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ADA University

The Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA) was established as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2006, following the demand for a modern training of diplomats. In January 2014, ADA University was created on the basis of the Diplomatic Academy and former IT University. Today’s ADA University has four diverse faculties which are leading unique and encompassing undergraduate and graduate programmes, with 2000 students from 32 different countries. The primary goal of ADA University is to prepare innovative global leaders who are committed to making a difference in the region and throughout the world. ADA University is dedicated to fostering advanced research in an innovative and thought-provoking academic setting. ADA University’s mission is not only to train a new generation of leaders and help resolve many current challenges in the region, but also to promote innovation in Azerbaijan’s higher education system and a new critical mentality among its people.

GCRF COMPASS project (ES/P010849/1, 2017-21) is an ambitious UK government capacity-building funding initiative, aiming to extend UK research globally and to address the challenges of growth and sustainability in developing countries. Notably, the COMPASS project led by the University of Kent, in partnership with the University of Cambridge, seeks to establish the ‘**hubs of excellence**’ at the top-level Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to enable them to become the centres for knowledge-sharing and transfer for *research integration, impact governance, and sustainable communities*.

AZERBAIJAN-EAEU COOPERATION: THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has grown out of the Customs Union, to become a hub for regional economic integration in 2015. To date, it includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia as member states, and Cuba, Moldova, and Uzbekistan as observers. The aim of the organization is to enhance international cooperation and free trade between member states, to improve the lives of its peoples living in these countries, and to contribute to the economic integration process across the Eurasian region. The prospect of Azerbaijan's membership in the EAEU has been one of the highly debated issues in the scholarly literature, and public discussions both in Azerbaijan and abroad. Azerbaijan has robust economic relations with the majority of the EAEU members. Some experts believe that Azerbaijan can gain many advantages in terms of economic integration and labour mobility from the EAEU membership. Furthermore, given that Azerbaijan prefers bilateral ties, its economic cooperation with member states is growing, yet not with the EAEU itself. The paper shows that despite some prospective advantages of EAEU membership, the choice for bilateral relations remains the preferred path for Azerbaijan. Although more successful than its predecessors, the EAEU has not yet established itself in terms of supporting growth of the common market and mitigating challenges in the development of a sustainable integration model in the Eurasian region. Furthermore, participation of Azerbaijan in the EAEU does not add much weight to the foreign economic interests of Azerbaijan. The paper argues that Azerbaijan's possible membership would not create unique advantages for the country: instead, the country would benefit more if bilateral relations were to continue with the EAEU member states.

Keywords: *EAEU, Russia, Azerbaijan, regional integration, Eurasian integration*

Abbreviations:

EAEU –The Eurasian Economic Union, FTA - Free Trade Agreement, EU - European Union, BTC-Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan oil pipeline, SCP - South Caucasus Pipeline, Middle Corridor – Trans Caspian International Transport Route, NSC - the North-South International Transport Corridor, SGC - the Southern Gas Corridor

BACKGROUND

Mainly led by Kazakhstan and Russia, the EAEU is a newly established Eurasian-based economic integration organization. Although the EAEU founding history dates back to the early 2000s, the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia signed the treaty at forming it in 2014.¹ Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the Union in 2015. Achieving economic integration and enhancing the competitiveness of the national economies of the member states are the economic agenda of the Union. The organization's key economic objectives also include the establishment of a common market between the member states to facilitate free movement of goods, services, labour and capital along with its geopolitical objectives. To accomplish its objectives, the Union has established a range of institutions, including the EAEU Court, the Eurasian Development Bank and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development.²

The establishment of the EAEU reflects Russia's reaction to the ongoing process of regionalisation that pool economic power to consolidate states' influences, together with its concern about economic exclusion linked to China's rising strength³. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell argue that Russia's real aim behind the integration process is to restore the USSR in some form.⁴ In line with this thinking, Libman points that "*Russia's nostalgia of its past Imperial greatness is perceived as linked to dominating post-Soviet Eurasia*".⁵ The organization, which seeks to develop a common market and accelerate economic integration between member states, has not yet achieved solid results toward reaching its objectives⁶. A number of obstacles and challenges⁶ to the development of a common market remain, including the absence of a common trade policy, trade regulations and the existence of non-tariff barriers.⁷

