

*History*

# Azerbaijani-Georgian Relations as a Model of Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation in the Caucasus (1991-2025)

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(Presented by Academy Member Liana Melikishvili)

**Abstract.** Against the background of contemporary global and regional transformations, the authors employ systemic, “ethnosolidarity,” and interdisciplinary approaches to comprehensively analyze Georgian-Azerbaijani interstate relations, drawing on methodological pluralism. Bilateral interaction is examined through the prism of national interests, security factors, the balance of power, and economic and transit feasibility. The study identifies the influence of socially constructed identities, historical experience, and normative value systems on the institutionalization of sustainable forms of cooperation. The research goal is to theoretically substantiate and conceptualize a rational and pragmatic model of interstate interaction based on the principles of a balanced, multi-vector foreign policy capable of ensuring the sustainability of bilateral relations in the context of a changing regional and global configuration. The paper demonstrates that Georgia and Azerbaijan, having restored their national independence and state sovereignty, have formed a sustainable model of interstate cooperation based on converging strategic interests in security, transit and economic development, thereby elevating bilateral relations to a qualitatively new strategic level. The role of identities, historical experience, and mutually reproducible norms of cooperation, institutionalized through the implementation of regional and international transport, energy, cultural, and educational projects, is analyzed. The authors conclude that the consistent practical implementation of the goals and objectives outlined in the paper can not only strengthen the pragmatic potential of Azerbaijani-Georgia relations but also imbue them with sustainable dynamism, creating a transit infrastructure space as a socially and politically constructed platform for peaceful interaction between regional and leading global powers. © 2026 *Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.*

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Georgia, Caucasus, economic cooperation, intercultural dialogue

## Introduction

In the current context of confrontation among major powers over the establishment of a new world order, it is important to study and forecast the

positions of small states and their willingness to defend their national interests and sovereignty.

The traditional good-neighborly relations between Azerbaijan and Georgia are shaped by their geographic location in the same region, shared

historical destinies, and cultural and civilizational affinities.

After the collapse of the USSR, Georgia and Azerbaijan, having restored their state sovereignty, established bilateral diplomatic relations and began institutionalizing their foreign policy activities. Both countries support each other's positions on many issues within international organizations, thereby protecting their national interests. Azerbaijan and Georgia must address global and regional challenges by diversifying their foreign policy activities.

Some aspects of Azerbaijani-Georgian relations have been examined by both regional and international scholars (Bağirova, 2013; Rəhmanzadə, 2008; Orucov & Şahməmmədov, 1996; Izoria, 2024; Ardashelia, 2018).

Having studied the importance of the Caucasus region in geo-economic projects related to China, E. Ismailov and V. Papava refer to cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia in the development of the Silk Road transport corridor as the "Caucasian Tandem" (Ismailov & Papava, 2018; Ismailov & Papava, 2007).

Professor R. Gachechiladze notes that in the 1990s, the leadership of Georgia and Azerbaijan laid the foundation for transport and energy projects, the implementation of which contributed to economic and, to some extent, political rapprochement between the two republics (Gachechiladze, 2023).

According to T. German and his colleagues, cooperation between Georgia and Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus contributed to the diversification of their foreign policy ties in western and eastern directions and to the implementation of transport projects, including the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). M. Gasimly notes that Georgia was viewed by Azerbaijan as a channel to Europe, while Azerbaijan played a similar role for Georgia in the Asian direction (German et al., 2023; Gasimly, 2016).

S. Cornell views Georgia and Azerbaijan as an East-West axis linking the Black and Caspian Seas and attributes tensions arising in their relationship primarily to external factors, including Russian and Western policies, emphasizing the significance of this partnership for Western interests in Eurasia (Cornell, 2019).

A. Krylov argues that since independence, the countries of the South Caucasus have lost the socioeconomic homogeneity of the Soviet period, exacerbating political and ideological differences and increasing the region's conflict potential. However, the experience of the early 1990s demonstrates that stable Georgian-Azerbaijani relations limited nationalist tendencies and external interference, facilitated by shared values and cultural foundations. The institutional expression of this approach was Georgia's adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in 2024 (Krylov, 2023; Melikishvili, 2011).

G. Turava highlights territorial disagreements, religious issues, and Georgia's policy toward the Azerbaijan minority as potential risks to the strategic partnership, noting that human rights issues should be considered within the context of civic nation-building and deepening social integration (Turava, 2022).

