

# Victim of a “War of Ideologies”

## Azerbaijan after the Russia–Georgia War

ANAR VALIYEV

**Abstract:** The August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia affected many of the Commonwealth of Independent States’ domestic politics, including Azerbaijan’s. The war significantly changed Azerbaijanis’ perceptions of the democratic West and negatively impacted their perceptions of the United States and the European Union. Meanwhile, the war forced Azerbaijan to strengthen its security measures, for fear political instability. More important, the crisis was portrayed as a “war of ideologies” between the Moscow-backed sovereign democracy and the U.S.-backed unmanaged democracy in Azerbaijan. Georgia’s defeat and the subsequent political turmoil demonstrated the viability and stability of the sovereign democracy and made the Russian model of governance more attractive to the people of Azerbaijan.

**Keywords:** Abu-Bakr mosque, Azerbaijan, Five-Day War, Karabakh conflict, military doctrine, public perception

The five-day war between Russia and Georgia dramatically changed the political situation in the South Caucasus. Although Azerbaijan was not directly involved in the conflict, the war nevertheless forced Baku to reevaluate its foreign and domestic policies. Moscow’s successful military intervention in Georgia forced Azerbaijan to distance itself from the United States to avoid antagonizing a belligerent Russia. Meanwhile, the inability of the Western countries—the United States in particular—to adequately respond to Russia led to large-scale public disappointment among Azerbaijanis. The crisis also “generated new sources of instability for the entire post-Soviet space, not only because it highlighted a new form of Russian revisionism but also because it brought to the fore the limits of Western policies in what Kremlin views as its sphere of influence.”<sup>1</sup> Moscow clearly showed its claims over the South Caucasus and demonstrated its readiness to embark on military confrontation to achieve its goals. The postwar situation indicated that Azerbaijan could become the next site where U.S.–Russian rivalry will arise. The Russian government’s decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia has led Azerbaijan to fear that Moscow

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would try to give similar support to the ethnic Armenian population in the region of Karabakh if Azerbaijan aligns itself too closely to the West.

Much has been written about the Russia–Georgia War’s impact on foreign policy, energy projects, and the clash of geopolitical interests. However, scholars and researchers have generally overlooked the influence of the war on domestic policy, political development, and changes in public perception. One of the assumptions of realist theory, which shapes the paradigm that underlies much of the theoretical understanding of political science, is that “states are unitary actors and that domestic politics can be separated from foreign policy.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the complexity of the problem in Azerbaijan has made it difficult to distinguish between domestic and foreign politics. The absence of any visible developments in domestic politics, the silence of political scientists and public figures, and an inactive and docile public have coalesced to limit research on the problem.

In this article, I aim to analyze the domestic development in Azerbaijan and establish causality between certain events and the Russia–Georgia crisis. I look at the Azerbaijani public’s changes in perception to see whether any changes occurred because of the conflict. I then examine the domestic security issues facing Azerbaijan and the government’s reaction to these events. Finally, I examine political development in Azerbaijan after the war.

### **Public Opinions, Changing Perceptions, and Expectations**

The war put Baku in a very delicate position. Refusing to support an important ally would have negatively affected Azerbaijan’s image both abroad and in the eyes of a public that was clearly on the side of neighboring Georgia. The Azerbaijani government, however, tread lightly, not wanting to say or do anything that might provoke Russia or lead to a deterioration of relations with Moscow. Azerbaijan instead chose a strategy of soft support for Georgia while refraining from making harsh statements against Russia. On the day following the Georgian operation in South Ossetia, Khazar Ibrahim, the press secretary for Azerbaijan’s foreign ministry, stated only that Azerbaijan favored a solution to the South Ossetia conflict based on the territorial integrity of Georgia and Georgian adherence to international law.<sup>3</sup> Azerbaijan’s support for Georgia in this conflict is understandable. After the Soviet Union’s demise, the relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia have been consistently cordial. Both countries shared similar problems, such as ethnic separatism, an aggressive Russian policy in the southern Caucasus, and a common goal of integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). The presence of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Pipeline prompted the strengthening and deepening of economic, political, and cultural ties. Furthermore, Georgia is a very important transportation hub, linking Azerbaijan to the rest of the world; all major projects implemented by Azerbaijan or multinational companies (including the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Pipeline, the Baku–Supsa Pipeline, and the Baku–Erzurum Pipeline) pass through Georgia. Meanwhile, an ambitious U.S.\$600 million project to construct a Baku–Akhalkalaki railroad, connecting Azerbaijan to Turkey and then to Europe, also crosses Georgia. For Azerbaijan, it is vital to have a pro-Western (rather than pro-Russian) government in Georgia that could endorse and support the projects implemented by Azerbaijan and oil companies. If Georgia had a pro-Russian government, Azerbaijan would lose the opportunity to freely export its energy resources to the West and be surrounded by Russia and Russian-backed regimes in Armenia and Georgia. The Kremlin was especially displeased with Azerbaijan and Georgia’s strategic

partnership. In fact, the supply of Azerbaijani energy resources to Georgia is the one of the important factors keeping Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili in power. Without Azerbaijani support, Russia would have strangled Georgia with an energy boycott and forced Saakashvili to resign.

Baku assessed the outcomes of the war in terms of Azerbaijan’s interests. If Georgia had succeeded in bringing South Ossetia back into the state, Azerbaijan would have a strong argument to settle the Karabakh conflict using Georgia’s actions as a precedent. It would have given the Azerbaijani side *carte blanche* in negotiations with Armenia. Western countries’ attitude favoring Georgian actions might have emboldened Azerbaijan to use harsh rhetoric against the Armenian separatists in Karabakh. The Azerbaijani government, however, would then have been in an uneasy position. It would be hard to explain to the public, including hundreds of thousands of refugees, any reason to delay launching military operations in Karabakh. Azerbaijan’s reaction to the events in Georgia was therefore strongly influenced by its domestic politics and pressure from the people’s sympathy for Georgia. Meanwhile, a Georgian blitzkrieg in South Ossetia would have strengthened military circles in Azerbaijan.

