Why Belarus Sides With Azerbaijan, Not Armenia

At a meeting last week, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka did his best to persuade the Armenian foreign minister of Belarus’ goodwill. But this was hardly convincing — the halcyon days of close relations between the two countries are long gone. Now Minsk is clearly siding with Azerbaijan, even though the latter is opposing Russian policy in the South Caucasus.

The USD 300 million loan given by the Azerbaijani president to Lukashenka this summer and visit to Baku by the Belarusian prime minister in July were just some recent signs of a strong partnership between Aliev and Lukashenka. Besides its neighboring nations in the post-Soviet area, Belarus maintains very close relations with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. In the late 2000s Azerbaijan apparently became the single most important customer buying significant amount of weapons from Belarus.

New Friend

In the words of the the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, cooperation with Azerbaijan was only activated “in recent years”. Until the mid-2000s, political relations were negligible and trade developed of its own accord. Lukashenka did not get along with former President Heydar Aliyev, a seasoned apparatchik of the Soviet period who looked down on Lukashenka as a young maverick.

Another reason for poor relations in the past was that Minsk tended to follow Moscow's foreign policy line. As a result, it developed relations with Azerbaijan's nemesis — Armenia. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the only Belarusian embassy in the region was based in Yerevan. In the late 1990s, Minsk finally decided to establish a presence in Baku but the
embassy was opened only after a considerable delay in 2006.

However, over the past decade, relations have improved dramatically. In Baku, Heydar Aliyev’s son Ilham inherited presidential power in 2003. Already in 2004, the heads of state of Belarus and Azerbaijan broke with precedent by conducting mutual visits. This set the stage for four top-level visits from 2006.

At the same time, Belarus deviated from its stringent pro-Russian political line. Lukashenka found new friends—among them not only Yushchenko of Ukraine and Saakashvili of Georgia, but also Ilham Alyev. In this process, the enhanced international stature of Azerbaijan played an important role, especially after the country launched a new Caspian oil pipeline. Belarus could hope for support from Baku as a natural ally against Moscow in the post-Soviet area. Azerbaijan had long bolstered Russia's opponents; in the past, it even went so far as to establish the GUUAM—an alternative organization to pro-Moscow integration initiatives—with Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. Although this organization is now moribund, Azerbaijan’s attitude toward Moscow remains unchanged.

A second set of factors are economic. Between 2008 and 2010, Belarus-Azerbaijan trade grew from US$ 100 m to US$ 146 m. More important than this moderate increase is the fact that Belarus enjoys a trade surplus, which helps to counteract its immense foreign trade deficit.

Azerbaijan is also helping Belarus to acquire alternative oil sources. Minsk recently began importing oil from Venezuela but direct shipments to landlocked Belarus are difficult. Baku thus agreed to swap schemes by which Minsk gains access to Azerbaijani oil in exchange for Venezuelan oil.

Belarus Turned against Armenia

For Azerbaijan, an added incentive to work with Belarus is to
garner support for military liberation of its territory occupied by Armenia and removal of self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabagh Republic. Negotiations in the OSCE Minsk group have rendered no results for years now. Meanwhile, the Azerbaijani government has used its growing oil revenues to perennially increase its military budget. But a stronger military will not change the fact that Armenians have Russia behind them. Although Russia wants to preserve Azerbaijan as an ally in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan is eager to change the status quo balance of power. It is only a matter of time before armed conflict breaks out again between Azerbaijan and Armenia and it may occur as soon as the Azerbaijani government sees less sense in tolerating the current situation which helps Armenia to legitimize the present favorable reality for Yerevan.

If such a war should ensue, Belarus will probably side with Baku, the principal buyer of its weapons. It is notable that no arms deals were made prior to 2005 – there is thus an unquestionable link between a stronger Azerbaijani military and the initiation of bilateral arms deals. By contrast, Armenia bought a small number of weapons from Belarus just once, in 2007.

**From Cooperation to Alliance**

The development of the Belarusian-Azerbaijani alliance is practically a fait accompli. Azerbaijan is openly defending the Belarusian regime from criticism in the West, as the positions of Azerbaijani representatives in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and EuroNest have demonstrated. Alyev is also willing to help Lukashenka financially – in addition to the latest 300-million loan, not so long ago, Minsk borrowed from Baku to pay Moscow for its outstanding claims.

For Azerbaijan, the motives for working with Belarus are political and economic. The Central Asian state needs all the support it can get if it wants to confront Armenia and Russia, not to speak of its tense relations with Iran. It cannot be
very hopeful about Western support, given the influential Armenian lobby there (especially in the US and France). This makes support from former Soviet states all the more important. At the same time, the privatization of Belarusian industries and development of non-Russian oil supply routes is vital – Venezuela is a good example.

For Belarus, cooperation with Azerbaijan is important as a tool to put pressure on Moscow, to obtain financing, and to develop trade. In particular, Azerbaijan may allow Belarus to access non-Russian oil and gas from the Caspian and Middle Eastern regions (Iran and Northern Iraq). The greatest hurdle for such a project would be neither technical nor financial – the infrastructure is mostly already in place. Rather, it is political: the Russians will stubbornly fight to preserve their energy monopoly in Eastern and Central Europe, while the United States will work to block any regional energy projects that involve Iran.

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