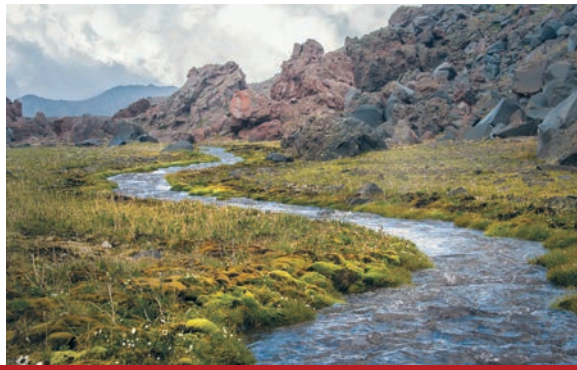
Thomas Kruessmann (ed.)

THE CAUCASUS IN EUROPE-ASIA CONNECTIVITY

The Promise of Infrastructure and Trade



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Thomas Kruessmann (ed.)

The Caucasus in Europe-Asia Connectivity

The Promise of Infrastructure and Trade

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Foreword

Dear reader!

The volume at hand is a core deliverable of AESC's Jean Monnet Support to Associations grant and at the same time the one deliverable that was probably hardest hit by the Covid pandemic. Originally planned to be based on an Annual Convention scheduled for Baku in April 2020, we had organized this volume in collaboration with Western Caspian University and the Azerbaijani European Studies Association. However, the pandemic intervened. So the entire event was moved to an online format and held in December 2020.

Working on the chapters in the course of 2021 proved to be an equally difficult task. There was an extraordinary fluctuation of authors, repeated calls for papers, and several online authors' workshops to bring together a core group of contributors who were willing and able to deliver. Reality showed that publishing under Covid was perhaps the even greater challenge.

Maneuvering all these difficulties and producing not only a hardcopy, but also an open access version of the book is in no small part the achievement of ibidem Press. I would like to use this opportunity to thank Mr. Christian Schön and his dedicated team of professionals for their patience and unwavering support. Let us hope that the result will reach a large audience of interested readers in the Caucasus and beyond. As we devote much attention to young scholars, this volume is also meant to be a practical encouragement to continue with publishing and strive towards peer-reviewed international journals.
Per aspera ad astra!

Thomas Kruessmann, Series Editor,
AESC President

Introduction

Thomas Kruessmann

The river on the cover of this volume is a metaphor for the flow of goods. Trade is like water: it flows where there are the least obstacles, or, technically speaking, where the terms of trade are the most advantageous. From this perspective, the idea of stimulating commerce through connectivity definitely holds a promise. It is the idea that by creating infrastructure a potential demand, be it in China or Europe, would be able to mobilize new levels of commerce and exchange.

However, one does not need to be an economist to see the risks inherent in this assumption. Demand in times of global crisis is an elusive foundation. While globalization as we know it has been built on the belief that the Chinese economy would become the world's manufacturer no. 1, the idea of global value chains and instantly available deliveries for just-in-time production has crumbled. As the Covid pandemic continues to take its toll, economies seek to become resilient while achieving environmental and social sustainability. After the year 2020, and especially in light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the world is no longer the same. There is a heightened awareness now of the limits of growth, as economies struggle with exploding energy and food prices. Even China, as a result of the downturn in global demand and also due to internal contractions, is feeling the limits of growths.

The countries of the South Caucasus are particularly hit hard by the rise in global food prices (Artuc et al. 2022). In fact, the vast majority of low-income households feels the impact much harder than their counterparts in affluent Western European countries. Still, the South Caucasus is also home to

some of the more exciting developments in this period of crisis. As the EU seeks alternative suppliers to Russian oil and gas, Caspian and Central Asian sources, connected via the South Caucasus and Türkiye to European markets, suddenly achieve prominence. The same is true, in principle, for bulk cargo that used to be shipped to Europe via the Northern Corridor through Russia by rail. While the Caspian Sea still presents a significant bottleneck, Türkiye is increasingly working towards establishing the so-called "Middle Corridor" as a viable alternative. It is no surprise, therefore, that the majority of contributions in this volume deals with energy.

Beyond economic feasibility and technocratic considerations, the humanities and social sciences have developed a critical apparatus of theories and approaches to look behind the sparkling façade of connectivity schemes. By focusing on the notions of supply-chain capitalism and circulation, scholarship in critical logistics has rendered visible the social and political implications of logistical growth (Bonacich and Wilson 2008; Cowen 2010 and 2014). While the Chinese reference to the earlier Silk Road is shrouded in romantic images of exchange and collaboration ("win-win"), history tells us that the roots of global circulation lie in imperial conquest, colonial exploitation, state violence and dispossession.

Current literature on logistics covers the geographies of transport and how new developments like containerization, transshipment, and multimodal transport impact local communities (Hesse 2010; Hoyle 2000; Negrey et al. 2011; Vormann 2015). Mobility scholars investigate the particular strategies and power relations through which the act of movement is invested with social meaning (Cresswell 2006). Ethnographers and anthropologists look at the impact of

connectivity schemes on border regions and trading communities who have been practicing "globalization from below" for a long time (Bruns and Miggelbrink 2012). Taken together, there is now a discipline of critical logistics emerging which, according to Chua et al. (2018), is informed by three core commitments:

1. to reject the field's self-depiction as an apolitical science of circulation;
2. to expose the flaws, irrationalities, and vulnerabilities of circulatory regimes;
3. to pay attention to moments of struggle within logistical networks, based on uneven geometries of power, facilitating and speeding up circulation in some cases while intensifying containment and fortifying borders in others.

Interestingly, while much of this research has been based on case studies from Africa and Asia, research agendas have now been both broadened and sharpened to visit the margins of supply-chain capitalism where one set of actors seeks to put things into circulation while others try to make a profit from blocking, re-routing, or slowing them down (Schouten et al. 2019).

Despite this impressive breadth of critical logistics, there is little that has been done specifically on the South Caucasus (Kemoklidze 2021; Tüysüzoğlu 2022; Valiyev and Bilalova 2020). The notion of "globalization from below" has been explored by research into bazaars and trading networks in a comparative perspective (Yalçin-Heckmann and Aivazishvili 2012; Rudaz 2020; Fehlings and Karrar 2022). Questioning the notion of "seamless transport" and exploring the power differentials between much-hyped mega-projects has been

foremostly on the agenda of Gambino (2019a, 2019b and 2020) and to a lesser extent of Rekhviashvili (2020). An interesting perspective on the South Caucasus is offered by the research focus on remoteness, as proposed by Saxer and Anderson (2019): to see how "seemingly remote areas are being wired into this global cartography at lightning speed through infrastructures of transport and telecommunication, these distance-demolishing technologies remain fragile, and the time–space compression once heralded as the hallmark of our times creates an ever more complex patchwork of distance and proximity."

The problem with the aforementioned approaches is that they are mostly represented by researchers from "outside the Caucasus", in their respective disciplinary traditions and published in highly specialized journals internationally. Local knowledge production is still, understandably, on the surface and far from the methodological sophistication of international researchers. For this reason, the given volume intends to be more modest in scope and ambition. While introducing the idea of critical logistics to a regional audience, its purpose is nevertheless to return the approach to the well-known "mother disciplines" of European Studies, political science and IR as well as law and economics, to offer some foundations for interdisciplinary explorations of the region.

The first chapter (*Tomczyk*) is an exploration of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, how it compares to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and what the consequences for Armenia will likely be. It argues that given Armenia's geography and political factors of the South Caucasus, it can be expected that both initiatives will turn towards avenues of cooperation in the digital economy. But given the growing divide in the digital policies of the EU and China towards both hardware and

software, adherence to either Brussels' or Beijing's standards towards the digital economy will become a point of friction for Armenian policymakers in the near future.

The second chapter (*Asim*) presents a dimension which goes far beyond the people-to-people contacts usually discussed in connectivity discourses. In Europe-Asia connectivity, as *Asim* argues, there is a sub-rosa Europeanization of Muslim societies occurring in all the countries surrounding the Caspian Sea. This Europeanization is purposefully kept outside the public gaze. In fact, it is strongly promoted by women in the region who seek to adopt a European lifestyle as a response to religious militancy, domestic tribalism and sectarian fundamentalism.

Starting with the third chapter (*Rahimov),* the collection will begin to address the role of energy in connectivity dimensions of the Caucasus. The Caspian Sea which in the era of the Soviet Union had merely been an inland water became a major bone of contention between the newly-independent littoral states. Several conflicts erupted over the exploitation of hydrocarbons and the integration of the Caspian Sea into schemes of multimodal transport, connecting Central Asia to the Caucasus. A large part of these conflicts appeared to be resolved with the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. However, as *Rahimov* argues, the littoral states collectively chose to avoid conflict initiation in favor of predictability and certainty. Therefore, the Convention merely formalized the already existing status-quo rather than changing it.

What this means for the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) is a question that is explored by *Zanatta* in the fourth chapter. He argues that although recent political events in the region have resulted in a more positive diplomatic environment

for this piece of infrastructure, discussing the TCGP merely in geopolitical terms does not explain why the EU has not managed to establish natural gas connectivity with Turkmenistan yet. *Zanatta* holds that it is the EU's energy policies and taxonomy as well as Turkmenistan´s approach towards foreign investments which are the major factors holding back cooperation between the two parties.

In the fifth chapter, *Gözkaman* invites the reader to consider the role of Türkiye in EU-Central Asia connectivity and in particular the role of the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) in connecting the Caspian Sea with European markets. In line with the approach of critical logistics, he looks behind the power interests of Türkiye in offering TANAP connectivity to the EU and how the revitalization of this pipeline may give a fresh boost to Turkish-EU relations.

The sixth chapter by *Weiss* is perhaps closest to the approach of critical logistics. She uses the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK) as a case study to show how large-scale infrastructure projects through their always-pending completion and their state of being never entirely complete embody a promise of and for the future—based on modernist development and integration taxonomies. The two main narratives in this connectivity paradigm are scalar imaginaries of (and implicit claims to) geopolitical significance and centrality as well as imaginaries of prosperity which generate social hope through underlying developmentalist promises. In her analysis, the Kars Logistics Centre serves as a case in point to illustrate how scalar claims are intertwined with the hope for development and with material structures that literally embody this hope.

Finally, in lieu of a conclusion, the seventh chapter (*Kruessmann*) tries to establish a genuine European Studies

perspective on the idea of connectivity by analyzing the various frameworks promoted by the EU and asking to which extent the EU is ready to project geopolitical thinking into its policy formats to specifically address situations in the South Caucasus. There appears to be a dissonance between the external action agenda, especially before and after the war in Ukraine, and the initiatives built on the common market and the EU Commission's European Green Deal. In fact, the two policy fields do not seem to be conceptually interlinked. Arguably, they even show a lack of commitment and ability of the EU to become a geopolitical actor. This is even more striking, as the EU Council and Commission like to be seen as acting tough on Russia and turning the EU into a more serious player.

Taken together, the seven chapters provide an overview of how different connectivity schemes, geopolitical ambitions and external shocks affect the South Caucasus. Much more needs to be done, not least to give the South Caucasus republics agency in determining their own future.

