerning the terms of the proposed gas hub project. On the eve of the 2023 Turkish presidential and parliamentary elections campaign, such issues are likely to carry significant political implications as they would provide an important source of financial relief for the Turkish government. Unsurprisingly, the pursuit of Moscow's aforementioned goals favors Erdogan's re-election ambitions. Emphasizing the proposal and its envisioned strategic benefits for the country is likely to be a feature of the electoral campaign. Evidence in support of this contention is that he has already begun to emphasize in his recent public speeches that Türkiye has succeeded in preventing surge in energy prices whereas European states have suffered due to deteriorated relations with Russia.

Putin has explained the Kremlin's decision to propose the Turkish gas hub was driven by two factors. *First*, he described Erdogan as a reliable "man of his word" once a deal is achieved whilst being a tough negotiator with whom it is difficult to reach agreement. Putin vividly contrasted Erdogan's posture with that of Russia's "European partners, with whom it is really very difficult to work." *Second*, Putin considers it to be easier for Russia, in partnership with Türkiye, to control the waters of the Black Sea and secure existing (and future) pipeline infrastructure compared to engagement in the context of exclusive German, Danish, and Swedish economic zones in the Baltic Sea, which is where the Nord Stream pipelines were first built and then sabotaged.

While the immediate effects are notable, broader and long-term geopolitical interests, perspectives, and goals stand at the heart of the Turkish gas hub proposal.

While the immediate effects are notable, broader and long-term geopolitical interests, perspectives, and goals stand at the heart of the Turkish gas hub proposal. The Russian interest is to influence the shaping of the gas price and to secure the safety and reliability of gas exports through the establishment of alternative export route that it can at least partially control. The EU's plans to fully eliminate Russia as a direct supplier of gas through various existing pipelines by 2027 has multiple consequences for the Kremlin. All but one is beyond the scope of this essay, namely the fact that Moscow is seeking to compensate for the resulting loss of revenue through the Turkish gas hub proposal.

The Turkish perspective is to boost its role as a major international energy hub and acquire economic gains and political benefits from such new circumstances. (It should be noted that the Turks have made it clear that the gas for this project would not be supplied solely by Russia, and that the project would also include numerous LNG terminals—more on this below.)

Accordingly, the Kremlin follows two major goals in the context of the proposed Turkish gas hub, both of which resonate well with Ankara for its own reasons: *one*, the diversification of export pipelines and routes, and *two*, the establishment of a mechanism to influence price formation.

The diversification issue is geopolitical and not new. Early in the twenty-first century, nearly 80 percent of Russian gas exports to the European Union were still being transported via a network of pipelines located in Ukraine—notwithstanding a history of disputes between the two states over gas prices, transits fees, and debt payments. These had caused supply disruptions to customers in the European Union.

By 2008, the latest in the series of Russo-Ukrainian disputes, (including those concerning the siphoning off of Russian gas from transit pipelines on Ukrainian territory destined for the European market that then caused disruptions in supply to paying customers in the EU) caused Moscow to initiate a diversification strategy. At its heart stood several initiatives to bypass Ukrainian territory entirely—with the aim of diminishing or even eliminating Kyiv's leverage. One of these was South Stream, a pipeline project whose route was to run from the Russian (eastern) coast of the Black Sea straight across to Bulgaria before branching off in various directions to deliver gas to consumers in the Western Balkans and the European Union. Ultimately, South Stream did not get built for various geopolitical

and geo-economic reasons behind which, the Russians suspected, stood Brussels and Washington. Instead, Moscow and Ankara came together to build TurkStream. The latter's present capacity amounts to roughly half of the one that had been planned for South Stream. The other half was supposed to have been supplied through Nord Stream 1 and 2.

The Turkish gas hub project aims to fill that other half by laying new pipelines beneath the Black Sea. Apart from that, Moscow does not necessarily regard the Turkish gas hub project as a replacement for Nord Stream 1 and 2. Rather, the former can be understood as an alternative to the latter (in the event the northern pipelines are ever repaired and the EU reverses its divestment plans), hence further serving Moscow's diversification strategy. Be that as it may, what Moscow regards as diversification fits well into Ankara's long-desired ambition to turn Türkiye into a key international energy hub. That is to say, Moscow's diversification goal overlaps with Ankara's energy hub goal.

Overlap and Optimism

Seen through both a historical and strategic lens, the Turkish gas hub project represents a sort of reincarnation of the logic that informed the South Stream project: then, as now, the question of sidestepping Ukraine is central to Russian diversification considerations. However, a major difference between South Stream and the Turkish gas hub project is that the latter implies the development of a gas price formation mechanism, as noted above.

This difference indicates that the Kremlin's ambition is not restricted to an ambition to diversify its gas transit routes, but also to retain an influence in the formation of the gas price—at a minimum, this will advance Russian commercial interests.

What Moscow regards as diversification fits well into Ankara's long-desired ambition to turn Türkiye into a key international energy hub: Moscow's goal overlaps with Ankara's goal.

The Turkish goal overlaps with the Russian goal to create a gas pricing mechanism as part of the hub project, but for different motivations. As noted above, Erdogan has identified the location of this hub as being in Thrace—that is, in the northwest corner of Turkish territory: the only part that is located on the European continent.

The gas hub project will not simply be a center for gas trading. As various Turkish officials have stated, it is being designed to be a gas distribution center that will make use of the technological infrastructure of the Istanbul exchange that operates the national energy market. It is important to underline that the Turkish natural gas wholesale market also operates in the electricity and natural gas section of the Istanbul exchange. How and what kind of role Moscow is set to play in the pricing mechanism is to be addressed in further talks at lower levels in the time ahead.

The pricing issue is evidently of vital strategic significance for the Kremlin in light of current developments. Aside from EU plans to eliminate the direct supply of Russian gas from the territory under its jurisdiction by 2027, the EU has recently unilaterally imposed a cap on Russian gas prices. On the one hand, Moscow is understandably concerned about the cap—i.e., the maximum amount EU member states will be permitted to pay for Russian gas—as this could negatively affect Russia's energy revenue stream in wartime conditions. On the other hand, too-high gas prices could encourage LNG production and exports, hence competing for and further diminishing Russia's market share in the EU markets. Therefore, the Russian desire is to maintain gas prices at reasonable levels so as to ensure revenues and profits without yielding its share in the market to LNG supplies—particularly those originating in the United States. This rationale stands behind the Russian proposal to establish the gas hub in Türkiye with a mechanism to regulate the prices.

Time is a factor, of course. But Putin has characterized his Turkish gas hub proposal as a "very realistic project" that can be implemented in a "very speedy manner" in no small part due to the fact that both Ankara and Moscow have the political will to do so. But this begs the question of whether Europeans are ready to purchase Russian gas through Türkiye—that is to say, whether they are willing to buy from the Turkish gas hub what is effectually the same Russian gas that was supposed to flow through Nord Stream 1 and 2 and other sources.

What further muddies the Turkish gas hub project's feasibility waters is that the EU is also planning to build several gas hubs on territory that falls within its

own jurisdiction—that is to say, in EU member states. One of the largest and potentially most promising is the project to build an Iberian gas hub in Spain, which EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen praised in December 2022. Still, Putin's confidence in the Turkish gas hub project is explained at least in part by his belief that the EU's economy is going to grow sufficiently that it will need more gas volumes to satisfy rising demand. However, Putin had stated that the West-led sanctions regime against Russia will cause the EU's de-industrialization. Now, both of these statements cannot be true simultaneously. All things considered, his Turkish gas hub project points to Putin's expectation that the EU's economy will, at the end of the day, keep growing and thus be in need of, inter alia, Russian gas supplied through this new Thracian mechanism once it is established.

