

**THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN HEADS OF STATE ON COUNTRIES' POLITICAL
AND ECONOMIC TIES
(BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF HEYDAR ALIYEV AND EDUARD SHEVARDNADZE)**

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Abstract. This research examines how personal relationships between national leaders can significantly impact bilateral state relations, focusing on the case study of Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia. Both former Soviet officials who later led their respective independent nations, Aliyev and Shevardnadze's long-standing personal connection played a crucial role in shaping Azerbaijani-Georgian relations during the turbulent post-Soviet period of the 1990s and early 2000s. The study analyzes how their shared Soviet political experience and personal trust facilitated strategic cooperation, particularly in developing energy transportation routes like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, despite regional instability. Through examination of diplomatic communications, memoirs, interviews, and policy outcomes, this research demonstrates how their relationship created resilience in bilateral ties, enabling both countries to navigate complex regional dynamics involving Russia, Armenia, and Western powers. The findings reveal that their personal connection provided institutional stability that transcended formal diplomatic channels, allowing for more flexible problem-solving and long-term strategic alignment. This case offers valuable insights into how leadership-level relationships can serve as diplomatic assets in post-Soviet space, creating paths for economic integration and mutual security arrangements when formal institutions are still developing. The research contributes to our understanding of how personal diplomacy shapes interstate relations in transitional political environments.

Keywords: Personal diplomacy; Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan; Post-Soviet; Leadership dynamics; Azerbaijan-Georgia relations.

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Introduction. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 precipitated a period of profound transformation across the Caucasus region. Newly independent states emerged from the Soviet system facing multiple challenges: establishing legitimate governance institutions, navigating economic transition, managing ethnic tensions, and defining their place in the international order. As Brzezinski (1997) argued in his seminal analysis of post-Cold War geopolitics, the Eurasian space — and the Caucasus in particular — became a pivotal arena of strategic competition among major powers. Amid this turbulent landscape, the personal

relationships between state leaders emerged as a significant, yet often underexamined, factor in shaping bilateral relations and regional dynamics. This article examines how the personal relationship between Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia influenced the development of political and economic ties between their countries during a critical historical juncture.

Both Aliyev and Shevardnadze shared remarkable parallels in their political trajectories. Both rose through the ranks of the Soviet system, held prominent positions in the Communist Party, and later emerged as leaders of their independent nations during the 1990s. Their shared Soviet experience, mutual understanding of regional complexities, and personal trust created a foundation for cooperation that transcended formal diplomatic channels. German (2016) has highlighted how such leadership dynamics proved particularly consequential in the South Caucasus, where formal state institutions were still being constructed. This relationship was especially important as both countries sought to establish sovereignty, manage relations with Russia, develop energy resources and transportation routes, and align with Western institutions.

The significance of their relationship must be understood within the broader geopolitical context of the South Caucasus — a region characterized by ethnic conflicts, competing great power interests, and strategic energy resources. The Aliyev-Shevardnadze relationship served as a catalyst for cooperation that would fundamentally reshape regional dynamics, particularly through energy projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline that bypassed Russian territory and connected the Caspian energy resources to European markets (Karagiannis, 2002).

This article contributes to the literature on personal diplomacy and interstate relations by examining how leadership-level relationships can facilitate cooperation in transitional political environments where formal institutions are still developing. Through analyzing diplomatic communications, policy outcomes, public statements, and memoirs, it demonstrates how the Aliyev-Shevardnadze relationship created a foundation for strategic partnership that has endured beyond their tenures in office (Mehdiyeva, 2011).

Methods. This research employs a qualitative case study methodology, drawing on a range of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include diplomatic communications, memoirs of key political figures, published interviews with former advisors and government officials, and policy documents from the relevant period (1993–2005). Secondary sources encompass scholarly analyses of post-Soviet transitions, South Caucasus geopolitics, and energy infrastructure development.