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Contact and Competition? Comparing Chinese and European Connectivity Strategies in Armenia

Justin Tomczyk

Abstract

Through the Belt and Road Initiative and the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, Beijing and Brussels have engaged in vast, wide-spanning development projects designed to improve their connectivity to the world's emerging economies. With China and the EU representing a combined total of half of the world's GDP the activities of these two formats of engagement hold major implications for logistics, labour, and production across Eurasia. Looking beyond wider grand strategy narratives and the political components of these two initiatives, this chapter will examine their diverging models of connectivity within a single state—Armenia. As a land-locked country within the South Caucasus, connectivity to the surrounding region and wider world has been a perennial challenge in Armenia's economic development. This paper will examine the modes of engagement presented by the Belt and Road Initiative and the EU-Engagement Strategy and their impact on Armenia between 2013 and 2020.

Keywords: Armenia; China; EU; connectivity; digital.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is the interaction between Armenia and two major foreign policy projects: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy. This paper will

briefly explore the origin of these projects and how they aligned with the wider strategic goals of Beijing, Brussels, and Yerevan in the South Caucasus. In doing so this piece will compare and contrast the structure of these projects and how they interact with Armenia. In terms of chronology this paper will examine the period of time between 7 September 2013 and 15 March 2020. This window begins with the formal announcement of the BRI by Xi Jingping and concludes with a review of the initial progress made in the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy by the European Parliament, as well as the opening weeks of the Covid 19 Pandemic—an ongoing event which would lead to radical disruptions in commerce and labour and held major impacts on the world economy. When examining the impact of these two strategies on Armenia, we are immediately presented with several questions. What is "connectivity", in a literal and political sense? What does it mean to improve connectivity? Additionally, how do differing models of connectivity interact with one-another? This piece will conclude with observation on further means of engagement between Armenia and the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy.

The EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy

The EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy was born on 19 September 2018 in the form of a joint communique from the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security on the necessity to improve Europe's economic connectivity to Asia (European Commission 2018a). While presented only as an initial guiding vision for what this policy may be, the strategy nonetheless included a wide-spanning series of ideas and concepts within its parameters. The communique specifies that the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy must be consistent with the guiding principles seen elsewhere

in the Union. This means that the promotion and upholding of the rule of law is paramount in all elements of the strategy and that the EU's stance towards environmental protections and sustainable development goals must be considered in physical infrastructure projects. According to this document, "connectivity" is sorted into a series of defined vectors. A clear proposition from the section "transport" is the expansion of the Trans-European Network for Transport (TEN-T) and its related projects towards Europe's immediate periphery. This means that in addition to providing funding for infrastructure projects within the EU and membership candidates in Western Balkans, the portfolio of TEN-T projects may be expanded to the six members of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and used as a means of facilitating East-West and North-South trade. In addition to the further development of road and rail networks, the strategy includes provisions for the expansion of air and sea transport capabilities with third-parties. While this is not explained in detail, references are made towards Civil Aviation Agreements and the promotion of sustainable and decarbonized means of fuel. Additionally Section 3.2, "Digital Connectivity", outlines the expansion of high-capacity network links and internet access as being elements of crucial infrastructure given their importance to modern economic activity. This section refers to the literal construction of infrastructure used in online communications as well as the harmonization of data protection standards and other legal elements. This section of connectivity is framed as being part of the EU's already established Digital4Development policies. The section titled "Energy" touches on the EU's interest in promoting usage of sustainable and environmentally conscious sources of energy in Asia. Finally, the section titled "people to people connectivity" reflects on the potential usage of educational networks like

Erasmus+ to improve study and research opportunities for students between Europe and Asia. The remaining sections of the document outline how the EU will engage with third parties in fulfilling this policy vision. This includes partnering with individual states on a bilateral level, working with regional bodies, and utilising larger multinational formats to enact policy. In describing partners in the financing of these projects, the document lists the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a potential partner. It is worth noting that the AIIB is the main financial organ of the BRI. This is worth noting as while the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy was created as a response to the BRI and China's growing influence in the world, the BRI is never actually mentioned in this strategy document. While it is possible for outside observers to frame these two formats as competing with one another (and indeed, certain principles of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy are in conflict with the development strategies seen in the BRI), Beijing and Brussels hold nominally cordial relations with one another. While the bilateral relationship between China and the United States features an underlying current of tension and a sense of impending confrontation, no such dynamic exists between China and Europe (or at least not in as pronounced of a way). This is further solidified by a reference in a European Commission memo which specifically states that it is in the mutual interest of China and the EU that their projects are complementary to one another (European Commission 2018b). While this paper will continue to compare and contrast both project it is important to acknowledge that the EU does not consider this to be a zero-sum game.

The EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy was announced just weeks before a planned Asia-Europe summit (Council of the EU 2018). An info sheet later released by the European External

Action Service (EEAS) provided a preliminary summary of the projects included in the strategy (European External Action Service 2019a). In addition to the funding of roads and bridges in the Western Balkans, the connectivity strategy included funding a unified electricity grid in Central Asia, extending Erasmus+ status to students from India, the inclusion of a digital trade component to the EU-Japan Free Trade Agreement, and the support of measures aimed at consolidating ASEAN's free trade provisions into a single consolidated market (European External Action Service 2019b). Not only does this provide a sense of how broad of a concept "connectivity projects" can be, but this document also portrays how wide-spanning the geography involved in this project can be (rather than being limited to a specific region or regional body). The main financing tool of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy is the "Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument" (NDICI). The NDICI has shifted into the EU's primary tool for a wide variety of development and investment projects since 2021 (CONCORD 2022).

Although the EU Asia Connectivity Strategy is framed as being an entirely new format of engagement between the EU and the emerging economies of Asia, it is worth noting that many of the projects and concepts involved have already existed for some time. TEN-T and its associated projects have existed since 1996.[i] Erasmus Mundus in its current form has existed since 2010 (Lloyd 2012) and negotiations on the EU-Japan Free Trade Agreement began in 2012 (Chowdhry 2018)—which is a normal timeframe for such an agreement but predates not only the connectivity strategy but the Belt and Road Initiative as well. This means that although the connectivity project is an effort to synthesize preexisting concepts, ideas and initiatives from the EU, we have yet to see a novel and unique policy be

born of the strategy. It's also worth noting that many of the concepts included in the strategy are not unique to the EU's foreign policy perspectives as a European Parliament review of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy mentions there are 16 different connectivity plans involving north-south connectivity between Iran and Eurasia (European Parliament 2020).

The South Caucasus in EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy

The South Caucasus occupies a curious space in the EU's political and strategic vision. Geographically the area is a literal conduit between the Asian and European landmass and rests between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. With extensive recorded deposits of natural gas, oil, and minerals, the area has historically been a center for resource extraction. Politically, the South Caucasus presents a challenge to the EU's ability to project its values and interests. The presence of three "frozen conflicts"—Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh—has kept all political and economic developments tethered to underlying questions of short-term security and long-term strategy for the three independent states of the South Caucasus. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia share many of the same socioeconomic stressors seen in EU members following the 2004 expansion such as demographic aging and persistent high levels of emigration. Additionally, the three states of the South Caucasus are in close enough political proximity to the EU that the topic of potential future EU membership has existed in the political imagination of Armenia (Stolton 2019) and Georgia (albeit to varying degrees of feasibility and drastically different levels of interest by governments). This means that, much like with Türkiye and Russia, Brussels is consciously balancing cooperation on a bilateral level with the potential integration of

these third parties into the political and economic structures of the EU.

Despite immediate proximity to one-another, the three independent states of the South Caucasus have found themselves increasingly disparate from one another in foreign policy priorities and their major partners. Azerbaijan has maintained a policy of staunch non-alignment with outside security structures (Stakes 2015) and alliance systems while emphasizing its deep political connections to Türkiye, as seen in the "One Nation, Two States" (Babayev 2007) principle articulated by both Ankara (Iddon 2021) and Baku. This foreign policy posturing is feasible due to Azerbaijan's capabilities to act as an energy exporter (Abilov 2019) and the political interests of the Aliyev family, who see democratization and integration with the EU as being a potential threat to their consolidated power (Alieva 2012). Since the mid-1990s, Georgian foreign policy has largely been based on decreasing dependence on the Russian Federation. This is largely a response to Russia's intervention in favor of the internationally unrecognized territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the South Ossetia War (German and Bloch 2006) and Georgian-Abkhazian War (Human Rights Watch 1995). This foreign policy posturing manifests in Georgia's close cooperation with NATO and pronounced interest in political and economic integration with the EU. Full membership in either organization has historically been dissuaded by the ongoing unresolved state of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts, yet Georgia's "European Perspective" (Lomsadze 2022) was recognized as Moldova and Ukraine were formally elevated to EU membership candidates. Georgia's EU membership perspective has been made possible following a series of recommendations put forth by the European Commission (Radio Free

Europe/Radio Liberty 2022). In distancing itself from Russia, Georgia has positioned itself into a conduit for East-West movement of energy and commercial activity between Europe and Asia. Projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway (Shepard 2017) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (Grennan 2017) have cemented this foreign policy posturing into meaningful, tangible infrastructure, while an assortment of memoranda of understanding and bilateral agreements have stitched together a network of ports in Azerbaijan and Georgia designed to facilitate East-West movement via a "Trans-Caspian Network" (Asian Development Bank 2021b) as much as possible. The third state of the South Caucasus, Armenia, has a rather precarious geopolitical situation. Armenia is the smallest of the three independent Caucasian states and is landlocked. Its western border with Türkiye and Eastern border with Azerbaijan are closed to all terrestrial travel due to the ongoing conflict over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and the presence of its unrecognized government, the Republic of Artsakh. While the conclusion of the 2020 Karabakh War led some to believe that the normalization of Armenia's eastern and western borders was possible (Tol 2021), the conflict remains an unresolved and simmering dispute prone to outbursts of violence and aggression (Kucera 2021). Armenia's northern and southern borders are the only possibilities for terrestrial travel. The southern border with Iran runs through Syunik, a remote and mountainous section of the country. Like the disputed territory in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syunik and the "Zangezur Corridor" have been the topic of both sharp political rhetoric (Silk Road Briefing 2022) from the government of Azerbaijan and have been the target of direct attacks (MasisPost 2021). Trade is also heavily impacted by the sanctions levied against Iran by the United States (Mejlumyan

2019). The remaining border—Armenia's northern border with Georgia—is the main vector for almost the entirety of the country's trade. This has led to a considerable bottleneck (Tsaava 2021) effect and has sent shockwaves through the Armenian economy during periods of intense traffic buildup.

Armenia and the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy

Armenia's participation in the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy was not marked with a ceremony or the signing of a treaty. Instead, Armenia's inclusion in the project was simply assumed given the EEAS' previous activity in the country. A combination of mountainous terrain, aforementioned closed borders, and lack of sea access has diminished Armenia's potential as a transit partner between the EU and Asia. There is a persistent reference to Armenia as a potential partner in connectivity projects between Iran and the greater Eurasian landmass—also known as the North-South Corridor (Tasmin New Agency 2022). However, these projects are often limited due to the aforementioned sanctions from the United States against Iran as well as preexisting terrestrial routes that connect Iran to Europe through Türkiye and Azerbaijan. This is not to say that the EU is uninterested in Armenia. Despite all these limitations the EU is still Armenia's largest trading partner. While this is largely focused on the extraction of minerals and the export of alcohol and spirits from Armenia to the EU (European Commission 2022), there has been considerable effort in recent years to balance the trade deficit between Armenia and the EU. Additionally Armenia participates in TEN-T infrastructure projects and Armenian institutions are involved in programs related to mobility and research opportunities with European institutions (COST Association 2022). While conventional trade remains difficult due to aforementioned geographic limitations,

Armenia has embraced the concept of "digital industry" and leverages its growing IT industry as a means of attracting trade and capital unencumbered by the limits of geography. This is actualized through Yerevan's participation in a variety of activities and initiatives included in the EU4Digital program (Eu4Digital 2022).

