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Azerbaijan's Expanding European Portfolio: Strategic Alignment and Energy Connectivity

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Key takeaways:

- Amid increasing inconsistency in the approach of certain European institutions towards Azerbaijan, Baku's relations with several countries in Central and Southeastern Europe are continuing to gain strategic significance.
- Resilient and steadily advancing bilateral relations are, in addition to evident tangible interests on the ground, based on convergence on the key principles that govern inter-state relations – mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, sustained demonstration of reliability, and a track record of effective implementation.
- These principles serve as the foundation of all the various cooperation directions Azerbaijan's relationships with countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia entail.
- The analysis divides the states into three categories: strong political partners with a shared vision on how foreign policy and inter-state relations should be conducted (**Hungary** and **Serbia**); emerging partners which have sought closer relations with Azerbaijan in the energy and military spheres (the **Czech Republic** and **Slovakia**); states that play an essential role in Azerbaijan's energy connectivity strategy in the mentioned region (**Bulgaria, Romania** and **Albania**).
- The partnerships explored are characterized by steadily growing and strengthening political will, with the countries consistently acknowledging the value of their partnership with Azerbaijan for their national security but also Baku's contribution to regional energy security processes in Central and Southeastern Europe.
- Going forward, a combination of key factors (a common vision on how inter-state relations should be conducted, material interests on the ground and unwavering political will) promises to elevate Azerbaijan's importance for Central and Southeastern Europe to an even greater dimension.

Introduction: Azerbaijan's diverse 'European' portfolio

The European vector of Azerbaijan's foreign policy portfolio consists of several different dimensions. These can be categorized in different ways – by geography, by the institutional nature of the actor involved, or by degree of partnership. In recent times, most analysis has focused on the second category, with the highly

unconstructive position adopted by the European Parliament damaging what is an otherwise upward-trending relationship. Here, in addition to Azerbaijan's fundamental bilateral ties with countries like Italy, a more rational and cooperation-centred approach by the European Commission since the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine has added a much-needed sense of direction which Azerbaijan had felt was lacking.

However, this European vector consists of more than just relations with leading EU institutions and with European 'heavyweights' like Italy. There is a separate dimension, which, although sometimes overlooked, is of major importance for Azerbaijan, its foreign policy approach and its national interests. This concerns several Central and Southeastern European states, a broad region whose global strategic significance has been steadily rising and in which Azerbaijan is increasingly viewed as a major player. The South Caucasus is experiencing a similar process, with the region gradually transitioning from one of conflict to one driven by cooperation. This has amplified its potential, given its strategically vital geographic position, to serve as a bridge between continents but also trade routes and supply chains. Within this process, the rise of Azerbaijan's role as a regional leader with multiple levers of influence and resources is occurring simultaneously. The country's highly active foreign policy agenda, which increasingly positions it as a leader of regional processes, is directly helping amplify the value of its existing partnerships.

An aspect which differentiates Azerbaijan's foreign policy approach is the country's unwavering commitment to a core set of principles which it implements in all of its bilateral relations, irrespective of geographic location and, crucially, without allowing these relationships to overlap or affect each other. In the case of Central and Southeastern European states, Azerbaijan has ascending ties with practically every country of the region. These relationships are a vivid demonstration of how the combination of strategic interdependence, a principled approach to inter-state relations and similar geopolitical circumstances can convert stable bilateral relations into a source of regional and geopolitical influence. Azerbaijan's partnerships with countries in this region are precisely that – strong bilateral ties which through years of development and close alignment have transformed into something greater and with major regional ramifications.

At the very core of this alignment is a crucial similarity between how Azerbaijan and states in Central and Southeastern Europe (Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia) approach their foreign policies. Despite some of these states' membership of the EU, which requires a certain degree of sovereignty transfer to Brussels-based institutions, these countries have consistently placed

national sovereignty and strategic autonomy above regional integration processes. Moreover, the countries also navigate increasingly complex geopolitical environments. With the war between Russia and Ukraine permanently changing the security architecture of Central and Southeastern Europe, the countries have placed even more emphasis on their national interests and security. The diversification of energy resources is an integral part of this process. This has resulted in overlapping interests with Azerbaijan, which continues to work towards consolidating itself as a stable, resilient and reliable energy player on the global market. This reality has made the development of the partnerships logical and even necessary. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan's connection to the mentioned countries extends beyond just the lens of mutual benefit. There is a shared vision on how inter-state relations should be conducted, with respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity coming first and serving as the basis for all other activity. It is precisely this strategic and conceptual alignment that makes the above list of countries such important pillars of Azerbaijan's European strategy, albeit in their own different ways.