The analytical framework combines elements of foreign policy analysis and personal diplomacy theory, with particular attention to individual-level factors in international relations. The study traces the development of the Aliyev-Shevardnadze relationship through its key phases: the renewal of ties following their returns to power (1993–1994), the energy cooperation phase centred on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (1994–2002), and the consolidation of broader bilateral cooperation (2000–2005). Policy outcomes — including energy agreements, security cooperation frameworks, and multilateral initiatives such as GUAM — are used as empirical indicators of the relationship's influence on interstate relations. Where direct primary sources are unavailable, the study relies on accounts from secondary literature and diplomatic memoirs to reconstruct key episodes of personal diplomacy.

Discussion

Theoretical Framework: Personal Relationships in International Relations

International relations scholarship has increasingly recognized the importance of individual-level factors in shaping foreign policy outcomes. While structural theories emphasize systemic constraints and domestic politics approaches focus on institutional factors, a growing body of literature examines how leaders' personalities, perceptions, and relationships influence interstate behavior (Sabanadze, 2010). Personal relationships between heads of state represent a specific dimension of this individual-level analysis, involving

emotional connections, trust, shared experiences, and interpersonal dynamics that can facilitate or hinder cooperation between nations.

Personal relationships can affect interstate relations through multiple mechanisms. First, they can reduce transaction costs in negotiations by establishing trust and facilitating direct communication channels. Second, they can help overcome institutional obstacles by allowing leaders to circumvent bureaucratic procedures when necessary. Third, they can create resilience in bilateral relations by preserving cooperative momentum during periods of tension. Fourth, they can generate shared visions for regional cooperation that might not emerge through conventional diplomatic channels.

The significance of personal relationships becomes particularly pronounced in transitional political contexts where formal institutions are still developing. In post-Soviet space, where newly independent states were establishing governance structures and diplomatic protocols, personal connections between leaders often provided stability amid institutional flux (Wheatley, 2005). However, personal relationships also present limitations and risks. They can create dependency on specific individuals, potentially leading to instability when leadership changes occur, and may circumvent democratic accountability mechanisms by conducting diplomacy through informal channels.

The Aliyev-Shevardnadze relationship offers an instructive case study for examining these dynamics. Their connection emerged from shared Soviet experiences but evolved to address post-independence challenges. By analyzing how their relationship influenced specific policy outcomes, particularly in energy cooperation and security alignment, we can better understand both the opportunities and constraints that personal diplomacy presents in transitional political environments.

Historical Context: Shared Soviet Experience and Path to Leadership

Heydar Aliyev and Eduard Shevardnadze's relationship was fundamentally shaped by their parallel experiences within the Soviet system. Both men rose through the ranks of the Communist Party during the Brezhnev era, eventually achieving positions of significant influence. Aliyev, born in 1923 in Nakhchivan, began his career in state security, eventually becoming the chairman of the Azerbaijani KGB in 1967. His appointment as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in 1969 effectively made him the republic's leader. During his leadership, which lasted until 1982, Aliyev gained a reputation as an effective administrator who reduced corruption while maintaining good relations with Moscow, eventually reaching full Politburo membership and the position of First Deputy Prime Minister of the Soviet Union in 1982 (Cheterian, 2008).

Shevardnadze followed a similar trajectory in neighboring Georgia. Born in 1928 in the village of Mamati, he joined the Communist Party at age 20 and gradually ascended through various positions in the Komsomol and Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1972 he was appointed First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party and earned recognition for his campaigns against corruption and his administrative competence. His success in Georgia led to his appointment as Soviet Foreign Minister in 1985 under Mikhail Gorbachev, where he played a crucial role in reforming Soviet foreign policy during the late Cold War period (Chikovani, 2020).

Their shared experiences as republican leaders during the Brezhnev era created a foundation for mutual understanding. Both had to balance the demands of Moscow with local interests, navigate complex ethnic politics, and manage economic development within the constraints of the Soviet system (Saparov, 2014). Both demonstrated pragmatism and adaptability, traits that would later prove valuable as they led their countries through post-Soviet transitions. The paths of Aliyev and Shevardnadze diverged temporarily during the final years of the Soviet Union but converged again as both emerged as leaders of their newly independent nations amid political crisis. Shevardnadze resigned as Soviet Foreign Minister in 1990 and returned

to his homeland in 1992 following the overthrow of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, eventually being elected president in 1995. Aliyev became chairman of the Azerbaijani parliament in June 1993 and was elected president in October of that year, following a period of political instability. Both leaders returned to power in periods of profound crisis — Georgia facing civil war, secessionist conflicts, and economic collapse; Azerbaijan struggling with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and political instability.