For Armenia, the largest element of physical infrastructure involved in infrastructure development would be the "North-South Road Corridor", a terrestrial network conceived in 2005 that is designed to connected Armenia's northern border with Georgia to the southern terrestrial crossing with Iran via a multilane highway running along the country's length. The project was divided into five tranches (Road Department Fund 2022) and is financed by a variety of development banks including the Asian Development Bank, the European Investment Bank, and the Eurasian Development Bank (the financial organ of the Eurasian Economic Union). While Tranche 1 was funded by the Asian Development Bank (an organization which includes Japan, the United States, and the EU among its members), the European Investment Bank is the sole financier of the Kajaran-Meghri and Talin-Lanjik sections of the road within Tranche 3 (Asian Development Bank 2021a).

The Belt and Road Initiative

Belt and Road in Context

The Belt and Road was formally announced by Premier Xi Jinping in September 2013 (Xinhua 2016). Initially known as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative, the early signaling of the project described a multimodal, multiregional project that was designed to echo the legacy of the Silk Road of antiquity in connecting China to commerce and trade networks.

The project featured the construction of critical infrastructure and industrial centers across a collection of emerging and middle economies as well as the expansion of logistics capacity in states that were principal consumers of Chinese goods. Rather than presenting itself as a unified block of states joined by a common vision of economic policy or a specific type of commerce, OBOR was intentionally presented as a nebulous grouping of partners who were joined by a mutual interest in trade. This may have been done to mitigate any trade bottlenecks that would arise from inter-state conflict, as well as present a means of mitigating unified actions or injunctions by a trading block. The relatively relaxed standards on governance and oversight of projects within OBOR was also a major draw for many emerging economies seeking access to cheap development capital, but over time concerns rose over corruption and mismanagement seen in unfinished infrastructure projects (Shepard 2020). The project envisioned a network of railways and roads across the "Eurasian Land Bridge" (OBOREurope 2017) that were designed to connect China to markets in Europe. In addition to this "East-West" vector of trade, OBOR detailed a "North-South" dimension that sought to connect Iran and parts of the Middle East to Chinese terrestrial land networks (Poghosyan 2019). Additionally, the "Belt and Road Sea Initiative" sought to construct new ports and logistic centers in key cities throughout the Asia-Pacific that were designed to improve trade connectivity outside of the Eurasian landmass (Freeman 2017). This was particularly relevant in Latin America, Australia, and East Africa. OBOR's initial vision presented a steady yet grand reorientation of the world's economy away from the established transatlantic, rules-based market structures that prevailed after the Cold War and towards the economic ascendency and demographic

weight of China. The announcement of the project was considered to be a major inflection point of Chinese foreign policy and was among the first pronounced efforts by Beijing to present itself as a major geopolitical actor beyond the Asia-Pacific (Greer 2018). In 2015 a third dimension was added to the project's terrestrial and maritime dimensions known as the "Digital Silk Road". This collection of projects was related to the export of ICT equipment and the development of digital industry among OBOR participants.

With these factors in mind, the South Caucasus represented an important component for OBOR's vision for an interconnected Eurasian landmass. The three states of the South Caucasus were considered crucial parts of the North-South trade vector as they bordered Iran, Türkiye, and Russia—all of which play major roles as both transit and destination partners. Additionally, the Caspian Sea and Black Sea make the South Caucasus a crucial element in an often underexplored vector of East-West trade. A multimodal theoretical route often known as the "Middle Corridor" (Szumski 2022) is remarkably similar to the aforementioned Trans-Caspian route and involves ferrying cargo across the Caspian sea from the Western shores of Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan. After this, goods are moved westward through Georgia to either the port of Poti (and onto Europe), or across terrestrial paths through Türkiye and the Mediterranean. While this theoretical route would be dependent on extensive means of transport across multiple mediums and would be dependent on legal arrangements on the national and local level, the Trans-Caspian route would drastically cut shipping times between China and Europe. Additionally, the presence of commodities such as rare metals, minerals, natural gas and oil deposits provide an immediate economic interest, while smaller industries like alcohol and

wine production have grown in interest of China's burgeoning middle class (Agenda.ge 2018).

Even with a heavy emphasis on the apolitical nature of commerce and trade and all the theoretical flexibility that would come from multiple vectors of trade through the South Caucasus, OBOR was still bound to the political realities of the region. The Armenian-Turkish and Armenian-Azerbaijan borders remain closed to any terrestrial travel due to the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which means that nearly all inter-state terrestrial movement in the Caucasus must flow through Georgia. Georgia's main rail artery to Russia and much of the former Soviet Union runs through Abkhazia, one of two frozen conflict territories within the country (Kotova 2021). The periodic fighting within the region's three frozen conflicts poses a direct threat towards any long term infrastructure project in the region—particularly when we consider that pipelines have been targeted by saboteurs in the past and remain targets of state actors in times of war (Kucera 2014). In addition to simmering and periodically active conflicts in the region, relations between the three independent states of the South Caucasus and their larger neighbors Türkiye, Iran, and Russia may oscillate between cordial and cold. This presents an immediate challenge to any major infrastructure that requires the cooperation of multiple stakeholders. Additionally, outside of the delta of eastern Azerbaijan, the geography of the region is characterised as heavily mountainous, adding significant cost to any type of infrastructure development initiative.

In 2017 OBOR was formally renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Stanzel 2017). At this point the project had matured from a broad vision of a new type of foreign policy to a collection of tangible legal structures and physical projects. The primary instrument used to govern the BRI's engagement

with state and non-state actors is a Memorandum of Understanding. These documents are signed by the representatives of the Peoples Republic of China or a specific organ within the government, such as the Ministry of Finance (Leutert 2020). There are 123 MoUs covering 105 countries participation in the project, with an additional 26 MoUs serving as protocols of cooperation with 29 different international Organisations (Belt and Road Initiative 2022). These documents outline basic agreements on intent and motivations in participating in the BRI and its affiliated development projects. It's worth noting that, as seen in the BRI MOUs signed by Italy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation 2019) and the Australian State of Victoria (Victoria State Government 2018), dispute settlement is referenced as only occurring in "independent consultations". This detail is an interesting insight into the more ad-hoc means of dispute resolution that China envisions when engaging with its partners rather than a more defined sense of legal approximation. Additionally, the MoUs associated with the BRI are not designed to be interpreted as exclusive infrastructure projects. The MoU between Italy and China specifically references points of intersection between the BRI and TEN-T infrastructure development programs (New Development Bank 2018). This implies that BRI MoUs are adaptable to the unique elements of their signatories, rather than based on blanket template agreements. The AIIB is largely considered to be the finance arm of the BRI and is the primary issuer of loans and debts within the project.

The BRI was slated to be completed by 2042. While the project is still in its early stages, there has been a mixed response to the BRI's rollout between 2013 and 2020. The vision of a wide spanning network of multi-vector trade routes

has been partially actualized in the creation of major projects like the Pakistan Economic Corridor (Mardell 2020). Additionally, the BRI has played a major role in financing industrial projects in regions of the world that have been underserved by traditional avenues of development funding for crucial infrastructure (Risburg 2019). However, the BRI has drawn criticism from outside observers for what some perceive to be a policy of "debt trap" diplomacy. Specifically, attention has been drawn to the proliferation of infrastructure projects that remain uncompleted or out of use, yet are still in debt from the home governments. An example of this is seen in Kenya where BRI participation funded a railway that was effectively useless (Herbling 2019). Additionally, the expansion of BRI resource extraction projects in Africa has drawn comparisons to European colonialism, particularly through the illicit forms of resource extraction associated with BRI projects (Harris 2020).

Armenia and the BRI

Armenia's entrance into the Belt and Road Initiative came with President Serzh Sargsyan's visit to Beijing in March 2015. During a bilateral summit Sargsyan signed an MoU on Armenian participation in the BRI as well as a collection of bilateral agreements on cooperation in sectors ranging from currency swaps and customs affairs to tourism and criminal investigations. Over a four day period 12 agreements were signed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2020).

Perhaps the most curious document from this collection would be the "Joint Declaration on Friendly Cooperation and Further Development and Enhancement of Relations between the Republic of Armenia and People's Republic of China" (Office

of the President of the Republic of Armenia 2015). While the Belt and Road has been continuously framed as an apolitical project, this treaty provides a glimpse into the political undergirding of this renewed bilateral engagement following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1996 and first Joint Declaration signed in 2004 (USC US-China Institute 2004). Like the 2004 joint declaration, the document signed by Sargsyan and Xi Jingping affirms Armenia's support for the One China policy and Yerevan's recognition of China's claim over Taiwan. There are two explicitly political sections of the treaty. First, Article Two states that China "stands for a peaceful and just settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in favor of the main objectives and principles of the UN Charter as well as according to the universally recognized norms of international law". While referencing "universally recognized norms of international law" can be interpreted as referencing either self-determination or territorial integrity and therefore obscuring China's policy towards the Karabakh question, we can see that no ambiguity was taken when Azerbaijan was joining the BRI nine months later. A similar joint declaration between Azerbaijan and China signed during Ilham Aliyev's visit to China in December 2015 explicitly states that Beijing supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and calls for the implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions related to Nagorno-Karabakh (National Assembly of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2016).

It is likely that supporting a "peaceful and just settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict" is the strongest political concession China could make to Armenia without jeopardizing Baku's participation in the BRI. This is particularly relevant given Azerbaijan's roles as a transit partner on both the East-West and North-South dimensions of the Eurasian terrestrial

networks, as well as Baku's ability to supply energy to China via pipeline projects in the Caspian Sea. It is worth noting that both Armenia and Azerbaijan have recognized China's claim over Taiwan since 2004 and neither party has indicated a willingness to tie their adherence to the One China policy with China's position on the Karabakh question. Nonetheless, the inclusion of these articles in the treaties signed by Armenia and Azerbaijan upon their entry into the BRI shows some effort to preemptively detach BRI participation from any Chinese policy towards Karabakh.

Another political element of the 2015 Joint Declaration was located in Article Nine. After noting that 2015 will mark the 70th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany, Article Nine states "As winner countries, the Parties condemn and counteract the distortion of World War II's history, Nazism, militarism and any propaganda attempts and actions of their accomplices", drawing upon the shared participation of the Armenian SSR and the Republic of China's alignment with the coalition of the Allied powers. It's worth noting that in months prior to the signing of the 2015 Joint Declaration, a resolution was presented to the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly titled "Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to fueling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance" (United Nations General Assembly 2014a). The document was primarily drafted by the Russian Federation and was co-sponsored by a variety of states in Africa, Latin America, and the Asia Pacific when presented to the General Assembly. Both Armenia and China would vote in favor of the 2014 Resolution (United Nations General Assembly 2014b) while nearly the entirety of Europe would abstain with the United States, Canada, and Ukraine being the assembly's

only "no" votes. The general explanation provided for the abstentions and no-votes was that Moscow was using the resolution to imply that the Baltic States were failing to properly condemn Nazi atrocities (Gardner 2014) and to push the narrative that the events of Euromaidan in Kyiv in early 2014 were a coup by fascists and far-right political forces. Similar resolutions would be introduced every subsequent year with both Armenia and China voting in favor. China was a perennial author of these resolutions, while Armenia would be listed as an author in 2015 (United Nations General Assembly 2015), 2018 (United Nations General Assembly 2018), and 2021 (United Nations General Assembly 2021). Like the aforementioned articles on Nagorno-Karabakh present in Armenia and Azerbaijan's Joint Declarations, a similar article is included in Azerbaijan's BRI treaty and is reflected in similar voting patterns between Azerbaijan and China on this series of UN Resolutions.