Moreover, Petrovskaja argues that "*the interaction within the EAEU is complicated by a number of negative phenomena*", including border disputes in Eurasia, instability in Russian currency and

¹ Eurasian Economic Commission 2015

² Vinokurov 2017

³ Wolczuk and Dragneva 2017

⁴ Starr and Cornell 2014

⁵ Libman, 2017

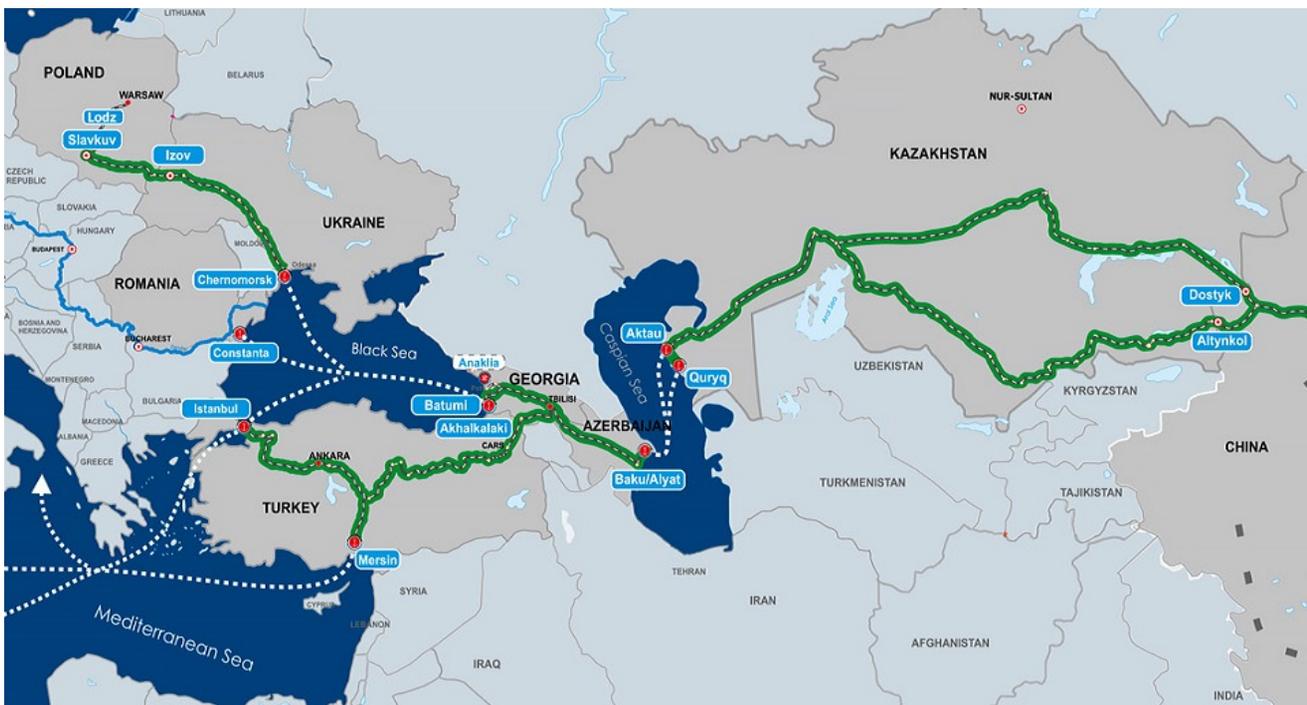
⁶ Russell 2017

⁷ Yeliseyeu 2019

inconsistent approaches of member states towards integration, and these factors detract from further integration within the EAEU.⁸ The mismatch between the ambitions and the factors outlined above undermines the overall expectations of the Union, despite the fact that the EAEU offers some concrete benefits for people.⁹ These benefits include labour mobility, educational opportunities and increased trade.

Located on the East and West, as well as the South and North transport corridors, membership of oil-rich Azerbaijan in the EAEU is among the topics currently debated in scholarly literature and public discussions. The key economic corridors passing through Azerbaijan are the “Middle Corridor” connecting China with Europe (see figure 1), “the North-South International Transport Corridor” connecting India with Russia and northern Europe as well as “the Southern Gas Corridor” (SGC) (see figure 4) providing access to the Caspian energy supplies for European countries.