Another notable moment with regards to the project's feasibility is Russia's silence regarding the Turkish emphasis on ensuring it also incorporates a pricing mechanism and involves non-Russian sources of natural gas. Various officials in Ankara have indicated in one way or another that Türkiye would like to include gas volumes not only from Russia but also from Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkmenistan, as well as from African countries such Libya and Nigeria, plus LNG from GCC states like Oman, Qatar, and the UAE. One argument in favor of Ankara's 'go big or go home' plans is that, if all goes well, Russian gas would not be able to fully meet the Turkish gas hub's demand—so said the country's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Fatih Donmez.

Pragmatic and Pivotal

Russian proponents of the rapprochement and partnership with Türkiye are inclined to reframe the history of conflicts and wars between the Ottoman and Russian empires and their successor states by attributing these to what they depict as Western instigations rather than to causes driven purely by Russians and Turks themselves. Turks, however, substantiate the necessity for partnership in their own way—by what they regard as unfair Western treatment of Turkish interests despite Turkish support and cooperation in matters that are important to the West itself. Resultingly, Moscow and Ankara have both assumed a pragmatic posture in the context of their contemporary bilateral relationship.

More broadly, the partnership serves both states simultaneously:

Russia's ambition to be an autonomous pole in the reshaping world order and Türkiye's ambition to become an autonomous actor on the world stage. Those ambitions were manifested in Putin's 30 September 2022 annexation address in which he said that the "world has entered a period of a fundamental, revolutionary transformation. New centers of power are emerging. They represent the majority—the majority—of the international community. They are ready not only to declare their interests but also to protect them. They see in multipolarity an opportunity to strengthen their sovereignty, which means [...] the ongoing collapse of Western hegemony is irreversible. And I repeat: things will never be the same. Similar ambitions were also manifested in Erdogan's statement that "the world is bigger than five"—a reference to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Bottom line: the Kremlin considers the conflict over Ukraine crucial to reshaping world order whereas Ankara sees it as an opportunity to flesh out its international status in accordance with its doctrine of strategic autonomy.

Putin's proposal to create a European gas hub in Türkiye in response to the effects of the war with Ukraine and the resulting sanctions regime against Russia captivates much attention in the mosaic of the bilateral relationship. Yet many unanswered questions remain. Here is a sample: *one*, who and how to define the gas pricing; *two*, will non-Russian suppliers of gas be involved; *three*, will the EU decide to be a customer—and if not, is the project viable; *four*, by the time the project is launched, will LNG suppliers have cornered the market.

These are tough questions, and they have not yet been answered to anyone's satisfaction. Still, the mere emergence of the idea illustrates how Moscow and Ankara understand, appreciate, and use each other's vulnerabilities and strengths. Whether this idea will actually be executed in practice will be hugely determinant of the future trajectory of Turkish-Russian relations; it will also have significant geopolitical and geo-economic implications beyond that bilateral relationship.

Rosatom's construction of nuclear power plants in Türkiye, Moscow's supply of its S-400 air defense missile systems to Ankara, and the implementation of TurkStream all came to fruition despite sometimes adamant Western objections and the imposition of sanctions on both Ankara and Moscow (all predate

the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, however). Such and similar successful examples of cooperation continue to shape the long-term, strategic character of what is now evidently an increasingly important bilateral relationship.

Unlike the foregoing projects, which were Turkish-centric in the sense that they were implemented in Türkiye, the Turkish gas hub proposal is understood by both Moscow and Ankara to be Europe-centric. This means that the geopolitical and geo-economic implications are potentially much greater, in both scope and scale—and unlike previous bilateral endeavors, this one is taking place amidst the war in Ukraine.

Thus, the Kremlin's proposal to establish largest European natural gas hub in Türkiye is a pivotal idea for the future trajectory of the Russian-Turkish partnership. To go even further: it could represent a hitherto missing element in deliberations of serious decisionmakers that presumably are taking place in the halls of power in various capitals with regards to the terms that could bring the Russia-Ukraine war to an end, if not the underlying conflict itself. BD

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Sustainable Agriculture in Aghali

The Smart Village Concept in the Great Return to Karabakh

Nazrin Baghirova

> *"Look, life is returning here—to Zangilan, [to] other places, and [to] Shusha. You know very well that a lot is being done to develop this region. Everyone who travels along the road sees the railway, the highway, and a six- and four-lane highway. An airport is under construction in Zangilan, which will be commissioned this year. A large agro-park has already been built, and the first crop will be harvested this year."*
>
> *– Ilham Aliyev, remarks in Aghali, 27 May 2022*

On 31 December 2022, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev delivered his annual televised address on the occasion of the Day of Solidarity of World Azerbaijanis and the New Year. One of his formulations serves as the political background to this essay: "the Great Return program is being successfully implemented. […] I am confident that hundreds of thousands of former displaced persons will return to their homeland in the nearest future."

The Great Return is a flagship state project to repopulate and rejuvenate the Karabakh and East Zangezur Economic Regions, which were liberated by Azerbaijan in 2020 thanks to its victory in the Second Karabakh War. This essay will examine how repatriated farmers can optimally utilize agricultural lands and water, gain access to equipment, fertilizers, and pesticides, and examine how they can gain access to agricultural retail markets thanks to technological innovation. The essay will focus on a pilot project being implemented in one part of Azerbaijan's liberated lands, namely the Zangilan district, which is one of the five districts that since the administrative reforms of July 2021 belongs the East Zangezur Economic Region.

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A milestone was achieved on 27 May 2022, when Aliyev participated in the official opening of a "smart village" project in the village of Aghali located in Zangilan (the quotation that serves as this essay's epigraph was pronounced by the president on that occasion). This ceremony marked the completion of the first stage of a green resettlement project that included 200 fully constructed residential buildings, the introduction of public services (ASAN services, banks, post office, hospital), a "smart" secondary school with a capacity for 360 pupils, a "smart" kindergarten for 60 children, modern infrastructure, a high-speed internet connection, and the Gilmed sewing factory. The state has also allotted agricultural fields to each household. (In the next phase of the project, the state plans to further expand the village and build 150 more homes, including two- and three-story apartment buildings.)

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This significant event marks the start of the "Great Return" of individuals and families that were ethnically cleansed by Armenian forces in the early 1990s, losing their properties, land, and friends and relatives as a result. According to the latest figures provided by the Zangilan authorities, about 66 families (326 residents, of which 169 are women, 157 are men, and 102 are children) have now come back home. To ensure adequate employment opportunities, the Azerbaijani government has taken a series of important steps—one being job creation and job training, including in the agricultural sector

(livestock, farm management, beekeeping, etc.), a grant of land ownership to each household, the provision of separate pastures for the development of animal husbandry, and the installation of pivot irrigation systems near the village.

The sowing season is right around the corner, and Aghali's repatriated villagers are ready to begin. There is no time to waste.

