

Neither Friend nor Foe

AZERBAIJANIS' PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIA

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani-Russian relations have undergone significant change. Consequently, the perception of Russia by ordinary Azerbaijanis has also often changed. Several factors have been influential in defining their perceptions.

The first factor is the Karabakh conflict and Russia's continued support of Armenia. Despite of its public support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, Russia continues to provide arms and other economic assistance to Armenia. Azerbaijanis also perceive the Russian base in Armenia as a major sign of Moscow's military support.

The second factor is Russia's constant opposition to major economic projects implemented by Azerbaijan, including the Baku-Ceyhan and Baku-Supsa pipelines and the Nabucco and Transcaspian pipeline projects. This also pertains to the unwillingness of Russia, until recently, to agree on the territorial status of the Caspian Sea.

The third factor is the presence of a significant number of Azerbaijani labor migrants in Russia and their remittances. Many rural, and even urban, Azerbaijanis survive only because of these remittances.

Lastly, Georgia and its relations with Russia have become an important factor in Azerbaijani-Russian relations. The Russia-Georgia war of August 2008 and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states have complicated the perception of Russia in Azerbaijan, leading to doubts as to whether Russia can be a neutral broker in the Karabakh conflict.

Background

The development of Azerbaijani views and perceptions of Russia can be divided into three stages. The first stage, 1992 to 2000, covers Boris Yeltsin's presidency. During these years, relations between the two countries swung from neutral to near hostile. Several issues contributed to these fluctuations. First, the Russian military establishment continued to support Armenia and provide it with military equipment. In

addition, Russia was pressing heavily on Azerbaijan to join the Collective Security Treaty Organization and to support other Russian initiatives. This first period was also characterized by the titanic efforts of Azerbaijan to build the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline to secure access to Western energy markets and Russia's continued hostility to such projects that bypassed Russia. The first period was also marked by the first Chechen war, in which the majority of Azerbaijanis were sympathetic to the Chechen cause. Thus, it is not surprising that Azerbaijanis had a negative attitude toward the actions of the Russian government at this time.

The second stage of relations between the two countries lasted from 2000 until 2008 and covered Vladimir Putin's two terms as president. This period was marked by purely pragmatic concerns. The Russian government rapidly came to understand the fruitlessness of attempts to disrupt Azerbaijan's movement toward the West and chose a soft and pragmatic approach instead. First, the Putin administration secured Azerbaijan's support in the second Chechen war. Second, economic interests overtook political ones and the Russian business elite began to actively cooperate with Azerbaijan. Last but not least, Putin was able to find common ground with both former Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev and current President Ilham Aliyev and to break down negative stereotypes. This was a period of joint projects, economic opportunities, and mutual understanding. The Azerbaijani public slowly began to change its attitude and to see Russia as an unbiased broker in resolving the Karabakh conflict. Meanwhile, despite the centralization of power and several of Putin's hardline actions, the Azerbaijani public moved away from "fearing" an "unpredictable" and "unstable" Russia, which instead began to acquire the image of a pragmatic and constructive partner.