Figure 1: Middle Corridor



Source: New records set on the Middle Corridor to Turkey (Photo credit: Railfreight.com)

⁸ Petrovskaia 2015

⁹Troitskiy 2020

Since gaining its independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has been among the countries that has avoided engaging in regional economic and military integration projects with the post-Soviet states.¹⁰ Some experts argue that if Azerbaijan becomes a member of the EAEU, it might gain some considerable benefits. The influx of direct investments, increased trade, and free movement of labour as well as a chance to join a single transport corridor are the most promising arguments for Azerbaijan to join the EAEU.¹¹ Valiyev, for example, discusses three specific advantages which Azerbaijan might gain from the Eurasian Economic Union. First, accession to the Union will address the problems of Azerbaijani workers in Russia sending remittances from Russia to Azerbaijan, which are between \$ 1.8 billion and \$ 2.4 billion per year, while quite often Russia uses “*the labour migration card*” to place pressure on neighbouring countries. Second, joining the EAEU will enable Azerbaijani products to join, freely and at lower prices, the Russian market. Third, Russia will have little interest in Azerbaijan’s destabilization on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹²

Baku is, in particular, interested in the North-South International Transit Corridor (see figure 2) project which enables Azerbaijan to become an economic corridor between Russia, Iran and India.¹³ The EAEU initiated negotiations on free trade zone with countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and India. Up to now, the EAEU has signed free trade agreements (FTA) with Singapore, Iran, and it negotiates similar agreements with India, Egypt, Indonesia, Israel and Pakistan¹⁴. Azerbaijan can play a key role in this issue, as it aspires to become a strategically important transportation hub in the region¹⁵.

Figure 2: North South Corridor¹⁶



¹⁰ Shahbazov n.d.
¹¹ Kofner 2020
¹² Valiyev 2013
¹³ Spice Way
¹⁴ Vinokurov 2020
¹⁵ Godjaev 2018
¹⁶ New Silk Road Project 2020

Nevertheless, membership in the EAEU may impede Azerbaijan’s pursuit of its preferred economic strategy. First, the EAEU membership will certainly challenge the energy strategy of Azerbaijan, as the organization requires members to conduct harmonized energy policies in relation to non-members: this may seriously harm Azerbaijan’s independent energy policy with the main trading partners and, primarily, with the European Union (EU) states. Valiyev argues that by entering the Union, Azerbaijan would risk its independence when deciding on its own energy policy allowing Russia to dictate the price of natural gas for the EU members¹⁷. Second, the lack of leverage over its natural resources would be another downside for Azerbaijan. Due to the EAEU’s shared internal energy policy, Azerbaijan will lose control over its natural resources, and it will have to share the benefits of its natural resources with other member states of the EAEU¹⁸. Despite its potential profitability, a similar policy of the Soviet Union harmed Azerbaijan’s economy as it had developed unsustainable economies that drew on the resources of the profitable ones¹⁹. Third, despite the fact that Azerbaijan regained some territories in and around Nagorno-Karabakh during the recent outbreak of war with Armenia (September-November 2020), the uncertainty about the potential relations between the two countries still call into question the membership of Azerbaijan in the EAEU. It is hard for Azerbaijani society to accept the Russian-led integration, “*as many people in Azerbaijan consider Moscow as the main initiator of the conflict*”²⁰. Azerbaijan Ambassador to Russia Polad Bulbuloglu, speaking to Russia’s Echo of Moscow, explicitly stated that unresolved tensions with Armenia are still an issue:

“We are already members of the CIS together with Armenia, the country that occupied 20 percent of our territory. As for joining any other alliances while having such a partner, I think there are objective reasons that hinder this. And, above all, there is the issue of the occupation of Azerbaijani territory”.²¹

As mentioned above, the EAEU has struggled to create an effective common market. It could not achieve its economic ambitions either, as total volume of trade between Russia and the EAEU members continuously decreasing. The member states have different expectations from the EAEU. Armenia and Kazakhstan, for example, view members in the context of handling their security challenges, while