Due to the local landscape and the region's agricultural legacy, the Aghali smart village concept focuses on agriculture as one of the state's priorities to foster its sustainable development. Priorities in the domain of agriculture include animal husbandry, meat and milk production, and intensive horticulture (including apple orchards and vineyards).

The sowing season is right around the corner, and Aghali's repatriated villagers are ready to begin. There is no time to waste.

This essay will examine how to best optimize the public resources on offer to support farmers in Aghali—especially the younger generation (including women)—as they come together again as a community in their quest to achieve sustainable livelihoods. This examination will be conducted by dividing its contents into three sections: the first described the "smart village" as an agricultural concept in Azerbaijan, with reference to international best practices; the second explains the various needs of farmers during the agricultural production process; and the third examines production challenges like access to markets.

The Concept

What is a smart village, and what purpose does it serve? A 2019 EU Commission document states that "smart villages are *communities in rural areas* that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities. They rely on a *participatory approach* to develop and implement their strategy to improve their economic, social, and/or environmental conditions, in particular by mobilizing solutions offered by *digital technologies*" (emphases in the original). Two years earlier, another EU Commission publication defined smart villages as "those (local communities) that use digital technologies and innovations in their daily life, thus improving its quality, improving the standard of public services, and ensuring better use of resources."

Such a conceptual definition can vary somewhat, depending on specific socio-economic circumstances. For example, in China smart villages are more focused on improving the quality of life of poor farmers, based on the specific economic circumstances of the various regions in this large country. Hence the emphasis in China on smart agricultural villages, smart public service villages, e-commerce villages, smart tourism villages, and "comprehensive development-type" smart villages. The idea is to promote and develop (to "smarten up") a village's objective comparative advantages.

The driving reason for rebuilding Aghali as a smart village from start to finish is to ensure the sustainable livelihood of the former IDP population through the revitalization and agricultural development of the rural area.

In the EU, on the other hand, "smartening up" is usually aimed at improving agricultural productivity as part of a broader campaign to ensure food security for the bloc, but also as a way to prevent the further mass exodus to urban areas through the improvement of public services offered at the local level. A 2017 EU Parliament appraisal report published by its Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development thus concluded that "success in rolling out the smart villages concept will depend on much greater investment in improving digital connectivity in rural areas," since the concept is itself "premised on access to high-speed internet in all rural territories." The same document also noted that the involvement of the local community is another prerequisite for launching the smart village concept.

In the context of Azerbaijan's liberated territories in general, and in the Aghali pilot project in particular, the driving reason for rebuilding the locality as a smart village from start to finish is to ensure the sustainable livelihood of the former IDP population through the revitalization and agricultural development of the rural area.

Access to Land

An important pre-requisite to the achievement of higher labor productivity in the context of the goal of ensuring returnees' sustainable livelihood is access to

sufficiently-sized plots of land. Thus, the government has provided special pasture lands and granted ownership to each repatriate household in Aghali of a 0.12-hectare plot of agricultural land.

This is a critically important step, since the first factor for successful family agricultural endeavors in almost all cases is private property rights, specifically land ownership. As one of the world's foremost experts on global food needs, Gordon Conway, writes in *One Billion Hunger* (2012), "without such rights, there is little incentive for a farmer to invest in improving soil, water, and other sources." Indeed, ownership enables farmers to effectively assess the trade-offs between productivity, stability, and resilience, all of which helps to ensure the development of sustainable agriculture practices.

Understanding the specific economic roles of farms based on the size of land plots is also important. The EU's statistical agency Eurostat has categorized farms according to their physical (utilized agricultural area) and economic (standard output in monetary value of production) sizes. By this classification scheme, Aghali's farms are designated as "very small farms (i.e., they're each less than 2 hectares in size, with a projected output of below 8000 euros per year). In the EU context, more than 50 percent of what such farms produce is self-consumed. They are also typically characterized by a high share of family labor in farm work. To refer to a Eurostat publication's assessment: "while many [larger] farms with a high level of standard output occupied considerable areas of agricultural land, there are specific types of farming which may have considerable output in monetary terms from very small areas of agricultural land, for example, horticulture or poultry farming." (The Eurostat publication fails to take into account the role that animal husbandry can play in "very small farms," due to the manner in which this form of rural activity is typically structured in EU member states, particularly in the context of pasturelands.)

Thus, the disadvantages associated with "very small farms" can be overcome in various ways. For instance, in order to increase Aghali farmers' sustainable competitiveness, the Ministry of Agriculture could institute policies supportive of the organization of one or more farmers' cooperatives (which is not the same as the institution of the collective farm in the Soviet period). International best practices indicate that membership in a well-conceived farming cooperative enables participants to pool their resources and support one another in access to water, infrastructure, equipment, markets, and capital. On the other hand, if the owner of a very small farm wishes is to remain fully independent, then the Ministry ought to have programs in place to assist the owner to develop optimal production strategies for developing horticulture, poultry farming, and so on.

Access to Water

Zangilan's geography is characteristically alpine, with sloped plains; its climate is thus a bit challenging for optimal agricultural production: summers are typically hot, dry, and clear whilst winters are very cold, snowy, and partly cloudy. Over the course of the year, the temperature typically varies from -5 °C to 31 °C. The hottest months are June, July, and August; the coldest are January and February. Annual precipitation is about 429 mm, with the wet period lasting from October to May (the wettest month is May, with 67 mm of rain; the driest months are June, July, and August, with an average precipitation of 15 mm per month).

In order to increase Aghali farmers' sustainable competitiveness, the Ministry of Agriculture could institute policies supportive of the organization of one or more farmers' cooperatives.

Again, the weather in Zangilan is not without its challenges. According to Professor Mirnaib Mirsalahov from Azerbaijan State Agricultural University,

> agricultural demands for water vary depending on the structure of the sown area, crop types, and irrigation method employed. We know that currently, Azerbaijan's irrigation practices in horticultural production require, on average, between 2,000 and 2,500 cubic meters of hectare per vegetation period—so four to five irrigation times throughout June to August—but 500 cubic meters per hectare per single irrigation.

This leads Mirsalahov to provide the following estimates, based on the accepted logic that 1 mm of precipitation translates into 10 cubic meters of liquid equivalent: since Zangilan receives 670 cubic meters of rain in May and an additional 740 cubic meters in total from June to August (the sum is thus 1,410 cubic meters from May to August), the vegetation period will require the additional provision of approximately

1,660 cubic meters of irrigated water per hectare. However, as Mirsalahov himself allows, it is possible that the foregoing amounts of required water are an underestimate: the driest summer months will probably need even more irrigation in comparison to the indicated requirements for May, which will also need additional irrigation water, but less than in the summer period.

Aside from the supply of water that is provided by a connection to Azerbaijan's national network, the availability of other sources for the irrigation of Aghali's agricultural plots are dependent on local hydrogeological conditions—i.e., tapping into rivers, springs, and underground waters. This is not without its challenges. Zangilan's rivers include transboundary one like the Okhchuchay, the Basitchay, and the Hakari. All originate in Armenia and flows through Azerbaijani liberated territory into the Araz river, which in that part of the country delineates the border with Iran.

The Okhchuchay, in particular, is heavily polluted: its source is located in the Armenian district of Gafan, near a copper-molybdenum plant and an iron ore processing factory. Their production processes, which involve the discharge of untreated industrial wastewater, have greatly contaminated this river with heavy metals, causing an ecological disaster along the river's basin in Azerbaijan, as documented by the country's Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources. This makes the water from the Okhchuchay effectually unusable.