Despite the extensive body of research on Georgian-Azerbaijani relations, existing studies primarily focus on specific areas of cooperation and external factors of influence. The scientific novelty of this study lies in the development and conceptualization of a holistic model of interstate interaction between Azerbaijan and Georgia based on the principles of rationality and balanced multi-vectorality, allowing for a new assessment of the sustainability mechanisms of bilateral relations in a changing international environment. The research goal is to develop a theoretically grounded model of interstate interaction based on the principles of rationality and multi-vector foreign policy, aimed at maintaining stable bilateral relations amid dynamic regional and global changes. The methodo-

logical basis of the study is a systemic, “ethno-solidarity”, and interdisciplinary approach, which, using general scientific methods, analyzes the legal framework, key aspects of Azerbaijan-Georgia relations, and results for bilateral cooperation in the socio-economic sphere.

**Contractual and legal basis for cooperation.** In 1991, Azerbaijan and Georgia established a comprehensive legal framework comprising more than 120 bilateral documents. The agreements signed in 1996 by Presidents Heydar Aliyev and Eduard Shevardnadze were of particular importance. Those agreements institutionalized the strategic partnership and laid the foundations for long-term cooperation based on the principles of mutual security, interethnic harmony, and regional stability. A key element of this normative evolution was the 1997 “Baku Agreement,” which established a model for interstate, interethnic, and interfaith cooperation and institutionalized the principles of tolerance and mutual recognition (For International Harmony..., 1996; National Archive of Georgia, n.d.).

In the 2000s-2020s, the contractual framework was consistently expanded to include agreements in trade, transport, energy, security and defense, including cooperation within the NATO Partnership for Peace program and multilateral formats involving Turkey. The signing of a new package of bilateral documents in January 2025 demonstrates the continuity and adaptability of Georgian-Azerbaijani cooperation, allowing it to be regarded as a practical embodiment of a rational and pragmatic model of interstate interaction focused on sustainability in a transforming regional and global environment (Aliyeva, 2021; Sputnik Georgia, 2023; Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan, n.d.). It should also be noted that the Georgian leadership supported the conclusion of negotiations on a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2025. As early as 2022, Georgia proposed the “Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative” platform, positioning itself as a mediator in the conclusion of

a peace treaty (President of Azerbaijan & President of Georgia, 2025; Kvitsiani, 2018).

Thus, having restored their national sovereignty, Azerbaijan and Georgia have established a solid legal foundation for the institutionalization of good-neighborly relations, creating opportunities for expanding regional and international cooperation formats. This process reflects the consolidation of bilateral norms of interaction and their integration into the international system, ensuring the sustainability and pragmatism of the partnership in a changing global and regional context.

**Problems in bilateral relations.** The restoration of the Baku-Tbilisi railway route, closed since 2020 due to quarantine restrictions in Azerbaijan, remains unresolved, leaving costly air travel as the only option. Urgent issues in Georgian-Azerbaijani relations include the resolution of territorial disputes in the border zone, dual citizenship, transportation, and related matters. The land connection between Kakhi and Tbilisi via Lagodekhi and the bypass road from the Red Bridge border crossing remain closed.

The border dispute concerns the territory of the 6th-century David Gareji (Keshikchidagh) monastery complex. Georgia claims the portion of the monastery located in Azerbaijan as an Orthodox cultural heritage site, while Azerbaijan identifies it as Albanian heritage (On the State Commission for the Delimitation and Demarcation of the Azerbaijan-Georgia State Border, n.d.). Commissions established to address this issue continue negotiations and propose various solutions, including territorial exchange and transforming the monastery complex into a tourist zone. According to Georgian Patriarch Ilia II, periodic escalations in Azerbaijani-Georgia relations are influenced by external forces seeking leverage in both countries (Tabula.ge, 2019).

Issues related to land use and the rights of the Azerbaijani population in Georgia’s Kvemo Kartli region, numbering approximately 500,000 people, are periodically raised. The most concentrated

settlements are located in Marneuli, Sagarejo, Lagodekhi, Telavi, Gori, Rustavi, and other areas (Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan, 2022).

Questions regarding the authority of Muslim religious institutions also remain contentious. The Caucasus Muslim Administration (CMA), headquartered in Baku, objected to the establishment of the Georgian Muslim Administration (GMA) as a non-governmental organization in 2011.

In the northwestern Azerbaijani districts of Kakhi, Zakatala, and Balakan, according to the 1999 census, approximately 15,000 Ingilos – a Georgian-speaking ethnic group divided between Muslims and Christians – reside. Georgian leaders meet with them during visits to Azerbaijan and pay close attention to their cultural needs. In Kakhi-Ingilo, there is a church with a priest appointed by the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, a Georgian cultural center, and the Lazar ensemble (Abbasov, 1995; Abbasov et al., 1998).

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, opened in 2017 and financed by Azerbaijan, was expected to facilitate large-scale cargo transportation from Central Asia and China to Turkey and Europe; however, these expectations have not been fully realized.