¹⁷ Valiyev 2013

¹⁸ Centre for Economic and Social Development 2013

¹⁹ Centre for Economic and Social Development 2013

²⁰ Valiyev 2013

²¹ Trend 2020

Belarus and Kyrgyzstan are seeking to gain economic benefits. Conversely, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are in no rush towards the membership.²² In short, different states have different motives for and expectations of the EAEU, ranging from political gains to identity-building²³. It appears that whatever the member states' goals are, in an economic union they should be similar or, at least, not in opposition to one another; otherwise, integration risks getting stuck.²⁴ Despite the fact the EAEU membership provides Azerbaijan with a number of economic and political advantages in terms of labour mobility, regional transport projects, political stability and lower-cost trade with Russia, it seriously harms Azerbaijan's energy policy that has played a vital role since 1991 in terms of accumulating of its economic wealth, modernizing its economy and building its international image as a trustworthy economic partner. It could have a detrimental impact on Azerbaijan's energy revenues too. Since the EAEU may undermine Azerbaijan's energy policy, membership from an economic standpoint does not seem beneficial despite some advantages which Azerbaijan could obtain via bilateral deals.

Table 1: SWOT Analysis of Azerbaijan-EAEU Cooperation

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Ideologically, the EAEU is a solid initiative towards achieving a common market that facilitates free movement of goods, services, labor and capital. It managed to establish a range of institutions, including the EAEU Court, the Eurasian Development Bank and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development to realize its objectives.	The organization, which seeks to develop a common market and accelerate economic integration between member states, has not yet achieved visible results toward reaching its objectives. Border disputes in the Eurasia, instability in Russia's currency and inconsistent approaches of member states towards Russian-led integration negatively affects the overall activity of the EAEU.	EAEU membership creates positive opportunities for Azerbaijan to join the single transport corridor, benefit from growing foreign investment and allow Azerbaijani products to enter the Russian market at low cost and with minimal obstacles.	EAEA membership requires the implementation of a unified energy policy among members against non-member countries which threatens Azerbaijan's independent energy policy. Thus, Azerbaijan risks its independence when deciding on its own energy policy allowing Russia to dictate the price of natural gas for the EU members.

Source: developed by the authors based on argument from Centre for Economic and Social Development, 2013; Valiyev, 2013; Kofner, 2020 and Troitskiy, 2020.

²²Yelisseyev 2019

²³ Patalakh 2018

²⁴ Patalakh 2018

AZERBAIJAN’S PREFERRED ECONOMIC STRATEGY

By exporting gas and oil to European markets, Azerbaijan’s foreign trade policy is directed towards playing a key role in Europe’s energy security. Selling its oil and gas in European markets through Baku-Tbilisi Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC) (see figure 3) and South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) (see figure 4) shapes the base of Azerbaijan’s energy policy. The BTC oil pipeline has played a significant role in building and modernizing national economy of Azerbaijan. Through diversification of oil and gas pipelines Azerbaijan has succeeded in pursuing an independent energy policy. The EU is the largest trade partner of Azerbaijan today. About 50 percent of the country’s foreign trade has been with the EU member states, far greater than the amount of trade with Russia or its allies.²⁵ Furthermore, the construction of regional transport and communication corridors has been a part of foreign economic strategy of Azerbaijan to minimize its economy’s dependence of energy resources. It plans to become a leader of transportation networks of the region to increase its revenues from transits. Taleh Ziyadov, Port of Baku Chief Executive, stated that *‘the aim is to turn the Port of Baku into a hub of hubs between east and west, north and south’*.²⁶

Figure 3: the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline



Source: Caspian Barrel (Photo credit: Caspian Barrel)

²⁵Valiyev 2016

²⁶ Ednews.net 2016

Nevertheless, Azerbaijan continues to actively cooperate with all economic powers in the region (European countries, Turkey, Russia and China) for implementing its economic and trade agenda. Baku tries to stay as neutral as possible in joining the integration organizations. Growing bilateral economic and trade relations with other countries including key members of the EAEU has been the cornerstone of Azerbaijan’s long-proven foreign economic policy. Azerbaijan has, in fact, enjoyed a steadily growing economic and trade relationship with all founding member of the EAEU. Russia has been a major economic partner of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan provides 50 percent of the South Caucasus region’s trade with Russia.²⁷ Russia’s economic presence in Azerbaijan is also strong. In 2019, trade between Russia and Azerbaijan increased 23 percent, while more than 750 joint ventures are involved in the Azerbaijani market, of which about 300 are 100 percent Russian-capitalized.²⁸ Azerbaijan has also enjoyed good economic ties with Belarus, as trade volume between the two countries exceeds \$252 million in 2020, and trade figures have remarkably increased.²⁹ Meanwhile, trade turnover from Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan relations increased 11 percent in 2019.³⁰