With the signing of the MoU, the Armenian-Chinese Joint Declaration of Friendship, and the collection of protocols and bilateral treaties during Sargsyan's Beijing visit, Armenia had formally entered the BRI. Armenia was classified a "prospective regional member" (Asian Infrastructure Development Bank 2022) by the AIIB and the amount of Chinese commercial activity in the country gradually increased. The coming months would feature several statements on the extension of BRI funding towards major infrastructure projects and commercial ventures. This included China's financing of the repair of the fifth unit of the Hrazdan Thermal Power Plant (Hovhannisyan 2019). Yet given the scope and scale of these concepts, many of China's infrastructure projects in Armenia between 2015 and 2020 were mostly confined to the exploratory stages. This includes a project known as the "Armenian Southern Railway",

a rail network designed to connect Armenia to Iran that was considered to be part of the portfolio of projects covered by the BRI in Armenia. Construction of this railway was originally awarded to the Dubai-based firm Razia FZE which placed the cost at $3.5 billion dollars following a feasibility study in 2013 (Financial Tribune 2018). Chinese firms have expressed interest in construction in the project since Armenia's entry into the BRI (ArmenPress 2015). At the time of writing this, no concrete steps have been taken towards the construction of this railway.

With regards to physical infrastructure, the most significant development would be the participation of Sinohydro in the construction of a section of the North-South Highway. Chinese construction firm Sinohydro was awarded the contract for the construction of the sections of the North-South Highway covered by Tranche 3 of the project's funding (ArmenPress 2016). While the financiers of Tranche 3 of the North-South Highway have not changed since the early 2000s, the start of this activity project nonetheless represents the largest Chinese infrastructure development project in Armenia between 2013 and 2020. It's worth noting that Sinohydro's construction operation on the third tranche of the North-South Highway were later connected to a tax evasion investigation involving Gagik Tsarukian, head of the Prosperous Armenia Party and one of the country's wealthiest individuals (Artak Khulian 2019).

Beyond the initial efforts made in constructing the North-South Highway, one can see that the majority of the Belt and Road's impact in Armenia between the signing of the MoU in 2015 and 2020 was grounded in the project's usage in normalizing commercial activity and acting as a tool for projecting soft power rather than a grand strategy for

proliferation of infrastructure and commercial activity in Armenia. A case study from the World Bank found that the majority of the BRI's progress in improving Armenia's connectivity was achieved through improving the function of border crossings and customs clearance along the northern border with Georgia rather than through the construction of physical infrastructure (World Bank 2020). When we couple this with events like the opening of a Chinese language school in Yerevan in 2018 (Azatutuyan 2018), the mutual lifting of visa restrictions (Xinhua 2019), and the expansion of the Chinese embassy in Armenia into Beijing's second large diplomatic post in the former Soviet Union (Harutyunyan 2017), we can see that the most immediate aftermath of Armenia's BRI participation is the expansion of soft power projection by China. While there was a minor improvement in shipping time for goods to and from Armenia, this was largely tied to infrastructure projects in neighboring Georgia such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. This does reflect two realities that have been apparent since 2020. The first is that if the BRI is to have a meaningful, long-term relevance to the Armenian economy, this will likely come in the form of improvements to specific pieces of internal infrastructure and mitigating bottlenecks along the Georgian border. As long as the BRI's vision of interconnectivity and infrastructure development is limited by the geographic barriers set in place by the closure of Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan or Türkiye, Armenia will not be a viable conduit for East-West or North-South trade. The second is that even without major a major role in facilitating East-West or North-South trade, Armenia does receive some tangible benefit from greater interconnection of the South Caucasus as a whole to the world economy. As long as it continues to become easier to get

cargo into or out of Georgia, it will be easier to get cargo into or out of Armenia.

Contrasting, Competing?

As mentioned previously in this paper, at no point during the founding of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy was the project described as being in conflict with the BRI. The BRI and its affiliated institutions like the AIIB are described as potential partners in improving Europe's connectivity with Asia. This has led to several instances where elements of the BRI and European development projects have been woven between one another. Sinohydro's construction of sections of the North-South Highway was done under supervision by an Italian engineering firm and funded by the Asian Development Bank and European Infrastructure Bank (Road Development Fund 2018). However, even without direct conflict between the BRI and EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, the visions of connectivity presented by both projects certainly do contrast with one another. China's vision of connectivity is based on physical, tangible pieces of infrastructure and can be measured in an increase in trade turnover with third parties and a decrease in shipping cost and transportation times. In comparison, the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy is based on the idea that preexisting infrastructure construction, academic and research partnerships, and development policies between the EU and its partners can be shaped into a single coherent strategy and used to direct future economic interconnectivity. Heavy emphasis is placed on institutional development and the promotion of rule of law, both of which are concepts closely tied to the notion of the EU acting as a "normative power" in its foreign policy. While the scope and scale of this strategy is considerably wider than the Belt and Road's focus on physical infrastructure, it can also

be harder to determine what exact metrics should be used to measure its effectiveness. This is particularly true when we consider that the projects considered to be part of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy all predated its launch in 2018. The largest diversion between physical elements of Chinese and European development strategies in Armenia would come from possible future planning, financing, and construction of infrastructure in Armenia by the AIIB. However, the construction projects associated with BRI in Armenia from 2013 to the time of writing this paper have been previously planned and drafted by institutions like the European Investment Bank and Asian Development Bank.

The one area of potential zero-sum competition between these two strategies is in their policies towards the development of their digital economies. China and the EU have increasingly disparate stances towards key elements of the digital industry, ranging from differences in regulations on the collection, storage, and sale of personal data (Liu 2021), to differencing in the regulation of digital enterprises (Ruhlig 2022). This divide extends beyond software and policy and affects the physical components of the digital economy—members of the EU have begun to reconsider its dependence on Chinese telecommunications infrastructure (European Parliament 2019) and is examining its overreliance on Chinese semiconductors (European Commission 2022). Despite the limited impact of the BRI on the construction of physical infrastructure in Armenia, the Digital Silk Road remains one of the more viable portfolios. In 2017 the city of Yerevan signed agreements on the development of "Smart city" technology within the city (Atanesian 2019). Digital Silk Road were not actualized in Armenia between 2013 and 2020, the "Digital Silk Road Center" was formally launched in 2021. This project is

described as an initiative to increase Chinese tourism to Armenia and facilitate greater ease of doing business in the country through the development of mini-applications within Wechat (Enterprise Incubator Foundation 2022)—a software platform with a wide variety of functions used primarily as a social network and a tool for Chinese commerce. The start of this initiative included the opening of two physical campuses in the northern Armenian city of Gyumri and Xi'an, the capital of the Shaanxi province in China (Poghosyan 2021). Although roadways and railways are agnostic towards the activity they are used for, digital industry features specific sensitivities towards the hardware and software incorporated in their activity. Overreliance on Chinese telecommunications infrastructure may present concerns on the ability of Armenian firms to uphold its standards for data protection and privacy when handling European data. Additionally, the minor incongruencies between the EU's GDPR and China's PIPL means that overreliance on one standard for personal data protection may prevent simultaneous participation in both digital economies.

Prospects for Armenia in the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy

As mentioned previously in this paper, the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy is largely a retroactive grouping of policies and foreign policy initiatives. While there is undoubtedly an effort to consolidate these often disparate and seemingly unrelated policies into a cohesive strategy, there is still ambiguity over what exactly the model for connectivity would be. There are, however, certain principles that can be agreed upon. Perhaps the most fruitful area of engagement between the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy and Armenia would be the recreation of a

bilateral agreement on digital trade similar to that which was seen in the 2018 EU-Japan Free Trade Agreement. Armenia occupies a unique spot in that while EAEU membership precludes participation in elements of trade policy such as customs unions and free trade agreements, there is no such EAEU analog to the EU's digital economy. This means that European standards for data storage and protection may be adopted by Armenia in order to assure full compatibility with the digital elements of the EU's free market. This is particularly relevant given the growing importance of Armenia's digital economy in the country's development.

When considering prospects for further developments in trade between Armenia and the EU, we should examine what this bilateral relationship looks like today. According to data from the Organization for the Observation of Economic Complexity, trade between Brussels and Yerevan is largely based on the export of metal and alcohol from Armenia to the EU (The Observatory of Economic Complexity 2022). Perhaps one of the most effective ways to increase trade between Armenia and the EU would be to use development and connectivity projects as a means of correcting the balance of trade and moving away from the continued extraction of metals. The European Investment Bank currently lists a project titled "Armenia Economic Resilience Facility" among its projects to be financed (European Investment Bank 2022). Although the project is currently under appraisal an initial reference is made to a 70 million Euro credit line being opened for the further development of "micro, small, and medium enterprises". It is possible that a continued emphasis on development of micro, small, and medium enterprises may create a more equitable balance of trade between Armenia and the EU in the long-run.

Conclusion

The BRI held a clear, concise vision of Yerevan's involvement in the project: improve Armenian-Chinese trade and Armenian connectivity to the world economy through the development of infrastructure. This was initiated with the signing of several bilateral treaties and was predicated on the construction of physical, tangible infrastructure. With Armenia's limited viability as a transit partner, the project largely became a tool for soft-power projection by Beijing. In comparison, Armenia's involvement in the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy was based on Brussels retroactively grouping previous political and economic integration between Armenia and the EU as being part of a wider strategy to improve economic connectivity. It's unclear what theoretical elements of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy have not already been covered by either Armenia's participation in TEN-T infrastructure projects via the Eastern Partnership or the areas of bilateral cooperation between Brussels and Yerevan outlined in the 2018 Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement. With both projects limited by Armenia's geography and political factors of the South Caucasus, we can expect that both the Belt and Road Initiative and the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy will find themselves turning towards avenues of cooperation in the digital economy in expanding their trade with Armenia. Given the growing divide in the digital policies of the EU and China, we can expect that adherence to either Brussels' or Beijing's standards towards the digital economy will become a point of friction for Armenian policymakers in the near future.

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Cultural Europeanization of Muslim Societies in the Caspian Region and Its Impact on Asia-Europe Connectivity

Muhammad Asim

Abstract

The Caspian region which includes Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is mainly under the influence of Islam. However, this particular region around the coastline of the Caspian Sea is also undergoing 'cultural Europeanization': the Islamic code of life (with the exception of Sufi Islam) clashes with the European way of living, thereby producing some kind of cultural hybridity. This research utilises the eclectic frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha and Mikhail Bakhtin to dig into this notion of cultural hybridity pertaining to the Caspian region. The study attempts to answer the questions of how socio-cultural lives have become a reflection of Europe in terms of "a process of incorporation in the logic of domestic (national and sub-national) discourse, political structures and public policies of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms" (Moumoutzis 2011), and why a majority of Muslims (especially women) in the region seek Asia-Europe connectivity by either adopting a European lifestyle or seeking complete enrolment in the EU when they are also suffering from religious militancy in line with domestic tribalism(s) or sectarian fundamentalism(s).