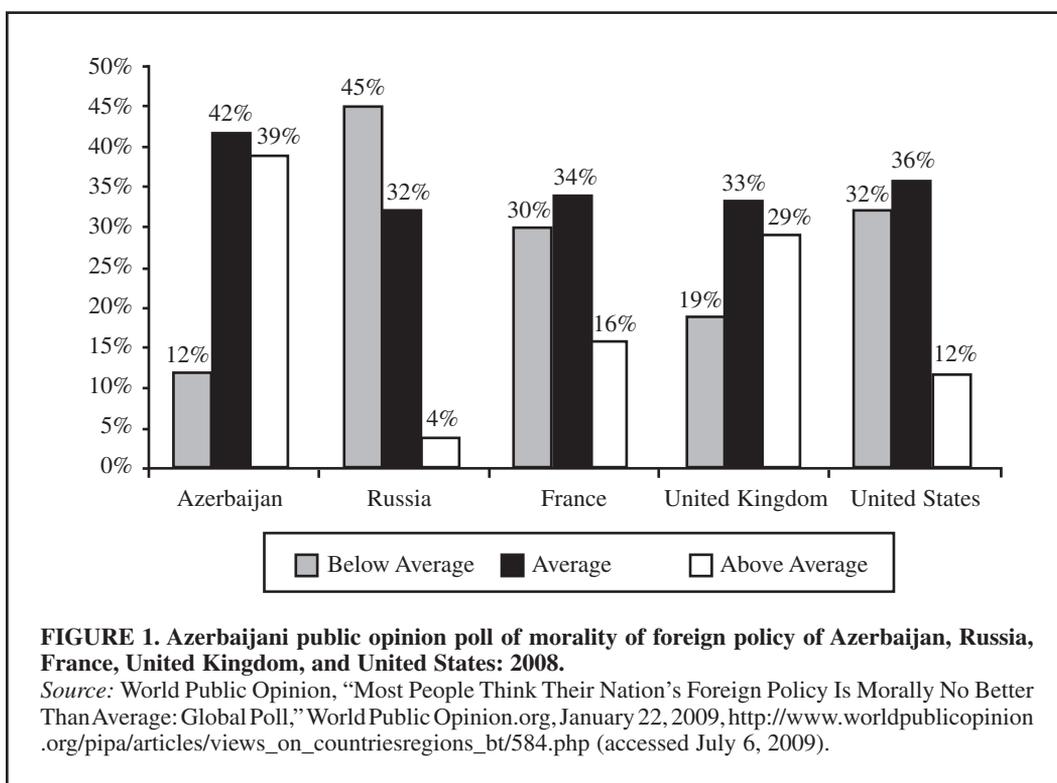
Despite their sympathy for Georgia in the war, Azerbaijani public officials were simultaneously deeply disappointed and displeased with actions that endangered Azerbaijan’s achievements of the last fourteen years. The history of Russia–Azerbaijan relations shows that Baku had never gone too far in damaging its relationship with Moscow. Azerbaijan has maintained good relations with Russia while slowly and incrementally moving closer to the West. The closest that Azerbaijan came to military action against the Russian army lasted for only a short period of time in 1993, during the presidency of the nationalistic Abulfaz Elçibey. Russian military circles supported and were deeply involved in the occupation of Azerbaijani territories. Thus, from 1995 to 2008, Azerbaijani government was slowly neutralizing the influence of Russia and trying to attract foreign interest and investment to secure and strengthen its independence.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Saakashvili’s bold moves put all the successes that Azerbaijan and Georgia had recently gained, including the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Pipeline, the Baku–Kars railroad, and the growing investment in both economies, at risk.

Georgia’s defeat, however, allowed the Azerbaijani government to tone down criticism from war supporters, as well as lower the public pressure that could demand immediate action against Karabakh. Georgia’s failure and the economic damage inflicted by Russia increased the credibility of the doves in the Azerbaijani government, who favored using economic tools to regain Karabakh. They noted that Azerbaijan’s gross domestic product grew threefold during the previous seven years, whereas Armenia’s and Karabakh’s economies stagnated, arguing that sooner or later, Azerbaijan would effectively buy Karabakh by giving economic preferences to Armenia. That approach worked in the interest of the Azerbaijani government, which was calling for a peaceful solution of the Karabakh conflict while not rejecting the right to use force.<sup>5</sup> However, the Georgian defeat disappointed and disheartened the Azerbaijani public. Russian intervention and the West’s inability to check Russia brought back old fears of Russia coming back to the Caucasus. The hope that the Karabakh conflict could be solved without Russian involvement faded away, reinforcing the old belief that Moscow holds the keys for regional conflict resolution.

The Azerbaijani elite did not react particularly harshly to Russian military actions in Georgia. Russian reluctance to bomb Azerbaijani property and to damage its other eco-

conomic interests in Georgia, such as the Baku–Supsa pipeline or the Kulevi oil terminal, pacified the Azerbaijani establishment. Nevertheless, Russian recognition of the breakaway republics instigated a wave of anti-Russian criticism both in society at large and within the government.

Public opinion polls became almost the only method of tracking political development and the perceptions and moods of Azerbaijani society. During and after the conflict, the Azerbaijani public was mostly supportive of their government's actions. The majority of the population understood the complex concerns of the government and highly appreciated that the government could keep the country out of trouble. In a poll conducted by World Public Opinion between July 15 and September 26, 2008, Azerbaijanis were among the most supportive of the morality of their nation's foreign policy, with a large majority stating that it was about average or better (see figure 1). They gave their most negative ratings to Russia and their most positive ratings to Britain. Participants rated the morality of Azerbaijan's foreign policy as: 39 percent answered "above average," 42 percent responded "average," and 12 percent answered "below average." By contrast, when asked about the morality of U.S. foreign policy, 12 percent of Azerbaijanis responded "above average," 36 percent responded "average," and 32 percent responded "below average." Russia's foreign policy was assessed as "above average" by 4 percent, "average" by 32 percent, and "below average" by 45 percent. France's foreign policy was assessed as "above average" by 16 percent, "average" by 34 percent, and "below average" by 30 percent. The morality of British foreign policy was ranked "above average" by 29 percent, "average" by 33 percent, and "below average" by 19 percent.



Azerbaijanis’ responses to the questions were definitely influenced by the conflict in Georgia. Russia often received low scores on their foreign policy by the public in Azerbaijan and Georgia, but the negative assessment of the foreign policies of the United States and France can be partially explained by the weak and unprofessional response of these countries to the situation in Georgia.<sup>7</sup> One could also argue that U.S. foreign policy was broadly unpopular in the world during that period of time mainly because of its Afghanistan and Iraq policies. Nevertheless, the Azerbaijani public has not been very critical of U.S. action in Iraq or Afghanistan; there have been no protests to the deployment of Azerbaijani soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the Azerbaijani public accused the United States of applying double standards to its foreign

policy. This was particularly true in the public perception of the U.S. stance on the Karabakh war and the West’s general support of Armenia. That the West did not protect Georgia during the conflict will likely harden this perception. Average Azerbaijanis could legitimately ask the question: “If the West did not support the Christian and democratic Georgia, would it ever come to the aid of a Muslim and democratic Azerbaijan?” This fear was further illustrated in other surveys conducted by World Public Opinion. A public poll conducted from July to Sep-