In recent years, particularly following Azerbaijan's restoration of its territorial integrity and the signing of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Agreement in Washington in 2025, as well as the agreement between Armenia and the United States on the future of the Zangezur Corridor – which will be leased to the United States for 99 years and renamed the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) – the significance of the BTK railway may change. Major geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus are influencing the diversification of transport policy. While the BTK railway previously faced no competition, an alternative – the Zangezur Transport Highway – has now emerged.

Therefore, in light of geopolitical transformations and growing geo-economic challenges, sev-

eral of the aforementioned issues require urgent attention.

The new geopolitical realities emerging in the South Caucasus enable Georgia, Azerbaijan, and now Armenia to develop existing projects and initiate new ones in land transport, energy, and infrastructure sectors (West-East and North-South). Their implementation is increasingly transforming the region from a peripheral area of major power centers into an independent transit hub. The development of the Middle Corridor in the Black Sea-Caspian region is supported by Georgia in its northwestern segment and by Azerbaijan in its southeastern segment, with cargo flows reaching European and Asian destinations, respectively.

In the near future, the successful development of bilateral and regional relations will depend on the extent to which Azerbaijan and Georgia succeed in diversifying their economic policies toward high-tech industries, digital technologies, education, and other sectors. Armenia's inclusion in the emerging regional infrastructure space expands opportunities for attracting foreign investment and creating new joint projects.

In the early 2010s, as in the early 20th century, the idea of a Georgian-Azerbaijani confederation re-emerged in expert and political discourse as a hypothetical model for deepening interstate cooperation, driven by shifts in the regional geopolitical configuration and the growing importance of energy, transport-transit, and military-political factors. Despite periodic revivals of confederal rhetoric, these initiatives have remained limited to expert discussions due to differing foreign policy priorities, persistent conflicts, and the absence of institutional prerequisites for supranational integration (Jones, 2013; Aliyeva, 2012).

**Economic cooperation.** Azerbaijan and Georgia cooperate in global energy, transport, and communications projects, including the Baku-Supsa (BS) and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipelines, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and TRACE-

CA, which collectively strengthen bilateral relations.

Azerbaijan is among Georgia's top five trading partners (Azerbaijan Statistics Information Service, n.d.; State Customs Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, n.d.), alongside Russia, Turkey, Armenia, and China (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2021). Cooperation among South Caucasus countries can mitigate the impact of West-Russia confrontation on their foreign policy orientations (Bakhturidze, 2018). Against the backdrop of initial direct gas supplies from Azerbaijan to Armenia and discussions surrounding the "Trump Route" project connecting Azerbaijan and Turkey, Georgia has become increasingly aware of the need to reinforce its role as a transit state. The diversification of Azerbaijan's transport and energy exports and the formation of a unified regional infrastructure space enhance the attractiveness of the Middle Corridor and stimulate cargo growth. President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev noted that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's omission of Georgia's role in Middle Corridor discussions during her visit to Uzbekistan was "unfair" (Imedi TV, 2025).

Trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Georgia is approaching USD 900 million. Georgia exports cement, locomotives, railway equipment, chemical and glass products, mineral water, alcohol, and pharmaceuticals to Azerbaijan, while importing oil, gasoline, diesel, fuel, gas, plastic products, furniture, and construction materials. Azerbaijani investments in Georgia reaches amount of USD 3.4 billion.

Georgian Black Sea resorts, as well as the Tskaltubo spa resort near Kutaisi, are popular destinations among Azerbaijani tourists (President.az, 2024).

Thus, effective Georgian-Azerbaijani economic cooperation, with the potential inclusion of Armenia, is contributing to the emergence of a regional infrastructure space in the South Caucasus.

**Education.** Azerbaijan and Georgia have signed an agreement on cooperation in education. Baku provides textbooks for-language schools of Azerbaijan in Georgia, while Tbilisi supplies textbooks for Georgian-language schools in Azerbaijan. As of 2018, there were 90 schools of Azerbaijan in Georgia and 7 Georgian schools in Azerbaijan (Turava, 2022).

Baku State University offers a "Caucasian and Regional Studies" program to train specialists in Georgian studies. Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University's Faculty of Humanities provides educational programs for the Azerbaijani population in Georgia, including Georgian language instruction and opportunities to pursue degrees in various disciplines. A Caucasian Studies program with a module on "Azerbaijan Studies" is also in operation. A symbolic milestone in bilateral cultural cooperation was the naming of one of TSU's auditoriums after Heydar Aliyev in May 2023. Several Georgian universities allocate designated places for Azerbaijani students, host congresses of teachers from Azerbaijan-language schools (2023, 2025), organize Azerbaijan Culture Days, conduct radio broadcasts, publish the newspaper *Gurjustan*, and maintain the Cultural Center of Azerbaijan, the M. F. Akhundov, D. Mammadguluzade, and N. Narimanov apartment museums, as well as the Azerbaijani Drama Theater in Tbilisi. These institutions actively support culture of Azerbaijan (State Committee on Diaspora of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025; Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan, 2022).

