

A French View on the State of French-Azerbaijani Relations

Maxime Gauin

Locating the Problem

If we consider most of the countries with which Azerbaijan has cultivated a special relationship, it is quite visible that the relations between those countries and France have recently improved and that the problems, when they existed, have been reduced or fixed.

For example, since January 2021, the tensions between *France and Türkiye* have drastically decreased. The [joint naval exercises](#), in the context of NATO, have multiplied during the last three years, with an increasingly warm wording of the French Navy. The trial of the PKK's funding network in Paris ended with [jail sentences](#) in April 2023. The strong Turkish support for Ukraine, even before the invasion of February 2022 and the implementation of [bank sanctions](#) by Türkiye in 2024, have been appreciated. In 2022, Turkish imports from France increased by 18.8 percent and 2023 broke the absolute record of the bilateral trade.

Concerning *France and Hungary*, Emmanuel Macron [leads](#) the EU countries who advocate negotiations with the government of prime minister Viktor Orbán rather than threats of sanctions. Correspondingly, the ratification of the Finnish, then of the Swedish candidacies to NATO was a source of relief in Paris, like in other capital cities of NATO members.

Concerning *France and former Soviet republics*, Emmanuel Macron traveled to *Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan* [in November 2023](#) to sign a series of civilian and military contracts, with the clear aim to diminish the dependency of these Central Asian countries to Russia (the visit of François Hollande in December 2014 had the same aim and similar methods). Then, in March 2024, the President of *Moldova* (a member of GUAM) went to Paris and signed a series of military and civilian

Maxime Gauin is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University. He previously served as Scholar-in-Residence at the Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) in Ankara. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

agreements. The relations with *Georgia* are less easy, but the Georgian president Salomé Zourabichvili is a dual citizen (French-Georgian), in close touch with Paris, and like the other EU leaders, the French president found wiser to accept Georgia as an EU candidate in 2023.

Concerning *France and Azerbaijan*, however, the situation is not so straightforward. We can begin by providing three quotes by President Ilham Aliyev in reverse chronological order. On 23 April 2023 at ADA University, he said, “We cannot sit and wait, seeing how France, India, and Greece are weaponizing Armenia against us, and do it openly, demonstratively, and as if trying to prove something to us.” On 10 January 2023, he said, “if there is an idea to normalize this situation [with France], we will not be the ones initiating it.” And on 29 April 2022, he said, “Talking about overall political relations, I would say that they are normal. They are back to normal, I would say.”

Less than a month before Aliyev uttered the latter words, the French Council of State (i.e., the final instance court for administrative litigation) [had rejected](#) the last application of Saint-Étienne municipality, which had challenged the cancelation of its “charter of friendship” with Shusha by the tribunal of Lyon. There were certainly tensions in September-October 2022, in the context of the clashes at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, but the fact is that the Prague declaration on the mutual recognition of the territorial integrity was co-signed by President Aliyev, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and President Macron, causing a deep ire in the Armenian diaspora. In April 2023, French Minister of Foreign Affairs Catherine Colonna went to Baku to pay tribute to the victims of the Soviet repression of January 1990 and to meet her counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov. This visit caused virulent [insults](#) from Armenian nationalists.

However, in October 2023 Colonna ruined what she had built. After Azerbaijan’s successful “antiterrorist operation” and the subsequent departure of most of Karabakh’s ethnic-Armenian population provoked by the leaders of the vanishing separatist entity, it was understandable to help Pashinyan against an OAS-styled scenario. The Organisation armée secrète (OAS), mostly made up of settlers, tried to prevent the independence of Algeria in 1961-1962 by attempting to assassinate Charles de Gaulle, then, after the independence was proclaimed, a part of the OAS members persisted in their terrorist plans until the arrest of its last cell [in May 1965](#). However, two major errors were committed: Colonna went to Yerevan only, instead of visiting Baku as well; and she spoke about providing “support for Armenia” without adding something like the following formulation: “in order to reach a peace treaty based on the territorial integrity of both sides.” This was not her only gaffe in the autumn of 2023: Macron was very angry against her colorless reaction to the massacre of Israelis on 7 October 2023—her satirical depiction in the 11 October 2023 edition of *Le Canard enchaîné* certainly did not help her cause. She was thus replaced by Stéphane Séjourné in January 2024. He also replaced Rima Abdul Malak, the relatively pro-Armenian Minister of Culture with Rachida Dati, a member of the Association of the Friends of Azerbaijan.