tember 2008, surveying 600 people, found that 25 percent of Azerbaijanis surveyed believed that the United States opposes democracy in the Muslim world, whereas 59 percent stated that the United States favors democracy in Muslim countries, but only if the government cooperates with the United States. Only 9 percent were sure that the United States favors democracy in Muslim countries, whether or not the government is cooperative with the United States. In those countries polled, including Azerbaijan, the United States is widely seen as hypocritically failing to abide by international law while pressing other countries to do so. Of the Azerbaijani respondents, 78 percent believed that the United States tries to promote international law for other countries, but is hypocritical because it often does not follow rules itself. Only 19 percent believed that the Washington has been an important leader in promoting international laws and sets a good example by following them. Meanwhile, the United States is widely perceived by Azerbaijanis as showing disrespect toward Muslim countries. Twelve percent responded that the U.S. mostly shows respect to the Islamic world; 47 percent of the respondents said that the U.S. is often disrespectful to the Islamic world out of ignorance and insensitivity. A significant 37 percent of respondents believed the United States purposely tries to humiliate the Islamic world. Respondents who believed that the goal of the United States is to “maintain control over the oil resources of the Middle East” amounted to 92 percent.<sup>8</sup> Given the developments during and after the conflict in Georgia, it is difficult for the Azerbaijani public to continue to support Euro–Atlantic integration and NATO membership wholeheartedly. Instead, it is likely that Azerbaijan will further soften its approach and maintain good relations with Moscow.

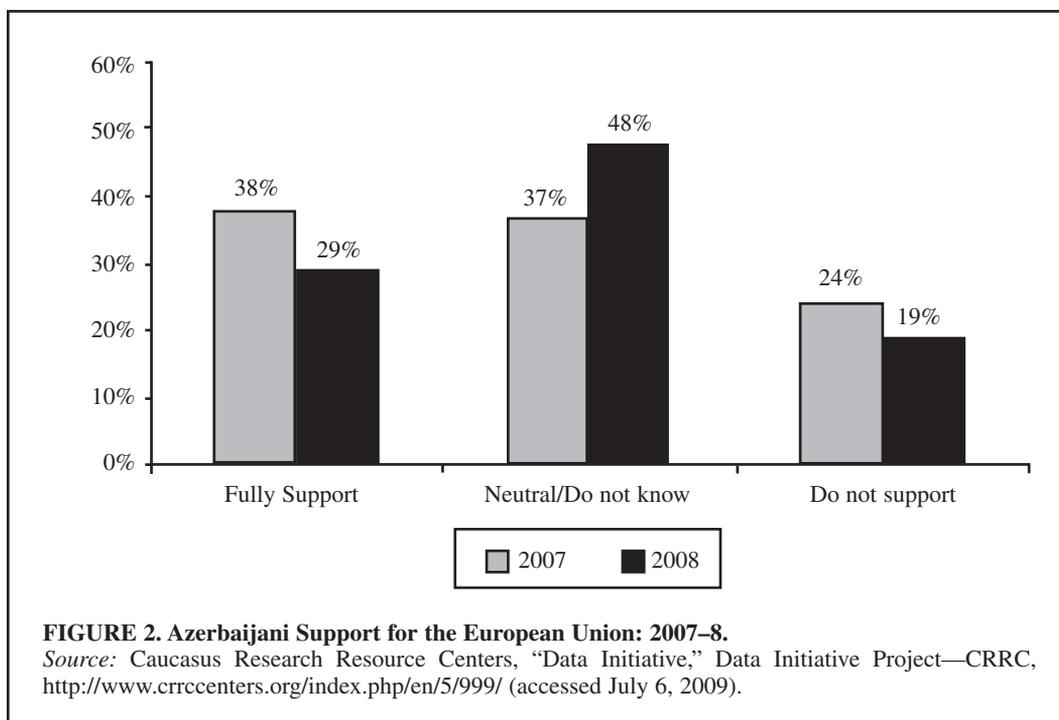
Azerbaijanis also changed their perception of the EU. For years, Azerbaijanis viewed the EU through the prism of its relations with Turkey, and statements such as “the EU is a Christian club” were very popular in the country. Azerbaijanis nevertheless consider

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themselves to be a part of Europe, and a large portion of the public supports becoming part of the EU (see figure 2). Seeing the warm relations between Georgia and the EU, as well as Saakashvili's promises to join the body, gave Azerbaijanis the incorrect impression that Georgia enjoys the same status as the Baltic countries did on the eve of their accession to the EU.<sup>9</sup> EU member states' weak reactions, with the exception of Poland and the Baltic states, shocked the Azerbaijani public, and their trust in the EU significantly decreased. As seen in figure 2, the public's trust in the EU dropped from 38 percent in 2007 to 29 percent in 2008. However, the share of people who do not trust the EU dropped only a few percentage points. The figure shows that a plurality of people—48 percent—are undecided or neutral about trusting the EU.<sup>10</sup> The polls show that the Azerbaijani public did not necessarily become skeptical of the EU but did become more confused about the role of this organization in the Caucasus.

A large amount of information on the conflict in Azerbaijan came from the local media that broadly covered the war from its very beginning. The majority of newspapers and news agencies—independent, oppositional, and even some pro-governmental—were supportive of Georgia. In the war's initial stages, the local media gave a positive assessment of the official actions of Tbilisi.<sup>11</sup> This supportive coverage was understandable; Baku saw the war in South Ossetia as a template for the solution of the Karabakh conflict. Nevertheless, most Azerbaijanis obtained information about the conflict through the Georgian media. Azerbaijani newspapers republished reports from Georgian Web sites and rebroadcast video coverage shot by Georgian television stations. Even Azerbaijan's own Tbilisi-based correspondents provided information reported by the Georgian media without actually being present at the site where the events were taking place.<sup>12</sup> The absence of Russian television broadcasting in Azerbaijan made it impossible to deliver the Russian version



of the war. In contrast to the public of Central Asia, Armenia, Belorussia, and Ukraine, the general public in Azerbaijan received little balanced information, and opinions were shaped by a one-sided flow of information. The lack of balanced information, parallels between Southern Ossetia and Karabakh, and the perception of Georgia as an ally of Azerbaijan prevented a split in public opinion about Georgian actions in South Ossetia from developing. Opposition leaders in Baku, meanwhile, were outspoken in their condemnation of the Kremlin's behavior. "Georgia is being punished for its NATO aspirations and its democratic choice," said Sulhaddin Akper, one of the deputy chairs of the Musavat Party. He urged swift action by the United States and NATO to bolster Georgia.<sup>13</sup> Vafa Quluzade, an Azerbaijani political analyst and former presidential adviser, called for full support of Georgia and refusal to let Russia replace Saakashvili with a pro-Russian government in Georgia, blaming the fighting on an effort by Moscow to change the government in Tbilisi.<sup>14</sup> In response to Russian actions in Georgia and the Kremlin's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a group of public organizations in Azerbaijan issued a joint statement, calling the Russian government's actions the culmination of Moscow's efforts to annex Georgian territories. The statement called on the Azerbaijani government to assist Georgia and not to yield to blackmail and threats from imperial circles in Russia. It also called on Azerbaijani civil society to help Georgian resistance to the Russian aggression and to collect funds for the Georgian population.<sup>15</sup>

Youth organizations and individuals participated in rallies outside the Russian Embassy in Baku in support of Georgia. Some attendees at rallies carried placards with slogans such as "Stop Russian Aggression" and "Russia: Get Out of The Caucasus."<sup>16</sup> Most of the protests were quickly dispersed by police. At the height of anti-Georgian hysteria in Russia, the Azerbaijani government did not want to be another scapegoat for the Russian media.