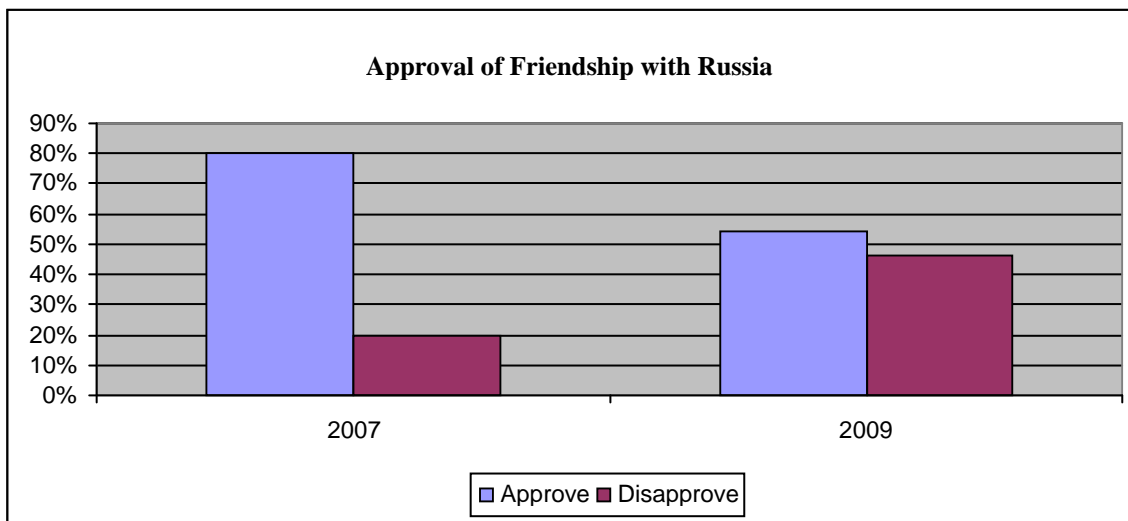
All this changed after the Russian-Georgian war, which heralded the beginning of a new stage in Azerbaijani perceptions of Russia. For the Azerbaijani public, it was shocking to see acts of aggression against an independent neighboring state. The fact that Georgian actions were directed toward preservation of its territorial integrity and Russia was seen as acting in violation of international law played a very negative role in shaping the image of Russia in Azerbaijan. During the August war, the Azerbaijani public was on the Georgian side, hoping that Georgia's success would strengthen their own position. Despite the fact that Russia did not take any direct action against Azerbaijan and, in fact, tried to mitigate the impact of war through frequent visits by state representatives and frequent mediation in the Karabakh settlement, a "fear" of Russia re-emerged in the country. At the same time, such fear did not strengthen any desire to counterbalance Russia by joining NATO. This is partly explained by the fact that the public believed Western powers did a poor job of saving Georgia from Russian aggression.

Changing Attitude, Changing Moods

To gauge Azerbaijani attitudes toward Russia, it is difficult to rely on opinion polls, as few surveys have been conducted to address this theme. Most polls have been unrepresentative, significantly biased, or inconsistent. This study thus relies on various

sources. One of the few comprehensive surveys is the Caucasus Barometer conducted by the Caucasus Resource Research Center.* Analyzing the results of surveys they conducted in 2007 and 2009, we see that the number of people approving of friendship with Russia dropped significantly, from 80% to 54% (**Figure 1**). Meanwhile, the number of people disapproving of friendship grew from 20% to 46%. This significant drop is surprising, taking into consideration the fact that Azerbaijanis have always separated the political side of relations with Russia from personal and cultural dimensions. Even during periods of high political tension, many Azerbaijanis favored close relations with Russians bearing in mind their possession of a common language and the absence of many cultural barriers. The August 2008 war may have affected Azerbaijani attitudes, but unfortunately, we do not have consistent data over several years to prove or disprove such a claim. Although it does not explain such a sudden drop, it is worth mentioning that the younger generation of Azerbaijanis (about 45% of Azerbaijan’s population is below 25 years old) does not share such feelings of commonality with Russia. Knowledge and significance of the Russian language has decreased and been marginalized over time.

Figure 1.

