

GEOPOLITICAL ADAPTATION OF AZERBAIJAN IN RELATIONS WITH THE EU IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES

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ELMIRA TALIBZADE

*Baku State University,**Faculty of International Relations and Economics,
Department of International Relations, PhD student**E-mail: elmiratalibzadeh@gmail.com**ORCID ID - 0000-0001-5122-2795*

Introduction

The modern international system, characterized by polycentrism and growing competition, has created the preconditions for enhancing the geopolitical role of regional actors. However, over the past few years, the dynamic system has faced a number of unprecedented challenges, including the phenomenon of polarization between global power centers, an energy crisis caused by geopolitical turmoil, and increasing turbulence in the South Caucasus. In this dynamic, Azerbaijan is demonstrating its ability to geopolitically adapt, developing cooperation with the European Union (EU) and strengthening its role as an energy and transport hub. It is worth noting that in this context, the integration of Baku into European economic and political processes is associated with a number of challenges that require strategic decisions. This is largely due to the anti-Azerbaijani policy of some EU states, in particular France; one-sidedness and bias towards the South Caucasus region have intensified the discussion about the need for geopolitical adaptation of Baku.

Research

The National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan, approved by the Presidential Decree of May 23, 2007, states that the strategic objective of the Republic of Azerbaijan is to integrate into European and Euro-Atlantic political and economic structures. Azerbaijan views its partnership with Euro-Atlantic structures as a key tool for supporting overall security, economic development, and democracy in the Euro-Atlantic space. The mutual relations between the EU and Azerbaijan date back to when Azerbaijan regained its independence. Naturally, Azerbaijan's strategic position, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has significantly increased the interest of the EU and its member states in developing political and economic relations with Azerbaijan (Suleymanov, 2011).

In recent years, Azerbaijan has been actively

re-evaluating its foreign policy, particularly in the context of the dynamically shifting geopolitical landscape in Europe and the global challenges that have emerged, including the energy crisis, climate change, and the intensification of both political and economic instability. Amid these transformative realities, Azerbaijan is seeking to fortify its relations with the European Union (EU) to not only preserve but also expand its geopolitical leverage on the international stage. Additionally, Azerbaijan is aiming to harness unique opportunities for the enhancement of its economic and energy cooperation, capitalizing on its strategic positioning and resource wealth. Currently, more than 1,700 companies from the member states of the aforementioned organization operate effectively in our republic. Forty percent of Azerbaijan's foreign trade turnover is accounted for by this entity, with this figure reaching 9.5 billion USD last years. The volume of Azerbaijan's export operations to EU member states has also reached 6.8 billion USD (The Main Outlines of the European Union's South Caucasus Policy: Implementation of Joint Projects on Cooperation, 2019).

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the EU member states was signed on April 22, 1996, in Luxembourg and entered into force on July 1, 1999. This agreement was concluded for a period of 10 years. The agreements the EU signs with cooperating states can be divided into several categories: 1) free trade agreements; 2) association agreements; 3) partnership and cooperation agreements; 4) special agreements. It is important to note that the nature of the EU's cooperation with any third country depends on whether that country is developed, developing, or underdeveloped (Hasanov, 2005).

In this context, it was taken into account that Azerbaijan was classified as a developing country at the time, and the relations between the parties were therefore based on a partnership. Article 1 of the PCA defines the partnership as the legal frame-

work for mutual cooperation between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the EU. The main objectives of this partnership include facilitating political discussions that promote the development of political relations between the parties, strengthening democracy in Azerbaijan, supporting Azerbaijan's efforts to develop its economy and complete the transition to a market economy, and establishing cooperation in economic, social, financial, and cultural fields (Hamidov, 2012).

One of the pivotal factors shaping the evolution of Azerbaijan's foreign economic and political strategy is the emerging geopolitical situation in Europe. This situation is largely defined by the repercussions of the Ukrainian crisis, which has resulted in a significant reshaping of the political landscape and the consolidation of the positions of countries focused on energy security, resilience to external threats, and the diversification of energy supplies. The European Union, for its part, is actively pursuing alternative energy sources and reducing its dependence on Russia. In this context, Azerbaijan, endowed with substantial hydrocarbon reserves, has emerged as a key partner for the European Union in the energy sector. Azerbaijan's strategy vis-à-vis the EU encompasses the expansion of cooperation in energy, the development of new gas supply routes through the Southern Gas Corridor, and the reinforcement of its position as a reliable supplier of energy resources to Europe.