Geopolitical Context: Shared Challenges and Interests

The post-Soviet South Caucasus presented a complex security environment that shaped Azerbaijan and Georgia's strategic calculations and created incentives for bilateral cooperation. Both countries faced significant security challenges: Georgia was dealing with separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Azerbaijan was engaged in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia (Lynch, 2004). These conflicts resulted in territorial losses, large numbers of internally displaced persons, and ongoing security threats that demanded significant political attention and resources.

Russia's role in these conflicts was a particular concern for both countries. Russian military forces played a direct role in the Georgian conflicts, while Russia maintained a close alliance with Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Tokluoglu, 2011). Both Aliyev and Shevardnadze were suspicious of Russian intentions in the region and perceived Moscow's involvement as an attempt to maintain influence over the former Soviet republics. This shared perception of Russia as a potential threat created common ground for strategic alignment between Azerbaijan and Georgia. The presence of Russian military bases on Georgian territory further challenged Georgian sovereignty and created vulnerability to Russian pressure (Yunusov, 2007).

Energy resources and transportation routes emerged as a critical arena for cooperation. Azerbaijan possessed significant oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea but required transit routes through neighboring territories. Georgia's geographic position made it an ideal transit country for new pipeline routes that could bypass Russian territory. For Shevardnadze, participation in energy transit projects offered multiple benefits: transit fees would provide much-needed revenue for Georgia's struggling economy; involvement in strategic infrastructure would increase Georgia's geopolitical importance; and energy cooperation would strengthen ties with Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Western powers (O'Hara, 2004).

Both Aliyev and Shevardnadze pursued policies aimed at integrating their countries into Western political, economic, and security structures, albeit with different emphases and timelines. Shevardnadze, drawing on his experience as Soviet Foreign Minister, positioned Georgia firmly in the pro-Western camp from the early years of independence. Aliyev initially pursued a more balanced approach, but by the mid-1990s, Azerbaijan was also moving toward closer alignment with Western powers, particularly through energy partnerships with major Western companies (Ismayilov, 2014). Both leaders recognized that cooperation between their countries could enhance their individual prospects for Western integration.

Personal Diplomacy in Action: Key Episodes of Cooperation

The renewal of the Aliyev-Shevardnadze relationship in their capacities as national leaders began shortly after Aliyev's return to power in Azerbaijan in 1993. Their first significant meeting as heads of independent states took place in Tbilisi in February 1994, marking the beginning of a series of regular bilateral consultations. According to diplomatic sources, the shared Soviet background facilitated communication between the two leaders: they often conversed in Russian, their common language from the Soviet period, and referenced shared experiences from their time as Communist Party leaders (Valiyev, 2009). A former Azerbaijani diplomat noted that there was an immediate understanding between them that did not require lengthy explanations, as both had operated within the same system and understood the regional dynamics in ways that younger politicians or Western interlocutors could not.

The most concrete manifestation of cooperation emerged in the energy sector. In September 1994, Azerbaijan signed what became known as the 'Contract of the Century' with a consortium of major Western oil companies for the development of the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil fields. Shevardnadze's support for developing a pipeline route through Georgia was crucial for the viability of Azerbaijan's energy strategy. During meetings in 1994 and 1995, the two leaders discussed the potential for creating an 'East-West corridor' — a concept that eventually materialized as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the South Caucasus gas pipeline (Garibov, 2016). The personal trust between Aliyev and Shevardnadze was particularly important in these early discussions, allowing both countries to present a united front to international partners and energy companies.