The analysis proceeds by assessing Azerbaijan's relationships with the above-listed states according to the following logic. In the first section, Hungary and Serbia are considered as two states that have enjoyed uniquely strong political relations with Azerbaijan. The countries have grown closer together through a shared approach to the conduct of foreign policy and inter-state relations, with progress in their bilateral agendas rooted in a common commitment to sovereignty and the pursuit of national interests. The second category considers the Czech Republic and Slovakia, two countries which are becoming increasingly important for Azerbaijan not only in the energy sphere but increasingly through military cooperation. In recent months, both have demonstrated considerable interest in elevating their relationships with Baku to a new dimension. The third category focuses on Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania, three states which play a particularly important role in Azerbaijan's energy strategy in the broader region. Bulgaria and Romania are considered together due to their role in helping Azerbaijan develop a regional gas transmission network, considerably expanding the supply of Azerbaijani gas through the Solidarity Ring initiative. Finally, Albania, given its significance for the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) segment of the Southern Gas Corridor, is considered. Moreover, with the Azerbaijan-Albania bilateral agenda also developing in recent months, this promises to be another key partnership for Azerbaijan's European portfolio.

Political and conceptual alignment: Hungary and Serbia

Hungary: strategic convergence

The relationship between Azerbaijan and Hungary is shaped by an important convergence in their external affairs strategies – both states are positioned in geopolitically complex environments but have, nevertheless, succeeded in maintaining national interests and sovereignty at the centre of their strategies. Although the bilateral agenda is comprehensive and carries significance for several sectors, the sides have undoubtedly been brought closer together through their shared interpretation of several fundamental concepts in international affairs. Hungary's external relations have been consistently and firmly rooted in a respect for national tradition, sovereignty, and the preservation of strategic autonomy, all of which are closely interlinked. National interests are the driving factor of all engagements, which in Hungary's case has occasionally resulted in the country being unwilling to delegate fundamental decisions over its geopolitical future to external or regional actors. For Azerbaijan, national interests and sovereignty are similarly essential factors, which explains the natural alignment between the two countries.

Hungary has now entered a new chapter following the recent elections, with Prime Minister Péter Magyar having commenced his tenure. For now, it appears that the management of challenging relations with Brussels will dominate the foreign policy agenda in the short-term. However, Budapest's non-EU portfolio is such that it already has multiple strategic partnerships which allow it to maintain a considerable degree of strategic balance in its engagements. The partnership with Azerbaijan stands out, with the interests of the countries converging on more than one front. Therefore, it would be reasonable for Hungary to remain interested in upholding existing cooperation mechanisms and positive momentum in its relationship with Azerbaijan. Re-approximation with Brussels should not be treated by Hungary through a zero-sum lens, where a turn towards closer ties results in a deterioration of relations with Turkic countries, including Azerbaijan. For the positive dynamic to continue, it will be important for new Hungarian leadership to resist pressure from certain circles or analysts in the country which are sceptical towards cooperation with Azerbaijan and present the country in misleading ways. After all, bilateral cooperation brings sufficient benefits to Budapest, which is why continuation should be viewed as the most rational decision.

From a strategic perspective, the two countries are united by their positions at important geopolitical crossroads. In Azerbaijan, Hungary sees an actor that provides strategically indispensable access to emerging markets and regions, with Central Asia

increasingly consolidating itself as an attractive market through the rapidly developing Middle Corridor. Azerbaijan's role within this major project is well-documented, with regional normalization with Armenia further boosting its status as a regional leader both in status but also capability. In Hungary, Azerbaijan and other Turkic states within the broader Organization of Turkic States (OTS) framework view the country as a unique gateway to the Western European market. Hungary's participation in the OTS as an observer state and its simultaneous membership of the European Union embody a unique dynamic. Azerbaijan pursues a similar degree of balancing between the major directions of its foreign policy. Although Azerbaijan has never considered EU membership, it has a comprehensive energy partnership with Brussels, which experienced an important turning point in 2022 when the sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the field of energy. On the other hand, Baku is actively advocating for closer integration within the OTS framework.