The degrees by which a regional connectivity with Europe is taking shape will be investigated using a cost-benefit analysis in light of the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative. Ironically, it is

Russia which "can neither allow Europeanization of the Caspian Region nor permit Caucasian and Central Asian states to grow with ethnically sovereign identities (Zaheer 2021). The study concludes that cultural Europeanization in the Caspian region is responsible for the cultural erosion in the region.

Keywords: Ismaili Islam; Tengrism; Iranian Revolution-exporting orientations; Caspian Economic Forum; Eastern Partnership Policy; EU-Georgia Association Agreement.

Introduction

The following chapter looks at the multifarious belief systems in Muslim societies through the prism of the Caspian region. Its geo-strategic location is particularly well suited to understanding the distinct religious beliefs of the regional Muslim societies. The theoretical perspective of this study is mainly owed to Homi K. Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (1995) which assists in tracing the roots of identities, races and cultures in the region from imperial times (Haydon and Fay 2017, 5). An additional angle of this study is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of cultural hybridity to see how the phenomenon of 'cultural Europeanization' in the Caspian region is playing out and what its repercussions are on the Muslims dwelling in the respective regions and hailing from distinct belief systems. This eclectic framework will help to reflect on the ever-growing Eurocentric approaches in the region under discussion. Historically, the Caspian region has been directly or indirectly influenced by distinct imperial powers during different times. By sponsoring orientalism, culturalism, deconstructionism, ethnic visualism, and geographical imaginationism they emerged as soft powers in the region. But at the same time, they brought confusion to the

local segments of the population regarding identity as well as their racial and cultural roots between Asia and Europe (Blum 2003).

In line with the approach of Bakhtin, this study brings to the fore cultural hybridity in terms of folklore and anthropology (Kapchan and Strong 1999). But it also focuses on the clear divisions among Muslim societies in terms of lifestyles, beliefs, and socio-linguistic affiliations (Blum 2003), created by distinct imperial regimes during different times.

Knowledge Gap

The debate about identity in the Caspian region has become increasingly confused among researchers and writers. One group of intellectuals describe the mixing of identity, race and culture as a planned phenomenon that eventually led to identity crises within the diverse cultural trajectories of the Caspian region (Bhabha 1995, 68, 117 & 208; Bakhtin 1993, 19, 35 & 55). A different group of scholars highlights this phenomenon as a historical evolutionary process (Snell-Hornby, Jettmarova & Kaindl 1995, Prabhu 2007, Gonzalez 2016 and Uytanlet 2016). In between both arguments, this study follows the note of Audrey Altstadt who once noted the "golden youth of Azerbaijan becoming Europeanized at the point of rejecting their native culture" (Altstadt 2016). This observation provides support to this study, as it applies to the whole Caspian region where Muslims (especially women) are inclined towards Europe. However, they have the choice to either adopt a European lifestyle within the existing territorial spheres or seek complete enrolment in the EU.

When it comes to actual identities of Muslims (and non-Muslim) inhabitants of the region, there is ideological conflict among and between liberals / progressives and

conservatives / extremists. Although the EU's Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) is positively working toward constructing a culturally Europeanized society within the folds of Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (Delanty & Rumford (2005), there appears to be no scholarly work that highlights the weaknesses or deficiencies of the EU's approach against the competing trajectories of Russification or neo-Sovietism in the Caspian region. Similarly, European researchers usually emphasize the benefits of cultural Europeanization or even joining the EU, but no meaningful work has been published which could define the cost faced by countries such as Georgia or Ukraine.

Iranian authors settled within the post-1979 Iran avoid discussing the overwhelmingly practiced "cultural indoor-Europeanization" due to strict censorship or dogmatic authoritarianism. Likewise, they evade describing the historical-cultural connectivity between the Azerbaijanis in Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan due to the state's fear of stimulating the "United Azerbaijan Movement" or "South Azerbaijan Movement". There is no substantial work done by European or Russian authors, most likely due to authoritarian Russification or other threats, on analyzing the wish of Turkic-origin Russian Muslims regarding amalgamating their territories into the EU. Likewise, there is no research done on the question why the majority of women in the Caspian region are inclined towards cultural Europeanization.

Tracing Islam and its Multifarious Aspects in the Muslim Societies of the Caspian Region

John A. Rees finds a direct relationship between Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations" (1993) and religious-cultural identities. He believes that in the post-9/11 scenario, the

political environment exhibited a confrontation between Islam and the West which further led to a dialogue between civilizations (Rees 2017). As a result, intellectuals found ways of reconciling religious fundamentalism or extremism with pure secularism, by focusing on the "us and them" debate as well as by discouraging every kind of religious fanaticism. Similarly, in between the extreme ends of Salafism (also called Saudi-Wahabi Islam or Jihadism) and the Iranian version of Shia-Twelver Islam (following the concept of an Islamic jurist's guardianship called Vilayat-e-Faqih), scholars traced religious liberalism, progressivism, and reformism inside the cohorts of Turkish Sufism, Hanafism, Ismailism and non-Vilayat-e-Faqih Shi'ism (Kuliev 2008).

Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are located on the coastal line of the Caspian Sea, they display varied religious-cultural identities (with hybrid beliefs, norms, and practices) within their Muslim societies. Understanding their dispositions, propensities and trends is a necessary first step toward developing the notion of "cultural Europeanization".

Iran

The demography of the Ardabil, Gilan, Mazandaran, and Golestan provinces along the Iranian coastline of the Caspian Sea shows that the majority of Muslims follow the Iranian version of Shia-Twelver Islam (sometimes also referred to as post-1979 Shi'ism or simply Iranian-Twelver Islam). The remaining sects in the region—as recognized by the Constitution of Iran[i]—are Hanafism and Shafism (Hassan 2008, 3). Moreover, there are other religions or sects related to Islam that have not found constitutional recognition in post-1979 Iran and which have adopted separate identities rather than

claiming to be a branch of Islam. These are Sufism, Ismailism, Babism, Baha'ism, and Yarsanism (Hassan 2008, 6-8).

Although Iran has no direct state-led rivalry with any European country, cultural Europeanism has been widely opposed both by the post-1979 Iranian leadership as well as by the majority of Ayatollahs and other religious fundamentalists (whether complying with the philosophy of Vilayat-e-Faqih or not). On the other hand, there is a clear inclination of Sufi, Ismaili, Babi, Baha'is, and Yarsani people toward Europeanization, as indicated by their liberal, progressive and reformist attitudes toward reconcilement between civilizations (Crane, Lal and Martini 2017).

Contrary to the claims of many researchers, the Iranian Constitution and the Government provide all kinds of socio-political and economic accommodations to the Hanafi and Shafi Muslims (Asadzade 2018). However, Iranian officials, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, are quite rightly to be blamed for the suppression of Sufi, Ismaili, Babi, Baha'i, and Yarsani people. As the Iranian Government, under the influence of rigid Ayatollahs, considers Sufism, Ismailism, Babism, Baha'ism, and Yarsanism a clear revolt against the Iranian version of Twelver-Shia Islam, its actions against them betray the idea of converting them back towards Twelver-Shia Islam and ending their progressive tendencies, also with a view to Europeanization (Khezri 2020; Naqvi 2021).

Many Turkish researchers believe that the advocates of Sufism in Iran idealize Türkiye (Naqvi 2021). This is true to some extent, but many Iranian Sufis have their own distinct identity. Living within Iranian culture, Nematullah Shah Wali founded a Sufi school in Iran that sought to gain awareness about God and His loved ones. In principle, the basis of this sect is in no way different from Twelver-Shia Islam, however,

practical differences along with the historical political rivalry between the Iranians and the Ottomans made the adherents of both sects ideological enemies of one another. As a result, one of the fractions among Iranian Sufis[ii] began to romanticize Türkiye whereas the other group began to consider the liberal, progressive and reformist environment of Europe as their ideal place for settlement (Mehraby 2020).

Although Hassan Ali Shah Mahallati (the Agha Khan I and the 46 Imam of Nizari Ismailis from 1817 to 1881) escaped Iran for Mumbai in 1848 due to political differences with King Fath Ali Shah Qajar, he left a large number of his followers in Iran who continued working to create an atmosphere of harmony and reconciliation among all nations and ethnicities. Although the French involvement in Iran had receded at that time, Britain and Russia were still working to establish their influence in western and northern Iran respectively. At this moment, though, the Agha Khan I facilitated reconciliation by subjugating many nationalities, especially the Kurds and Balochis, to the Shah. As Fath Ali Shah toed the line of Agha Khan by following his ideology of harmony and reconcilement, historians find six major reasons for the Agha Khan's escape from Iran to Mumbai. These are (1) the anti-Ismaili movements of the Twelver-Shia leaders in Iran, (2) conspiracies in the palace, (3) efforts to undermine the intellectual worth of Agha Khan I from the provinces of Qom and Kerman, (4) the Shah's preference of Twelver-Shia Islam over the Sufi beliefs of Nimatullah Shah Wali, (5) the Agha Khan's soft spot for cultural Europeanization, as he never completely idealized Iranian culture before his followers, and (6) the Agha Khan's modern Quranic interpretations within the context of liberalism, progressivism and reformism (Newman 2019; Daftary 2018). Currently, the Ismaili Heritage Society claims that Ismaili

people are still living in Iran. However, they have been forced to hide their identity because of having no constitutional recognition (Research-Directorate 2000).

It is a universal fact that extremism never accepts rationalism but makes various conspiracies against it. The same thing has happened or is happening in Iran with the Babis and Baha'is. Zackery M. Heern holds that Baha'is (as the next version of Babism) always seek world peace through establishing equality, justice, and unity. For this purpose, they look for gender equality, harmony between science and religion, racial unity, and universal education. As they embrace interracial marriage and education for girls, they established the first schools for girls in Iran. However, their suppression in Iran forced them to travel to the United States, Chile, Canada, and other Middle Eastern and European countries (Heern 2017). The majority of Iranian Twelver-Shia scholars believe that Babism and Baha'ism are the product of Russian and European (especially British) influences or neo-colonialisms in Iran during the Qajar dynasty. Supposedly, the inclinations of their leaders towards Europeanization motivated them to establish a new religion against Twelver-Shia Islam. Fact is though that initially they claimed to be a sect of Islam promoting liberalism, progressivism, and reformism. It was only due to the suppressive attitude of Iranian authorities that they were forced to establish a new religious identity (Asim 2020).

Similarly, Yarsanism is usually considered as a branch of Sufi Islam. However, Yarsani people show a separate religious identity. In their opinion, Islam is a heresy of Yarsanism. Although the patriarchal nature of this religion is often portrayed against its anti-liberal, anti-progressive, and anti-reformist alignments, their followers have faced and are still

experiencing suppression in Iran because of their contradictory beliefs—on the bases of egalitarianism[iii], innatism[iv] , and millenarianism[v]—against Twelver-Shia Islam (Hosseini 2020, 20). Therefore, they have been coerced to either settle in European countries (especially Austria and Türkiye) or hide their identity within Iran (Naqvi 2021; Kurdistan24 2016).

Russia

Within Europe, Russia has the largest Muslim population, mainly covering 6.5 to 7 per cent of the total Russian population. However, the majority of them are settled in the North Caucasus, comprising the North Caucasian Federal District, Southern Federal District, Krasnodar Krai, Stavropol Krai, Republic of Adygea, Republic of Dagestan, Chechnya, Republic of Ingushetia, Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia (Fawaz 2016).