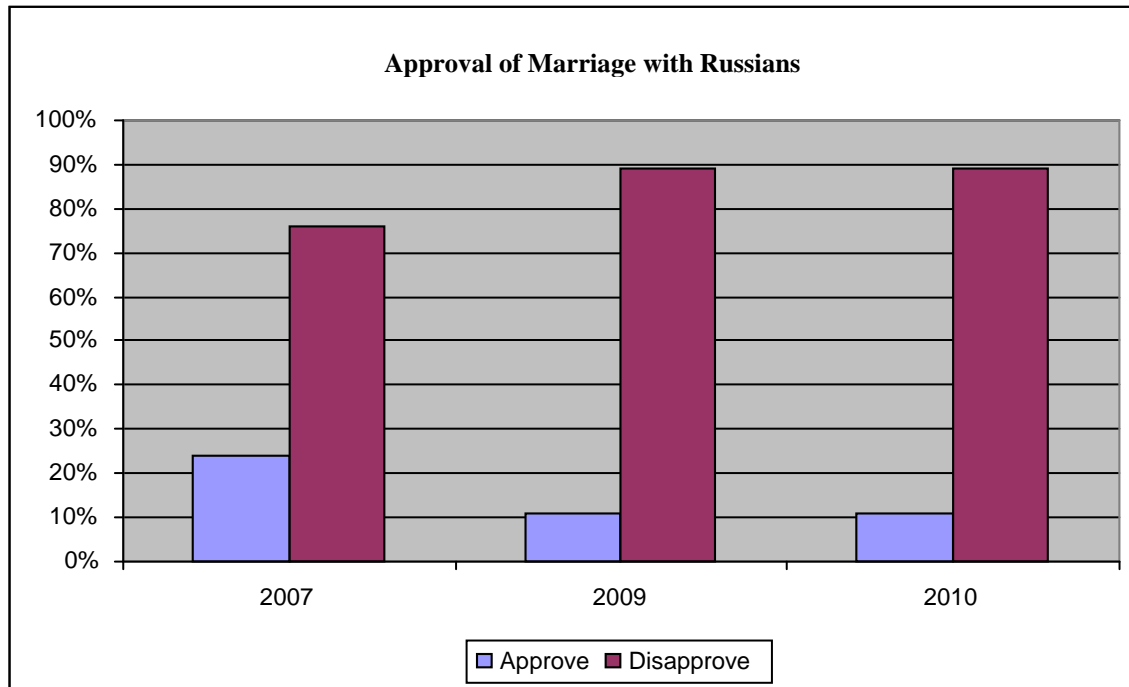


A similar point is reflected in the answers to a question regarding approval of marriage with Russians (**Figure 2**). The percentage of Azerbaijani respondents who disapprove of such marriages increased from 75% in 2007 to almost 90% in 2009 and 2010. Azerbaijanis, in contrast to their Caucasian neighbors, were always conservative in marital relations, even during Soviet times; because of differences in religion, culture,

* The Caucasus Barometer is one of the few reliable surveys. It uses multistage cluster sampling with preliminary stratification on nine geographically defined units in each country: capital, urban-Northeast, urban-Northwest, urban-Southeast, urban-Southwest, rural-Northeast, rural-Northwest, rural-Southeast, and rural-Southwest. The sampling frame in 2010 was the census in Azerbaijan and Georgia and electricity records in Armenia. The number of primary sampling units (PSUs) in each stratum was proportional to the population of each stratum. Fifty households on average were randomly selected in each PSU for an interview. The rough number of individual interviews per country was 2,001 in Azerbaijan, 2,089 in Georgia, and 1,922 in Armenia. The average expected margin of error varies between settlement types [capital, urban non-capital, and rural], but none are greater than 5%.

and tradition, marriage between Russians and Azerbaijanis was rare within Azerbaijan. At the same time, many Azerbaijani labor migrants marry Russian women in Russia. In many cases, they have their own families in Azerbaijan that they support, but they also choose to live in civil marriage in Russia because of the benefits a Russian *propiska* (residence permit) or Russian citizenship bring.

Figure 2.



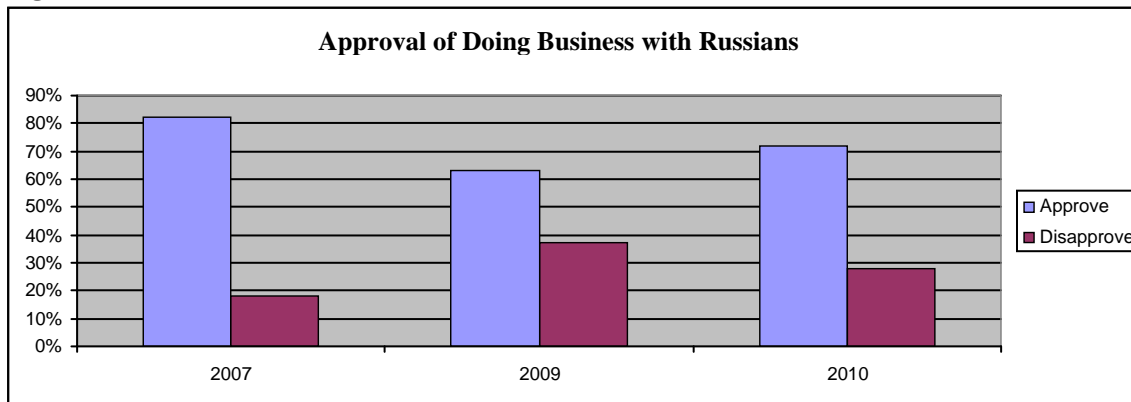
Approval of doing business with Russians has also significantly dropped (**Figure 3**). In 2007, the percentage of respondents who approved of business with Russians was around 82%; in 2009 and 2010, the number dropped to 62% and 70%, respectively.