Figure 4: The South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP)



Source: *The Southern Gas Corridor* (Photo credit: *The Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan*)

²⁷Azernews 2020

²⁸Devonshire 2019

²⁹Azertag 2020

³⁰ABC 2020

It must be noted that the reasons behind Azerbaijan's policy of maintaining its neutrality and staying out of economic and military alliances with other countries, are that this allows Azerbaijan to mitigate possible regional and superpower pressures while enabling it to work bilaterally with a variety of countries to create economic opportunities³¹.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The EAEU has not yet established itself in terms of supporting growth of the common market and mitigating challenges in the development of a sustainable integration model in the Eurasian region, despite being a competitive organization compared with its predecessors. Moreover, national economies of the member states are not very competitive. It does not offer a shared vision and does not focus on civil societies in member states which make it unattractive at the societal level. The countries in Eurasia are therefore treating the EAEU membership with a high degree of scepticism. Factors that negatively affect the overall work of the organization include disagreements between Eurasian countries on integration, as well as distrust of integration organizations led by Russia. The organization has not had many visible successes and outcomes so far even though trade between members has expanded among members.

As regards the status of Azerbaijan, it should be noted that since its establishment, Azerbaijan has distinguished itself by its cautious stance on membership in military blocs and involvement in Eurasian space integration organization. Azerbaijan maintains its neutrality for many political and economic reasons. Azerbaijani officials have consistently claimed, first of all, they do not want to be in the same economic bloc as Armenia, which was used to occupy Azerbaijan's territories. Future relations with Armenia remain unclear despite Azerbaijan managed to liberate its occupied territories and a new Russian-brokered agreement with Armenia envisages unblocking of the region's communication lines. Second, the organization's greatest threat for Azerbaijan's economy could be the harmonization of its energy policy with the members of the organization, which means that Azerbaijan will be unable to fulfil its economic obligations to the largest trade partner of Azerbaijan which is the European Union.

Overall, Azerbaijan has always wished to establish bilateral economic and political ties with post-Soviet countries. It maintains close economic relations with the organization's key member states,

³¹ Ismailzade 2020

including Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The latter is one of the key economic partners of Azerbaijan and political ties are also rising between the two countries. The general stance of Azerbaijan remains impartial toward this Union. The main foreign economic strategy of Azerbaijan is to supply its energy resources to European markets and at the same time to create regional transport corridors with all major actors in the region including the European Union, Turkey China and Russia. The country aims to diversify its economy through these means by becoming ‘*the hub of hubs*’.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Azerbaijan should strive to stay as neutral as possible in relation to the EAEU. The Union promises much for Azerbaijan neither politically, nor economically. Since the organization does not create special added value for Azerbaijan’s economy, but *vice versa* creates serious barriers for the implementation of its foreign economic interests, in particular barriers to Azerbaijan energy policy. The organization’s disadvantages for Azerbaijan’s economy are greater than the benefits³². Azerbaijan can also achieve the mentioned advantages without the EAEU membership via bilateral agreements.
2. Azerbaijan’s chosen economic and political strategy has been shown to be effective, and it should stick to it with regard to the EAEU too. The expansion of bilateral ties between Azerbaijan and member states of the EAEU brings economic benefits to Azerbaijan while does not obstruct Azerbaijan’s capacity to maintain trade links with non-member partners. In addition, advancing bilateral agreements with Russia and key members of the EAEU will bring the same benefits for Azerbaijan which can be achieved through the EAEU membership while avoiding the political strains.
3. The “North-South International Transport Corridor” linking India with Northern Europe is the largest regional project that Azerbaijan can further develop with Russia. This economic project turns Azerbaijan into “*a transport hub of Eurasia*”, and it therefore should continue its cooperation with Russia to the benefit of both countries which will foster integration and connectivity in the region. Bilateral agreement for further labour mobility and trade openness can be signed within this framework and on the grounds of the existing partnership between two countries.

³² Valiyev 2013, Centre for Economic and Social Development 2013

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