Hence, the two countries' natural preference for multi-directional engagement in their foreign policy has undoubtedly brought their interests closer, something which is reflected on the bilateral track. The countries have emerging ties in sectors like education, with Hungary ranking among the most preferred European destinations for Azerbaijani students.¹ Moreover, there is considerable cooperation in the academia and research sectors, with major think tanks and other institutions frequently engaging with each other and hosting events.² In the energy sector, Hungarian companies are becoming increasingly active in the energy network of the South Caucasus, of which Azerbaijan is an integral part. Hungarian energy company MOL already has a 9.5% stake in the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli (ACG) oil field, with the company's production steadily increasing year on year (a 5.5% increase was recorded in 2025 compared to 2024).³ Together with Azerbaijan's SOCAR, the sides are stepping up efforts to engage in direct cooperation and explore new opportunities, particularly in relation to upstream projects. Moreover, it was recently announced that the MOL Group (a Hungarian multinational oil and gas corporation) has also begun gas production in the ACG oil field, highlighting the evolving nature of the company's engagement with Azerbaijan and its energy infrastructure.⁴

The steps being taken across different sectors highlight the existing momentum in the relationship, with several joint initiatives already categorized as long-term

¹ <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/more-than-1-500-azerbajjanis-study-in-hungary>

² <https://aircenter.az/en/post/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-air-center-and-the-danube-institute-1725>

³ <https://caliber.az/en/post/hungary-s-mol-group-boosts-output-at-azerbajjan-s-oil-field-in-2025>

⁴ <https://hungarytoday.hu/mol-begins-gas-production-at-the-acg-field-in-azerbajjan/>

initiatives. Most importantly, however, this particular relationship demonstrates that countries in Central and Southeastern Europe view Azerbaijan as more than simply a partner in one or several sectors. With Baku, a series of shared interests, which have emerged as a result of the rising strategic significance of both the South Caucasus but also Central and Southeastern Europe, have transformed the partnership into one with major geopolitical connotations. Going forward, as Azerbaijan continues to strengthen its role as a regional hub (including for gas and transit) through new partnerships and even greater output, the strategic importance of the Caspian region for Hungary will only continue to grow.

This trajectory demonstrates that the Azerbaijan-Hungary relationship is built on an increasingly powerful combination of practical but also conceptual alignment. The countries have been cooperating in several areas for some time and recognize the need for even deeper engagement in certain areas, including education and connectivity. However, the primary factor which makes their partnership so natural and logical is how similarly essential their roles are in the ongoing broader geopolitical reconfiguration being witnessed in the Eurasian continent. As two states with vast resources, a complex geography and multiple diplomatic tools at their disposal, Baku and Budapest are bound by more than just their bilateral cooperation. A mutual commitment to upholding sovereignty as the principal norm in international affairs has served as the basis for deepening engagement in recent years. As new Hungarian leadership implements its foreign policy approach, there should be every reason for Azerbaijan to be treated with the same strategic weight as in previous years.

Serbia: a key partner outside the EU

When discussing Azerbaijan's relations with Central and Southeastern Europe, relations with Serbia cannot go unnoticed. The country's relationship with Azerbaijan is another vital demonstration of the importance of political understanding between states on major issues defining state-relations, primarily respect for sovereignty and each other's national interests. The bilateral relationship dates back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when political coordination dominated the agenda. The signing of the strategic partnership declaration in 2013 paved the way for deeper contacts, including between state companies. Shortly after, Serbia began considering Azerbaijan as a potential energy supplier, with the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 serving, once again, as a definitive turning point in the energy relationship. Since then, SOCAR and Srbijagas, Serbia's main natural gas provider,

have signed multiple agreements targeting the increase of gas supply to the country from Azerbaijan. This began with the November 2023 agreement on the supply of 400 million cubic meters of gas per year (2024-2026) and was followed up by a separate short-term deal in September 2024 for the supply of an additional 1 million cubic meters of gas per day.⁵ The launch of the Serbia-Bulgaria interconnector in December 2023 was a significant step in the operationalization of this process. Moreover, in 2026, SOCAR and Serbia's EPS signed a cooperation agreement to jointly construct and develop a gas-fired power plant in Niš, with SOCAR also involved in the implementation phase.⁶

The Azerbaijan-Serbia relationship is a powerful demonstration of how two countries from different regions can transform a solid political and diplomatic foundation into a partnership that strengthens both their national but also regional security. A strong, working political relationship between the two leaders and also a highly institutionalized bilateral agenda, with both a Strategic Partnership Council and an Intergovernmental Commission in operation, will continue to drive the agenda forward. As noted by President Ilham Aliyev in his remarks during the first Council meeting, friendship, sincerity and seriousness are among the key aspects of the working Azerbaijan-Serbia relationship.⁷ In an era of international relations increasingly characterized by fragmentation and competition, the ability of states to act in accordance with these principles remains a significant source of optimism. Moreover, when bilateral relations are sufficiently powerful to directly influence regional security, their strategic value increases substantially. This capacity is what distinguishes Azerbaijan's relations with the countries of the region.