In general, however, Azerbaijanis have usually been supportive of business relations with Russians, taking into consideration the high number of their compatriots living in Russia. By 2002, official Russian statistics documented 621,500 ethnic Azerbaijanis living in 55 administrative entities in the Russian Federation, making them the thirteenth-largest ethnic minority in the country. Russian law enforcement bodies and the Azerbaijani embassy in Moscow believe that the actual number of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Russia is much higher. Some modest estimates place their number between 1.3 to 1.8 million. These estimates also include seasonal workers or individuals who live in Russia on a temporary basis. Meanwhile, large remittances are sent by these labor migrants to Azerbaijan, though no definitive data on these remittances exists. Some claim that private remittances sent from Russia to Azerbaijan amount to somewhere between \$1.8 billion and \$2.4 billion every year. However, the Russian Central Bank puts this figure much lower: at only \$887 million in 2008. According to the World Bank, remittances coming to Azerbaijan from all countries increased from \$6

million in 1998 to a peak in 2008 of over \$1.5 billion, with 57% percent coming from Russia.

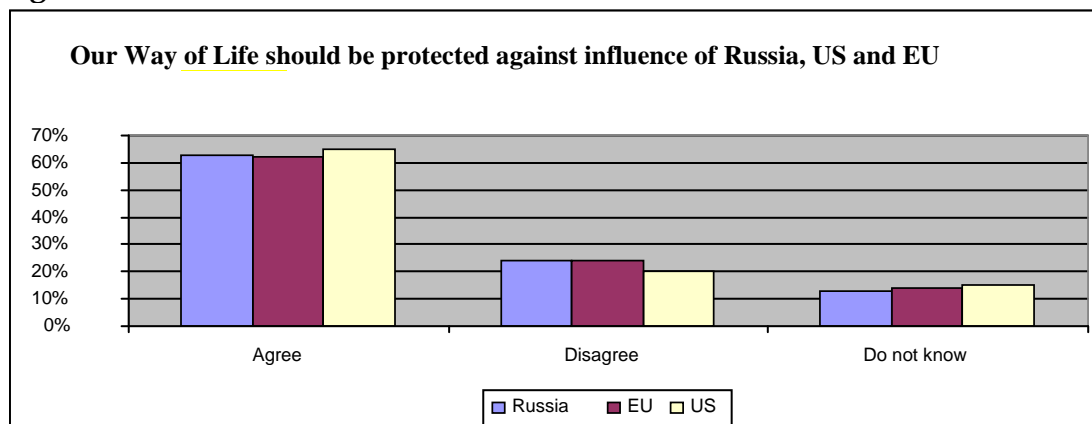
Taking the above into account, it is odd to observe the above-mentioned drop in approval of doing business with Russians. The data is insufficient to discern a clear pattern, but one factor may explain the observed tendency: the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 may have led many Azerbaijanis in Russia to lose their businesses or investments and forced them to return home. Loss of income or remittances could also have led to the rise in negative perceptions of doing business with Russians.

Figure 3.