No matter how deplorable Colonna's visit was, another advancement was accomplished with the Grenada declaration of October 2023, in the sense that Pashinyan agreed in writing for the first time on what constituted sovereign Azerbaijani territory (in square kilometers). This indicated a firm political commitment, if not exactly a legally-binding recognition, of all of Karabakh as belonging to Azerbaijan—it amounted to a de facto written promise to give back the last occupied villages (for more on this, click [HERE](#)). More concretely, the months following the Grenada declaration were marked by an unprecedented decrease of tensions along the non-delineated border between the two countries and by the [first mutual diplomatic support](#) between Yerevan and Baku, which paved the way for Azerbaijan to be elected President of COP29.

Another positive change is the fact that French media reactions were less one-sided in September 2023 than during the Second Karabakh War. After Azerbaijan's antiterrorist operation, Ambassador Leyla Abdullayeva gave interviews to TV5 Monde, France24, [France24 in English](#), France Info TV (all three are state-owned), and BFM TV; before this military measure, she had spoken on Sud Radio. President Aliyev's Representative for Special Assignments, Ambassador Elchin Amirbayov, gave [an interview](#) to Radio France (public radio). Elsa Vidal, chief of the Russian service of Radio France Internationale, [stated](#) to the public TV channel France 5 that the Azerbaijanis of Karabakh were victims of ethnic cleansing in 1992-1994, that four resolutions of the UN Security Council recognize Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, and that those who support the territorial integrity of Ukraine should also support that of Azerbaijan if they want to be consistent with their principles. She got some insults on Twitter, but other French journalists had been [threatened with death](#) for much less than that in 2020. This decrease of the Armenian nationalists' aggressiveness is partly due to the cumulative effect of a succession of military defeats (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023) and partly to [the sentence](#) of Loris Toufanian (a former leader of the Dashnak youth branch, now leader of a dissident group, Charjoum), in June 2023, for having damaged the entrance door of the Azerbaijani embassy in September 2022.

Actually, the internal crises in the Coordination Council of France's Armenian Associations (CCAF) only worsened. In Autumn 2021, the national leadership of the CCAF unilaterally cancelled the internal elections for the Parisian region, after the Armenian Revolutionary Federation suffered a crushing defeat. No new election has been organized so far, in blatant violation of internal statutes. Since this affair, the Parisian branch of the Hunchak party (which won the election) has been in open conflict with the ARF and Jean-Marc "Ara" Toranian (co-chair of the CCAF). But something new emerged. In March 2024, [a petition](#) signed by Hunchak members of whole France and also by Gérard Tcholakian (who has been the main lawyer of the ARF from 1980s to 2010) was published, criticizing the hostility of the ARF against the Pashinyan government and invoking the electoral legitimacy of the Armenian cabinet. This provoked [a new polemic](#) with the CCAF's national leadership.

Meanwhile, the “Pan-European Mobilization” (an initiative of the ARF only) for Karabakh on 27-28 January 2024 was a failure, both in terms of attendance and of media coverage—not only in France, but also in Belgium and in other EU member states. The image of a unified and fundamentally strong “Armenian lobby” in France is thus increasingly outdated.

The Armenian nationalists asked in 2022-2023 for a “humanitarian convoy” led—why not?—by Emmanuel Macron himself, but it never happened. They repeatedly asked for sanctions, but these demands were rejected. More recently, on 13 March 2024, a far-left member of the European Parliament Emmanuel Maurel [complained](#) that his amendment advocating the suspension of the EU-Azerbaijan gas agreement was rejected by a majority 16 votes, and that the 19 Macronist MEPs voted against this amendment, decisively acting to defeat it.

Designed to be Harmless: Military Material for Public Relation

The sale of military material by France to Armenia has raised considerable concerns in a part of the Azerbaijani media. These concerns are not fully justified, but to be fair, they could have been avoided if the French diplomacy had explained them clearly.

After the success of the October 2023 antiterrorist operation and the Grenada declaration, 21 Bastion infantry armored vehicles (out of 50 promised) arrived from France through Georgia. This needs to be properly contextualized. First, the Armenian forces lost at least 154 infantry armored vehicles during [the Second Karabakh War](#). So, even in including the promised vehicles (the rest may arrive only after the signature of the peace treaty), it does not even represent one-third of what Armenia had lost. Second, the Bastion belongs to the less heavy category of armored vehicle: those armed with one or several machine guns only—unlike infantry fighting vehicles, such as the French VBCIs or the American Bradleys, which have a cannon. Even more remarkably, [leaked photos](#) show that not only the option to have three machine guns instead of one has not been taken, but the machine guns normally present in any case had been removed by the French military before being sent to Armenia.