Thus, recent developments in the educational policies of both countries provide grounds for optimism that the social integration of the Azerbaijani community in Georgia and the Georgian community in Azerbaijan will gain renewed momentum.

## Conclusion

While summarizing, emphasis should be given to the fact that Azerbaijani-Georgian relations at the present stage are strategic in nature and are aimed to deepen interstate, economic, cultural, and educa-

tional cooperation, as well as to create an independent regional transport and communications infrastructure space. Pragmatism and mutually beneficial cooperation, despite existing challenges, create favorable conditions for the implementation of new transit and energy projects and the advancement of intercultural dialogue.

Azerbaijani-Georgian relations from 1991 to 2025 can be regarded as a model of good-neighborliness for regions characterized by multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations and for cooperation among regional and major global powers.

*ისტორია*

## აზერბაიჯანულ-ქართული ურთიერთობები, როგორც კეთილმეზობლობისა და თანამშრომლობის მოდელი კავკასიაში (1991-2025 წწ.)

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(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ლ. მელიქიშვილის მიერ)

ნაშრომში წარმოდგენილია თანამედროვე გლობალური და რეგიონული ტრანსფორმაციების კონტექსტიდან გამომდინარე, მეთოდოლოგიური პლურალიზმის საფუძველზე, სისტემური, „ეთნოსოლიდარობის“ და ინტერდისციპლინური მიდგომებით საქართველო-აზერბაიჯანის სახელმწიფოთაშორისი ურთიერთობების სრულფასოვანი ანალიზი. აღნიშნული ურთიერთობა გაანალიზებულია ეროვნული ინტერესების, უსაფრთხოების ფაქტორების, ძალთა ბალანსის, ეკონომიკური და სატრანზიტო მიზანშეწონილობის თვალსაზრისით. ნაშრომში განხილულია სოციალურად კონსტრუირებული იდენტობების, ისტორიული გამოცდილების, ნორმატიული და ღირებულებითი სისტემების გავლენა თანამშრომლობის მდგრადი ფორმების ინსტიტუციონალიზაციაზე. კვლევის მიზანია ასევე მრავალვექტორიანი საგარეო პოლიტიკის პრინციპებზე დაფუძნებული და დაბალანსებული სახელმწიფოთაშორისი ურთიერთობების რაციონალური და პრაგმატული მოდელის თეორიული დასაბუთება და კონცეპტუალიზაცია, რომელსაც შეუძლია უზრუნველყოს ორმხრივი ურთიერთობების მდგრადობა ცვალებადი რეგიონული და გლობალური კონფიგურაციის კონტექსტში. ნაშრომში ნაჩვენებია, რომ საქართველომ და აზერბაიჯანმა, ეროვნული დამოუკიდებლობისა და სახელმწიფო სუვერენიტეტის აღდგენის შემდეგ, შექმნეს სახელმწიფოთაშორისი თანამშრომლობის

მდგრადი მოდელი, რომელიც დაფუძნებულია უსაფრთხოების, ტრანზიტისა და ეკონომიკური განვითარების სტრატეგიული ინტერესების თანხვედრაზე, რითაც მათ ორმხრივი ურთიერთობები თვისობრივად ახალ, სტრატეგიულ დონეზე აიყვანეს. იმავედროულად, გაანალიზებულია იდენტობების, ისტორიული გამოცდილებისა და თანამშრომლობის ორმხრივად სასარგებლო ნორმების როლი, რომლებიც ინსტიტუციონალიზებულია რეგიონული და საერთაშორისო სატრანსპორტო, ენერგეტიკული, კულტურული და საგანმანათლებლო პროექტების განხორციელებით. ავტორები ასკვნაან, რომ ნაშრომში გამოკვეთილი მიზნებისა და ამოცანების თანმიმდევრული პრაქტიკული განხორციელება არა მხოლოდ აძლიერებს საქართველო-აზერბაიჯანის ურთიერთობების პრაგმატულ პოტენციალს, არამედ მათ სტაბილურ დინამიზმსაც შესძენს, ასევე ქმნის სატრანზიტო ინფრასტრუქტურის სივრცეს, როგორც სოციალურად და პოლიტიკურად კონსტრუირებულ პლატფორმას რეგიონულ და წამყვან გლობალურ ძალებს შორის მშვიდობიანი თანამშრომლობისათვის.

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