Another challenge is that only the Hakari-Basitchay fluvial system runs near Aghali. Only those farmers whose plots of farmland are closest to the river could access its water, but only after having constructed special pumps. Thus, not all the smart village's farmers would have equal and cost-effective access to the river through recourse to this method.

The third option is gaining access to groundwater. This, too, is challenging, since not all sources of underground water are close to the farms—and they are not equally dispersed among the allotted plots of farmland. The Azerbaijan Amelioration and Water Economy Open Joint Stock Company (OJSC) is in possession of precise maps and can guide villagers through the process of identifying and constructing water wells.

Insufficient precipitation, pollution, and unequal access to fluvial and underground sources of usable water indicate that the optimal solution for Aghali's farmers is the establishment of an artificial irrigation system. This has already been done: a pivot irrigation system has been constructed for use by farmers.

The irrigation system established near the Aghali village is a hydraulic pivot irrigation set designed to irrigate 100 hectares per machine. The advantage of the pivot irrigation system is that it allows for the watering of crops in a targeted way. Water is delivered to plants on a regular basis, and the individual farming homestead determines how much and how often plants are irrigated. The pivot irrigation method is also a low-pressure application. As a result, less water is wasted compared to other methods of irrigation—if used correctly.

However, this system is designed to irrigate more or less flat valleys and plains. This does not correspond to Aghali's geographical conditions. Hence the imperative to apply another innovative irrigation method. The relatively inexpensive technique that relies on a system of IoT-based sensors for precision agriculture is a promising way forward. Rafiq Verdiyev, the Deputy Head of Azerbaijan's National Hydrometeorological Service, has pointed to research indicating that such a system could precisely monitor soil water levels and schedule sprinkling times in well-calculated amounts.

Other localized irrigation techniques—these apply water directly to where the plant is growing and thus minimize water loss through evaporation from the soil—include the use of porous clay pots, porous pipes, and perforated plastic sleeves, as noted by Mirsalahov. All in all, drip irrigation can dramatically reduce water use, with some studies showing a 70 percent savings rate.

There are other methods and systems—none of which are exclusionary—that could be implemented in the context of Aghali and, if successful, subsequently be applied elsewhere. For instance, the establishment of a piped water supply system from nearby surface water sources, which would minimize water loss and increase water usage efficiency. The rain harvesting method (RWH)—i.e., collecting rainwater during periods of heavy rain and storing it for later usage—could also be utilized, supplemented by groundwater resources, as needed.

Whatever the specific solution or set of solutions are chosen, all should operate in a holistic and coordinated manner. This will require

the establishment of a benevolent regulatory environment, which would help ensure farmers have equal access to, and share of, the water supply. This might include the establishment of a water-user association at the local level, whose centerpiece would be an online platform accessible to all farmers. Surely, the instauration of a cooperative would facilitate such an endeavor.

Access to Equipment

Both a lack of training in the operation of farm machinery and equipment (and spare parts), as well as their actual unavailability, could be a bottleneck during production periods. This could result in the inability of a farmer to harvest in time, thus affect the yield. Depending on the types and brands of agricultural machinery, including smart machinery, that is or will become available to farmers in Zangilan, proper capacity-building training programs must be delivered, and licenses should be received. In addition, the equal and equitable availability of machinery to all farmers necessary for production should be delivered on time—otherwise, the yield can be lost.

What, then, could be the reasons for the unavailability of the farm machinery on time?

Generally, Azerbaijani farmers have identified three main reasons: *one*, the high cost of farm equipment; *two*, delayed delivery of leased machinery; and *three*, the absence of spare parts and unavailability of mechanics and qualified service personnel when they are mostly needed (i.e., during peak periods of production).

The Azerbaijani authorities have addressed the high-cost issue by providing certain forms of subsidies. According to Firdovsy Fikratzade, the head of the country's Agricultural Research Center, the government has instituted new regulations whereby public funds cover 40 percent of the purchased cost of equipment and machinery, which is procured directly from local or international dealers.

The second method for obtaining farming machinery is by renting it. The going daily rate, apparently, is 50 AZN per hectare. In many cases, this produces bottlenecks, since the owners of the machinery (assuming they use these themselves, which is typical) cannot always ensure prompt delivery—even assuming there is no rental waiting list, which there typically tends to be.

The final challenge is the absence of spare parts and necessary machinery service when it is most needed, i.e., during the peak production season. Professor Vagif Mirzaliyev of Azerbaijan State Agricultural University makes this point succinctly:

> There are more than 1,000 different types of farm machinery brands available on the local market in Azerbaijan in the context of horticultural production alone. Each of them enters the market with a package of equipment and spare parts services. However, one of the main concerns of farmers is that none of the providers conduct information sessions and training programs on how farmers can fix at least minor problems to the machinery that is sold, or how to obtain replacement spare parts without going through a cumbersome process with the providers. Since farmers do not receive necessary information and training on fixing spare parts and cannot access spare parts on time, they tend to be unable to complete their production in a timely manner if equipment breaks down. And this results in both a loss on investment and additional high costs.

The equipment challenge, which is hardly unique to Aghali, suggests strongly that the solution is the instauration of farmers' cooperatives. This would, inter alia, increase farmers' equipment and machinery purchasing power.

Several concrete recommendations derive from such a policy proposal. For instance, developing an online demand-responsive platform for sharing equipment and providing mechanical services. Training programs on farm machinery could be more easily organized and focus on the types of machinery and equipment available to Aghali farmers and used by all members of the cooperative. The power of collective bargaining could be harnessed to ensure service contracts include robust provisions for the timely supply of spare parts, maintenance services, and information and training sessions. This could include penalties for non-compliance. Surely there are others, but only implementing these could lead to vast improvements.

Access to Fertilizers and Pesticides

Despite drawbacks in some cases, fertilizers unquestionably ensure higher crop yields and agricultural production: they are food for plants and replace the nutrients that crops uptake from the soil. Fertilizer consumption measures the quantity of plant nutrients used per unit of arable land. It is crucial that farmers are able to balance the nutrients while using

chemical fertilizers in the way that the plants fully absorb them in the appropriate quantities.

That being said, excessive use of certain types of fertilizers diminishes crop yields, which varies with crop and soil type, levels of humidity and other climatic factors, and nutrient types. It is also harmful to consumers. According to Professor Hasanali Aslanov of Azerbaijan State Agricultural University, "the excess of nitrates in crops is poisonous to human beings and can be fatal to human health."

Moreover, an excessive release of nutrients (especially nitrogen and phosphorus) in the environment—stemming from the excessive use of certain fertilizers and the fact that not all nutrients used in agriculture are effectively absorbed by plants—is another major source of air, soil, and water pollution. All this has an adverse impact on the climate and also harms biodiversity in rivers, lakes, wetlands, and seas. Increasing greenhouse gas flux and the emission of nitrous oxide are additional consequences to excessive fertilizer use on croplands.

One way forward is to develop what the EU calls an "integrated nutrient management action plan." This would both address nutrient pollution and increase the sustainability of the livestock sector. Precise fertilization techniques are critical to fostering sustainable agricultural practices consistent with the smart village concept. These should include programs to recycle organic waste into renewable fertilizers whenever possible. In this regard, Aslanov and his colleague at Azerbaijan State Agricultural University, Vigar Bashirov, emphasize the importance of identifying nutrient load reductions and applying balanced fertilization techniques.

