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ENHANCING AZERBIJAN'S ECONOMIC COOPERATION VIA REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Keywords: *economic cooperation, regional organizations, transportation, energy, partnership*

This article focuses on economic cooperation within the foreign policy of Azerbaijan. While cooperation encompasses various dimensions across political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian (social) spheres, this paper hones in on the economic aspect of collaborative efforts. Specifically, *the purpose of the study* is to examine how Azerbaijan engages in productive collaboration within regional organizations, a sub-category of international organizations, to advance its economic interests. This research emphasizes Azerbaijan's proactive role in shaping and driving cooperative endeavors on the global stage. These endeavors can be characterized as dedicated on promoting economic interests of the country. *The practical significance* of the analyses is to offer insights into the dynamics of economic cooperation within regional organizations from the perspective of emerging discussion on 'rising regional states' in international relations. *The method of the study* is based on systematic analysis of official documents (i.e. declarations, agreements and others), speeches, and news from official websites of Azerbaijan and regional organizations. The author collected thematic patterns emerging from those sources and organized them around narratives inspired by theoretical discussions of 'rising regional states' phenomenon.

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AZƏRBAYCANIN REGIONAL TƏŞKİLATLARLA İQTİSADI ƏMƏKDAŞLIĞININ GENİSLƏNDİRİLMƏSİ

Açar sözlər: *iqtisadi əməkdaşlıq, regional təşkilatlar, nəqliyyat, enerji, tərəfdaşlıq*

Məqalədə Azərbaycanın xarici siyasətində iqtisadi əməkdaşlığın rolu öyrənilir. Əməkdaşlıq siyasi, iqtisadi, mədəni və humanitar (sosial) kimi müxtəlif sahələri əhatə etsə də, məqalədə əməkdaşlıq söylərinin iqtisadi aspektinə diqqət yetirilir. Konkret olaraq, tədqiqatın əsas məqsədi Azərbaycanın regional təşkilatlarda iqtisadi maraqlarını müdafiə və inkişaf etdirmək üçün həmin təşkilatların tərkibində qurduğu məhsuldar əməkdaşlıqları araşdırmaqdır. Məqalədə

həmçinin Azərbaycanın beynəlxalq miqyasda əməkdaşlıqların formalaşmasında özünəməxsus rolu vurğulanır. Bu səyləri ilk növbədə ölkənin iqtisadi maraqlarını təmin etməyə yönəldirilmiş hesab etmək olar. Məqalə Azərbaycanın regional təşkilatlar çərçivəsində iqtisadi əməkdaşlığının dinamikasına dair fikirlər təqdim etmək məqsədi daşıyır. Bununla da məqalədə aparılan təhlillərin praktik əhəmiyyəti beynəlxalq münasibətlərdə “regional güclər”lə bağlı yaranan elmi diskussiyalara öz hissəsini qoşmaqdır. Tədqiqatın metodu rəsmi sənədlərin (yəni bəyannamələr, sazişlər və s.), Azərbaycanın və regional təşkilatların rəsmi internet səhifələrindəki xəbərlərin və çıxışların sistemativ təhlilinə əsaslanır. Müəllif həmin mənbələrdə önə çıxan mövzuları toplayıb və onları “regional güclər” fenomeninin nəzəri diskussiyalarına əsaslanaraq yeni elmi təhlillər aparır.

Дж.Ш.Мусейбзаде

РАСШИРЕНИЕ ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА ЧЕРЕЗ РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ

Ключевые слова: *экономическое сотрудничество, региональные организации, транспорт, энергия, партнерство*

Статья посвящена экономическому сотрудничеству в сфере внешней политики Азербайджана. Хотя сотрудничество охватывает различные измерения в политической, экономической, культурной и гуманитарной (социальной) сферах, в данной статье основное внимание уделяется экономическому аспекту совместных усилий. В частности, целью исследования является изучение того, как Азербайджан участвует в продуктивном сотрудничестве с региональными организациями, подкатегорией международных организаций, для продвижения своих экономических интересов. В этом исследовании подчеркивается активная роль Азербайджана в формировании и развитии совместных усилий на мировой арене. Эти усилия можно охарактеризовать как направленные на продвижение экономических интересов страны. Практическая значимость анализа заключается в том, чтобы дать представление о динамике экономического сотрудничества в региональных организациях с точки зрения возникающей дискуссии о «региональных державах» в международных отношениях. Метод исследования основан на систематическом анализе официальных документов (то есть деклараций, соглашений и других), выступлений и новостей с официальных сайтов Азербайджана и региональных организаций. Автор собрал темы, освещенные в этих источниках, и проводит новый научный анализ, основанный на теоретических дискуссиях о феномене «региональных держав».

