

French President Hollande visits Caucasus amid Ukrainian crisis

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On May 11-13, French President François Hollande visited the ex-Soviet republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. His visit, coming as Washington, Berlin and Paris escalate a confrontation with Russia over nearby Ukraine, aimed to strengthen France's economic ties with the oil-rich region, while deepening the Western powers' military and diplomatic encirclement of Russia.

Hollande's visit began as pro-Russian activists hostile to the Western-backed, far-right regime in Kiev voted overwhelmingly in favor of greater autonomy for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine and petitioned Moscow for its incorporation into Russia.

Arriving in Azerbaijan, Hollande denounced the referendum in eastern Ukraine as "null and void." He said the votes in Donetsk and Luhansk made "no sense," and that only the Ukrainian presidential vote scheduled by the Kiev regime on May 25 mattered.

Hollande cynically claimed that European Union (EU) plans for an "eastern partnership" were not aimed at Russia. He said, "These are processes, these tours are not directed against anyone but aim to strengthen ties between Europe, France and partners who are now independent and concerned about their development."

Hollande's visit also underscores Paris's moves to secure vital energy resources from Azerbaijan as the EU and Washington threaten to cut off energy purchases from Russia, a key gas exporter to Europe, over the Ukraine crisis.

Azerbaijan is the Caspian region's most important strategic export openings to the West and one of the main gas exporters to many European nations. Hollande said that Azerbaijan is important for France's "energy security," adding: "Our goal is to support the development of the Azeri economy, in particular the energy sector."

Hollande also promoted French corporate interests in Azerbaijan. France is the fifth largest foreign investor in Azerbaijan with holdings of about \$2.4 billion, including nearly \$1 billion in the energy sector. French energy firms like Total and GDF-Suez are to take part in exploring and developing the Absheron gas field. After Hollande visited a May 12 Azeri-French business forum, French companies signed \$2.5 billion in business contracts, including for building Baku's subway system and the sale of 50 Alstom freight trains.

Azeri President Ilham Aliyev said that his country closely cooperates with the EU on energy security. He stressed, "Azerbaijan makes efforts to support Europe's energy security. The documents signed late last year will help to deliver Azerbaijan's gas to Europe and I am sure our relations with Europe will be even closer after realization of this project."

Citing major infrastructure projects including the Shah Deniz field—one of the world's largest natural gas and condensate fields—Aliyev noted that the investments represent about \$45 billion.

Assuring the EU powers that they can rely on Azerbaijan's oil and gas resources as an alternative to Russia's, Aliyev called Azerbaijan the leader of the Caspian Sea region in delivering energy to world markets. "Azerbaijan's rich oil and gas resources, the existing transport infrastructure and the one that is being created have greatly changed Europe's energy map," he said.

Hollande's trip underscored the bitter struggle for influence and commercial advantage waged between the NATO imperialist powers and Russia throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union. The reactionary character of the NATO powers' intervention finds highest expression in their campaign for regime change in Ukraine, backing fascist forces

that led a putsch that toppled pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych in February.

The NATO intervention extends into the Caucasus, a strategically critical region bordering war-torn areas of southern Russia, the oil-rich Caspian Sea region of Central Asia, Turkey, and Iran. The three ex-Soviet republics of the South Caucasus are seeking to closer ties with Western imperialism, with Georgia going as far as trying to join the NATO military alliance.

While his government foments ethnic tensions in Ukraine by denouncing pro-Russian protesters opposed to the pro-Western regime in Kiev, Hollande hypocritically claimed that France will do “all it can” to help Azerbaijan and Armenia. He said the two countries, which descended into an armed conflict over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, can “live in peace.”

Visiting Armenia on Monday, Hollande urged the EU to enter into an Association Agreement with Armenia—a move aimed at lessening Russia’s substantial influence in Armenia, which plans to join a Russian-led Customs Union currently including Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. Hollande said: “Europe must accept that an agreement about an association with Armenia can go with a trade-commercial union with Russia.”

Perhaps the most potentially explosive visit was Hollande’s final stop on Tuesday in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. Hollande was greeted by Georgian Foreign Minister Maia Panjikidze, who praised Hollande’s visit as an expression of EU support. Georgia is to sign an Association Agreement with the EU by the end of next month. “Especially now when we are closer to the signing date of the Association Agreement,” she said, “the French president’s visit is a special event in Georgia’s foreign policy history.”

Hollande said that his trip to Georgia expressed his support for Georgia’s decision to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, and for Georgia’s territorial integrity.

This statement was implicitly a promise of diplomatic and military assistance in the case of future conflict with Russia. In 2008, Washington backed Tbilisi as it attacked Russian peacekeepers in the breakaway region of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, mounting air and land attacks in an attempt to grab the regions.

In exchange, the Georgian regime agreed to support French imperialism’s wars in Africa. Hollande praised

Tbilisi’s decision to participate in the French intervention in the Central African Republic (CAR), calling Tbilisi’s move to provide cannon fodder for Paris’s wars a good example of what Georgia can do as an EU partner now and as a EU member state in the future.



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