Beyond energy cooperation, Aliyev and Shevardnadze coordinated their approaches to regional security and relations with major powers. They often consulted before major CIS summits and supported each other's positions on controversial issues within the organization (Kubicek, 2009). The establishment of GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) in 1997 represented another dimension of their coordinated approach to regional organization. Security cooperation also extended to practical measures, including coordination on border security and information sharing, facilitated by the trust between the two presidents.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline: A Case Study in Personal Diplomacy

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline project represents perhaps the most significant outcome of the Aliyev-Shevardnadze relationship. The project encountered significant opposition from Russia, which viewed it as a threat to its strategic interests. Russian officials lobbied against the project, proposing alternative routes through Russian territory and questioning the commercial viability of the BTC route. The project also faced skepticism from many Western oil companies and financial institutions, particularly in its early stages, as well as environmental and social concerns from civil society organizations (Pirani, 2009).

The personal commitment of both leaders to the BTC pipeline was essential for maintaining momentum despite these challenges. According to former advisors, both presidents devoted significant personal attention to advancing the project, frequently discussing pipeline development during their bilateral meetings and presenting a united front in negotiations with oil companies and Western governments. Their shared commitment created continuity in the project's development despite changes in governments, oil company leadership, and regional dynamics.

Their strategic vision for the project went beyond immediate economic benefits to encompass broader geopolitical realignment — both leaders understood that the pipeline would create an 'East-West corridor' reducing Russian influence and strengthening ties with Western countries and Turkey (Garibov, 2016). The BTC pipeline reached its final investment decision in 2002 and was completed in 2005. While Shevardnadze was no longer in office by the time oil began flowing (having resigned following the Rose Revolution in 2003), the project represented a lasting legacy of their cooperation. Subsequent energy projects, including the South Caucasus gas pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor, have followed similar routes and built upon the institutional relationships established during the BTC development.

Beyond Energy: Economic and Cultural Dimensions

While energy cooperation represented the most visible dimension of their relationship, Aliyev and Shevardnadze facilitated broader economic integration between the two countries. Trade relations expanded significantly during the late 1990s and early 2000s, with Azerbaijan becoming one of Georgia's most important trading partners. One significant joint initiative was the development of the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) project, aimed at improving transportation infrastructure connecting Central Asia and the Caucasus to European markets (Ziyadov, 2012). Both leaders strongly supported this project, recognizing its potential to enhance their countries' economic prospects and geopolitical significance.

The Aliyev-Shevardnadze relationship also fostered cultural and social connections between Azerbaijan and Georgia. Both leaders emphasized the protection of minority rights — particularly for the Azerbaijani minority in Georgia and the Georgian minority in Azerbaijan — recognizing that the treatment of these communities could significantly influence bilateral relations. Educational exchanges and cultural programs celebrating the shared heritage of the two countries helped build constituencies in both societies that supported closer bilateral relations.

Conclusions. The relationship between Heydar Aliyev and Eduard Shevardnadze offers valuable insights into how personal relationships between heads of state can influence bilateral relations, particularly in transitional political environments. Their cooperation facilitated strategic initiatives that have had lasting impacts on the South Caucasus region, most notably through energy infrastructure that redefined regional connectivity and reduced Russian influence.

Several key conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, shared experiences and backgrounds can provide a foundation for trust between leaders that facilitates cooperation on sensitive strategic issues. Second, personal relationships can be especially consequential during periods of institutional transition, providing stability and continuity that might not have been possible through conventional diplomatic mechanisms (Wheatley, 2005). Third, leadership-level relationships can create frameworks for cooperation that endure beyond individual tenures in office — the strategic partnership established by Aliyev and Shevardnadze has largely persisted under their successors, most evidently in ongoing energy cooperation and integration with Western institutions.

Fourth, personal diplomacy has limitations and cannot completely transcend structural constraints. Despite their close relationship, Aliyev and Shevardnadze could not resolve all regional challenges. The conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia remained unresolved, and Russian influence, while diminished, was not eliminated (Yakobashvili & Kulick, 2015). For policymakers, the case offers lessons about the value of leadership-level diplomacy in developing strategic partnerships, while also underscoring the importance of institutionalizing cooperation so that it can endure beyond individual leadership tenures. The Aliyev-Shevardnadze legacy continues to shape the South Caucasus today, and their personal diplomacy — rooted in shared Soviet experiences but adapted to post-Soviet realities — demonstrates how individual leadership can help shape national trajectories during critical historical junctures.

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