Similar to its relations with Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, Azerbaijan-Serbia relations are also underpinned by a convergence in the two states' views on key principles in international relations. This is particularly relevant with respect to sovereignty and the role of international law. Both countries have, in different ways and circumstances, demonstrated their unease with the selective application of 'rules' in the international system, campaigning for the unequivocal recognition of sovereignty and territorial integrity as the basis of inter-state relations. As shown, this is a common uniting factor in all of Azerbaijan's relationships explored so far, with Serbia a particularly powerful example.

⁵ <https://report.az/en/energy/socar-energy-cooperation-between-azerbaijan-serbia-strategic-in-nature>

⁶ <https://caliber.az/en/post/socar-serbia-s-eps-sign-deal-to-develop-gas-fired-power-plant-in-ni%C5%A1>

⁷ <https://president.az/en/articles/view/71614>

Emerging strategic ties: the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Czech Republic: a clear signal of intent

When considering prospective long-term partnerships which could gain a greater place in Azerbaijan's European engagement, the Czech Republic is another highly relevant example. The country's recent approach to Azerbaijan is a clear demonstration of both Azerbaijan's and the South Caucasus's growing strategic significance. The newly elected Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's first trip outside the European Union being to Azerbaijan is a strong confirmation of this, with the leader making his acknowledgement of the importance of ties with the country clear from the start. Currently, the two countries are strategic partners, with Azerbaijan covering approximately 42% of the Czech Republic's oil consumption in 2025.⁸ This is a significant figure, demonstrating consistency and reliability. The two leaders, however, recognize that there is potential to further expand cooperation in the energy sector. This concerns the establishment of the supply of Azerbaijani gas to the Czech Republic. With a comprehensive transmission network already in place in Central and Southeastern Europe, the extension of this to Prague would be both logical and completely in line with the momentum being observed in the bilateral relationship.

This bilateral relationship, in similar ways to Serbia and Slovakia, is also recognized for its considerable military portfolio. During Prime Minister Babiš's visit to Azerbaijan, President Ilham Aliyev noted that the two sides are exploring opportunities for joint production in this field, which would serve as an important extension of existing contacts in the sphere.⁹ The visit coincided with the announcement by Czech defence group 'CSG' of the establishment of a joint venture between its Azerbaijani subsidiary ('Excalibur Army Azerbaijan LLC') and a local partner. The venture is expected to specialize in the "repair, servicing and modernization" of armoured vehicles and other land-based military equipment.¹⁰ Characterized as a long-term investment, the project promises to focus on the development of local capacity through knowledge sharing, something which the Czech defence industry is known for.

Cooperation between Azerbaijan and the Czech Republic could be broadened even further if the countries combined their efforts with Türkiye. With all three countries possessing their respective military capabilities and expertise, and the Czech Republic

⁸ https://mzv.gov.cz/baku/en/bilateral_relations/the_prime_minister_of_the_czech_republic.html

⁹ <https://president.az/en/articles/view/72194>

¹⁰ <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2026/04/27/3281383/0/en/CSG-establishes-a-joint-venture-in-Azerbaijan-focused-on-servicing-and-modernisation-of-land-systems.html>

already engaging in cooperation with Türkiye, the establishment of this trilateral cooperation framework would add even further momentum to the Czech Republic's engagement with Azerbaijan.