Introduction

Peace movements and policymakers of the 19th century advocated for the establishment of international structures, believing in the idea that humanity can create systems to discourage war and promote peaceful

cooperation [29, p.151]. Therefore, two crucial premises of international organizations, also true for regional organizations, emerged in the 19th-century Europe: first, urge to warn against and if possible control inter-state conflicts to achieve Kantian 'perpetual peace'; second, facilitate inter-state cooperation, which is more relevant to this article [14, p.422].

Harold K.Jacobson, a scholar on the international politics, categorizes international organizations into three different types, which encompass those focused on security and peace, economic matters, and issues related to social welfare and human rights [11, p.3]. For Harold K.Jacobson 'economic matters' constituted a crucial component of cooperation within international organization (IOs), even leading to special IOs dedicated to such matters. Thus, Jacobson's depiction is useful in perceiving the 'economic mission' of the international organizations.

Although realism and liberalism essentially differ in explaining the *raison d'être* and power of international organizations, they do not exclude the idea that IOs help states to establish cooperative relations. Especially, the increasing globalization of the economy enhances interdependence among states. As states deal with the structural shifts linked to globalization, they may find motivations to engage in international collaboration collectively. Liberalism goes as far as claiming that the economic cooperation is a basic form of cooperation¹ – 'low politics' – that can potentially incentivize and intensify a political level cooperation – 'high politics' (1, p.154-161).

The role of rising regional powers (RRPs) in fostering economic cooperation within regional organizations, while simultaneously advancing their national interests, has become increasingly apparent in the contemporary global landscape. As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan asserts "My long experience at the United Nations has shown me that the small states of the world... are more than capable of holding their own. I would even go so far as to say that their contributions are the very glue of progressive international cooperation for the common good" [22].

Despite their smaller economies and limited foreign policy apparatuses, rising regional powers such as Azerbaijan have demonstrated extraordinary capabilities in leveraging regional organizations to mitigate these disadvantages and promote their economic and strategic interests. While disagreeing with the Scandinavian school of thought on the claim that relatively weak aggregate structural power (i.e. smaller economies) of rising regional powers makes them less attractive as coalition partners and incapable to influence economic negotiations, this article also partially supports the Scandinavian school by illustrating how RRP benefit most

¹ Note: Under this category, we also see technical and social cooperation too.

from “institutionalized, cooperative and peaceful international system [26, p.4-11].”

By participating in regional organizations, RRP's can access a variety of strategies to enhance their influence, including coalition-building, cooperation with specialized agencies, and leveraging the support of the IOs [16]. Rising regional powers share several characteristics that enhance their effectiveness in regional organizations. For instance, they are adept at developing networks and working through groups, a cooperative mindset that is crucial for success in such organizations [30, p.4-5].

The evolution of international communications, the proliferation of international organizations, and the transparency of their proceedings have reduced the incidence of economic coercion against RRP's by greater powers and the risk of burdening costs alone [28, p.92]. As a result, rising regional powers like Azerbaijan are incentivized to conduct their relations, especially in the economic sphere, through regional organizations.

Azerbaijan prioritizes its efforts within the economic area to ensure its interests are effectively represented. To address urge for economic cooperation, among other needs, RRP's may seek membership within international or regional organizations. This also helps them alleviate vulnerabilities by integrating economically, and ensuring access to innovations, and ideas that their small populations may not generate independently [26, p.8]. To note, this article refers to regional organizations, which are sub-category of international organizations, to study the case of Azerbaijan, leaving other international organizations such as United Nations and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation out of scope.

How Azerbaijan Engages in Economic Cooperation through Regional Organizations?