Other recommendations include adopting a participatory approach to improving the efficiency of fertilizer usage by farmers. Working together, experts and farmers should identify the nutrient balance of the soil and type of crops to be planted whilst taking into account local climate conditions before the sowing period starts. Lastly, farmers or at least their agronomists should pass a certified capacity-building training program to ensure they know how to properly use the fertilizers on offer.

Related to fertilizer use is pesticide use—also an indispensable part of agricultural production that significantly helps to increase fruit, vegetable, and cereal yields. Pests detrimental to agriculture can be broken down into four main categories: vertebrates (rodents, birds, reptiles, and other mammals); invertebrates (insets, spiders, ticks, slugs); weeds (any plant growing out of place); and diseases (fungi, bacteria, viruses, and other microorganisms). Various methods are used to bring these four categories under control. All in one way or another relate to pesticide use.

ICTs properly used can help Aghali's farmers overcome most of the impediments to rapidly and optimally gaining direct access to outside markets with as few middlemen as possible.

The excessive use of chemical and other hazardous pesticides in agriculture, however, contributes to soil, water, and air pollution and biodiversity loss. It can also harm non-target plants, insects, birds, mammals, and amphibians.

Various mitigation techniques ought to be applied in Aghali, in accordance with the smart village concept. Making less toxic chemical pesticides available is one avenue. Moreover, environmentally friendly pest control techniques should be adopted. These could include integrated pest management (IPM), whereby farmers are trained to focus on pest prevention and alternative pest control methods (with chemical pesticides only being used as a last resort).

The integrated use of specialized drones is also possible, as a way to ensure a more precise and efficient application of not only pesticides, but also fertilizers, and as a way to minimize exposure to harmful pesticides. Finally, making use of nano structured biosensors in the detection of soil nutrients and fertilizers should also be considered as part of a broader set of integrated, smart technology-based measures.

Access to Markets

Smallholder farming is a fragile business, with success depending on a variety of factors, some of which have been discussed in previous sections of the essay. In the present section, we will analyze the ways in which smallholder farmers, like those inhabiting the Aghali smart village, can gain proper access to the marketplace. This is, evidently, a key component of the returnees' quest to achieve sustainable livelihoods.

In general, there are three types of consumer outreach channels available to farmers, depending on

the types of agricultural product they produce: direct to consumers, selling to retailers, and selling their products to producers of processed or secondary agricultural merchandise. In the case of Aghali's farming community, all three of the foregoing outreach channels are available.

The full embrace of ICT is an integral part of the smart village concept, which is, after all, predicated on the idea that technology is holistically adopted to hasten the growth of sustainable development.

Officials from the country's Ministry of Agriculture are planning to organize the sale of what is produced in Aghali—both in the Azerbaijani market and abroad. However, the full-on development of efficient supply chains will take time, given the state of the market: public-private partnerships will need to be established, and this will involve bringing policymakers, farmers, cooperatives, and state authorities together, thereby ensuring decreased production costs throughout the supply chain. There is thus an argument to be made that, at least in the short-term, Aghali's farmers should focus on producing and distributing their output in the local and nearby rural areas.

However, Aghali's farmers could use an online platform—the lead time to design such a platform is relatively short—as an additional way to promote their products directly. Having recourse to relevant information and communication technologies (ICT), they could reach more consumers and, in turn, increase their sales. ICTs properly used can help Aghali's farmers overcome most of the impediments to rapidly and optimally gaining direct access to outside markets with as few middlemen as possible.

According to a Chinese study conducted among the rural population of its Guangdong province, where a smart village strategy had been previously launched by the state, 82 percent of respondents indicated that the "internet has played an important role in bringing together the power of internet users to help poor farmers." ICTs fostered the rapid development of rural e-commerce, which in turn helped increase agricultural product sales and made it easier for farmers to obtain information about market demands.

In other words, the full embrace of ICT is an integral part of the smart village concept, which is, after all, predicated on the idea that technology is holistically adopted to hasten the growth of sustainable development. A statistical analysis indicates that revenues from e-commerce in Azerbaijan are expected to double by the end of 2023 against a baseline of 2020—the year marked by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Second Karabakh War. The number of e-commerce users in Azerbaijan is also projected to grow along similar lines.

This clearly creates an opportunity for Aghali's farmers, but the initial learning curve may be steep. Improving their financial and digital (ICT) literary through targeted training programs, as well as enabling access to financial instruments and other resources, would be imperative—as would the development of a new e-commerce platform for the envisioned farmers' cooperative, as part of a holistic business model that would need to be instituted.

With sufficient coordination, benevolent state actions, and enough local open-mindedness, the Aghali smart village can become a successful, sustainable community and come to serve as an example amongst many others of just what the Great Return can accomplish "in the nearest future." BD

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Azerbaijan's Impending Migration Challenge

How to Get Prepared and What to Expect

Tamilla Mammadova, Aynur Rahimli, and Parviz Sunatulloev

Azerbaijan's migration policy framework has seen major developments in recent years, including the consolidation of migration-relevant legislation in its State Migration Code. Moreover, close cooperation with the UNHCR on asylum status determination is resulting in overall recognition rates comparable to those founds in some EU member states. All this is to be welcomed.

In April 2018, an EU-funded study published by the Vienna-based International Centre for Migration Policy Development titled "Baseline Study in Migration in Azerbaijan," confirmed that the country is home to a large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), refugees, and other similar categories of people, due to the at-the-time ongoing conflict over Karabakh and surrounding territories with Armenia.

Official statistics provided by the State Committee for Refugees and IDPs in 2017 put the number of IDPs at 789,000 and the number of refugees at 420,000—of these, 350,000 are identified as originating in Armenia and are, presumably, ethnic-Azerbaijanis. The 2016 figures provided by the UNHCR indicate 613,129 IDPs (this UN agency does not classify ethnic-Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia as "refugees" for methodological reasons). The numbers have not changed dramatically in the interim—in June 2022, that UNHCR's IDP number was 654,839, although Azerbaijan's flagship "Great Return to Karabakh" strategy aims to reverse the tragedy and hardship of displacement in the years to come, as discussed inter alia in several Analytic Policy Papers published by ADA University's Institute for Development and Diplomacy as well as in essays appearing in the pages of *Baku Dialogues* by the likes of Nazrin Baghirova, Fariz Ismailzade, Aybaniz Ismayilova, Ruslan Suleymanov, and others.

The UNHCR's June 2022 report indicated that the number of registered refugees in Azerbaijan was 6,466, with most coming from Ukraine; another 3,585 persons were classified as stateless. Moreover, the number of asylum seekers from abroad has been very low. According to UNHCR data, a total of 2,277 foreigners applied for asylum in Azerbaijan between 2005 and 2015. Also according to the June 2022 UNHCR document, at the time of its publication there were 121 asylum seekers in the country, which is slightly below the annual average and may be a result of the fact that all of Azerbaijan's land borders are presently closed (as part of a package of anti-coronavirus quarantine measures). Lastly, legal migrant inflows from foreign countries have considerably increased in the past several years, with tens of thousands of temporary and permanent residency permits being issued annually (the numbers decreased as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting worldwide lockdowns). Forecasts suggest those numbers will rise in the years to come.

