
Georgia is becoming hostage to Azeri-Turkish alliance.

Interview with Pavel Pavel Chobanyan - expert of the Caucasus analytical center, doctor of historical sciences

10/7/2006

Permanent news address: <http://www.regnum.ru/english/670432.html>

REGNUM: What problems are there in Armenian-Georgian relations and what effect are they having on Russian-Georgian relations?

Armenian-Georgian relations have always been substantive, but they got even more pronounced in the post-Soviet independence years.

Armenia and Georgia have generally positive relations, but we should admit that there are some negative things too. Today, they are facing a number of problems that can't be resolved just on their good will.

The first episode of the Armenian-Georgian confrontation is the position of the Armenian community of Abkhazia and their cooperation with Abkhazians, who, as you know, have proclaimed independence from Georgia. The Georgian authorities accuse Armenians of cooperation with the Abkhazian side and are trying to sow distrust towards them among Abkhazians and to kindle ethnic strife.

The Georgian authorities are conducting a nationalist policy in both the capital and the regions, thereby creating ethnic conflict spots.

They are publishing openly anti-Armenian books and articles with the only view of accusing Armenians of being unkindly to Georgia. One of the objectives of this "old-story" policy is to assimilate Armenians: in fact, by changing their surnames into Georgian ones (or, as Georgians say, "restoring their Georgian surnames"), many Georgia-based Armenians try to relieve themselves of the yoke of ethnic discrimination.

The next stage of the Armenian-Georgian confrontation is the growing diktat of the Georgian authorities against Javakheti and the local Armenians. Obviously, Tbilisi is trying to force them out of the region.

If in the first issue Armenia's official position is quite unnoticeable, this problem is going outside Georgia and is getting pan-Armenian and even international importance, especially in the light of the national minority rights situation in Georgia, the withdrawal of Russian military bases from Akhalkalaki, the Council of Europe's demand for returning Meskheti Turks to Georgia, the project to lay a railroad Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi bypassing Armenia.

In fact, any attempt of the Javakheti Armenians to exercise their democratic rights receives negative response from the Georgian press, public and state.

For example, Georgian media have immediately reacted to the statement made by the United Javakhq association during its first congress a few days ago: their articles contained anti-Armenian statements. In response to the association's protest against the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi railroad, the Georgian press said that

"only blind will fail to see that this protest reflects the position of the central political forces of Armenia." One Georgian newspaper has appeared with provocative article saying that "In Akhalakali Russia is selling arms brought from Tskhinvali." (Khvalindeli Dge, June 27-28, 2006, 65).

There are also problems concerning the activities of the Armenian Church in Georgia: the Georgian authorities are curbing church ceremonies, seizing Armenian churches, denying legal status to the Diocese of the Armenian Church in Georgia.

Various media and "scientific" editions are openly distorting facts in order to present the Armenians as the Georgians' enemy.

The logic of Georgian-Russian and Armenian-Russian relations is also a good soil for anti-Armenian moods. Regarding Russia as a force steadily destroying the Georgian statehood and church autocephaly since Georgia's accession into the Russian Empire in 1801, the Georgian authorities deny Russia any positive role in the history of Georgia. Armenia, on the contrary, admits and appreciates the role of Russia. As a result, Georgia is beginning to regard it as undesirable Russia's ally.

REGNUM: Why is Nagorno-Karabakh Republic refusing to join the agreement of the unrecognized republics Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdnistria. Is this because Armenia does not want to spoil its relations with Georgia?

This may, certainly, be the case. However, it should be noted that, unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who are directly negotiating with Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh is more restricted in its foreign relations, and it is Armenian rather than Nagorno-Karabakh president who is holding talks with Azerbaijan. As a result, this conflict is regarded not as conflict between NKR and Azerbaijan but as a conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Besides, if in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, peace is kept by Russian troops according to a relevant agreement and definite quota, in Nagorno-Karabakh, security is guaranteed by own army and the Republic of Armenia.

