

Russia Cracks the Whip

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The threat of a visa regime has forced Azerbaijan to make strenuous efforts to placate the Kremlin

Over the past 15 months, Azerbaijan has come under increasing pressure from Russia to abandon its pro-Western outlook and return to the fold.

The saga began with claims by the Russian government that Baku was openly supporting the rebels in Chechnya. It culminated in a threat to impose a visa regime on the former Soviet republic for refusing to cooperate with the Kremlin.

These were threats Azerbaijan could not afford to ignore. Two million Azerbaijanis work in the Russian Federation, providing a vital lifeline to their families back at home. With its Western partners still treading cautiously, Baku was forced to reach for an olive branch.

In September, the Azerbaijani interior ministry extradited seven Chechen nationals suspected of staging the 1999 terrorist bomb attack in Buinaksk. It was an unprecedented move - especially as the Chechens have traditionally enjoyed a high level of moral support from the Azerbaijani public.

Weeks later, government officials from both countries announced that Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, would visit Baku in January next year to sign new agreements over the future of the Caspian Sea oil wells. The announcement was the culmination of successive visits by Russia's Caspian envoy, Victor Kaluzhny, to the Azerbaijani capital.

Finally, last month, Azerbaijan's President Heidar Aliev took part in the CIS leaders' summit in Minsk, Belarus, and signed an agreement to establish an Anti-Terrorism Centre, based in Moscow and serving the entire CIS.

In early December, Aliev made a point of giving an interview to the daily newspaper, Zerkalo, in which he made uncharacteristically positive comments about the political future of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

This was a far cry from Aliev's notorious antipathy for the alliance, clearly expressed in 1997 when he cold-shouldered the CIS summit in Chisinau, Moldova. In the same year, Aliev was one of the leaders behind GUAM - an inglorious pact between Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova - which was aimed at strengthening its members' independence and territorial integrity as well as paving the way to gradual integration with Europe.

Russia has been quick to show her appreciation for these gestures of good will. When the visa issue came back on to the agenda this autumn, Azerbaijan was granted a stay of execution - whilst a full visa regime has since been imposed on neighbouring Georgia (another GUAM dissident accused by Russia of harbouring Chechen rebels in the Pankisi Gorge).

The Russians have made no secret of their diplomatic machinations. In an interview with Zerkalo last week, the Kremlin's spokesman on Chechnya, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, commented, "Baku has drawn the right conclusions. We were considering a visa regime with Azerbaijan as well, but our Azerbaijani colleagues approached this issue far more constructively than their Georgian counterparts."

Last week, at the OSCE's end-of-year session in Vienna, Western leaders made little progress in their efforts to persuade Russia to close its military bases in Georgia and Moldova. In response, the Russian deputy foreign minister, Yevgeny Gusev, warned the OSCE not to meddle in the internal affairs of any nation east of Vienna.

Is this the beginning of a sinister trend? Once again, we are seeing Russia and the West struggling to impose their influence on key strategic areas. It may only be a matter of time before the Kremlin steps up its demands.

Perhaps Azerbaijan will be persuaded to freeze its multi-billion dollar oil contracts with Western companies. Perhaps Baku will be forced to opt out of the US-backed Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline. Some observers speculate that Russia may even seek to re-establish military bases in the former Soviet republic, or worse still, spark off another military conflict with Armenia.

Certainly, the West should be aware that Russia holds Azerbaijan - and the other GUAM countries -- in a stranglehold. If any of the above-mentioned scenarios becomes reality, it will already be too late for the West to react. It is manifestly clear that the Western powers must continue to support the former Soviet states in a bid to moderate Russia's hegemony.

Let us not forget that Georgia has already been the victim of at least one "accidental" artillery bombardment. Russia is not afraid of cracking the whip when its erstwhile dependents step out of line.

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