For reasons that will be elaborated below, it is becoming increasingly important to examine how Azerbaijan generally deals with the growing presence of foreigners in the country. This is at least partly due to the fact that it has become an increasingly attractive destination for people from across the Silk Road region and farther afield. And by this we mean not just for tourists (those numbers have also been on the upswing, too) but for highly-skilled professionals and, yes, those with less-in-demand job skills as well as for people who are attracted to its political stability, economic

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prospects, tolerant and secular social environment, and linguistic makeup—especially when compared to many of its neighbors and its neighbors' neighbors. Be that as it may, we wish to note that for reasons having to do with terminological ease, this essay will in most cases refer to them all as "migrants" and their journey as one of "migration."

With this in mind, the foregoing question can be reformulated more precisely along these lines: is Azerbaijan ready for heightened immigration—and not just in the political and economic sense, but mainly from the human perspective?

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Before we delve into the country's specific circumstances and address this question directly, however, we need to understand what drives migration in general, its impact on recipient countries, and the opportunities and key challenges that migration is likely to cause in the time ahead. In doing so, we will have occasion to say something about the future and importance of human mobility as a phenomenon.

Migration and its Impacts

There are dozens of factors that drive and formalize migration. Among the key factors that make people leave one place for another are uprising and conflicts, genocide, the outbreak of war, poverty, lack of safety, high crime, and some others. Positive factors include employability, accessibility to education, and even marriages and domestic partnerships. It is no secret that those who migrate do so mainly in the quest for economic, social, political, and environmental stability. No one willingly migrates somewhere worse. And even those who are forced to migrate try their best to move somewhere better.

Not so long ago, developed countries like Germany, France, Canada, the Netherlands, the United States, and some others were among the most in-demand countries for potential migrants. And they still are. However, a high influx of migrants to those countries has made them choose to apply more restrictions, which, in turn, opens new horizons—new destination countries, as it were—to those who may or must leave their homelands.

In previous writings, best-selling author Parag Khanna made the case for two axioms that define the past and present "arc of global civilization," as he puts it: "geography is destiny" and "demography is destiny." This largely deterministic outlook has been supplemented more recently in two of his recent books in which he focused more on forecasting the future of humanity. In the first, titled *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization* (2016), Khanna argues that "connectivity is destiny" and makes the case that "our vast infrastructure networks—a mechanical exoskeleton of railways, electricity grids, internet cables, and more—[are] enable[ing] the rapid movement of people, goods, services, capital, technology, and ideas on a planetary scale." In his latest book, titled *Move: Where People Are Going for a Better Future* (2021), Khanna puts the concept of connectivity alongside the concept of mobility, arguing that that the two are "complementary, two sides of the same coin, and together they give rise to a fourth axiom that will define our future: *mobility is destiny*."

Azerbaijan is in the midst of a comprehensive transformation whose effects are likely to see it becoming an increasingly attractive destination for a significant number of foreigners.

Khanna's basic argument is that the "coming age of mass migrations won't just be a continuation but an acceleration. The swirl of humanity will only get more intense as each of the forces shaping our human geography gathers steam." He identifies five accelerating forces: demographic imbalances, political upheaval, economic dislocation, technological disruption, and climate change. Each amplifies each of the others. When these five forces are put alongside the continued rise of connectivity, Khanna argues, the "future of human mobility points in just one direction: *more*." Like all other states on the planet, Azerbaijan is going to be affected by this human drive for "more mobility." In fact, Khanna argues, Azerbaijan is likely to be particularly affected by this "axiom that will define our future."

With its fast-growing economy and effective management, which in turn indicates a realistic chance to achieve sustainable development, Azerbaijan is in the midst of a comprehensive transformation whose effects are likely to see it becoming an increasingly attractive destination for a significant number of foreigners, i.e., migrants. In *Move*, Khanna describes the country's strategic potential to serve as a migration hub thusly:

> Azerbaijan presents an even more interesting case [than Türkiye, the states of the Fertile Crescent, Georgia, Armenia, etc.] of how economic and environmental trends may drive large numbers of migrants to a forgotten corner of the world. […] Spanning the snowy Caucasus Mountains to the deserts outside its capital of Baku, Azerbaijan is home to the full planetary array of micro-climates, including dense forests and wetlands. To ward off the encroachment of its deserts, it launched a tree planting binge and pipes cool water down from the Caucasus for irrigation and urban cooling.

In fact, Khanna has particular praise for the cosmopolitan character of Baku. He underlines that Azerbaijan has branded its capital city as the "Caspian region's diplomatic hub," adding that it "would not be the first time" it has performed this vital function. He explains:

> The oil boom of the 1870s brought large numbers of Europeans to Baku, giving its Caspian corniche a glittering Victorian facade that has been impeccably refurbished to cater to today's delegations of Arab and Turkic, French and German, Indian and Chinese traders and contractors. Listening to them all mingle and bicker in Baku's medieval old city is a reminder that the Caucasus [in general, and Azerbaijan in particular] are once again claiming their role as a corridor of both the east-west and north-south silk roads—though in the nineteenth century these various nationals all spoke one another's languages with far greater felicity.

One of the maps Khanna produced for *Move* goes so far as to identify Baku and all of Azerbaijan as belonging to one of the world's 15 or so zones and corridors "likely to emerge as [ever-larger clusters or climate oases] as population shifts accelerate." The foregoing forecast adds salience to our below analysis of Azerbaijan's state of readiness to face the real possibility of an increasing influx of migrants in the next few years.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Any movement of human beings is also a movement of their language and culture. As people move, they naturally take something of their old 'place' with them to the new one. Most developed countries with a strong migration policy have been culturally and linguistically affected by this phenomenon to one extent or another. A vivid example is Germany, which has recently reshaped its cultural values as a result of a further influx of people from what has been called the Greater Middle East—i.e., from Türkiye and Afghanistan and everywhere in between. A newly-mainstreamed hybrid language spoken by migrants—the German term is *Kiezdeutsch*—has emerged among adolescents in multiethnic urban neighborhoods of Germany. In some parts of cities spanning the German-speaking world, it may even gradually become a rival language to the standard spoken and perhaps even written language. This has sparked fears in some quarters of the native population that *Kiezdeutsch* could one day become the country's principal mode of communication.

Countries newly introduced to large migration flows should initially take serious steps to minimize the risks of migration's negative impact.

Evidently, mass migration has positive and negative impacts on host countries' locals. Positive impacts include an enriched and more diverse culture, the establishment of material conditions conducive to benefit from lower costs, the promotion of development, and the bringing forth of fresh viewpoints, experiences, and ideas. When migrants arrive in a new-to-them country, the demand for new workers tends to rise. From this it generally follows that the prices for goods and services are reduced, allowing all inhabitants to benefit from lower costs. Migrants build businesses, earn money, and support recipients in their local communities. All this creates an opportunity for the recipients to strengthen their own material standing. Likewise, migration may also produce negative effects, including the disruption of "traditional" ways of life in the host country and, in some cases, an increase in crime rates. To this end, countries newly introduced to large migration flow should initially take serious steps to minimize the risks of migration's negative impact. This last will be discussed immediately below and in a later section.