Azerbaijan's energy policy is central to its relations with the EU. After the worsening energy crisis in Europe caused by restrictions on Russian gas supplies, Azerbaijan became a key supplier of hydrocarbons, in particular thanks to the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). In 2022, Azerbaijani gas supplies to the EU increased by 40%, indicating its strategic importance. On December 1, Azerbaijan began supplying gas to Slovakia, which increased the number of European countries receiving Azerbaijani gas to 12. Thus, the growing interest of European countries in Azerbaijani gas is associated with an increase in demand for energy, as the EU seeks to completely abandon Russian gas against the backdrop of the situation in Ukraine.

High-level reciprocal visits, meetings, negotiations, and the signing of agreements have played a pivotal role in the formation and development of bilateral cooperation with this prestigious institution. The agreements signed to date, including the

Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements, the Joint Declaration on the Southern Gas Corridor, the Action Plan within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Memorandum of Understanding on Strategic Partnership in Energy, and other critical documents, have laid the foundation for multifaceted cooperation. The initialing of the "Partnership Priorities" document between Azerbaijan and the European Union on July 11, 2018, unequivocally demonstrated the mutual interest in developing cooperation based on mutual respect and equal standing. One of the key points expressed in this document was the parties' commitment to supporting not only the territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of states, but also the inviolability of international borders (A New Phase in Azerbaijan-European Union Relations, 2022).

The "Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy" in the field of energy concluded in July 2022 strengthened the role of Baku as a reliable partner for the European Energy Community (European Commission, 2022). The document sets goals for doubling gas supplies to the EU by 2027. In the context of the EU's decarbonization ambitions, Azerbaijan, which is actively developing projects in the field of green energy, is also becoming an important participant in the energy transition. The project to build an offshore wind power plant in the Caspian Sea, attracting investments from EU countries, is an indicator of Azerbaijan's involvement in global climate initiatives. Azerbaijan has made significant progress in the field of renewable energy sources, and the indicators are very high. If we study the EU reports, we will see that in the future they intend to switch to 100% use of renewable energy sources. This is only possible if there is a reliable partner, which is Azerbaijan (European Commission, 2024).

The competition for dominance in Eurasia has made Azerbaijan a key link in transport corridors connecting East and West. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), known as the Middle Corridor, has gained strategic importance following the disruption of supply chains through Russia due to the conflict in Ukraine. The EU actively supports the development of infrastructure projects in Azerbaijan. The financing of the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway section, as well as

the modernization of the port infrastructure in Alyat, demonstrate the importance of Baku for the European transport strategy. The prospects for Azerbaijan's integration into global transport chains strengthen its geo-economic influence. In 2023, Azerbaijan hosted the International Forum on Transport Connectivity, which became a platform for discussing the integration of the Middle Corridor into European logistics chains. Azerbaijan's large-scale investments in the North-South transportation corridor, along with the planned opening of new airports in Fuzuli, Zangilan, and Lachin by 2023, as well as the construction of highways and railways, will further accelerate regional and global integration processes.

The main problem in Azerbaijan's relations with the EU remains the discriminatory policies of a number of states, in particular France. Yerevan's support, including arms supplies (it's most likely that the supply of these weapons is carried out by Paris with the aim of creating a military-technical platform to ensure its long-term presence in Armenia for active actions in the region as a whole) and promotion of a pro-Armenian agenda, creates a risk of undermining trust. It is quite obvious that Paris views its relations with Yerevan, including through the prism of realizing its military-political interests in the South Caucasus, and, most likely, in South-West Asia.

It would be interesting to pay special attention to the factor of strengthening Azerbaijan's relations with such EU states as Hungary and Italy. Hungary, under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, has emphasized its pragmatic foreign policy and strong bilateral relations with Azerbaijan. Budapest has supported Azerbaijan's energy projects, such as the Southern Gas Corridor, which diversifies Europe's energy supplies and reduces dependence on Russian gas. Hungary's skeptical stance toward excessive EU centralization and its focus on national sovereignty align with Azerbaijan's non-interference principle in international relations. Italy remains one of Azerbaijan's most significant trade partners, especially in energy. The Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), a key component of the Southern Gas Corridor, ends in Italy, solidifying its role as a primary consumer of Azerbaijani gas. Italian diplomacy, traditionally balancing between EU consensus and national interests, provides an opening for Azerbaijan to deepen bilateral cooperation on energy, trade, and

cultural diplomacy. This is especially noticeable in the context of: 1) political pressure through European structures; 2) information war discrediting the actions of Azerbaijan; 3) attempts to isolate Baku in diplomatic and economic processes.