### **Relations with Russia**

Despite the competition and rivalry between Russia and Azerbaijan, and their spurious accusations, the countries maintained positive relations. Azerbaijan is the only country in the former Soviet Union that, in the language of the Russian political scientists, cannot be considered either "pro-Russian" or "pro-Western." Azerbaijan demonstrated its commitment to building solid neighborly relations with Russia. Despite the fact that Georgia and Azerbaijan are united by their security concerns and their perception of Russia's dominant role in the region, their individual ways of dealing with Russia differ. Azerbaijan takes post-Soviet Russian sensitivities into account and chooses soft and respectful language in bilateral relations. It prefers not "to trouble the trouble"<sup>17</sup> while not sacrificing its general political course of integration into the West. This prevents Russia from taking openly aggressive steps toward Azerbaijan but also does not promote resolution of the Karabakh conflict, progress in the state, or regional security.<sup>18</sup> Within that, Russia still has an important and significant tool for affecting its domestic policy: the large number of Azerbaijani immigrants working in Russia. Official statistics estimate that 62,800 ethnic Azerbaijanis migrated to Russia between 1989 and 1999. According to Russia's 2002 national census, 621,500 ethnic Azerbaijanis live in fifty-five administrative entities of the Russian Federation, which makes 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 million and 1.8 million. These estimates also include seasonal work-

ers or Azerbaijanis who live in Russia on a temporarily basis. According to Ruslan Grinberg, director of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Science, private remittances sent from Russia to Azerbaijan are somewhere between U.S.\$1.8 billion and \$2.4 billion every year.<sup>19</sup> This figure comprises almost one-fifth of Azerbaijan's budget or 15–20 percent of the spending of the average Azerbaijani family. The loss of these remittances could increase the poverty in Azerbaijan and financially strain the government's social security system.

Before and after the Russia–Georgia war, Azerbaijanis on both sides of the border feared that Russia could use the “immigration weapon” against Azerbaijan, just as it had with

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Georgia. It would be devastating for Azerbaijan to have tens of thousands of Azerbaijanis deported from Russia, and the massive influx of these immigrants would significantly increase unemployment. Additionally, many deported migrant workers typically do not return to their native villages but move to the cities instead, especially to Baku; an influx of these workers would contribute to social instability. Also, the loss of remittances that fuel Azerbaijan's rural regions would negatively impact the economic conditions

of a large share of population. Together, all these factors would exacerbate undesirable tensions in society.

Despite the negative attitude Azerbaijanis have for the Russian army's actions in Georgia, the average citizen—especially those dependent on Russian remittances—understands the country's dependence on its powerful neighbor, and continues to view Russia with a certain respect. A 2007 poll held by the Caucasus Research Resource Center found that 80.6 percent of the 2,075 Azerbaijanis surveyed approve being friends with Russia (19.4 percent disapprove), whereas 82.1 percent approve of doing business with Russia. Asked about their perception of economic cooperation, 33.8 percent of the respondents support full economic cooperation with Russia, whereas only 2.4 percent want no economic cooperation with this country. By comparison, 34.3 percent of those surveyed support Azerbaijan's full economic integration with the EU, whereas 33.5 percent of them support full economic and political cooperation with the United States. Meanwhile, only 24.9 percent support full economic cooperation with Georgia.<sup>20</sup>

However, when Azerbaijanis are asked about political cooperation with Russia, most of those surveyed opposed deep political connections with Russia and very often considered Russia an unfriendly state. Between April and June 2008, the Russian Center for Public Opinion Studies conducted a survey in thirteen countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The results of the polls did not come as a surprise. Of all surveyed Azerbaijani citizens, 39 percent stated that none of the CIS or Baltic states are friendly toward Azerbaijan; 21 percent considered Georgia friendly and 20 viewed Ukraine as a friendly state. Only 12 percent considered Russia friendly. Only 4 percent of the surveyed citizens considered Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Latvia, and Lithuania friendly.

Thirty-one percent wished to unite with Turkey, 24 percent wanted to join the EU, and only 13 percent wanted to unite with Russia or Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> Remembering Moscow’s negative role in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict and Russian military support for Armenia, it is not surprising that most Azerbaijanis opposed any political cooperation with Russia. At the same time, in the mind of most Azerbaijanis, political cooperation with Russia contrasts sharply with cooperation with the EU or the United States. Most consider political cooperation with Russia as a major step toward the establishment of Russian military bases in the country and the loss of independence. Meanwhile, cooperation with the EU is seen as one of the steps to improve Azerbaijan’s economic condition and resolve the Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijanis’ attitude toward political cooperation with Russia was exacerbated by the war. In January of 2009 the Azerbaijani media reported that Russia shipped U.S.\$800 million worth in arms to Armenia. Although the Russian political establishment refuted this information, the scandal did not increase Azerbaijani sympathy for Russia. Moreover, it neutralized all efforts of the Russian government to win back the Azerbaijani public and restore its image, which was spoiled after the war with Georgia.<sup>22</sup>

It is unlikely that the average Azerbaijani’s attitude toward Russia has changed significantly because of the war. The events in Georgia definitely shook Azerbaijan’s political establishment and altered their perception of Russia, but for the average citizen, the perception of Russia from an economic perspective changed only slightly, if at all. Despite Azerbaijanis’ negative attitude toward Russia’s actions in Georgia, this attitude did not spill over to alter longstanding habitual perceptions, particularly in the economic sphere. Politically, Azerbaijanis remain cautious about Russia because of its stance in Karabakh conflict and its military support of Armenia.

