

Ivanishvili goes to Azerbaijan – a visit overshadowed by misunderstandings

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The new head of the Georgian government, Bidzina Ivanishvili, visited the capital city of Azerbaijan, Baku on 26 December. This was his second foreign visit, after Brussels. What had originally been planned as a courtesy visit to become acquainted with neighbouring Azerbaijan has been to a great extent overshadowed by statements Ivanishvili made before leaving. For example, he called into question the economic benefits of the Baku–Akhalkalaki–Kars railway designed to link Azerbaijan and Turkey (a section of this is currently under construction in Georgia). This project is of key significance for Baku. Its implementation has been possible owing to preferential loans granted by Azerbaijan to Georgia (the total loan amount will reach US\$775 million, of which over US\$400 million has already been allocated). Thus a land connection will be ensured with Azerbaijan's strategic partner, Turkey. This project will also permanently isolate Armenia in terms of transport routes and additionally will be an element of the network of routes which connect Asia and Europe. Ivanishvili also suggested that the prices Azerbaijan charges Georgia for gas (which are already favourable) should be reduced. Following his visit to Baku, the Georgian prime minister, who emphasised that his meetings with the president and the prime minister of Azerbaijan had been held in a "warm and friendly" atmosphere, withdrew his previous statements.

Commentary

- Maintaining close relations with Azerbaijan has traditionally been part of Georgia's strategy. However, since relations with Russia have been deteriorating, Georgia has no other alternative at the regional level but to have good contacts with Azerbaijan. These contacts have made it possible for Tbilisi to become independent of Russian gas supplies. Azerbaijan is also among the largest foreign investors in Georgia and a strategic economic partner. In turn, from Baku's point of view, a friendly government in Tbilisi has been a necessary condition for the implementation of its strategic energy and infrastructural projects (the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline and the railway connection to Kars). Therefore good mutual relations have in fact formed the basis of the two countries' foreign and energy policies and their independence from Moscow in these areas.

- Baku found the statements Ivanishvili made before his visit incomprehensible. They were met with astonishment and raised concerns about the future of these projects of strategic significance for Azerbaijan. At the same time, Ivanishvili's renouncement of his own words after his talks with President Aliyev has shown that Azerbaijan has demonstrated that it is the stronger partner in relations with Georgia and firmly opposes any renegotiation of the existing conditions of co-operation. In practice, Georgia could broaden its room for manoeuvre in dealings with Baku only were its relations with Russia to significantly improve, for example in the area of energy co-operation. This situation is the case because Georgia is currently dependent on gas supplies from Azerbaijan. Tbilisi could embark on a more assertive policy towards Baku if it resumed the purchase of gas from Gazprom.
- It is difficult to assess whether Ivanishvili's statements were incidental or if they signified a more profound revision in Tbilisi's policy towards its most important regional partner. Actions taken so far by Prime Minister Ivanishvili on the international arena have clearly been chaotic. As a consequence, the new Georgian government has been forced to make excuses to its foreign partners for his controversial moves or unfortunate choice of words.