The above trilateral agreement has followed the demand of the Georgian authorities for the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers and is aimed at ensuring joint defense of independence in case of military aggression. Hence, the Nagorno-Karabakh army can neither hope for military help, say, from Abkhazia or Transdnestr, nor help them itself.

REGNUM: What do you think about the statement of Georgian Prime Minister Nogaideli that there will be no new autonomies in Georgia?

Autonomy is often the result of the struggle of a local population for its well-grounded rights and of, though reluctant, but the acquiescence of central authorities to recognize these rights. In Georgia they regard the Javakheti Armenians' demands for respect of their rights exactly as struggle for autonomy. However, there was no such demand in United Javakhq's statement and Nogaideli might have seen one in the urge "to regulate the mechanisms of using the Armenian language in administrative paper work and education as an equal and alternative language to the only state language -Georgian."

It should be noted that Armenians have faced many similar problems before - and not only inside Georgia, but also over the Armenian territories of Azerbaijan that were outside the borders of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region.

Today, when the Russian language has no state status in Georgia, I think that the Georgian authorities must not give hostility and misunderstanding to a local population's demand for respect of its native language equally with Georgian.

I think that they should permit the use of native language in village, district or regional paper work.

REGNUM: To what a level and quality Russian-Georgian relations may get in the near future?

A week before the Putin-Saakashvili meeting and after it, the Georgian side stopped the unpromising and dangerous anti-Russian rhetoric. Even more, some Georgian analysts called for restoring good neighbor relations with Russia. Although the news about US President Georgia Bush inviting Saakashvili to Washington has given a new rise to pro-American moods in Georgia, there is still a growing wave of pro-Russian and anti-Soros actions in the country. Nevertheless, Georgia will continue acting and speaking against Russia, which will make Georgian-Russian relations even worse. External forces cannot make peace in Georgia but are still trying to convince Georgia of its own political significance. Nevertheless, the authority and influence of Saakashvili and his team are falling. In a recent survey only 10% said that Saakashvili has political prospects against 17.8% voting for Salome Zourabichvili and 12.7% for Koba Davitashvili.

REGNUM: And what do you think about the dynamics of Georgian-Azeri relations?

In its struggle for existence, Georgians have traditionally tried to avoid bad relations with neighboring Muslim states, to maneuver between them so as to reduce own losses. Sometimes, they succeeded.

In the last years the Georgian authorities have proclaimed themselves as the strategic allies of the US, Turkey, Ukraine and Azerbaijan and, by confronting the regional policy of Russia, are trying to create economic and political prerequisites for solving their own internal and external problems. Availing itself of the Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azeri conflicts, Georgia is trying to act as a transport corridor in East-West energy relations.

With economic cooperation being the priority of Georgia's relations with the Turkish-Azeri alliance, the local authorities are actively attracting Turkish investments into their economic projects.

Given its deepening military-economic cooperation with Turkey and Azerbaijan, Georgia could not evade their political positions. Being the key energy transit link between Armenia and the outer world, Georgia is constantly forced to yield to Azerbaijan's demands, which are allegedly aimed only against Armenia. For example, Azerbaijan has put a ban on the transit of oil products for Georgia via its territory, alleging that, at least, part of them are for Armenia and will be given to it.

Georgia had to give numerous proofs it would not, the Georgian prime minister went to Baku specially to solve this problem. Recently, an Azeri MP said that Azerbaijan is against the opening of the Abkhazian railroad as this will give Armenia direct communication with Russia.

Otherwise, Baku is threatening with aggravation of Azeri-Georgian relations. Presently, the Georgian-Russian railroad operations are carried out via Azerbaijan.

In fact, Azerbaijan is not only actively interfering in Georgia's internal affairs but is actively enrolling to this end its communities living in the southern regions of Georgia. Some Azeri organizations, especially, the National Assembly of Azeris of Georgia and its president Dasgyn Gulmamedov, are beginning to more frequently call for Georgia's federalization.

Obviously, this interference will keep growing, and Georgia will be forced to make more and more concessions to the Turkish-Azeri side, especially after the return of Meskheta Turks.

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