90% of North Caucasian Muslims are Sunni, and only 9% follow Twelver-Shia Muslims. Among the Sunni Muslims, the majority follows the Turkish version of Sufi Islam. They live in Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia, North Caucasian Federal District, and Southern Federal District. On the other hand, the remaining Sunni Muslims follow either Salafism, the Qaderiya sect of Sufi Islam, the Shadhili version of Sufi Islam, Hanafism and Shafism (primarily those living in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan). Likewise, the majority of Twelver-Shia Islam is not pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih (residing in Stavropol Krai and Dagestan). However, a small portion of them is looking toward the Iranian version of Twelver-Shia Islam (i.e. those living in North Ossetia-Alania and Krasnodar Krai) (Asim 2020).

Currently, President Putin has declared the Muslim population as “an integral part of the Russian cultural code”

(Delkic 2018). But despite all this, a large number of their population is now reluctant to call themselves Muslims; especially in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. The main reason for this is the militarism and extremism under the influence of Salafi Islam which claims to be against Russian authoritarianism. However, Russian military operations against Salafi militants also affect the daily routine lives of other Muslims. And considering Salafi Islam as a major obstacle to their progress, they are either turning to Sufi Islam, which encompasses all aspects of development and modernism, or toward European secularism in complete disgust with Islam (Dannreuther 2010).

On the other hand, followers of Sufi Islam have also been highly affected by current extremism so that they have also stopped calling themselves Muslims. According to a survey conducted in the Russian federated republics of Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia-Alania, respectively 29%, 10%, 5.6% and 0.8% followers of Turkish-Sufi Islam are now calling themselves "spiritual" instead of Muslims (Asim 2020). The reason behind this claim is that the patriarchal element in Turkish-Sufi Islam coerces them (especially women) to turn towards Europeanization; having liberal progressive and reformist attributes. Thus, rather than to follow Dagestani, Chechen, Kumyk, Azeri, Circassian or any other domestic cultural norms, the majority of Muslim women are now inclined towards cultural Europeanization; more broadly seeking settlement in the EU for business, job, study or marriage (Parfitt 2007; Bervoets and Clifford 2016).

Azerbaijan

Although Azerbaijan is a secular state as per article 48 of its Constitution, it comprises a 96 to 99% Muslim population. A more precise look indicates that 85% are followers of Twelver-Shia Islam while 14 to 15% follow Sunni Islam. One of the major conflicts between Iran and Azerbaijan is the concept of Vilayat-e-Faqih (Asim 2020). Iran under Articles 5 and 107 of the Iranian Constitution believes in ideological expansionism; they always tried to influence Shia clergy in other countries (especially Iraq and Azerbaijan). On the other hand, Azerbaijani Twelver-Shia scholars always criticize the concept of Vilayat-Faqih because the Vali-e-Faqih (jurist, also called Supreme Leader) is merely appointed by the Assembly of Experts within the Iranian legislature and can never be considered as guide or leader of the Shia Muslims across the globe. Therefore, a little pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Shia segment of society faces state-sponsored suppression in Azerbaijan as well. On the other hand, Sunni Muslims in Azerbaijan follow Hanafism, Shafism and a somewhat Turkish version of Sufi Islam (Asim 2020).

Critics find three main reasons for modernism among Azerbaijani Muslims. The first reason is that the post-1979 Iranian push for ideological expansionism forced Azerbaijan to strategically connect with Israel and the EU (Reynolds 2012). This closeness affects Azerbaijanis' lifestyle (either Twelver-Shia or Sunni Muslims), and they idealize the kind of liberalism, progressivism and reformism in Europe which Israel has already followed. The second reason is that the followers of Shafism and Turkish-Sufi Islam are more lenient than the orthodox Muslims within other sects of Islam. Unlike Hanafism and Salafism, they are always keen to adopt modernism by "Ijtihad."[vi] Likewise, a third reason is that Azerbaijanis are Turkic-origin, having close socio-cultural ties with Turkish soil.

As Turkish society has been highly inspired by Eastern European culture since the Ottomans' occupation of Greece and the Balkan states, Azerbaijanis are practicing almost the same lifestyle in whatever Turkish society has already adopted from Europe[vii] (Najafizadeh 2012).

Kazakhstan

72% of the total population of Kazakhstan profess a Muslim identity, with a majority following Hanafism within Sunni Islam. On the other hand, 2 to 5% of Muslims follow Twelver-Shia Islam (either pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih or not). As the demographics of post-Soviet Kazakhstan show, the representation of ethnic Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tatars and Uyghurs and their experiences during Soviet rule have molded them in a way that they idealize liberalism, progressivism and reformism not only in a private capacity but at the state level (Nazarbayev 2017). Moreover, Turkish and Egyptian financial assistance for the construction of religious schools and mosques in Kazakhstan facilitated the local population regarding converting their lives toward modern Islam as is generally practiced in Türkiye and Egypt (Baldauf 2001).

Sometimes analysts point to the fear of transmitting terrorism or religious extremism from Iran and Afghanistan. However, currently there are no signs of any pro-Taliban or pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih movement within the Muslims of Kazakhstan. Therefore, this liberal, progressive and reformist attitude encourages them to be culturally, economically, politically and socially inclined to Europe (Patalakh 2018).

Turkmenistan

93% of the population of Turkmenistan is Muslim; a majority of them follow Hanafism while a little portion following non-

Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelver-Shia Islam. As the region has an almost similar history to Kazakhstan, local Muslims follow parallel traits. However, scholars have also traced the impact of the ancient Turko-Mongolic religion "Tengrism" on the lives of local Muslims. Several historians believe that the concept of "Dervish" in Turkish-Sufi Islam is extracted from the "Shamans". Similarly, the word "Tanry" in the Turkmen language means "God", deriving from the Turkic word "Tengri" (Relic 2020, 58). Therefore, whether they follow Hanafism or Turkish-Sufi Islam, they are not as militant or extremist as a significant portion of Muslims in neighboring Iran and Afghanistan (Umarov 2019). However, the state's restrictions on promoting unauthorized political and religious expressions urge the local population (especially women) to idealize liberalism, progressivism and reformism in Turkmenistan (McGlynn and Rawlings 2021).

Negotiating Cultural Europeanization in the Context of the Caspian Region

Some scholars relate the term "Europeanization" to "Westernization" which for a non-European person or society generally means to adopt European features in terms of culture, language, lifestyle, norms and traditions. However, the 21st century reinterprets these terms within the context of the EU, distinguishing it from earlier British, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and other European orientalisms. Now Radaelli describes "Europeanization" as "a process involving a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational)

discourse, political structures and public choices" (Radaelli 2002). Furthermore, Moumoutzis elaborates this definition in more comprehensive way as "a process of incorporation in the logic of domestic (national and sub-national) discourse, political structures and public policies of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, "ways of doing things" and shared beliefs and norms that are first defined in the EU policy processes"(Moumoutzis 2011). At the same time, according to Tuuli Lahdesmaki, Viktorija L. A. Ceginskas, KatjaMakinen and Sigrid Kaasik Krogerus, "being or becoming European by culture" is called "cultural Europeanization" (Lahdesmaki, et al. 2021).

As hybrid cultural complexities in the Caspian region exhibit neither complete European nor Asian lifestyles, cultural demonstrations from different ethnic segments can never be defined completely as Central Asian, Russified, Turkic, Arabic, Iranian and Afghani or South Asian, but as a reflection of social miscegenation in the postcolonial paradigm (Blum 2003). In other words, the works of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and Joseph-Ernest Renan (Acheraiou 2011) also assisted in the understanding of cultural hybridity by mixing various socio-cultural identities in the Caspian region. However, while the supporters of enlightenment welcome this hybridity, numerous forces still consider this phenomenon a threat of wiping out their separate identities; they criticize this practice as cultural imperialism or neo-colonialism (Wright, Schofield and Goldenberg 2005, 36).

Within Iran, pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih forces define Europeanization as the refusal to obey fundamental Islamic teachings and lifestyle for the sake of adopting all the anti-Islamic attributes commonly practiced in Europe (Bukhari and Naqvi 2015). On the other hand, Russian authorities assume

Europeanization as a threat to Russian culture and try to engage once again in the re-russification of former Soviet territories (as has been happening in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea) (Shusharin 2014). In opposite to both, Azerbaijani youth and government have been strategically inclined toward the EU by trying to follow the Israeli model of cultural Europeanization (Makili-Aliyev 2013). Finally, both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan[viii] are also inclined to Europeanization for the sake of economic modernization, political advancements, religious liberalism and tolerance as well as the social up-grading of patterns defined by the EU (Patalakh 2018, Peyrouse and Anceschi 2017).

Problematizing the Caspian Region: A Battleground for Identity Politics

There is no religion in the world whose followers do not believe in the credibility of their own religion. In the same way, every religious fundamentalist not only calls the history of his religion the beginning of a glorious age but also considers that the survival of all humanity will depend on believing in his religion. Although this phenomenon is not limited to Muslims, the study of the Caspian region indicates an overlapping of Muslims' historical consecrations with other religious identities, such as Armenian Catholics, Jews, Mandaeans, Russian Orthodox, Slavic Neopaganists, Tengrists, Yazidis and Zoroastrians. Even so, variation among Muslims in the claims for ancient glorifications generates chinks between Muslims' historical consecrations and idealizing the European enlightenment (Bukhari and Naqvi 2015).

What Europeans consider their Dark Age is counted as a glorified period for Muslims. Likewise, Europe's beginning of the enlightenment is considered as the start of the Muslims'

downfall (Bukhari and Naqvi 2015). But irrespective of what has been done in the past, currently Muslims in the Caspian region think that they would be more prosperous if Western Europeans did not interfere with their local affairs. Western Europeans, on the other hand, consider fundamentalism, extremism, conservatism, government corruption and lack of education as the biggest obstacles to Muslims' prosperity (PEW 2006). However, unlike Muslims following Salafism, pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelverism and somewhat Hanafism, no one other Muslim fraction in the Caspian region is found to be against cultural Europeanization. As the Caspian region including northern and northwestern parts of Iran has experienced Soviet rule, various scholars like Enayatollah Yazdani describe the respective differences among Muslims' fractions as a phase of transformation from resistive Islam during Soviet times to the post-Soviet version of enlightened Islam (Yazdani 2009).

Historically, the first All-Russian Congress of Muslims in Moscow welcomed Bolshevism against Tsarism in May 1917, and this act encouraged other Muslim segments in the Caspian region to idealize Bolshevism. By highlighting the suppression of Muslims and Eastern Orthodox Christians in Tsarist Russia, Lenin announced:

> "Muslims of Russia; all you whose mosques and prayer houses have been destroyed, whose beliefs and customs have been trampled upon by the tsars and oppressors of Russia: your beliefs and practices, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate. Know that your rights, like those of all the peoples of Russia, are under the mighty protection of the revolution." (Crouch 2006)

Initially, Lenin tried to lure Muslim segments of the population by adding some Islamic laws and appointing some Islamic socialists within the post-1917 legal system of the

Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. However, state-sponsored atheism led to the executions of various popular Muslim leaders in the Muslim republics, belonging to the Muslim Social Democratic Party (Hummet), Tatar Communist Party, Tatar Union of the Godless and Mladobukharans (Young Bukharians) (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1980, 224). Furthermore, ethnic cleansing, as well as forceful deportation of Muslims including Balkars, Ingushs, Karachays and Meskhetian Turks of the Caspian region, urged them to adopt an aggressive and militant attitude against the Soviet Union. Thus, regardless of their sects, they started Jihad for their religious and political liberation from Soviet authoritarianism (Nekrich 2017).

