

## **Azerbaijan and Georgia need coordination**

A video-recording about an incident between Georgian citizens and Azerbaijani frontier guards at Keshikchidag temple on July 14 was posted in mass media. The video shows that a group of civilians attacked two Azerbaijani frontier guards, insulted them and demanded to leave the frontier zone. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Azerbaijani Republic assessed this action as «a provocation aimed at contronting relations between the two countries».It has to be kept in mind that this is not the first case on the frontier zone. For some time past a group of persons from Georgia, in an attempt to create tensions between the two peoples, put forward unsound demands due to a cave-church complex “Keshikchidag”.In April where Azerbaijani frontier frontier guards imposed a ban upon entering the church and tens of caves on the frontier between Georgia and Azerbaijan, the complex became an object of discussions. In four days the ban was lifted; however, debates had been underway. On May 5, hundreds of activists with Georgian flags in their hands created a human chain on a disputable line. Participants of the protest action demanded from the Georgian government to immediately resolve the frontier dispute charging it with collaboration with the Azerbaijani authorities and the threat of the loss of Georgia’s cultural heritage and holy places. Participants of the protest action were composed of students, public figures and tourist firms’ officials. They were singing paschal songs and chanting a slogan “Long live Georgia”.What’s happening between the two countries in reality?Araz Aslanly, a head of the Caucasian Center of international Relations and Strategic Studies, answered ASTNA questions.

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**-Araz bey, for some time past a second incident took place on the Azerbaijani-Georgian frontier, at Keshikchidag. What do you think, what's the apparent and latent causes of sudden incidents between the two countries?**

✖- As a whole, the Azerbaijani-Georgian factors are governed by scores of factors. Putting aside some details, there are certain historical factors being used by opponents to strain relations between the two countries. There are also some historical factors that draw us together. It should be noted that Caucasian states and nations come together when external forces are eager to consolidate their positions and occupy the region to thus threaten the very existence of these peoples.

Regretfully, there are periods where the Caucasian peoples fought against each other. Factors of this sort are capable of blackening relations between them. Fortunately, there are periods, especially earlier-later 20 century, where we drew nearer.

Also, there are common values; common historical past. There is a population factor: Georgians residing in Azerbaijan; Azerbaijanis residing in Georgia. Possibly, the most important thing is that both Azerbaijan and Georgia are faced with a common-rooted question of territorial integrity. This factor contributes to drawing the two peoples together. Besides, there are important regional projects to be implemented by the two countries. Note that these regional projects make up a part of global projects. This notwithstanding, the two countries are faced with similar threats.

It should be appreciated that despite score of common factors that draw the two countries together, there are, regretfully, artificial problems alienating us. Beyond any doubt, the second incident at Keshikchidag is governed by external source. Yes, there are some historical aspects that lead to misunderstanding; there are problems arising from frontier

definition. However, the problems mentioned above are insignificant as compared to total strategic goals. The Keshikchidag issue is among insignificant ones.

Unfortunately, there is a certain group of politicians in Georgia, including allegedly NGOs, religious figures and ordinary people that intentionally fan the flames of enmity.

As a matter of fact, these circles are seeking to turn visits to Keshikchidag into a cause of irritation in the Azerbaijani society, provoke a stormy reaction of Azerbaijan. Initial aggressors are doing their utmost to arouse serious problems and confrontation between the two countries and two societies. In this case our countries are likely to focus on existing problems, give up our strategic projects while third parties will avail of the situation.

**- Many experts hold that the point is about a provocation of pro-Russian forces inside Georgia; some analysts are prone to think that these actions have been arranged by Armenian forces. Do you think there is the third force involved in the matter?**

- We cannot say definitely who is behind these provocations. If legal proceedings have been instituted in Georgia, it'd be possible to identify an involvement of special services of a foreign state. Unfortunately, Georgia does not demonstrate an open, clear and decisive stand on the issue. There is just a certain position. Beyond any doubt, many countries are concerned about the current level of relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan. The question is about three neighbors of Azerbaijan that are interested in aggravating relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Beyond any doubt, Armenia is the most interested party in the matter. There are several reasons for this country to behave in this manner. First of all, Armenia puts forward territorial claims to Georgia and Azerbaijan. Note that this country's territorial claims to

Georgia are softer than those to Azerbaijan. Armenian claims to Georgia are apparent in various religious, ideological and national provocations. Armenia dearms of generating problems between Georgia and Azerbaijan and thus forcing Azerbaijan to decline from directing all its resources against Armenia.

In so doing, Armenia is eager to make Georgia face problems both in the south and north, and Azerbaijan to face problems not only in Karabakh but Georgia as well.

Armenia pursues other goals as well. The point is that Georgian problems will decelerate large-scale regional projects being implemented by Azerbaijan. In other words, resources of Azerbaijan will concentrate on two directions and thus be depleted. Also, diplomatic, economic, military and democratic resources will run out.

For reasons cited above Armenia is most interested in aggravating the Georgian-Azerbaijani relations. The same is true of the Russian Federation and Iran that are scared of positive resolution to the conflict. Account has to be taken of the fact that Iran is a country uninterested in the development of energy, transport projects and consolidation of Azerbaijan in the region, on the one hand, and Georgia's aspiration to expand relations with the West, on the other hand. Allowing for the factors quoted above, Russia is unwilling to reconcile with normal relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan. The factors I mentioned are topical both for Iran and Russia. Besides, Russia faces the challenge from Georgia. At any rate, the conflict takes root to Russia, Iran or Armenia.