The unjust resolution adopted by the European Parliament on January 19, 2023, marked the next offensive in the series of anti-Azerbaijani campaigns launched after the Second Karabakh War. The document claims that Azerbaijan has blockaded the mountainous part of Karabakh and imposed restrictions on movement in the Lachin corridor. In reality, the resolution's allegations regarding the blockade of over 20,000 ethnic Armenians and the restrictions on the movement of Red Cross representatives, Armenians living in Karabakh, and sick and children traveling through the Lachin corridor are unfounded. Despite the European Parliament's application of double standards towards Azerbaijan, positive calls for the development of relations are also reflected in the statements of European officials. For example, the European Parliament's rapporteur on Azerbaijan, Norica Nicolai, has expressed support for the development of ties:

"The EU is Azerbaijan's main trading partner, and Azerbaijan is the EU's strategic partner in energy. It is time to update the framework of our relations through a comprehensive agreement. I hope that we will be able to work together to achieve the necessary progress, from democratic standards to the completion of negotiations," – he stated in his remarks (European Parliament Sets Conditions for Azerbaijan, 2018).

While in Baku, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, when asked about the continued and deeper development of relations, clarified:

"The rapprochement of the European and Azerbaijani peoples, as well as the enhancement of civil society and media freedom to increase the country's investment confidence, is a key factor," – thus reiterating the importance of democratic reforms (Ursula von der Leyen in Baku: Europe considers Azerbaijan a reliable partner, 2022).

Despite the challenges posed by the policies of France and its allies, Baku continues to demonstrate strategic restraint, strengthening its role as a key factor in the international arena. The following ways out can serve as a solution to potential aggravations between Azerbaijan and the European Union:

1) Expanding energy cooperation: Azerbaijan must strengthen its position in the energy sector by increasing gas exports and developing projects in the field of renewable energy sources. Attracting private European investors through capital return guarantees will help bypass political barriers. Furthermore, Azerbaijan is actively advancing alternative and renewable energy sources, which not only aids in diversifying its energy resources but also opens new avenues for cooperation with the European Union in the realm of sustainable energy. This trend has gained particular relevance in light of Europe's growing interest in "green" technologies and sustainable development.

2) Strengthen diplomatic dialogue: Baku should step up its work with EU allies such as Hungary and Italy to balance French influence. Mechanisms of diplomatic pressure through international organizations (for example, the OSCE) can be used to protect national interests.

3) Information campaign: Azerbaijan needs to strengthen its position in the EU information space. The creation of English-language platforms covering the real situation around Karabakh will help counter disinformation.

4) Economic integration: that deepening economic ties with Europe has already been successfully demonstrated, including the creation of joint logistics and transport projects, which will also increase interdependence, reducing the influence of political rhetoric. Azerbaijan, for its part, is keen on modernizing its industrial sector, agriculture, and agricultural exports, which could provide additional opportunities for attracting European investments.

5) Increasing its weight in international organizations: Azerbaijan's active participation in international organizations such as the UN and the Non-Aligned Movement, such as COP29, has demonstrated its leadership in the field of climate diplomacy and sustainable development. These steps helped attract investment and strengthen the country's geopolitical position against the backdrop of international challenges (UN Climate Change Conference in Baku, 2024).

Azerbaijan places significant emphasis on combating climate change, aligning with the broader agenda of the European Union. The strategy for sustainable development and the implementation of green technologies have become integral com-

ponents of Baku's diplomatic agenda, facilitating the strengthening of cooperation with the EU in the environmental domain. Global challenges, such as economic upheavals, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change, also play a crucial role in shaping Azerbaijan's foreign economic strategy. In the context of globalization and increasing uncertainty, Azerbaijan aims to construct a flexible foreign policy that will enable it not only to safeguard its national interests but also to engage effectively with various poles of power on the global stage.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's geopolitical adaptation to new international challenges underscores its resilience and strategic foresight. With the effective implementation of these measures, Azerbaijan will be able to strengthen its position and minimize the negative impact of the anti-Azerbaijani policies of individual countries. This multifaceted strategy aligns with Azerbaijan's broader goal of securing its geopolitical and economic objectives in a complex and evolving international environment. Despite the challenges posed by competition in the global market and political issues, Azerbaijan continues to advance its foreign economic agenda, aiming to strengthen its role in global politics and economics.

The relations between the European Union (EU) and Azerbaijan should be continued along a rational trajectory, especially in the context of the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh war. In the speech delivered by the Head of State on April 13, 2021, during a conference, positive developments in the direction of enhancing relations with the EU were evident. Given the cultural, political, economic, and educational exchanges between Azerbaijan and the EU, as well as the emphasis the EU places on "human-to-human contact," it is desirable to prioritize the expansion of EU-Azerbaijan relations. During the military operations carried out in the course of the 44-day war, the number of European partners providing explicit support to Azerbaijan, such as Italy, who were not neutral but actively engaged, has increased. This would facilitate the acceleration of the achievement of the goal of strengthening these ties. Among the pressing issues ahead is the cultivation of influential diplomats, experts, and journalists who will further fortify our communication with the EU leadership.