Iranian people at the coastal line of the Caspian region had also experienced Soviet rule when the USSR established the short-lived Soviet Socialist Republic of Gilan/Iran 1920-1921 (a territory currently covering the geographical demarcation of Gilan province), and Azerbaijan Peoples Government 1945-1946 (recently consisting of the territories of East Azerbaijan province, Ardabil province, Zanjan province and some parts of West Azerbaijan province) (Chaqueri 1995, 242; Ezzatyar 2016, 27). This occupation led to the formation of three groups in Iran: the first favored Soviet orientalist studies in Islam (called Islamic socialists), the second idealized Soviet-style communism (called pro-Soviets), and the third followed anti-Soviet, anti-Marxist Islamic extremism (called Jehadists). Likewise, Muslims in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan had also been divided according to similar lines (Asim 2020).

Although post-Soviet studies of the region highlight the continuation of extremism in Iran and the Russian-federated states of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, theological

studies indicate different versions of Islam within their practices. Unlike the pre-1979 universal version of Twelver-Shia Islam, the emergence of pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelverism led Iran to going not only against Soviet, but also against European or western orientalism (Bukhari and Naqvi 2015). Similarly, Salafism in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, and somewhat Hanafism in Turkmenistan followed the same disgust for Soviet and European socio-political inclinations (Vatchagaev 2012). All other Muslim groups, by contrast, vary in their social accommodation of cultural Europeanization within the post-Soviet era (Asim 2020).

Escalating Cultural Europeanization and its Raison d'être

When Soviet disintegration ended any hope for Islamic socialists and pro-Soviets, they re-molded their attitude towards Europe in line with the desire to secure or grow their economic future. Similarly, historical attachments of universal Twelverism with European culture during the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties compelled non-Vilayat-e-Faqih Shia Muslims to migrate to Europe after 1979 (Bukhari and Naqvi 2015). The same is the case with post-Soviet Azerbaijan where non-Vilayat-e-Faqih Shia Muslims have been socio-culturally and strategically inclined towards the EU, the Council of Europe or Europe-oriented Türkiye (Asim 2020). Although the EU's Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was also designed for Russia, Russian concerns over the EU's efforts in expanding influence in former Soviet republics encourage authoritarian Russification (sometimes refer as Putinism). Therefore, not only Central Asian republics (specifically Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), but also Russian-federated states with Muslim populations (especially women) have been gradually inclining

towards cultural Europeanization because of liberalism, progressivism and reformism rather than obeying patriarchy and an authoritarian political culture (Verda 2014, 25-28 & 34). However, extremist Hanafism which is transmitting from Afghanistan to Turkmenistan is causing trouble for the Turkmen population regarding the adoption of cultural Europeanization or engagements with the EU (Haidari 2017).

By investigating all the socio-religious differences in the Caspian region, the study highlighted some reasons which contribute to the cultural Europeanization of local Muslims

1. Pre-1979 Iranian culture was inspired by European culture since the Qajar dynasty. Pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelver-Shia extremism is highly opposed to cultural Europeanization since the pre-revolution Islamic movement. All the other sects and religions including followers of universally recognized Twelverism have reconcilement or harmony with Europeanism. They never stood against Europeanization, but initiated the argument in favor of restoring cultural Europeanization (Boroumand 2020).
2. The majority of Russian Muslims are keeping themselves away from Salafi extremism, thinking that their suppression by Russian authorities is due to the acts of such militant elements within the Russian Muslims. Thus, the majority of Muslims now (in Adygea, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Krasnodar Krai, North Caucasian Federal District, North Ossetia-Alania, Southern Federal District, and Stavropol Krai) openly oppose Jihadi teachings as projected by Salafism or somewhat Hanafism. Instead, they follow lenient versions of Sunni Islam, such as Turkish-Sufism and Shafism. In the same context, both

versions allow not only cultural engagements with other societies, but condemn extremist tendencies as Salafism and Hanafism. Therefore, followers of both sects are welcoming a gradual opening towards cultural Europeanization, either directly inspired by the EU or transmitted via European orientalism from Türkiye (Malinkin 2007; Bervoets and Clifford 2016).

3. Being deeply opposed to the concept of Vilayat-e-Faqih, the state and society of Azerbaijan idealizes cultural Europeanization as other followers of universal Twelverism romanticize it. As the Baku and Ganja khanates had once been influenced by European and Russian orientalisms during the Qajar dynasty, Azerbaijan is still experiencing cultural influences from both. However, current engagements with the EU encourage the local population to think more about their European identity rather than to consider their Eurasian, Caucasian, Azeri or Turkic origin (Najafizadeh 2012).
4. As an example of engaged theory defined by Carol J. Adams,[ix] Kazakhstani society unveils itself as a multicultural and cosmopolitan nation that avoids interethnic or interreligious conflicts between the major populations of Kazakhs, Germans, Tatars, Uyghurs, Ukrainians, Uzbeks and Russians (following any version of Islam, Christianity or other religions). Moreover, rather than to be inspired by the Russian policy of "collective consciousness[x]" and "spiritual administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan"[xi] during Soviet times, Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian republic that constitutionally declared itself a secular state[xii]—forbidding political, racial or religious rifts—gradually inclining towards the EU in terms of socio-

political and economic relations (Khaidar 2018; ET-Bureau 2020). As Soviet authorities had tried to weaken Kazakhs' connections to Islam, they now feel comfortable to be engaged with Europe for liberalism, progressivism and reformism. And this trend is endorsing cultural Europeanization within the folds of all the socio-religious segments including Muslims in Kazakhstan. The impacts of cultural Europeanization can also be observed by the statement of former Kazakhstani foreign minister Marat Tazhin who said that "Kazakhstan is only attached with positive potential Islam, learns from Islamic history, culture and heritage" (Tazhin 2007).

5. On the other hand, while the existing socio-political cultures of Afghanistan and Iran are causing religious militancy in Turkmenistan, Articles 18, 41 and 75 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan 2006 not only prohibit the imposition of any religious or sectarian belief on others but also appear to follow the policy of "live and let live" by making religion the personal matter of every citizen[xiii] (Humanists 2021). Factors that contribute to adding such secularism-based constitutional provisions in a Muslim state are the wish to not repeat the Soviet experiences of suppressing religious communities, an effort to keep distance from the extremist ideologies generated in or transmitted from Afghanistan and Iran, and a determination for engaging Turkmen society with the European nations experiencing a liberal, progressive and reformist culture (Umarov 2019). Therefore, unlike some areas along the borders of Afghanistan and Iran, Turkmen society at large has been inclined toward cultural Europeanization through the process of constitutionalization (McGlynn and Rawlings 2021).

Impacts of EU Initiatives on the Muslim Populace in the Caspian Region

As Muslim societies of the Caspian Region are easily led to idealizing European culture based on their previous experiences, they become fascinated by some of the EU's initiatives and aspire towards deeper integration. Up until now, the EU is collaborating with Azerbaijan in the EaP framework, whereas with Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan it has distinct sorts of engagements. However, Russia has numerous reservations over the EU's initiatives (Weaver and Henderson 2016, 65-78) and has taken various initiatives to re-influence or neo-Sovietize former Soviet states, such as:

1. establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Eurasian Development Bank (EDB);
2. attempting to influence domestic and foreign policies in such a way that all these states are still Russian subjects;
3. Occupying areas of strategic importance by military intervention, and recognizing them as Russian-federated parts or sovereign states; and,
4. manipulating regional affairs by Russian peacekeeping forces (Lynch 2000; Asim 2020).

By evaluating all the respective initiatives it is clear that Russia is still suffering from the tragedy of Soviet disintegration, and that its goal is to restore its former might. But Russia also sees the former Soviet states as a threat to Russian culture. For this reason, it reiterates that the former Soviet states shall idealize Russian culture (Putin 2005; Osborn and Ostroukh 2021). Against this background, let us now examine how the neo-colonial approaches of the EU towards the Caspian states are affecting Muslims' attitude towards the EU and European culture.

EU-Azerbaijan Alliance: Cultural Repercussions on Azerbaijani Muslims

Currently, Azerbaijan is, as part of its role in the EaP, engaged with the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, but also connected to the Council of Europe. The EU is providing the largest amount of grants (in terms of donations and investment) since 1992 (Frappi and Pashayeva 2012, 108). Such is the EU's engagements with Azerbaijan that President Ilham Aliyev in 2004 even declared:

> "Azerbaijan's current strategic choice is integration in Europe, European family and institutions. We are strongly committed to this policy. We will do our utmost so that Azerbaijan meets all standards and criteria peculiar to Europe. Our policy is such and we have been pursuing it for a long time. Current events in Azerbaijan are the results of this continued policy" (Aliyev 2004).

However, he demanded from the EU a balanced approach to Azerbaijan and Armenia, claiming that that Azerbaijan did not sign the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU because of double standards on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. He held that the EU should adopt the same policy towards Armenia as it adopted towards Russia on the issue of Ukraine. Otherwise, by compromising national integration and sovereignty Azerbaijan cannot seek integration with Europe (Gotev 2016).

On the other hand, socio-economic integration between the EU and Azerbaijan within the EaP generates among a majority of liberal, progressive and reformist Muslims (especially the youth) a sense of being culturally European because of various accommodations, benefits and incentives, such as:

- EU-Azerbaijan Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements;

- Short-term Schengen visa for the citizens of Azerbaijan;
- EU assistance to the Azerbaijani nation for skills development by vocational education and training;
- EU facilitation to 13,000 companies of Azerbaijan by the EU4Business Initiative which generated 3,300 jobs for Azerbaijanis within EU member states;
- EU provision of a COVID-19 response package for Azerbaijan worth up to €31.6 million, committed to continue support to Azerbaijan's State Mandatory Health Insurance Agency during this pandemic (EaP 2021).

Moreover, Azerbaijan is also a signatory of the European Cultural Convention since 1997. The Council of Europe's further initiative for adding Azerbaijan into the European Heritage Days project[xiv] in 2000 not only strengthened the sense among Azerbaijani Muslims to be culturally European but motivated them to be associated with Europe as a family (European-Parliament 2006).

Impacts of EU-Iran Relations on Iranian Muslims

In between ups and downs, the EU's initiatives for facilitating or supporting Iran in the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) agreement and against US sanctions have generated soft corners within the Iranian Muslims' attitude towards Europe. However, the EU's accusations and criticisms of Iranian authorities and the Iranian political system for human rights violations led to a socio-political distancing between the pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih majority of Iranian Muslims and the EU (Immenkamp 2020). However, some of the Muslim communities (following other sects rather than the Iranian version of Twelver-Shia Islam) welcomed such allegations (Bukhari and Naqvi 2015). Therefore, it cannot be said that any kind of EU initiative in favor of Iran is becoming a cause of

promoting cultural Europeanization in Iran. However, as an anthropological study of Iranian markets highlights, Iranians' social interactions with Europeans have highly influenced the Iranian lifestyle. Impacts of European media are also counted in the same manner (Semati 2009).