Slovakia: a partnership for the long-term

Azerbaijan's relationship with Slovakia is another important demonstration of Baku's long-term strategic significance for the countries of the region. In recent years, the sides have steadily increased direct contacts, recognizing both the ample opportunity for closer relations but also the numerous mutual benefits that can be derived from a more active bilateral agenda. During President Ilham Aliyev's official visit to Slovakia in December 2025, along with Slovak President Peter Pellegrini, the two leaders delivered highly encouraging statements indicating a desire to rapidly strengthen the bilateral relationship.¹¹ The primary focus of this relationship is also the energy sector, with Azerbaijan playing an increasingly active role in helping Slovakia diversify its energy resources as the country seeks to boost its energy security. The initial foundation for this was set in 2023, when a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between SOCAR and the gas transmission system operators of Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia.¹² This established the "Solidarity Ring Initiative", designed to upgrade and expand existing transmission infrastructure to facilitate the supply of additional Azerbaijani gas to Slovakia. The gas was to move through the Bulgarian, Romanian and Hungarian transmission networks before reaching Slovakia.

It was not until late 2024 when the first commercial deliveries of Azerbaijani gas to Slovakia through the above-mentioned transmission network began, when SOCAR initiated supplies to SPP, Slovakia's largest energy supplier.¹³ The sides, however, recognize that current volumes are far from being indicative of the full potential. Only recently, Slovak Deputy Prime Minister Tomas Taraba announced that the country is actively working on securing a long-term natural gas supply contract with Azerbaijan.¹⁴ With negotiations currently underway, there is hope that the short-term contract which was implemented in 2024 will serve as a platform for a longer-term contract which will convert Slovakia into a permanent recipient of Azerbaijani natural gas.

¹¹ <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70737>

¹² <https://minenergy.gov.az/en/xeberler-arxivi/bolqaristan-ruminiya-macaristan-ve-slovakiyanin-oturuclu-sistem-operatorlari-ve-socar-arasinda-emekdasligin-tesviqine-dair-anlasma-memorandumu-imzalanib>

¹³ <https://report.az/en/energy/socar-begins-natural-gas-supply-to-slovakia>

¹⁴ <https://ceenergynews.com/oil-gas/slovakia-long-gas-supply-deal-azerbaijan/>

During President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Slovakia, expanding cooperation in the defence industry sector was another key focal point of discussions. Contacts in this sphere are already established, with Slovak military equipment first delivered to Azerbaijan as early as 2005.¹⁵ As recently as in February 2026, a deal worth 210 million euros was signed for Azerbaijan to acquire SAM-120 automatic mortars produced by ZŤS Spéciál, Slovak defence manufacturer.¹⁶ The sides are eager to ensure that cooperation in this area moves beyond just the regular trade and exchange of military technology. Both recognize the respective expertise they can bring to the relationship, with Slovak technologies gaining considerable popularity through their active testing in real combat and Azerbaijan demonstrating commitment towards boosting investment across several of its partnerships in the defence sector. In his speech, President Ilham Aliyev pointed out the potential for "real synergy" to be established between Slovak technological capabilities in the sphere and Azerbaijan's financial resources.¹⁷ The Slovak side has also expressed interest in acquiring Azerbaijani defence products, which has set the ground for joint production.¹⁸ With both sides expressing consistent interest, cooperation in the defence industry sector has all the necessary features to help elevate the bilateral relationship to the next stage. With some degree of institutionalization already in place through the work done by the joint economic group, the combination of progress in the energy and defence industry can drive the next chapter of the relationship.

The emphasis of Slovakia's leadership on reliability and partnership when referring to the country's relationship with Azerbaijan demonstrates a now consolidated and widely accepted reality. Baku is viewed by countries in Central and Southeastern Europe as more than just a resource-rich partner in several spheres. Increasingly, such states, which are EU members but stand out through their insistence on exercising strategic autonomy in their relations, are turning to Azerbaijan in a more systemic and long-term way. Whether through securing energy supplies and diversification or simply boosting the resilience of the defence sector, there is ample evidence that Azerbaijan's ability to combine its strategic location with effective implementation is an increasingly attractive model for both its current and emerging partners.

¹⁵ <https://aircenter.az/en/single/what-does-azerbaijan-slovakia-strategic-partnership-promise--oped-1462>

¹⁶ <https://caliber.az/en/post/azerbaijan-secures-210-million-deal-for-300-slovak-sam-120-mortars>

¹⁷ <https://president.az/en/articles/view/70737>

¹⁸ <https://en.apa.az/foreign-policy/slovakias-ambassador-elchin-gasimov-bratislava-views-cooperation-with-azerbaijan-in-the-defence-industry-as-a-strategic-priority-interview-492065>

