

AZERBAIJANI-GREEK RELATIONS: NEW VISION

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All countries in the world differ from one another at some level, however, they still share similarities in many spheres, sometimes more, sometimes a few. Practices show that having more similarities in traditions and customs or life styles of people from different countries situated in various distances, is the result of political, diplomatic, businesslike relations and friendships that exist between those countries. Contemporary relationship existing between Azerbaijan and Greece is a solid example to this.

At first glance Azerbaijan and Greece might seem completely different from each other – Azerbaijan is a new independent state with a territory of 86,6 km², and population of approximately 9,5 million people, 96% of which is Muslim by religion; Greece, on the other hand, gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1822 has a territory of

132 km² and is mostly a Christian country. However, one can easily see the cultural and historic similarities if observed them closely. Let it be common love for dolma (stuffed grape leaves), bouncy music, hospitality of local people, or what a big festivity weddings are for both nations, Azerbaijanis and Greeks have a lot in common. Maybe this is one of the reasons why the historic relations between Azerbaijan and Greece go as far as Ag Goyunlu Dynasty (also known as: White Sheep Turkomans), when Uzun Hassan married Greek princess Despina khatun. ¹

Despite the relationships between these two countries were absolutely ceased during the Ottoman reign in the region, and, as well as, when Azerbaijan was part of the Soviet Union, the foreign affairs were re-established between Azerbaijan and Greece in 1993, 2 years after Azerbaijan gained independence from the USSR, with the opening of the first Greek Embassy in Baku. These affairs were strengthened even more when Azerbaijan opened its Embassy in Athens in 2004. It is also worth mentioning that Greece was one of the first countries to recognize Azerbaijan as an independent state on December 31st, 1991 (Azerbaijan declared its independence on October 18th, 1991).

Today both countries are full members of the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which in their turn also contribute to the expansion of

¹ Kazemzadeh, Firuz (1951). *The Struggle for Transcaucasia: 1917–1921*. The New York Philosophical Library. pp. 124, 222, 229, 269–270. ISBN 0-8305-0076-6.

cooperation between countries.² This cooperation covers all kind of issues from human rights to tourism, agriculture and renewable energy sources.

During her visit to Azerbaijan in 2011, Member of the Greek Parliament and at the same time, Member of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Elsa Papadimitriou mentioned the close cooperation between Azerbaijan and CoE, as well as Greece on protection of human rights and discussed future collaborations with the Azerbaijani Minister of Justice Fikrat Mammadov.³

After Azerbaijan was elected a competent member of Universal Tourism Organization (UTO) the country gained an opportunity to integrate the world tourism family and share its experience in the sphere of tourism of developing states. After the election to the UTO Azerbaijan signed agreements on cooperation in tourism sphere with a number of countries, one of which was the Hellenic Republic of Greece.⁴ This, in its turn, increased the tourist flow from Azerbaijan to Greece, particularly, to Santorini, the southernmost member of the Cycladic islands group.⁵ The Greek Foreign Minister Dimitris Avramopoulos expressed his interest in the enhancing relationships in tourism sphere to

²http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/roundup/2009/02/17/roundup-dd-03

³ http://www.jlc.gov.az/e_view_index.php?id=91

⁴ http://www.azerbaijan.az/_Society/_Tourism/_tourism_e.html

⁵ <http://greekreporter.com/atatravel-partners-with-greek-tourism-company-in-azerbaijan/>

his Azerbaijani counterpart Elmar Mammadyarov when the two met in New York City in 2011.⁶

Besides all these mentioned above, there's a joint intergovernmental commission that is working on strengthening economic cooperation between Greece and Azerbaijan. Having Azerbaijani-Greek Business Forum held several times in both countries is another vivid example of mutual interest in economic sphere.⁷

With Greece becoming the first country in the European Union that wanted to directly import gas from Azerbaijan a new chapter in Azerbaijani-Greek foreign affairs was established. Following this, Greek Minister of Development Dimitris Sioufas signed a "memorandum of cooperation" to enhance the joint work in natural oil and gas sector during his visit to Baku in 2007. Furthermore, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Greece in 2009 boosted bilateral relations and shifted them to a totally new stage.

In 2012 Azerbaijani and Turkish governments agreed on a strategic investment in Trans-Anatolian natural gas pipeline (TANAP), which would carry Azerbaijan's natural gas, specifically from Shah Deniz -2 field to Europe. The pipeline starting from Azerbaijan was planned to reach to Greece and Bulgaria through Turkey. Thus, according to the Memorandum of Understanding between State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) and Greek National Gas Company (DEPA), Greece became the

⁶ http://www.azerbaijan.az/_Society/_Tourism/_tourism_e.html

⁷ <http://en.president.az/articles/1838>

first European country to directly receive gas from Azerbaijan through TANAP, after having Azerbaijani gas delivered through Turkish state pipeline company BOTAŞ since 2007.⁸

In 2013 Greece became one of the 3 countries to sign an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) to support Azerbaijan's TAP (Trans Adriatic Pipeline) project, which is the Western section of the Southern Gas Corridor, a chain of energy projects that is aimed to link the natural gas supplies from the second development stage of Shah Deniz field to Europe. In addition to this, Greece, along with Albania also holds host governmental agreement with TAP project.⁹

In addition to above-mentioned co-operations in oil and gas sector, State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) has acquired most of the shares of Greek company DESFA, which, most definitely, will lead on further partnerships in this sector.¹⁰

During his very recent visit to Greece in June, 2014 Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev mentioned the developing cooperation between Greece and Azerbaijan, stating the agreements signed in the field of agriculture, memorandums on cooperation for the European Union issues of the Republic of Azerbaijan between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Affairs of the Hellenic

⁸ <http://teas.eu/news-greece-get-azerbaijani-gas>

⁹ <http://www.tap-ag.com/the-pipeline/the-big-picture>

¹⁰ <http://en.president.az/articles/12085>

Republic and in the field of youth and sport between the Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs of the Hellenic Republic.

Summing all mentioned above, increasing co-operation in energy sector, agriculture and tourism, investing in educating the youth about both countries, especially, having Greek language taught at the Baku Slavic University¹¹, without any doubt, will increase the cultural and historic similarities between Azerbaijan and Greece, and will bring these two countries even closer, both in governmental and national level, creating more opportunities in future partnerships.

¹¹ <http://en.president.az/articles/12085>