### **Security Issues after the War**

Security issues and the possibility of political instability after the Five-Day War became the major concern for the Azerbaijani government. For years, the government was praised for maintaining stability and security. However, the events following the war showed that stability in Azerbaijan could be violated by various forces. On August 17, 2008, less than ten days after the end of the war, the Azerbaijani public was shocked by the bombing of Baku’s Abu-Bakr mosque. Three people were killed and 13 were wounded. Witnesses claimed that a young man threw a grenade into the mosque where as many as 200 people were praying. The assailant was able to evade arrest despite attempts to capture him. The minister of national security and the minister of internal affairs immediately visited the scene of the attack while Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev took special control of the investigation.<sup>23</sup> Gamat Suleymanov, the imam of the mosque (who was wounded in the bombing and is believed to have been the main target of the attack), stated that the incident was directed toward disturbing stability in the country. However, he did not point to a specific group that could be behind the bombing.<sup>24</sup> The public did not associate the bombing with any single organization. Experts on the region, the media, and public officials offered various versions.<sup>25</sup> The public ultimately settled on two possible culprits responsible for the Abu-Bakr attack—external (i.e., Russia) and internal (i.e., radicals from the Salafi community). The fact that the bombing happened at the height of the Russia–Georgia War in Abkhazia and South Ossetia revived old fears that Russia could destabilize the situation in Azerbaijan. If Russia was responsible for the attack, the bombing could be interpreted as a warning to Azerbaijan not to intervene in the conflict with Georgia. The opposition

Musavat Party even issued a statement that did not explicitly exclude Russian involvement in these events.<sup>26</sup> Some politicians, such as Oqtay Atakhan, leader of the marginal Humanistic Party of Azerbaijan, said that Russia would have benefited from the U.S.–Iranian conflict and that the Russians may have been behind the bombing of the mosque, hoping to escalate U.S.–Iranian tension.<sup>27</sup> These concerns are justified. During its short period of independence, Azerbaijan had seen several successful and unsuccessful Russian attempts to destabilize the country. In 1993 and 1994, the Russian establishment was involved in coups, instigating mutiny, assassinations, and assisting radical organizations. However, a sober analysis would show that Russia could hardly be behind such an attack. Despite the history of Russian involvement in Azerbaijan's domestic situation, Moscow is not especially interested in destabilizing it. The Azerbaijani establishment is not hostile to Russia, so it is not expedient for Russia to be unfriendly to its neighbor. If the attack was intended to inflame sectarian violence, it failed to take the secular nature of Azerbaijani society and the relative absence of religious rivalries into account. In fact, the bombing was most likely the result of a struggle inside Baku's Salafi community between Abu-Bakr–associated leaders and a group of radical Salafists. The latter likely carried out the bombing because of their disagreement with the Abu-Bakr mosque's policies.

In any case, the bombing became the first terrorist attack committed in a sacred place in Azerbaijan. Although it is unlikely to lead to the levels of sectarian violence experienced in Iraq or Pakistan, it was nevertheless a serious warning to Azerbaijani authorities not to ignore local radicalism by treating it as an external, rather than an internal, problem. Despite the radicals' failed attempt to instigate sectarian violence, the timing of the bombing was perfectly chosen by the terrorists. In the aftermath of the Russia–Georgia War, the Azerbaijani government became fearful of any attempts to destabilize the situation. Thus, instead of dealing with the problem through legal measures, authorities shut down the mosque. Fearing that there could be another attack, the authorities dispersed the Salafi community to prevent them from becoming a target.<sup>28</sup>

In the war's aftermath, leaflets promoting the Zagatala and Balakan regions' secession from Azerbaijan and the declaration of a Zagatala–Balakan republic were distributed in northern Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani law enforcement agencies, fearing separatist movements in the north, took drastic measures to maintain control. Within the next few months, a total of twenty–five members of the Forest Brothers, a Salafi radical organization, were arrested and charged with bombing the Abu-Bakr mosque in Baku. They were detained as a result of the counterterrorism operations in the Qusar region of Azerbaijan. The Ministry of National Security carried out a special operation to prevent further criminal activities. Thirteen people were arrested and held criminally responsible because of these urgent measures. Many firearms, military supplies, explosive materials, maps, and other equipment belonging to the Forest Brothers have been brought to light and confiscated.<sup>29</sup> Ilgar Mollachiyev, one of the leaders of the group, was killed in Russia by Russian law enforcement agencies.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the situation has remained difficult. The newspaper *Baku Khabar* stated that Russian passports were being distributed by Russian authorities among the citizens of northern Azerbaijan, highlighting the fact that all these actions started to appear after the Russia–Georgia War.<sup>31</sup> It is believed that to keep Azerbaijan under control, Russian forces tried to play the separatism card in the Zagatali region. Gabil Huseynli, a political scientist from Baku, believes that the Special Service of Russia is inflaming tensions in the Caucasus, noting that information on distribution of passports among

ethnic minorities demonstrates Moscow's intentions toward Azerbaijan.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the same newspaper, *Baku Khabar*, reported on the distribution of Russian passports to migrants from Azerbaijan. The newspaper stressed that even Azerbaijanis from southern parts of the country receive Russian citizenship. These actions by the Russian government may be directed against Azerbaijani statehood. Taking into consideration the recent distribution of Russian passports among citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and using this card as pretext for invading Georgia in the name of "saving Russian citizens," the Azerbaijani public took this information very seriously. It is quite possible that the information is just speculation, but nevertheless it is possible that Russia could use the Georgian territories' precedent in Azerbaijan, too.<sup>33</sup> However, other experts believe that the distribution of Russian passports among Azerbaijanis is not particularly dangerous and instead serves to address Russia's demographic problems. Alovzat Aliyev, the head of the Migration Center of Azerbaijan, claims that Azerbaijanis working in Russia and at the Azerbaijani-owned Qabala radar station are themselves interested in receiving Russian citizenship because it would facilitate their trips to Russia and back.<sup>34</sup>

Fear of Russia's attempts to destabilize the situation in Azerbaijan were revived again in mid-February 2009, when a commander of the Azerbaijan Air Defense, Lieutenant-General Rail Rzayev, was killed by a gunman in Baku. Months of investigation did not reveal any information about the motives or profiles of the murderer or murderers. Rzayev became the most senior official in the country to have been killed since the 1990s. Military analyst Uzeir Jafarov said that "Rzayev was the focal point for air force and air defense military acquisitions and the largest part of Azerbaijan's military budget is being allocated for acquisitions in these spheres."<sup>35</sup> Rzayev was also in the center of negotiations between Russia and the United States over the use of the Qabala Radar Station in northern Azerbaijan. In 2007, Russia offered to share Qabala station, which it leases from Azerbaijan, with the United States in exchange for the United States halting its plans to deploy a radar station in Czech Republic and missile interceptors in Poland. The murder of the general coincided with the Kyrgyz government's decision to expel the United States from Manas Air Base and with U.S. negotiations to establish a base in Azerbaijan. Newspapers speculated that the murder was in Russia's interest, sending a signal to Baku to be careful with what countries it allows to have bases in its territory.