Regional energy connectivity: Bulgaria, Romania and Albania

Bulgaria and Romania: when the bilateral intersects with the regional

Relations with Bulgaria and Romania are another essential pillar of Azerbaijan's broadening European portfolio. Both cases serve as a practical demonstration of how cooperation in the energy sector can bring the national interests of states permanently closer together. Since the inauguration of the Greece-Bulgaria Interconnector in 2022, which enabled significantly greater volumes of Azerbaijani gas originating in the Caspian region to reach Bulgaria via the Southern Gas Corridor, the countries have elevated their relations to a new dimension. First, the 2022 arrangement represented an important moment for European energy security, with another expansion of Azerbaijani gas supplies to the continent. Moreover, domestically, Azerbaijani gas has helped Bulgaria significantly replace its previous reliance on Russian gas, with latest figures suggesting that the country now receives around 60% of its gas supplies from Azerbaijan.¹⁹ With the initial agreement signed in 2013 accounting for the supply of 1 billion cubic meters of gas per year, this has increased steadily, with the figure for 2025 reported at 1.931 billion cubic meters.²⁰

Most significantly, cooperation between Azerbaijan and Bulgaria now transcends the bilateral dimension. The "Solidarity Ring Initiative", which was launched in 2023, is a gas transmission system which connects gas transported through the Southern Gas Corridor with the systems of Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. This was an important step towards strengthening and broadening the supply of Azerbaijani gas to different parts of the European continent. Moreover, it served as a demonstration of how a group of states can work together to integrate their national gas infrastructure systems and contribute to the strengthening of regional energy security. New extension plans are being announced on a consistent basis to further boost the regional dimension of the partnership. This involves the proposed Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye-Bulgaria Green Energy Corridor, the feasibility study phase for which is to begin soon. Draft plans suggest the project is based around an electric cable for energy transmission between the countries.²¹

Azerbaijan's relations with Romania are following a similar trend. Recently, high-level contacts between officials have intensified, with the sides openly discussing opportunities for a deeper partnership. The relationship is regularly described as one based on 'strategic partnership' and 'friendship'. Here, energy security is once again the decisive factor, with the sides acknowledging that cooperation expands beyond

¹⁹ <https://report.az/en/energy/bulgaria-receives-over-60-of-its-annual-gas-consumption-from-azerbaijan>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ <https://report.az/en/energy/azerbaijan-georgia-hungary-romania-agree-on-further-steps-for-geco-project>

traditional hydrocarbons and is oriented towards developing partnerships in green energy. In particular, the Caspian-Black Sea Green Energy Corridor (also referred to as the Black Sea Submarine Cable project) serves as the backbone of cooperation between the two countries. Latest reports suggest that the feasibility study for the project is nearing completion.²² This would be an important milestone in advancing a significant project that has the potential to link the power systems of the South Caucasus with Central and Southeastern Europe. It continues to attract considerable interest from investors, with the European Commission planning to allocate 2.3 billion euros once implementation begins. For Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary and Romania, it would reinforce each other's importance for both their own but also regional energy security.²³

The relationships with Bulgaria and Romania demonstrate how, in a relatively short period of time, Azerbaijan has succeeded in not only building several key partnerships with countries in the region but also developing them in a broader regional network which continues to expand and bring immediate benefits to regional security. The positive nature of the ties is consistently emphasized in regular bilateral engagements, serving as the basis of all cooperation. Above all, this demonstrates that Azerbaijan's status in the region extends beyond just the status of a 'partner' – it is an increasingly vital regional actor which plays a direct role in shaping regional processes. The already established projects and agreements will continue to develop and, most importantly, already serve as an important basis for deeper inter-state relations which span more than just the energy sector. The Azerbaijan-Bulgaria and Azerbaijan-Romania partnerships are witnessing a greater volume of high-level engagement, which in a short period of time is expected to generate new, positive results for the countries involved.