Azerbaijan prioritizes transport projects within the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) with a distinct approach to enhancing cooperation. President Ilham Aliyev highlights Azerbaijan's commitment to safeguarding the national interests of ECO member states, while actively participating in major infrastructure and economic ventures within the organization as a shareholder of the ECO Bank [24]. Azerbaijan's role in energy security through projects like the ‘Southern Gas Corridor’², connecting seven countries and solidifying Azerbaijan's position as a key and reliable transportation hub in Eurasia is especially noteworthy. Additionally, Azerbaijan recently introduced the concept of the ‘Zangazur

² Note: This project, launched in 2018, aims to deliver gas from mainly Azerbaijani gas fields in the Caspian Sea to the European market, diversifying the sources of natural gas for Europe.

corridor,' linking mainland Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan (exclave territory of Azerbaijan) and Turkey, offering new transportation opportunities for the region.

In 2021, the operationalization of the ECO-ITI (Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul) Road Corridor and following successful cargo dispatch from Pakistan to Azerbaijan and Turkey underscores Azerbaijan's commitment to regional connectivity and transportation. Aliyev calls for practical measures to implement other regional projects and expand the network of transport corridors, aligning with the objectives outlined in the Transit Transport Framework Agreement and Vision 2025 of the ECO [1]. In the same vein, Azerbaijan's proposal for an ECO Research Centre (think-tank) demonstrates its constructive approach in advancing cooperation and development strategies within the organization.

Azerbaijan cultivates trade relations with the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Initiatives undertaken by Azerbaijan include trilateral meetings to strengthen regional connectivity and enhance trade relations, such as the meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Transport of Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan-Turkey and the meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Trade/Economy, and Transport of Azerbaijan-Turkey-Uzbekistan. These initiatives reinforce the actualization of the Trans-Caspian International East-West-Middle Corridor at the center of which Azerbaijan is situated.

Azerbaijan's emphasis on trade is evidenced by projects like Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway connection, operational since 2012, aimed at streamlining transportation among Turkic states, hence increasing trade in Eurasia region [7]. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan also seeks to pioneer new forms of cooperation within OTS, as demonstrated by the Digital Hub project, which involves construction of a high-speed internet line between Asia and Europe as part of the Trans-Caspian Fiber Optic project.

Azerbaijan also recognizes the importance of cooperation within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), especially following the Second Karabakh War, in 2020, which necessitated rebuilding and revitalizing the region affected by the conflict. President Ilham Aliyev emphasizes the need for "companies from friendly countries to be involved in the restoration of our cities and villages, and so that they can carry out these projects and demonstrate solidarity" with the desire to "revive Karabakh and make it one of the most developed regions in the world" [10].

Economic cooperation holds significant prospects and economic benefits too, with particular emphasis made on the transport sector where Azerbaijan has invested in infrastructure development (i.e. sea ports, railways, airports) to facilitate trade in North-South and East-West

directions. Despite efforts, back in 2015, Aliyev noted that there has been a decline in trade turnover among CIS member countries, prompting the need for innovative forms of economic interaction [9]. Therefore, President Aliyev echoes the suggestion by Vladimir Putin to explore settlements in national currencies and emphasizes the importance of strengthening new economic model within the CIS.

The Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM) aims to address important issues for the participating countries through joint quadrilateral efforts, especially promoting peaceful conflict resolution, combating separatism, developing secure transportation corridors, and collaborating with European and trans-Atlantic institutions [4, p.18]. Following the Washington Summit, in April 1999, President Heydar Aliyev, then Chairman of GUAM, emphasized that the organization aims to promote economic cooperation among its members, with a particular focus on the Transcaucasian highway [19]. Similar position has been re-iterated by Heydar Aliyev in the meeting of the presidents of the GUAM countries in Yalta, in June 2001 [8, p.39].

As a founding member of GUAM, Azerbaijan actively supports the organization's shift to become a project-oriented institution [3]. Azerbaijan places special importance on mutually beneficial cooperation in various areas such as trade, transport, customs, energy, tourism, technology, and agriculture. The country is also an initiator and active participant in projects aimed at facilitating and digitizing trade and transport routes of the region. Azerbaijan has chaired GUAM on several occasions, precisely in 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020 and 2024. Moreover, Azerbaijan served as the coordinator for various working groups, including transport in 2011-2012 and 2019-2020, energy from in 2011 and 2018, information technologies in 2011-2012 and 2015-2016, and culture and tourism in 2013-2014 [15].

