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French diplomatic charge in the South Caucasus

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On 6-7 October the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy visited Yerevan, Baku and Tbilisi. During these visits he made a number of strong statements of a kind avoided by other EU leaders, including an announcement that France would become actively involved in the Karabakh peace process, confirming Georgia's territorial integrity and the legitimacy of its Euro-Atlantic aspirations at a rally in Tbilisi, and complementing the achievement of the region's countries (especially Georgia). He sharply criticised Turkey for its blockade of Armenia and denying the Armenian genocide of 1915; he announced the possibility that France would criminalise the denial of genocide. He also criticised the Russian concept of spheres of influence, and accused Moscow of failing to observe the agreements ending the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, while still stressing the strategic relations between France and Russia. The visit was very well received, especially in Armenia and Georgia.
The French president's visit is the first by a leader of a Western state to the Caucasus for many years.

Commentary

- Especially in Armenia and Georgia, Sarkozy's visit has been seen as a very important expression of France's support for these countries in their difficult relations with their neighbours (for Armenia with Turkey; for Georgia with Russia), as well as of direct support for both countries' leaders before next year's planned parliamentary elections. However, it should be assumed that France's political commitment to the region is mainly limited to gestures (a fact which the region's leaders are aware of).

- This visit seems to have been part of Sarkozy's pre-election campaign (April 2012), and is aimed at mobilising the support of the fairly influential Armenian diaspora in France (who number around 500,000), and reinforcing Sarkozy's image as a leader who creates political reality around Europe (in the Caucasus, and in relations with Russia and Turkey).

- France has quickly capitalised on the EU's current activity in the South Caucasus, and is setting itself up as the leader of EU policy in the region. Despite its formal participation in the OSCE Minsk Group's work on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and its mediation between Russia and Georgia in 2008 associated with its then-presidency of the EU, France has over the years kept its distance from the region. Meanwhile, the Union's significant involvement in the regional context (institutional and financial, including the

Eastern Partnership) and that of individual countries (including Germany) have not been very effective, entirely invisible on the public level, and have not been given the spectacular political support anticipated in the Caucasus (including issues of conflict resolution and integration with the West). Sarkozy's visit and his policy statements are now filling the vacuum which the EU has left. The fact that EU diplomacy in the region is now being dominated by France (Philippe Lefort has been the EU Special Envoy for the South Caucasus since August), as well as the expected re-activation of the Minsk Group, means that France can be seen (especially at the public level) as the promoter and implementer of EU policy in the South Caucasus.