Albania: highlighting the significance of the Southern Gas Corridor

Although Albania does not yet directly receive Azerbaijani gas which passes through the Southern Gas Corridor, the country's importance from a strategic perspective is noteworthy. The Southern Gas Corridor is an integral part of Azerbaijan's European energy portfolio, with a unique transmission network delivering Azerbaijani gas to the European market. Its full operationalization, in addition to effective planning and management, requires regional states to play an active role. In this regard, Albania's role must be highlighted. Gas has flowed through the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) on

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

Albanian territory since May 2020, with the country serving as a vital connection to the final stage of the project in Italy. Maintenance for the TAP infrastructure in Albania is currently being provided by a joint venture formed by Albania's Albgaz and Italy's Snam, a partnership that is expected to continue for at least another five years.²⁴

However, in recent years, Albania has gradually emerged as another potential *direct* recipient of Azerbaijani gas. This is a consequence of two factors – developing bilateral ties and political dialogue between the two states, but also Albania's desire to expand the gas segment of its energy portfolio. The first direct gas supplies to Albania via TAP are expected to begin at some point in 2026, with an initial volume of 0.16 billion cubic meters viewed an important first step in this process.²⁵ Recognizing the importance of ensuring this volume increases substantially over the coming years, the Albanian government has expressed interest in collaborating with Azerbaijan. There are already practical examples, with SOCAR playing an active role in the “Nur” project designed to gasify the Albanian city of Korçë. Once completed, the plan is expected to have a major impact on domestic economic development as a distribution network able to supply vital local infrastructure will be in place.²⁶

For Albania, the TAP represents more than just an energy pipeline. It has rapidly developed into a source of investment, local employment and social development, with figures announced in 2024 pointing to around 285 million euros in tax payments received by Albania in the past 25 years.²⁷ Crucially, the country has significant political will to broaden its energy portfolio, with Azerbaijan emerging as a key partner in more than just traditional energy projects. First, the gasification experience in the city of Korçë, according to Besart Kadia, Albania's Ambassador to Azerbaijan, is likely to be applied in other parts of the country.²⁸ In particular, SOCAR is highlighted as an essential partner which can provide vital experience, resources and support as Albania seeks to upgrade its domestic energy infrastructure. More broadly, there is an expectation at the bilateral level that, just like with other relationships considered in this analysis, energy cooperation will serve as a starting point for broader engagement across several sectors. The tourism and hospitality, culture and SME-related partnerships are just some of the areas the two countries are actively exploring.

²⁴ https://www.azernews.az/oil_and_gas/256702.html

²⁵ <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/business/4142095.html>

²⁶ <https://www.trend.az/business/energy/4143968.html>

²⁷ <https://minenergy.gov.az/en/xeberler-arxivi/00277>

²⁸ <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/business/4142095.html>

The case of Albania demonstrates another important element of Azerbaijan's European portfolio. In addition to supplying gas and contributing to regional gas transmission infrastructure, the country is also viewed as partner by regional actors for processes as vital as national development. In a relatively short period of time, Azerbaijan and its state oil company has accumulated enough experience to be able to act in direct support of states in the European continent seeking to develop their own energy and national resilience.

Conclusion

A holistic approach is insufficient to fully understand the importance of 'Europe' in Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Partnerships and their relevant significance must be treated case by case. This is becoming more and more significant as certain circles in the broad 'EU system' intensify efforts to jeopardize the partnership with Azerbaijan and continue an unjust campaign based on completely contradictory narratives. However, as this process expands, so do Azerbaijan's critical partnerships with several of the continent's key players. The information presented above serves as a tangible confirmation of the strategic significance of these relationships. Although they may occasionally receive less attention and coverage than relations with primary EU bodies or larger member states, Azerbaijan has repeatedly underlined their invaluable nature.

When referring to Azerbaijan, the countries discussed in this analysis point to similar features of their inter-state relations with the country: **reliability, efficiency and transparency**. In addition, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, acknowledgment of each other's national interests and the conduct of friendly diplomatic relations form the basis of the relationships. This confirms an underlying trend, which is that in addition to possessing considerable diplomatic resources, Azerbaijan's image is increasingly one of an emerging middle power. Moreover, the rise of the strategic significance of the Central and Southeastern European region is occurring almost simultaneously to the global recognition of Azerbaijan's regional leadership. This is generating essential momentum for ensuring the relationships are constantly advancing and fulfilling their potential.

Azerbaijan's highly diverse foreign policy portfolio operates in accordance with the principle of complementarity. This enables multiple directions, partnerships and spheres to coexist under two overarching objectives: the fulfilment of national interests and the protection of regional security. The partnerships discussed in this analysis are integral to both objectives. Most importantly, the political will to deepen

them further appears greater than ever before. Against the backdrop of the inconsistency which is observed in the EU's approach to Azerbaijan as well as several member states, the value of these partnerships is amplified even further. Azerbaijan is the first to recognize this and will continue to treat their deepening as a key foreign policy objective.

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