Despite the fact that the war between Georgia and Russia largely quieted Azerbaijan's hawks, it nevertheless reinforced the positions of those arguing for increasing military expenditures or keeping them at the same high level. Thanks to the windfall of oil profits, Azerbaijan has increased its defense expenditures from \$135 million in 2003 to \$1.85 billion in 2008.<sup>36</sup> Although Baku announced a planned 10 percent cut in defense spending in the 2009 state budget, Azerbaijan is likely to maintain a high level of defense spending at least until oil revenues begin to decline.<sup>37</sup> Considering the history of Russia supplying arms to Armenia and the continued militarization of Karabakh, Azerbaijan's reliance on military expenditures could be interpreted as adopting the slogan "we will spend you to the ground." Azerbaijan's arms race is mostly directed at increasing the Armenian economy's military burden, especially in a time of crisis. However, such policy would work only if Armenia spends a high proportion of its budget on military acquisitions. However, most of its arms come from Russia for a low price or for free. Thus, an arms race has little impact on the Armenian economy.

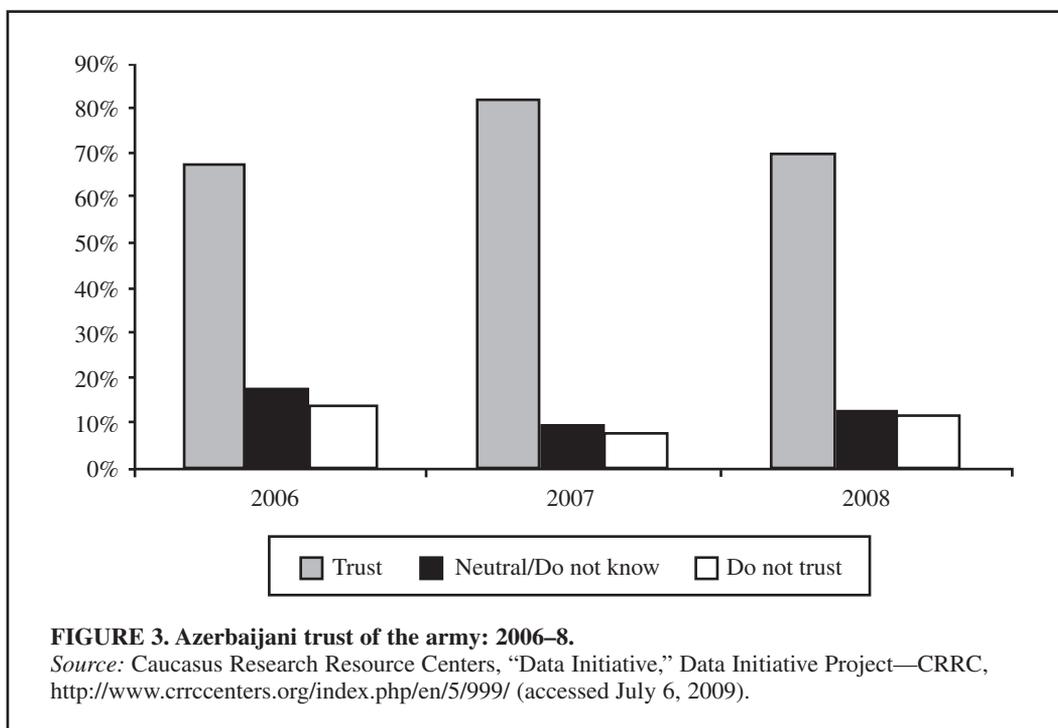
The Five-Day War and Russia's ability to crush the Georgian army created some doubts in Azerbaijani society that its national army would be able to protect Azerbaijan from an

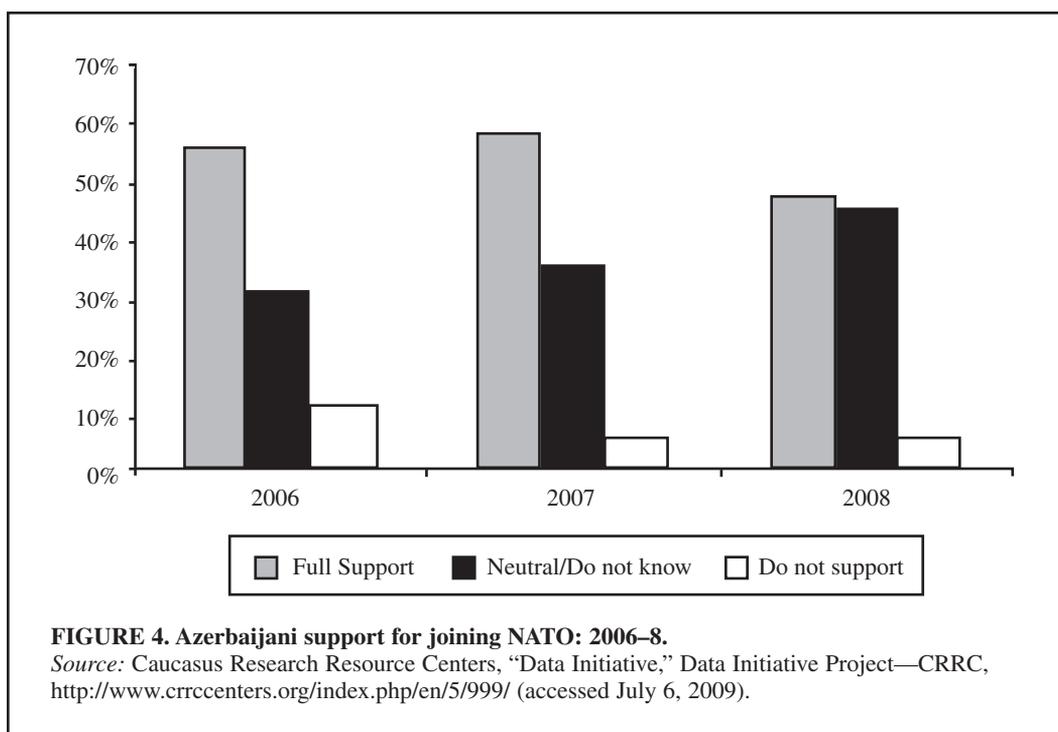
invasion. The public's trust in the army peaked in 2007, reaching 81 percent (up from 68.4 percent in 2006), but the events in Georgia damaged the public's perception of the army, and the trust levels dropped back to the same level as in 2006 (see figure 3). The war also affected Azerbaijan's public support for NATO membership. Support for NATO membership in 2006–7 was between 58 percent and 60 percent. In 2008, support had dropped to 48 percent (see figure 4). However, the decrease in support for NATO membership does not necessarily indicate that the public has become distrustful of NATO. In fact, the share of people who do not support NATO membership has remained the same at 6 percent. Instead, 45 percent of those polled were neutral on this issue (see figure 4). This shift can be explained by the fact that a significant segment of the Azerbaijani public is still undecided about possibility of joining NATO.<sup>38</sup>