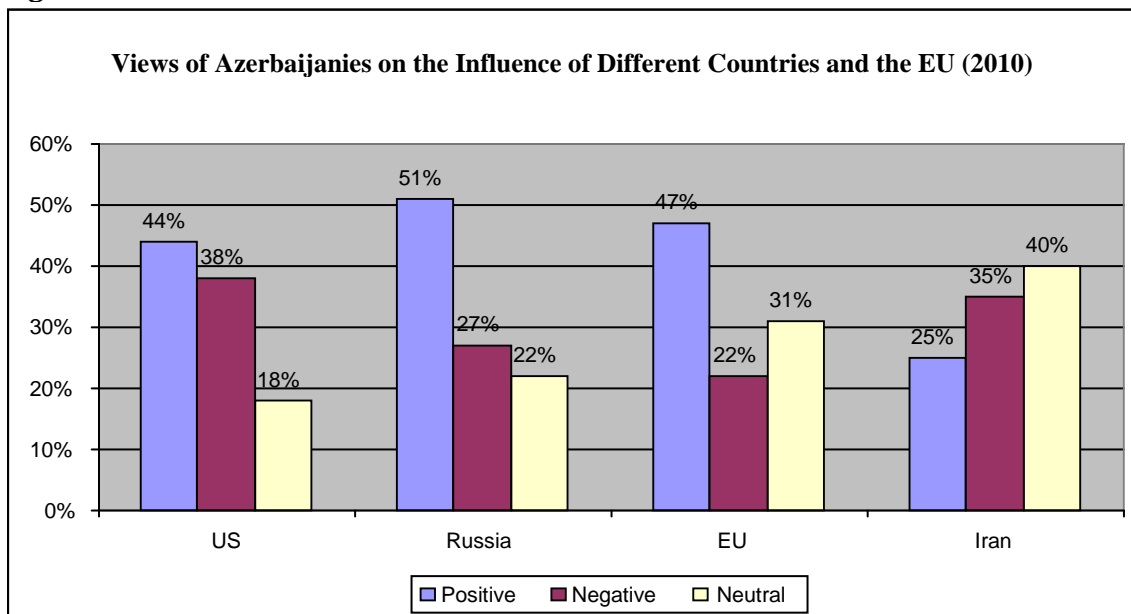
All these negative perceptions – declines in approval of doing business, friendships, and intermarriage with Russians, also stems from the conservative nature of Azerbaijanis, who fear a loss of identity and their way of life, together with an erosion of family values. The next table (**Figure 4**) suggests that a majority of Azerbaijanis not only believe their way of life should be strongly protected against the influence of other countries but that they do not distinguish in this case between Russia, the United States, and the European Union.

Figure 4.



Somewhat paradoxically but a poll conducted by the BBC in 2010 found that a majority of Azerbaijanis positively view the influence of Russia in Azerbaijan. Fifty-one percent of those polled positively assessed Russian influence in Azerbaijan, while only 27% viewed it negatively (Figure 5). Of all major regional players, Russia received the highest rating. Forty-four percent of those polled, positively assessed U.S. influence in Azerbaijan, while 38% negatively assessed the U.S. role. This could be explained by the fact that Russia was actively engaging with Azerbaijan last year in cultural, economic, and other areas. Several high-ranking Russian officials and delegations visited Baku that year. Meanwhile, Azerbaijani-U.S. relations were hitting a low point, which also added some points to Russia.

Figure 5.



Conclusion

In addition to the factors discussed above, the Azerbaijani government and the media also contribute to the formation of Azerbaijani perceptions of Russia. Depending on the government's interests, perceptions and attitudes can easily be improved or worsened. A vivid example of this involves the substantial Russian arms supplies to Armenia that were revealed in the winter of 2009. The disclosure of this fact, and excessive media attention given to the issue, could have changed public attitudes toward Russia. Anti-immigrant hysteria in Moscow and the events on Manezh Square in December 2010 could also have affected perceptions. At the same time, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Azerbaijan (September, 2010) in which several important documents were signed, and his strong statements in support of Azerbaijan, may have improved the perception of Azerbaijanis for some time. But compared to Azerbaijani perceptions of other countries in the region – such as Iran, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, and the countries of Central Asia – their perceptions of Russia swing from one extreme

to another. The inability of Azerbaijanis to understand or define the role of Russia in the region contributes to this. For the last decade, Russia has been dramatically changing its policy in the region, which complicates the formulation of Azerbaijani perceptions. Georgia and Turkey (despite Azerbaijan's short "cold war" with the latter in 2010) have always been perceived as friendly and amenable countries. Accordingly, attitudes to these countries have been rather stable. The same can be said about Armenia, which is in a state of war with Azerbaijan, or about Iran, which continues its hostile/neutral policy toward the country. Azerbaijanis have been more or less able to formulate their attitudes toward these states. It is only with Russia that Azerbaijanis have a problem.

It is very difficult to predict how views of Russia will change in the short- or long-term. But it is clear that they could go in any direction and depend on factors that may be out of the control of both Azerbaijan and Russia. The data appears to show that historical complexities, economic necessities, and not-entirely-compatible cultural aspects make Azerbaijani perceptions toward Russia rather unstable. As yet, views have not hardened, which keeps a window open for the solidification of a more positive outlook.