Azerbaijan, during its chairmanship periods of GUAM in 2016, 2020, and 2024, consistently prioritized economic cooperation as reflected in the official chairmanship documents³. Across all chairmanship terms, Azerbaijan placed special emphasis on the development of the GUAM Transport Corridor, facilitating trade and transit through closer collaboration with international partners and member states. Key initiatives included

³ Visit following links (documents) for more detail: <https://guam-organization.org/en/chairmanship-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-2024/> Document name: "Chairmanship of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2024)"; <https://guam-organization.org/en/chairmanship-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-2020/> Document name: "Chairmanship of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2020)"; <https://guam-organization.org/en/2016-chairmanship-of-azerbaijan-in-the-guam/> Document name: "2016 – Chairmanship of the Republic of Azerbaijan in GUAM"

advancing the Protocol on Rules of Origin for commodities, promoting digitalization in transport and customs, and enhancing energy security with a focus on sustainability and climate resilience. While the 2016 chairmanship highlighted the creation of a “GUAM window” at border checkpoints to speed up border crossings, the 2020 chairmanship concentrated on the feasibility study of the GUAM transport corridor and cooperation with customs officers.

Azerbaijan is also the founding member of the Black Sea Cooperation Organization (BSEC) and has chaired the organization on multiple occasions, particularly in 2003, 2004, 2009, and 2018, and hosted more than 20 events at various levels of the organization [18]. Moreover, Azerbaijan has actively contributed to the BSEC by participating in the preparation and adoption of over 11 official documents during the working group meetings [5]. From 2005 to 2007, it coordinated the activities of the energy working group. Additionally, in February 2014, Azerbaijan hosted a High-Level Forum in Baku to promote private sector involvement in agro-food chain development. More recently, Azerbaijan was appointed to coordinate the BSEC Working Group on small and medium-sized enterprises from 2022 to 2024, and the Working Group on Energy from 2023 to 2025.

During these meetings and country's chairmanship period cooperation projects in transportation, energy, communication, and trade have been implemented. Azerbaijan emphasizes the development of cooperation within the organization based on mutual interests in various priority areas, including trade, customs, transport and energy. Azerbaijan has actively supported initiatives to enhance the efficiency of the BSEC. The organization has provided Azerbaijan with a platform for fostering regional and interregional economic cooperation, contributing to the country's economic development and building ties between the Black and Caspian Sea regions [2].

Although Azerbaijan holds the status of a dialogue partner within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), at the Samarkand Summit in 2022, President Ilham Aliyev highlighted the country's active engagement in various fields, including security, economy, culture, and humanitarian cooperation. To note, Azerbaijan's invitation to participate in the SCO's Samarkand Summit as a guest of honor marked Azerbaijan's first attendance at such high-level SCO event. Invitation by Uzbekistan certainly encouraged Azerbaijan's active participation and created aspiration for full membership to the organization.

Vladimir Norov, former SCO Secretary-General, acknowledged Azerbaijan's role as one of the most engaged dialogue partners, particularly

in security, economic, cultural, and humanitarian spheres [20]. President Aliyev underscores Azerbaijan's commitment to enhancing cooperation with SCO member states, emphasizing bilateral and trilateral infrastructure and energy projects as key priorities. During the meeting with SCO Secretary-General, in 2019, Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister, Elmar Mammadyarov, lauded the SCO's initiatives and expressed Azerbaijan's eagerness to deepen collaboration in mutually beneficial areas. He specifically highlighted Azerbaijan's interest in enhancing cooperation with SCO countries in the transport sector, including participation in relevant projects and organizing joint thematic events [20].

Azerbaijan's relationship with the European Union (EU) has evolved and grown closer since gaining independence in 1991, although the country do not seek joining the EU formally. Initially, the focus was on technical assistance due to the country's economic challenges, while the conflict with Armenia over Karabakh constituted another aspect in the relations [27, p.740].

Azerbaijani-EU engagement reached its comprehensive form with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1996. Subsequent policy frameworks such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 and the Eastern Partnership Program (EaP) in 2009, further emphasized 'European' values in Azerbaijan such as democratization, good governance and market reforms, and aimed at multilateral cooperation.

After Azerbaijan's accession to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a new policy framework for Azerbaijan-EU relations was adopted with the name of the "Republic of Azerbaijan-EU Action Plan" in 2006. This Action Plan, which replaced the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, outlined 10 priority areas for further development, including a peaceful resolution to the Karabakh conflict, strengthening democracy, improving the business and investment climate, enhancing customs services, and promoting energy and transport cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan [25].