The EU, for its part, is keen to maintain its re-

lations with Azerbaijan through energy projects. European officials, who have consistently regarded Russia as a threat to energy security, have repeatedly declared that they consider Azerbaijan to be a secure energy source for Europe. Additionally, with the participation of European companies in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Azerbaijan's liberated territories, it is expected that relations will evolve in a positive direction.

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Elmira Talibzade

Baku State University, Faculty of International Relations and Economics, Department of International Relations, PhD student
E-mail: elmiratalybzadeh@gmail.com
ORCID ID - 0000-0001-5122-2795

Geopolitical adaptation of Azerbaijan in relations with the EU in the context of new international challenges

SUMMARY

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is undergoing strategic recalibration in response to the evolving global order marked by polycentrism and heightened competition. Azerbaijan's geopolitical positioning, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, has made it increasingly relevant to EU interests, particularly in the context of the energy crisis exacerbated by the Ukrainian conflict.

The article emphasizes the importance of Azerbaijan's energy strategy, including its increased gas exports to Europe. The 2007 National Security Concept outlines Azerbaijan's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures as a strategic objective. Its energy policy, anchored in the Southern Gas Corridor, positions Azerbaijan as a critical supplier of hydrocarbons to Europe, while its commitment to renewable energy initiatives aligns with EU decarbonization goals. The recent Memorandum of Understanding on Energy, along with advancements in green energy projects, further underscores Azerbaijan's pivotal role in energy transition.

However, Azerbaijan's relations with the EU are complicated by the biased policies of certain member states, particularly France. Despite these challenges, Azerbaijan's pragmatic diplomacy, coupled with its growing economic integration and infrastructure projects, enhances its geopolitical leverage. By expanding energy cooperation, strengthening diplomatic ties, and countering disinformation, Azerbaijan aims to mitigate external pressures and secure its position as a reliable partner on the global stage.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, EU, energy security, geopolitical adaptation, Economic integration, France, Southern Gas Corridor.*

Açar sözlər: *Azərbaycan, Aİ, enerji təhlükəsizliyi, geosiyasi adaptasiya, İqtisadi integrasiya, Fransa, Cənub Qaz Dəhlizi.*

Elmira Talıbzadə

Bakı Dövlət Universiteti,

Beynəlxalq münasibətlər və İqtisadiyyat fakültəsi,

Beynəlxalq münasibətlər kafedrası, doktorant

E-mail: elmiratalybzadeh@gmail.com

ORCID ID - 0000-0001-5122-2795

XÜLASƏ

Azərbaycanın xarici siyasəti, çoxmərkəzli və artan rəqabət ilə xarakterizə olunan global nizamın inkişaf edən dinamikalarına uyğun olaraq strateji yenidən qurulma mərhələsindən keçir. Azərbaycanın coğrafi mövqeyi, Avropa və Asiya arasında kəşişən nöqtədə yerləşməsi, onu xüsusilə Ukrayna münaqişəsinin dərinləşdirdiyi enerji böhranı kontekstində Avropa İttifaqının maraqları üçün daha da vacib edir.

Məqalə Azərbaycanın enerji strategiyasının, xüsusən də Avropaya artan təbii qaz ixracının əhəmiyyətini vurğulayır. 2007-ci il tarixli Milli Təhlükəsizlik Konsepti, Azərbaycanın Avropa və Avroatlantik strukturlarına integrasiyasını strateji hədəf olaraq müəyyən edir. Enerji siyasəti, Cənubi Qaz Dəhlizi əsasında qurulmuşdur və Azərbaycanın Avropaya enerji daşıyıcıları təmin edən mühüm bir tədarükçü olmasını təmin edir, eyni zamanda bərpa olunan enerji təşəbbüslərinə bağlılığı, Aİ-nin karbon azaldılması məqsədləri ilə uyğunlaşır. Yaxın zamanlarda imzalanan Enerji üzrə Anlaşma Memorandumu və yaşıl enerji layihələrindəki irəliləyişlər, Azərbaycanın enerji keçidi sahəsindəki mühüm rolunu daha da vurğulayır.

Lakin Azərbaycanın Aİ ilə əlaqələri bəzi üzv dövlətlərin, xüsusən Fransanın qərəzli siyasətləri tərəfindən mürəkkəbləşdirilmişdir. Bu çətinliklərə baxmayaraq, Azərbaycanın pragmatik diplomatiyası, artan iqtisadi integrasiyası və infrastruktur layihələri, onun geosiyasi təsirini gücləndirir. Enerji sahəsində əməkdaşlığın genişləndirilməsi, diplomatik əlaqələrin gücləndirilməsi və dezinformasiyaya qarşı mübarizə ilə Azərbaycan, xarici təzyiqləri azaltmaq və beynəlxalq səhnədə etibarlı tərəfdaş olaraq mövqeyini möhkəmləndirmək məqsədini güdür.