It'd be appropriate to note that irrespective of whether this was a provocation or not, it is undoubtful that pro-Russian forces and Armenians of Georgia are used therein. We have already witnessed actions of this sort in other forms and other times. They are willing to instigate provocations against Georgian-Azerbaijani relations through the use of Armenians

residing in Georgia. Regretfully, we are witnessing provocations of this sort in Georgia staged by Armenian minority and directed against national interests of Georgia, particularly against the Georgian-Azerbaijani relations.

**- What is the purpose of this provocation? Why does the Georgian government create conditions for it?**

- The principal aim of the provocation is to maximum alienate Georgia from Azerbaijan, cast aspersions on regional projects, hamper their implementation, distract attention from existing problems, etc. At the same time, behavior of the Georgian authorities is one of topical issues. Unfortunately, the Georgian authorities decline from evaluating the regional projects properly and even make steps that create problems between the two countries. Whether knowingly or unconsciously, they are becoming a part of the process originating from other forces. That's why the Georgian government takes no preventive measures but instead make statements generating provocations of this sort.

It should be remembered that the Georgian authorities are taking no specific steps to avoid situations where citizens of this country cross the frontier and attack Azerbaijani frontier guards. It is obvious that neither Georgian authorities and people, nor groups directly involved in the provocation would benefit from this action. Perhaps, they will receive dividends for a short while. For instance, any political force will gain more seats at the parliament or pro-Russian forces will establish collaboration with this country. At any rate, it will be short-term dividends while the very existence and security of Georgia will be jeopardized. Note that no good will come out of it for Azerbaijan as well.

**- Behavior of Azerbaijani soldiers in the last incident was acknowledged as correct, for they managed to escape the provocation and bloodshed. On the other hand,**

**many analysts described actions against the Azerbaijani soldier as insult of the state. How do you think would the government of Azerbaijan act under this situation?**

- Indeed, this not a good situation when the soldier gave up his weapon and left the guarded section, especially as he is a soldier of the state with territorial problems. However, we do not know whom he reported back and who instructed him.

At the moment, the question is not a mere violation of the frontier but a part of the big provocation. So we should evaluate the whole situation, not soldier's behavior only. To my thinking, it was decided not to instigate provocation under a specific situation. Should the soldier open fire at a provocateur who tried to take a weapon from him, a Georgian citizen or a minister of church would be lost, and subsequent developments could be predicted between Georgia and Azerbaijan. In my view, the Azerbaijani authorities declined from the provocation to demonstrate that the Azerbaijani-Georgian economic projects in collaboration with 3-4 countries involved are of top priority, so we cannot yield to provocations for common interests even despite harsh criticism inside the country.

But this is not to say that we are minded to keep aside from the problem. It should be noted that the Azerbaijani army, state, Ministry of Foreign Relations, frontier troops, soldiers and even ordinary people can make some concessions for common interests. But everything has its limits. The frontier is to be respected by Georgia, other states, ordinary citizens, religious figures, political parties and leaders, deputies. If Azerbaijan makes certain that Georgia benefits from our goodwill to the detriment of Azerbaijani interests, specific, tough steps are meant to be made

Showing its good will, Azerbaijan declines from raising questions on disputed territories,

violation of rights of Azerbaijanis residing in Georgia; on their social conditions, their representation at state structures. In so doing, Azerbaijan is guided by common interests. So the Georgian party should adequately assess these steps of Azerbaijan.

**- The Georgian party is minded to believe that relations between the two countries are not spoiled. What happens if relations between Georgia and Azerbaijan are spoiled?**

- Azerbaijan should make well thought-out steps concerted with Georgia to oppose external provocations unrelated to the Georgian authorities proper. In case where Georgia cannot take preventive measures, the latter should recognize it legally or de facto. In this case Azerbaijan should take some preventive steps to avoid provocations of this sort. In the first turn, Azerbaijan should remove the very possibility of these provocations. There is no need in reacting aggressively to the said provocations. True, aggressive actions are relevant if the state frontier is violated. At any rate, preventive measures are compulsory to avoid subsequent complications.

One must bear in mind that the Georgian-Azerbaijani relations are directed to success not only between the two countries but the region as a whole. Good neighbourly cooperation is sure to turn Caucasus into the peace region. Some non-Caucasian countries are nurturing plans aimed at creating conflict zones, not cooperation, in the Caucasian region. The question is that where conflicts are at their height, countries of Caucasus fell upon dependence of external forces. There are certain projects of Caucasian countries contrary to interests of external forces. The latter are seeking to torpedo the projects. If Caucasus is an area of peace and cooperation, it can contribute to the resolution of other conflicts in the region.

In other words, should the conflict in Caucasus aggravate, other conflicts would not be resolved. And instead, should the peace and cooperation set in Caucasus, we would be able to assist in resolving challenges in other countries as well. Also, there would be favorable conditions to ensure the energy security of Europe, develop trade relations between North and South. That said, top officials of Azerbaijan and Georgia are meant to expand the dialogue. Besides, some countries of East and West should make their contribution to the process as partners in the Azerbaijani-Georgian cooperation. Within the framework of the process Azerbaijan would have to make a retaliatory step. And again, the most important are preventive measures.

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