Azerbaijan is one of the six former Soviet republics⁴ participating in the Eastern Partnership program to support political and economic reforms and foster closer ties between the countries of the region and the EU. Azerbaijan gained EU support for the construction of pipelines to transport Azerbaijani gas to Europe. Baku also negotiated a visa facilitation and readmission agreement, which simplified the visa process for Azerbaijani citizens. For instance, thanks to the visa facilitation agreement, a vast

⁴ Note: Others being Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

number of students gained the opportunity to pursue their education in European higher education institutions with less obstacles and paperwork⁵.

Azerbaijan-EU relations are often seen as primarily driven by pragmatic considerations. Azerbaijan particularly focuses on cooperation in economic sphere which does not stipulate legally binding political commitments [17]. The EU states are the country's largest foreign trade partners and investors, while Azerbaijan is considered an important strategic partner in the energy sector, providing resources to meet a considerable portion of the EU's oil and gas needs [6, p.17]. For example, Azerbaijan currently supplies around 5% of the EU's gas demand⁶. Thus, Azerbaijan serves as Europe's link to the wider Caspian region, where energy-rich fields lay, and plays a role of "key partner on Caspian regional energy projects [13, p.10]."

Indeed, energy sector has been a defining factor in mutual cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU since early 1990s [12, p. 33]. The energy relations have revolved around the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). The SGC consists of three pipelines that connect Azerbaijani energy to Georgia, Turkey, Greece, Albania, and then to Italy⁷. The main supplier for the SGC is the Shah Deniz field – located in Azerbaijan's sector of Caspian Sea. The EU signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Azerbaijan in 2006, and later the Joint Declaration on the South Corridor in 2011, reiterating the union's commitments to energy projects. Moreover, in 2016, these foundations were further expanded under new EU program, thanks to which Azerbaijan was entitled to take advantage of EU's technological and financial resources to solidify the energy policy [6, p.17].

Conclusion

The case study of Azerbaijan within the Economic Cooperation Organization, the Organization of Turkic States, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, the Black Sea Cooperation Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation, and European Union illustrate how rising regional powers can

⁵ Note: Since 2014, 488 Erasmus+ international mobility projects have taken place involving Azerbaijan higher education institutions. More than 2,000 students and academic staff from Azerbaijan were supported to study or teach in the EU. Source: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2c6527b7-198e-42ce-b72f-202355afba4d_en

⁶ Source: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/azerbaijan_en

⁷ Note: Those three gas pipelines are the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) passing through Azerbaijan and Georgia, the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) crossing Turkey, and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) connecting Greece, Albania and Italy.

effectively navigate regional organizations to further their interests. Despite their developing economies and limited influence in economic negotiations, these nations have managed to effectively leverage their positions to foster regional cooperation, enhance trade, and promote strategic initiatives.

Azerbaijan exemplifies how energy resources and strategic geographical positioning can be utilized to build substantial influence within regional organizations. Its active participation in the Eastern Partnership and its pivotal role in the Southern Gas Corridor underscore Azerbaijan's capacity to shape regional energy policies and secure critical investments. The country's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, focusing on economic gains while maintaining strategic partnerships, allows it to navigate complex international dynamics effectively.

Azerbaijan illustrates that rising regional powers can achieve significant economic and political outcomes by engaging in capacity-building, coalition-forming, and strategic partnerships within regional organizations. These states utilize their unique strengths, such as Azerbaijan's energy resources and strategic location, to maximize their influence and achieve their national objectives. In this respect, Azerbaijan takes advantage of its membership within IOs to gain support for regional projects such as oil and gas pipelines, serving as a bridge between the East and West.

The experience of Azerbaijan also demonstrates that regional organizations play a vital role in reducing transaction costs, facilitating cooperation, and providing platforms for RRP to amplify their voices. By participating in these organizations, rising regional powers can mitigate their inherent vulnerabilities and leverage collective action to achieve greater economic stability and growth.

In conclusion, the ability of rising regional powers to play significant roles in international economic cooperation is not limited by their smaller economic scale. Instead, it is their strategic use of regional organizations, their focus on specific economic sectors, and their ability to form effective coalitions and partnerships that drive their success. This case study underscores the importance of regional organizations in providing a conducive environment for smaller states to thrive and further their national interests on the global stage.

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