Another key aspect is that these Bastions had been refused by Ukraine because, unlike the *Véhicules de l'avant blindés* (VABs), which are appreciated by the Ukrainian army, the armor on the Bastions is considered insufficient. Actually, while the VAB has been [the standard carrier vehicle](#) of the French army until their current replacement by newer-generation vehicles (Serval and Griffon), the French army has not bought a single Bastion—literally. So far, this vehicle (not designed for mountainous warfare) has been used mostly in Africa—and to fight militias, rather than conventional armies. As a result, it is safe to conclude that this sale

could have any qualitative or quantitative effect on the military balance of power in the South Caucasus. In other words, the arms deal had been signed primarily to relieve Pashinyan's position against his Kremlin-linked opposition.

This assessment is even more applicable regarding other French arms sales. The Armenian army purchased 160 sniper rifles [from the PGM company](#). Beside the fact that the quantity is quite small, on the cover of its [April 2024 issue](#), the Dashnak monthly *France-Arménie* inadvertently demonstrated that this is not even a real military rifle. Indeed, the model sold is the Ultima ratio, namely the model designed for the police. The French police and gendarmerie have bought this model, but the French land army and Navy infantry never bought a single one. Similarly, the Israeli police's anti-terrorist unit [bought](#) Ultima ratio rifles, but the Israeli Defense Forces never did so. PGM makes a model for the military, the Hécate II, used by the French, Swiss, Polish, and Brazilian armies, but this model was not sold to Armenia. The Ultima ratio fires 7.62×51 mm ammunitions, yet the [Marauder](#) infantry vehicles produced since 2007 by the Azerbaijani defense industry, in partnership with South Africa, are in conformity with the NATO standard [Stanag 3](#). One of the conditions to satisfy this standard is to resist any 7.62×51 mm bullets, including those for sniper rifles, the most powerful. Yet, [the Hécate II](#), like the British Rangemaster [used by the Azerbaijani army](#), fires 12.7×99 mm bullets, which pierce the Stanag 3 armors. It is quite clear that the Ultima ratio can considerably reinforce the protection of Pashinyan and other Armenian officials against terrorists; but these rifles are hardly fit for the battlefield. Yet, Yerevan has nothing to hope from the other French company fabricating military rifles, Verney-Carron, which is quite busy with fulfilling [orders from Ukraine](#). As a result, Yerevan did not even bother asking them for anything.

The last item on the French armaments list is made of three radars Ground Master 200, including two that have actually been delivered. These radars are not compatible with the Soviet and Russian-made surface-to-air missiles possessed by the Armenian army and no contract with the short-range MBDA missiles adapted to these radars has been signed so far. As long as no such missiles arrive, this material is completely useless, except of course for the purposes of domestic politics. The contrast is absolute with the [satellites](#), radars, lasers, ammunitions, [thermal cameras](#), and electronic components sold by France to Azerbaijan from 2014 to 2022 (see [HERE](#) p. 70, [HERE](#) p. 90, [HERE](#) p. 88, and [HERE](#) p. 90 for more details)—all of which are compatible with the NATO-standard weapons purchased from Israel and Türkiye.

In addition, I note that the Armenian government also asked Safran (who, among others, fabricates the laser-guided bomb AASM, which has a range of more than 70 km and a margin of error inferior to one meter) for a contract of production under license, but the negotiations ended by a strictly negative reply from the French side. Dassault also rejected any deal with Armenia and Manurhin, a company specialized

in cartridge manufacturing machines, even refused to enter into any preliminary negotiations with Armenia.

These purely symbolic sales, combined with the rejection to sell anything more serious, have to be understood in the context of the war in Ukraine, the delay of further American contributions to Ukraine's war effort, repeated Russian threats on the [Baltic states](#) and France itself, and the Armenian contribution to the bypassing of Western sanctions against Russia.