Migration's Key Challenges

Migration in itself is a challenge, both for the migrants themselves and those who were there before them (i.e., the more established locals or what previous paragraphs called "recipients" or "natives"). In developed countries, challenges mainly include local views described as prejudice, employability, cultural issues, and housing. Biased attitudes held by locals toward migrants is the most common problem they face. Anti-migrant attitudes in many parts of the developed world are widespread among recipients in the host countries, whether due to racism, extreme patriotism, or what have you. On the other hand, various studies demonstrate that migrants experience a more welcoming and courteous attitude from local communities characterized by an already high percentage of other migrants. Migrants are more tolerant and accepting of other migrants—more or less irrespective of their respective countries of origin—because people who inhabit high-migration areas have had more interactions with migrants compared to those who inhabit in non-migrant majority areas. In other words, the welcoming atmosphere that comes with preexisting multiculturalism is more likely to welcome more multiculturalism.

Employability is another obvious challenge. Statistical data shows that the majority of migrants come from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, implying that their educational attainment is also low. This, in turn, indicates that there is a lack of available employment for migrants, since most of the labor demand for regular employment is supplied by middle- or working-class locals—certainly this tends to be the case in the immediate period following the influx of migrants as well as in times of economic downturn. Apart from that, one might argue that because job criteria and formal qualifications vary from country to country, the process of acquiring gainful employment will be more difficult for migrants searching for a new niche.

Other than tolerance and employment issues, the tangible and intangible manifestations of cultural differences pose another set of challenges to migrants. People who move from one country to another bring their cultural values with them (e.g., language, religion), as noted above. When they come into contact with the predominant host country's culture as well as with the cultures of other migrant communities, this may cause all these cultures to simply blend into one another, making it difficult to distinguish one culture from another. This phenomenon is called acculturation: the process of mutual influence of different cultures whereby one nation adopts the cultural values and beliefs of another. This suggests that the process could have irreparable consequences in that the cultural distinctiveness of migrant communities' cultures could end up being swallowed up by the host country's dominant culture. The process of acculturation is key to understanding the American concept of the "melting pot," which in more recent times has become less prevalent for various reasons. This is also manifest in other developed countries. In some ways, admittedly, this is more advantageous than some of the alternatives.

Parallel to culture-related problems, another challenge posed by migration is the housing issue. The lack of affordable housing, overcrowding, and substandard housing are the most common problems. This seems to be a growing concern in many countries, as the demand for housing far exceeds its supply. This can lead to a further increase in economic inequality as well as increased social exclusion and greater marginalization.

Migration Then and Now

The collapse of the Soviet Union is sometimes understood as having been a major geopolitical disaster of the past century that resulted in the movement, migration, and displacement of millions of former Soviet citizens within the former Soviet space (and, of course, beyond). This has included around one million ethnic-Azerbaijanis from Armenia and Armenian-occupied Karabakh, most of whom ended up in Azerbaijan just as it was regaining its independence. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijani citizens were choosing to emigrate from the country, mostly due to political instability and economic hardship: the period before Heydar Aliyev's return to Baku in June 1993 was truly a chaotic one: ethnic-Armenian secessionist forces were gaining ground in and around Karabakh as Azerbaijan came close to becoming a failed state. Consequently, the country's GDP was in seemingly terminal decline—it stabilized in 1994 and 1995 and began to grow for the first time only in 1996 (and it was only in 2005 that Azerbaijan's GDP, in real terms, reached the level of 1990, thanks in part to an increase in oil exports and the

rising price of petroleum and effective politics of the head of the country).

In the first few years of Heydar Aliyev's presidency, Azerbaijan began adopting a series of laws dealing with various aspects of the migration issue. Soon after his death in October 2003, his presidential successor, Ilham Aliyev, spearheaded the adoption of a series of new migration framework policy documents, laws, and regulatory acts as well as the establishment of new national institutions, including the State Migration Code and the State Migration Service. As a consequence, the material and psychological conditions of IDPs and refugees vastly improved over time. It certainly helped that a vast majority of these migrants (i.e., ethnic-Azerbaijanis) spoke the same language and shared the same traditional and cultural values of the host country's locals, which made the adaptation process easier than it might otherwise have been.

More than ever, migration and education are going increasingly hand-in-hand.

Other sectors of the country have also been affected by migration trends, with university education being an obvious one. The transition from a Soviet system to one that now largely aligns itself with the EU-led Bologna Accord (Azerbaijan signed it in 2005) and the European Higher Education Area (established in 2010) has largely been completed. Azerbaijan now participates in various mobility and exchange schemes financed by the European Union, including Erasmus Mundus, Erasmus+ (including TEMPUS), as well as numerous student and faculty exchange, scholarship, and fellowship programs in cooperation with other developed countries like the United States and South Korea, as well as CIS member states. In addition, the Ministry of Science and Education oversees several state programs that subsidize the graduate education of meritorious Azerbaijani students at prestigious universities abroad. At the same time, the Azerbaijan International Development Agency (AIDA), as well as some of the country's universities, including ADA University, offer a growing number of scholarships, fellowships, and executive education programs for foreigners to study in the country.

Lastly, in the pursuit of educational and job training opportunities, Azerbaijanis are going abroad and foreigners are coming to Azerbaijan in increasingly larger numbers. More than ever, migration and education are going increasingly hand-in-hand.

Present Challenges

A series of ongoing geopolitical and geo-economic tectonic shifts have also had an impact on migration across the globe. Civil wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Ethiopia (to name but a few); destabilizing waves of internal unrest in Iran and in countries like Venezuela and Myanmar; the worsening effects of climate change in the most at-risk countries of the developing world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa; and, of course, the conflict over Ukraine—all have contributed to the forced migration of tens of millions of people around the globe. Indeed, the UNHCR estimates that at the end of 2021, the figure was 89,3 million—and that does not count the more than one-third of Ukraine's citizens that are thought to be internally displaced or have fled abroad due to the fighting since those statistics were released. By early 2023, the number of forced migrants worldwide surely exceeds 100 million.

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Directly or indirectly, Azerbaijan has been negatively impacted by the multiplying consequences of an increasingly insecure world. For instance, its economy has been adversely affected by the consequences of the extraterritorial application of the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regimes imposed on its two largest neighbors: Russia and Iran. Azerbaijan also hosts thousands of forced migrants (i.e., refugees), as noted above. This number does not include the growing number of temporary resident permits issued to Russians, Ukrainians, and other "highly-qualified specialists" who have relocated to Azerbaijan from various warzones and conflict areas.

Whatever the formal classification of the status of such migrants under the law, their ability and willingness to adapt to the linguistic milieu and integrate into the cultural mainstream of the host country will play a not unimportant role in determining their future status in this country and, by extension, that of the acceptability by Azerbaijan of

an anticipated increase in the rate of migration to its territory in the time ahead.

What to Expect?

As a relatively inexperienced migration recipient country (at least when it comes to absorbing large numbers of non-Azerbaijanis into its political and socio-economic fabric), Azerbaijan is very likely to face many new challenges as a result of the larger immigration wave that Parag Khanna and others have predicted is around the corner.

The linguistic factor is one of the determinants of effective integration by migrants into a new community. Put plainly: to stand a good chance of being accepted, migrants need to acquire proficiency in the local language. As is the case with many other newly-independent states, Azerbaijani society is particularly approving of outsiders who embrace the national language as opposed to exclusively relying on one or more of the *linguae francae* on offer (in the case at issue, Azerbaijani as opposed to Russian or, to a much lesser extent, English).