The Russia–Georgia War also accelerated the first-ever adoption of a military doctrine for Azerbaijan. Since 2005 experts in parliament and the military have been discussing the possibilities of developing and adopting a new doctrine that would take relations with neighboring countries, the situation in the region as a whole, and Azerbaijan's security issues into consideration. In mid-February 2009, the Parliamentary Commission on Security and Defense member Zahid Oruj stated that the new military doctrine of Azerbaijan has been drafted and will be discussed at a parliamentary session in the near future. He noted that NATO gave positive feedback on the doctrine.<sup>39</sup>

### The Impact of the War on Political Development

The marginalization of political parties and the absence of a vibrant and active civil society in Azerbaijan caused the Russia–Georgia War to have little impact on the country's political development. It seems that the war did not influence the country's development and





stability, and its neutrality was preserved. For political scientists researching Azerbaijan it is very difficult to measure the changes in political development for the period after the war. Most of the measurements involve qualitative assessment and biased approaches. Few quantitative indexes or measures are available for political scientists. One of the often-cited indexes is *Foreign Policy*'s Failed States Index, which assesses sovereign states based on the total scores of twelve indicators that are grouped into three categories: social indicators, economic indicators, and political/military indicators. For each indicator, the ratings are placed on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being the lowest intensity (most stable) and 10 being the highest intensity (least stable). The total score is the sum of the twelve indicators and is on a scale of 0 to 120. Table 1 shows Azerbaijan's trends in the index for each category between 2006 and 2009.<sup>40</sup>

Azerbaijan's position has worsened in almost every category between 2008 and 2009. Azerbaijan's indicator scores for demographic pressure and refugees and displaced persons increased by 0.4 points each. With the constant growth of population and decreasing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), one would expect the indicators to have improved. Moreover, the trends for 2008–9 suggest that the pressure from the demography, refugees, and IDPs remained constant or even decreased. The sudden and significant increase in pressure could be attributed to the influx of refugees from Georgia who entered Azerbaijan. By some estimates, there are up to 300,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Georgia. Although the military actions did not take place in the areas populated by Azerbaijanis, an unidentified number of people fled to Azerbaijan. At the same time, the Russian government's campaign against the Georgian immigrants in Russia also affected Azerbaijan. Many ethnic Azerbaijanis from Georgia live and work in Russia; when the Russian government started persecuting Georgian immigrants, many ethnic

TABLE 1. Failed States Index Score, Azerbaijan: 2006–9

Year	Social Indicators				Economic				Political/Military				
	Total score	Demographic pressure	Refugees and internally displaced persons	Group grievance	Human flight	Uneven development	Economy	Legitimacy of state	Public services	Human rights	Security apparatus	Factorialized elites	External intervention
2006	81.9	6.0	8.1	7.3	5.0	7.5	5.9	8.1	6.5	6.0	7.0	7.5	7.0
2007	81.2	6.0	7.5	7.3	5.3	7.4	6.3	7.8	6.0	6.4	7.2	7.5	6.5
2008	81.0	6.0	7.8	7.3	5.3	7.0	5.9	8.1	5.5	6.9	7.2	7.5	6.5
2009	84.6	6.4	8.2	7.9	5.7	7.4	6.1	8.2	5.5	7.0	7.3	7.9	7.0

*Note:* The index rank is based on the total scores of the twelve indicators that are grouped into three categories—social, economic and political/military. For each indicator, the ratings are placed on a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being the lowest intensity (i.e., most stable) and 10 being the highest intensity (i.e., least stable). The total score is the sum of the twelve indicators and is on a scale of 0–120.

*Source:* Fund for Peace, "Azerbaijan," [http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=340&Itemid=501](http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=340&Itemid=501) (accessed July 2, 2009).

Azerbaijanis who have Georgian passports were deported back to their homeland. The lack of employment opportunities in Georgia forced these people to move to Azerbaijan, putting additional pressure on the Azerbaijani job market and increasing social tensions. Another indicator of particular interest is external intervention. This is defined as “military or paramilitary engagement in the internal affairs of the state at risk by outside armies, states, identity groups or entities that affect the internal balance of power or resolution of the conflict.”<sup>41</sup> In that indicator, Azerbaijan’s rating increased by 0.5 points (see table 1). Considering that there were no significant clashes in the Karabakh front line and no other paramilitary activities in Azerbaijan for this period, the change in ranking is attributable to the Russia–Georgia War.

Few events since August 2008 suggest that Baku took a road of Russian appeasement. Thus, when a popular Azerbaijani news Web site, Day.Az, abruptly stopped operating in February 2009, many were surprised.<sup>42</sup> The Web site irritated Russian ruling circles, and during the Russia–Georgia War, Day.Az took an oppositional position to Russia’s actions in Georgia, running anti-Russian statements and articles. During the war, the Russian government expressed its dissatisfaction with Day.Az’s coverage of the events in Georgia. Additionally, a couple of days before the Web site’s closure, the site published an interview in which Boris Berezovski, a famous Russian oligarch, blasted Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin and his team. Berezovski claimed Putin was deeply corrupt and his personal financial assets totaled at least \$40 billion in foreign accounts. Berezovski also said Russia was not interested in solving the conflict in Kharabakh. Ali Hasanov, chief of the presidential administration’s public-political department, said that the authorities had no information on the reason the site closed. However, he stated that in general, Azerbaijan has friendly relations with Russia and cannot remain indifferent to any false information about heads of state and government. He did not exclude the possibility of the closure of any site for that reason.<sup>43</sup> The Web site returned a few weeks later.