Under such conditions, all pro-Western tendencies in the South Caucasus are being encouraged by France and other major Western powers, which suggests a strategy by the West to use the weakest South Caucasus state—i.e., Armenia—in its ongoing attempt to contain Russian ambitions. A concrete result of the foregoing was obtained when Pashinyan announced the end of Russian control over [Armenia's airspace](#) and some of its [land borders](#). Yet, Baku has nothing to fear: While the interest of Russia is, arguably, to prevent the signature of a peace treaty, the interest of Paris and Brussels is to facilitate it (this is, of course, different from tactically taking steps to be able to advance this interest successfully). Actually, far from having incited the Armenian government against Azerbaijan, the recent events had led Pashinyan to [reaffirm](#) his recognition of the Turkish-Armenian boundary and to a more conciliatory position vis-à-vis the delineation of the boundary with Azerbaijan, provoking, one more time, [the ire](#) of the ARF. In April 2024, he went further in his rejection of the dreams of “greater” or “historical” Armenia: “The real Armenia is the one that has an internationally recognized territory and internationally recognized borders and, realizing this fact, has the self-awareness of a full and respectable member of the international community.” This declaration has been followed, the same month, by the first demarcation of a part of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and by the peaceful return of parts of four of the eight Azerbaijani villages that remained occupied as of April 2023.

That having been said, French diplomacy did nothing to explain the actual scope and aims of these sales to the Azerbaijan, at least not publicly. This is a major error of communication and public diplomacy. Another major error was to accuse Azerbaijan of having aggressive designs on Armenia. If this is a French intelligence failure, the persons responsible should be moved to other positions. If the accusation was based on intelligence reports by allied agencies, then this too should be taken seriously by Paris. The end of the funding of SOCAR for the French high school of Baku (an ominous development, to be sure) may explain, at least for a part, the recall of the French ambassador in Azerbaijan in mid-April 2024 (she returned to Baku about a fortnight later). Another issue at the origin of this move is the incarceration of Martin Ryan, a French-British businessman who was forced by France's Directorate-General for External Security (DGSE) to spy against Iranians and Russians in Baku. A verdict covering the time already spent in jail would be a relief in Paris.

What Now?

Since 2017, the action of successive Azerbaijani ambassadors in Paris have been undermined by the absence of a serious public relations budget, which of course is predicated on having a coherent strategy. One element of this, which has not been stressed in the context of the French public, is Azerbaijan's engagement with Ukraine. There is an underreported story to be told, here.

One example on unexploited potentialities is particularly illuminating. Xavier Tytelman is a retired fighter jet pilot, currently the editor of *Air et Cosmos*, a regular contributor to the LCI channel, a personal friend of the chair of the Defense Committee of the National Assembly, and a fierce supporter of Ukraine since February 2022. His personal YouTube channel has 446,000 followers. Until the end of 2022, his (rare) comments on the conflict over Karabakh had been misguided, to speak euphemistically. Since the beginning of 2023, however, he has stopped criticizing Azerbaijan, started mentioning the material help of Baku for the Ukrainians, and ended his defense of the Armenian position. During a [conference](#) in March 2024, he mentioned Armenia only in the context of speaking about the country's "oligarchs who enrich themselves" in helping Russia to bypass Western sanctions and Azerbaijan only as an example to follow in terms of production of shells. Yet, as far as I can tell, he has never met any Azerbaijani diplomats, officials, or leaders of ethnic associations.

Barely used, too, is the Azerbaijani-Israeli alliance. Ambassador Abdullayeva gave an interview to Radio J in June 2023 and has a larger access to the Israeli-French TV channel i24, but the situation as a whole remains without possible comparison with the support of Jewish pro-Israeli American organizations for Azerbaijan. I [wrote](#) in 2023 about the grievances of French-Azerbaijanis against Jean-Pierre Allali, vice-president of the Association of the friends of Azerbaijan, who wrote a few articles in favor of the Azerbaijani position (although none during the Second Karabakh War), but is considerably more active in promoting the claims of Armenian nationalists against Türkiye. More than a year later, few alternatives have been explored. The fact that the [ARF is an ally of Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon and is the only ethnic-Armenian party allowed to [operate in Iran](#) remains virtually unknown among the French Jewish community. The collaboration of the ARF with the Nazis and the glorification of ARF leader Garegin Nzhdeh in independent Armenia is a bit more known [since 2020](#), but a lot of work remains to be done in this regard, too.

A more strictly diplomatic opportunity is the rapprochement of Paris with Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan, a country that has excellent relations with Baku.