Clearly, some accommodation and a process of give-and-take will be forthcoming, but ultimately the migrants ought to be expected and encouraged to make the greater sacrifice. There is at least one instance in which Azerbaijani law already speaks to this point: an Azerbaijani language proficiency test is an integral part of the process of granting permanent residency (as opposed to temporary residency) to migrants. This serves to make a broader one: the Azerbaijani language is a central component of Azerbaijan's national identity and is not likely to change fundamentally as a result of an increase in migration.

In Azerbaijan, the authority of the state is unchallenged by the influence of any religion.

The second factor is clustered around the topic of religious issues. Religion is largely a private affair in Azerbaijan, which like many other post-Soviet republics has adopted an official policy of neutrality—even *laïcité*—which is enshrined in its constitution. Islam is the religious tradition observed by the majority in one way or another, with Shiism statistically outweighing Sunnism. Judaism and traditional forms of Christianity like Orthodoxy are present and freely exercised, too.

By and large, the practice of religion is understood to be more a matter of family tradition, cultural affinity, and personal preference rather than anything else. Moreover, secularism or the "lay principle" is a doctrine that it upheld both by law and public practice: in Azerbaijan, the authority of the state is unchallenged by the influence of any religion. Building on centuries of tolerance for and acceptance of religious differences, the country continues to be largely welcoming of an individual's religious preferences so long as they do not infringe on those of others, including those who do not manifest any such preferences. Prejudice and discrimination, including antisemitism, is not tolerated by the state; enforcement of applicable laws is rigorous.

The foregoing indicates that Azerbaijan is thus well-placed to greet migrants from all over the world with a set of "liberal" norms when it comes to religious practice; in return, the state would naturally expect adherence to the foregoing from all who wish to become a part of its diverse political, socio-economic, and cultural fabric.

The state should carefully study international best practices wherever they may be found whilst taking care not to replicate the failed or failing immigration policies and practices of some developed countries.

Relatedly, cultural diversity is encouraged in Azerbaijan and is manifested in various domains like the arts, cuisine, media, and sport: the cultural rights of minorities are enshrined in both law and everyday practice. This, surely, will be extended to new migrant communities as they increase in size, so long as they remain dedicated to enrich or enhance, as oppose to seek to transform, the existing social contract and cultural practices of the host (recipient) country.

Again, this is a question of balance: the migration process can impact positively on both locals and migrants. However, ineffective or ill-considered policies to instill aspects of mainstream culture among a migrant population may cause misunderstanding and communication breakdown. At the same time, unethical behavior on the part of migrant communities may also become manifest, which could be interpreted a sign of their unwillingness to adapt sufficiently to their new surroundings. In

short, all relevant actors will need to demonstrate both goodwill and understanding to maintain the successful balance that has characterized Azerbaijan's success in this sensitive domain in the time ahead.

Obviously, questions of access to employment and educational opportunities are also challenging factors, as is the danger of migrants engaging in various sorts of nefarious and even criminal activities that affect public safety and the confidence of the citizenry in the ability of the state to deal with them effectively. On such and similar issues, adjustments and accommodations of various sorts will also need to be taken, requiring careful treatment and consideration by migrant communities, the authorities, and the citizenry—albeit the latter two to a lesser extent than the former.

Present-day Western European or North American models and attitudes towards integrating migrants are unlikely to be replicated by Azerbaijan; something more akin to the East Asian (e.g., Singaporean) ones can be expected to be emulated. The state should carefully study international best practices wherever they may be found whilst taking care not to replicate the failed or failing immigration policies and practices of some developed countries.

Getting Ready

Having referred to some international examples regarding the treatment of immigration in an effective and healthy manner, we can now turn to concrete measures Azerbaijan may wish to take under advisement. For instance, specific labor and housing policies should be prepared for refugees and asylum seekers. As a general rule, migrants should be encouraged to intermingle with locals as much and as rapidly as possible upon arrival. Self-isolation and long-term segregation ought to be avoided, for this inhibits the capability of migrants to adapt to established rules, norms, and codes of conduct and behavior.

The participation of migrants in national festivals like Novruz is an illustrative example in this regard. Novruz is a holiday that is observed by all Azerbaijanis, irrespective of their particular culture, faith, or tradition. At the same time, providing public support to the manifestation of migrants' cultural celebrations should also be undertaken in such a manner that Azerbaijani society may experience and be enriched by these—including through

appropriate subsidies and their promotion via various media and other communication channels. The aim here would be to facilitate the intermingling process whilst helping migrants adapt to local conditions: after all, holidays and festivals—and the underlying values they are designed to promote—are connective events that can bring together locals and migrants.

The time has come for Azerbaijan's various state organs and branches to better coordinate the issues related to incoming or already settled migrants. The foregoing is not to imply that this process has not already begun in Azerbaijan. On the contrary: the adaptation and integration of migrants has already gained serious momentum not only in the country's domestic policy but also in the conduct of its foreign policy.

Azerbaijan finds itself in a rarified position of becoming one of the few countries that can truly benefit from the massive movement of people in the time ahead.

For instance, learning Azerbaijani is evidently one of the most important contributors to a new immigrant's successful integration into Azerbaijani society. One of the most successful programs of this kind is run in Israel. The concept of the *ulpan* (a Hebrew word meaning study center or center of instruction) was designed and executed to intensively teach the modern Hebrew language to newly-arrived immigrants, together with instruction in the fundamentals of the country's history, culture, geography, and so on. Its primary purpose is to foster their integration as quickly and as easily as possible into the social, cultural, and economic life of the country. This immersion model of language learning has been adopted in various countries in both the developing and developed world (e.g., France, Russia, Switzerland). Most such programs are state-run or state-supported. A concrete example in an EU member state is the Centro Interculturale "MoviMenti," which has operated in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy since 1998. A leader in the field of multilingual integration, it covers almost the entire spectrum of difficulties that migrants encounter—including the provision of Italian language courses to them. Thus, the establishment of specialized learning centers for migrants is one of the main ways of mitigating the challenges associated with an influx of migrants to Azerbaijan.

State involvement—although imperative—will not be enough. The role of Azerbaijani society is equally crucial. Luckily, a well-developed spirit of voluntarism exists throughout the country: today's students and young people carry on a longstanding tradition of giving their time and energy to various social-responsibility projects. There is no reason not to expect that volunteers would fail to take an active role in helping newcomers adapt to life in Azerbaijan.

There is evidently much more to say on this subject. Our intention has been to make a modest contribution to an ongoing policy discussion that surely is already taking place in certain circles. As Parag Khanna has argued, Azerbaijan finds itself in a rarified position of becoming one of the few countries that can truly benefit from the massive movement of people in the time ahead. We may even have the extraordinary luxury of choosing the types of migrants we wish to welcome into our country. Squandering this opportunity by not planning for the optimal execution of the right sort of policies to encourage it would constitute an abrogation of responsibility, as would hoping against hope that the global trend towards game-changing migration and mobility will simply pass us by.

We choose to end this essay in much the same manner as Khanna's *Move*—with a citation from the 2019 *National Geographic* essay written by Lahore-born writer Mohsin Hamid:

> Ours is a migratory species. Human have always moved. Our ancestors did […]. Our contemporaries are moving […]. And our descendants will move too. […] [We are becoming] a species of migrants at last comfortable [with] being a species of migrants. That, for me, is a destination worth wandering to. BD

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