However, since the closure, the site’s criticism of Russia softened, and no information critical of the Russian political establishment has been published. Local Azerbaijani newspapers speculated that the Russian government demanded that the Azerbaijani government punish Day.Az and Baku complied by shutting down the site altogether.<sup>44</sup> They argued that the fear of aggravating relations forced the Azerbaijani government to meet the demands of the Russian government. In fact, fear alone cannot explain the Azerbaijani government’s actions. The growing belief that the Russian model of governance, rather than the Western one, is more suitable for Azerbaijan must also be taken into consideration. Several political scientists analyzing democratic development in the southern Caucasus after the Russia–Georgia War stated that one could see that the “fulcrum of power was shifting away from the Western liberal democratic world toward a new nationalistic, authoritarian group of states led by Russia and China.”<sup>45</sup> The Russia–Georgia War reinforced the Russian model of governance that was described by Oleksandr Sushko as the “prevalence of shadow politics instead of transparent ones, bureaucracy-controlled economy instead of liberal regulation, a strong connection between business and politics (oligarchy phenomenon) instead of separation of business from politics, and a large and inefficient state apparatus instead of a lean administration and weak judiciary system.”<sup>46</sup>

In the eyes of average Azerbaijanis and elites, by defeating the democratic West, the authoritarian Russia became a role model for the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Such an attitude is understandable. Democratic ideas and the principles of a market

economy have never been deeply rooted in Azerbaijan. In a Life in Transition survey taken by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in August–October 2006, 33 percent of the Azerbaijanis surveyed stated that democracy and a market economy are the preferred political and economic systems. For 39 percent, it did not matter which system is in place; 3 percent preferred an authoritarian political system paired with a market economy. Only 2 percent of those surveyed preferred an authoritarian system with a planned economy and 5 percent preferred a democracy with a planned economy. For 18 percent of those surveyed, all other combinations were preferable. Although support for democracy and a market economy is high, alienation from the political and economic system is also evident, with 40 percent believing that the type of political and economic system does not matter.<sup>47</sup> Thus, it is not in the Azerbaijani establishment's interest to discredit the Russian government and elites.

Moving away from the West and remaining a hostage of fear, Azerbaijan is actually following the scenario drafted by Moscow to impose its concept of sovereign democracies on the CIS. Sovereign democracy can be understood as political life of the society, where the executive powers, authorities and decisions are decided and controlled by a diverse Russian nation. This means achieving welfare, freedom and fairness by all citizens, social groups and nationalities. As Ivan Krastev notes, managed democracy has its origin in the Kremlin's conception of the Orange Revolution, which is referred to as "Orange Technologies" in Kremlin terms.<sup>48</sup> This line can be traced back to a statement by the Kremlin's chief ideologist, Vladislav Surkov, in February 2006.<sup>49</sup> Sovereign democracy, in his view, is Moscow's response to the dangerous combination of populist pressure from below and international pressure from above that destroyed the regimes of Leonid Kuchma and Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, and Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan. As Dimitri Furman brilliantly stated:

Managed democracies are actually a soft variant of the Soviet system. The Russian system's democratic camouflage demands partnership with the West. However, the authoritarian, managed content of our system dictates the exact opposite. A safety zone for our system means a zone of political systems of the same kind of managed democracies that we are actively supporting in the CIS and, insofar as our forces allow, everywhere—in Serbia, the Middle East, even Venezuela. The Soviet Union's policy might seem quixotic. Why spend so much money in the name of "proletarian internationalism?" But if you do not expand, you contract. The same could be said about our policy toward [Aleksandr] Lukashenko's regime [in Belarus]. The system of managed democracy in Russia will perish if Russia is besieged on all sides by unmanaged democracies. Ultimately it will once again be a matter of survival. The West cannot fail to support the establishment of systems of the same type as the West's, which means expanding its safety zone. We cannot fail to oppose this. Therefore the struggle inside the CIS countries is beginning to resemble the Russian–Western conflict.<sup>50</sup>

Following the scenario offered by sovereign democracy a few months after the war, the Azerbaijani parliament initiated a referendum that was held on March 18, 2009, introducing changes to the constitution. A major amendment lifted the presidential term limit, allowing a person to run for the office more than twice.<sup>51</sup> One major reason for initiating the referendum lifting the term limit was fear that a change in the government in 2013, or even the possibility that the current government might leave power, could be enough

to stimulate instability in the country. Ilham Aliyev clearly saw that possible discussions about or expressed intention to leave the office could work against his government. From this viewpoint, Aliyev’s securing the presidency for a third term would alleviate the public’s security concerns and allow his government to concentrate on other social and economic problems. Although the government would likely have introduced the changes to the constitution even without the August war, the Georgian crisis nevertheless added to the public’s fears and reinforced the government’s decision to initiate the referendum. Besides the security concerns, a few other factors helped the Azerbaijani government hold the referendum and introduce new constitutional amendments. One of the most important factors is Aliyev’s personal popularity, which was bolstered during the Georgian crisis. The ability of the Azerbaijani government to preserve neutrality brought the level of trust in the president to a record 82 percent.<sup>52</sup>

After the August crisis, experts and analysts were concerned that Azerbaijan could be the next target of a Russian attack. Looking at the war as some kind of geopolitical battle between the West and Russia, the analysts considered the crisis a “Russian blow to the Caspian policy of the West.”<sup>53</sup> In fact, endangering the oil and gas projects in the Caucasus was not the Russian government’s objective. Russia’s reluctance to bomb oil and gas pipelines showed that Russia was not interested in disrupting the flow of energy resources. The main aim of the war was to eliminate or weaken the hostile Rose ideology on Russia’s southern borders. The Russia–Georgia War could be seen through the prism of a war of ideologies and the consequent victory of the Russian ideology. Azerbaijan, with a political system that is similar to Russia, does not represent a danger to Russia. Using various tools, from migrant pressure to security concerns, Russia can continue to shadow Azerbaijan and carefully look at the political development inside the country. Meanwhile, Russian policy with respect to the conflict in Karabakh can be defined as controlled instability. This policy is to foment, then manage, the conflicts; it casts Russia in the dual role of party to and arbiter of the conflicts; it frustrates the conflicts’ resolution (unless they are on terms that ensure Russia’s dominance over the whole of the affected country); it perpetuates a Russian military presence; it capitalizes on the geopolitical and socioeconomic consequences of mass ethnic cleansing (of Azerbaijanis from Karabakh and of Georgians from Abkhazia); it fosters state weakness and chaotic conditions in the target countries; it distracts these from the agenda of systemic reforms; and it discourages Western interest in developing organic ties with Azerbaijan.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

The marginalization of diverse political parties and the absence of viable opposition and civil society in Azerbaijan limited domestic politics to an inner elite development. The Russia–Georgia War did not affect Azerbaijan’s political parties and their development. The war did, however, significantly affect the public perceptions of Russia and its role in the Caucasus. The Russian intervention showed the Azerbaijani public Russia’s ability to restore its influence in the Caucasus. At the same time, the limited role of the West and the United States left an impression that the United States, and now the Obama administration in particular, are looking forward to restoring a positive relationship with Russia and will not sacrifice that relationship for Georgia’s (or Azerbaijan’s) sake. More important, the war reinforced the public perception of the advantages of the Russian model of governance over liberal and democratic systems. It is hard to predict how long Russia will continue to serve

as a model and how long Azerbaijani domestic politics will remain dormant. One thing is clear enough: through this conflict, Russia fulfilled its own agenda, forcing CIS countries to not only fear Russia, but also to adopt Russia's ideology and model of governance.

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