As the post-1979 religiously authoritarian political system of Iran does not allow anyone to openly idealize European or Western culture, cultural Europeanization can be widely and easily found in private indoor lifestyles. The demand for European-styled dresses has highly increased in Iranian markets while indoor dresses along with other living ingredients are similar to the European culture. Moreover, keenness for the European lifestyle is also observed when Iranian travellers or tourists (especially women) just cross the border of Iran for Azerbaijan, Armenia or Türkiye. They feel free from the restrictions of wearing *hijab* (scarf) and *abaya* (veil). At the same time, Iranian Muslims settled in Europe are also a reason for promoting cultural Europeanization inside Iran (Sadeghi 2010).

Although some historical studies trace the roots of cultural Europeanization from the times of the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties (which is true), the indoor inclinations of the pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih segment of Iranian Muslims toward European culture also show that cultural rigidity has now been opposed or not followed by many of the revolutionary ideologists. However, such debates in public cause imprisonments or sanctions, as they are usually considered anti-regime activities in Iran. One of its examples is the case of Faeezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani and her "Executives of Construction of Iran Party" (Azizi 2021).

Impacts of EU-Kazakhstan Relations on Kazakhstani Muslims

Because of practicing socio-religious harmony among the masses, not only Kazakhstani,[xv] but also EU officials[xvi] have also expressed their intention to see Kazakhstan as a permanent member of the EU (Engvall and Cornell 2017). Moreover, EU-Kazakhstan's economic relations since 1992 have not only encouraged Kazakhstan to ratify the European Cultural Convention in March 2010, but also encouraged 72% of Kazakhstani Muslims to seek socio-cultural and economical associations with Europe. As the EU's Erasmus+ program for cooperation with Central Asian republics regarding higher education has fixed an amount of €115 million for the period of 2014 to 2020, Kazakhstan has become the biggest beneficiary of this program. According to the EU External Action Service 2011-2021 (EEAS10), Erasmus+ became ready to welcome almost 3,400 Kazakhstani students and teachers in Europe. Similarly, Kazakhstan was prepared to host almost 1,500 European students and teachers under their respective program (EEAS 2020). As this program will continue from 2021 to 2027, the students and faculty exchange program is also affecting Kazakhstani Muslims to be culturally engaged with Europe where a significant number of Muslim students (both male and female) have been attracted to marrying a European partner for life. At the same time, they assumed themselves to be economically protected while staying in Europe (Engvall and Cornell 2017).

Impacts of EU-Turkmenistan Relations on Turkmenistani Muslims

Although Turkmenistan is a member of the OSCE and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the EU

has a mission in Ashgabat that aims to ensure bilateral relations through partnerships with government and other decision-makers, businessmen, academics, media persons and civil society regarding promoting democracy, good governance, respect for human rights, facilitation of trade and investment relations (EEAS-Turkmenistan 2016). However, unlike European media and Europe-oriented Turkish culture, all the initiatives via respective platforms have very little impact for attracting the majority of the Muslim population in Turkmenistan towards cultural Europeanization (Deloire 2017; Yazliyeva 2020).

Similarly, Turkmenistan has also only a 0.1% share in the Erasmus+ program. Under this program, during 2015, 2016 and 2017, only 18, 9 and again 18 students and teachers had mobilities from Turkmenistan to Europe whereas only 4, 3 and again 4 European students and teachers respectively came to Turkmenistan. At the same time, Turkmenistan is the only state not having a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU because of its human rights situation (Anceschi 2021).

Currently, a significant number of Turkmen Muslims are struggling to be liberal, progressive and reformist while facing extremist religious sentiments transmitted from Afghanistan and Iran. Unlike religious freedom in the Constitution[xvii], it has been observed that some extremist elements within the Government also favor unregistering extremist militant organizations. Similarly, these elements are also an impediment in the way of promoting socio-religious harmony by not allowing Twelver Muslims, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews and some of the Evangelical Christian groups to be registered. This situation is a cause of human rights violations and creates a void among EU and Turkmenistan at

the official level. Therefore, such prejudice and religious hatred-based environment (whether created by some in the Turkmen Government or imported from Afghanistan and Iran) is alienating the mature, educated and rational Turkmen Muslims and contributes to the idea of migrating to Europe (Vatchagaev 2012; McGlynn and Rawlings 2021).

Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Emerging Nexus between the Caspian Region and Europe

Under the framework of cost-benefit analysis (Eckstein 1958), the study investigates how cultural Europeanization can be effective for the economic welfare of Muslim societies within the Caspian region, or which sorts of cost they would be willing to pay if they had the chance to be culturally European.

In the case of Iran, post-1979 Iranian authorities are well aware that "indoor" cultural Europeanization is thriving as it did before 1979 (Boroumand 2020). However, freedom of publically exhibiting European culture would not only destroy the cause of the Islamic Revolution but would also end the strict control over Iranian politics by the successors of Imam Khomeini and the other pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih clerics.[xviii] Likewise, liberalism, progressivism and reformism as the prerequisites for cultural Europeanization could never allow Iranian authorities to interfere in the internal socio-political and economic affairs of other countries.[xix] At the same time, the common value of EU member states is respect for human rights but the Iranian Constitution does not allow numerous religious or sectarian minorities to receive the same amount of accommodations which some of the major communities[xx] are receiving. Besides, the authoritarian nature of the Iranian Constitution only allows pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelver clerics to enjoy key posts at governmental, bureaucratic and military

levels[xxi] (Asim 2020; Roofi, Asim and Zaheer 2020). Thus, post-1979 Iran never expects to be culturally aligned either with Europe or with Russia,[xxii] although some of the political[xxiii] and religious elites[xxiv] along with a significant portion of Muslim youth are favoring cultural liberalization or cultural reconcilement between Asia and Europe[xxv] (Boroumand 2020).

On the other hand, the perception that Russia is following neo-Sovietism (sometimes referred to as Putinism) towards the former Soviet states along with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is widely spreading. The cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea have built russophobia among various segments in the respective countries. Therefore, their leaderships have been inclined to welcome European states—as members of the OSCE since 1992—in their quest for politico-military assistance. At the same time, Russian efforts for socio-political or diplomatic russification of the respective states encourage them to be associated with Europe by distinct initiatives. However, Kazakhstani orientations toward permanent membership in the EU came at the price of Russian threats against Kazakhs' sovereign identity. In 2013, President Vladimir Putin claimed that "Kazakhs never had a statehood" (Michel 2014). His controversial statement received a severe response from President Nazarbayev while Kazakhstan was going to celebrate the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate. Moreover, Nazarbayev also threatened to withdraw from the EEU, arguing that a country's sovereignty is the "most precious treasure" and Kazakhstanis will never surrender its independence (Mirovalev 2016). Since then, Kazakhstani authorities have been more triggered toward closeness with the EU. With ratification from the Kazakh parliament in March 2016 and from the European Parliament in December 2017, Kazakhstan has become the first Central Asian republic to

conclude an 'Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement' (EPCA) with the EU (Gotev 2017).

Turkmenistan is neither under complete Russian patronage nor has it deep engagements with the EU in terms of trade.[xxvi] On the other hand, trends of relations between Russia and Azerbaijan have been changing recently. Before 2020, a huge portion of Azerbaijani society assumed Russian military support to Armenia on Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the trilateral ceasefire agreement between Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh[xxvii]not only decreased Russophobia among Azerbaijanis but they have been socio-culturally and economically inclined towards Muslim communities in Russia. However, sometimes they face Caucasophobia because Russians are usually unable to differentiate between Azerbaijanis and other Caucasian nationalities including Dagestanis and Chechens[xxviii] (Djalilov 2019).

Besides all the respective developments between Russia and Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani public at large is still committed to considering themselves as European rather than be Russified or neo-Sovietized. Neither do they rely upon Russian peace initiatives in favor of Azerbaijan nor do they examine EEU as a Russian sincere effort to be an equal partner in regional economic development (Valiyev 2016). Hence, different sorts of engagements with the EU have intensified the wish among Azerbaijani Muslims to find security and protection of their future with Europe (Cornell 2006).

On the other hand, although the followers of Turkish, Shadhili and Qaderiya versions of Sufi Islam along with universal Twelver Muslims in Russia (especially women) desire to follow cultural Europeanism or Europe-oriented Turkish culture, Russian recent efforts to undermine their

ethnolinguistic identities by adopting a bill in summer 2017 for Muslim majority areas of North Caucasus and Tatarstan have once again put them in the fear of new slavery (Chapman 2017). They know that the EU, Türkiye and other countries or organizations may speak out in their favor, but economic interests or a desire not to be embroiled in a military confrontation prevent them from taking any practical action against Russia (Walt 2021; Ellyatt 2022).

Conclusion

Investigations of the different Muslim orientations in the Caspian Region showcase their cultural inclinations toward Europe. However, the weaknesses or silence of the EU and OSCE is not only triggering Russia to form a cohort with the former Soviet states, but proving the statement that "Russia can neither allow Europeanization of the Caspian Region nor permit Caucasian and Central Asian states to grow with ethnically sovereign identities, but under the influence of authoritarian Russification, neo-Sovietism or Putinism as exhibited in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea" (Zaheer 2021). Therefore, Asia-Europe connectivity can only be seen in terms of cultural hybridity in the Caspian region where Muslim societies have been inclined toward European lifestyle, norms and traditions. However, the political implication of Asia-Europe connectivity by an expansion of the EU seems to be impossible; either because of forceful Russification, Putinism and neo-Sovietism, or due to the incomplete implication of the EU's policies regarding democracy and human rights in the landscape of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

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i According to Article 12 of the Iranian Constitution, Twelver-Shia Islam is the official religion of Iran whereas the Hanafi, Shafi, Maliki, Hanbali and Zaidi sects acquired constitutional recognition as the sects of Islam (Constitution of Iran 1989).

ii Some significant Sufi orders in Iran are Hakimian, Molavian, Noorian, Qaderian, Safavian, Sohrevardian and Naqshbandian along with Nematollahian (Mehraby 2020).

iii Yarsanism believes upon gender equality in social affairs. However, religious heads can only be male (Hosseini 2020, 93 & 102) (Asim 2020).

iv Yarsanism claims to be a religion of innate ideas; based upon rationalism, empiricism and nativism since the birth of mankind (Hosseini 2020, 93) (Asim 2020).

v By inspiring millennialist movements in Christianity, Yarsanism also believes upon transformation of society "in millions of times"; means to adopt modifications and modernism as per the need of times (Hosseini 2020, 41 & 102) (Asim 2020).

vi An Islamic term for fulfilling modern needs by following directions of Sunni Muslim jurisprudent (as Hanafism says), or by self-assessments of Quran and Hadith (as Shafism allows) (Jannati 2022).

vii In the work of *The Politics of Culture in Soviet Azerbaijan; 1920-1940* by Audrey Altstadt (2016), it has also been mentioned that 'the golden youth of Azerbaijan has become Europeanized by the point of rejecting its indigenous culture' (Altstadt 2016, 178).

viii However, it should be pointed out that a workshop on EU-Turkmenistan relations, organized by the Directorate General for External Policies of the European Parliament, recommended some socio-political changes within the state-structure of Turkmenistan regarding strengthening ties with the EU (Peyrouse and Anceschi 2017).

ix "It is engaged theory, theory that arises from anger about what is, theory that envisions what is possible. Engaged theory makes change possible" (Adams 2010, 02).

x Soviet authorities sponsored the concept of collective consciousness within the Muslim societies of Central Asia, aimed to promote shared beliefs, ideas and social norms; trying to install a pro-Soviet group mindset (Hunter, Thomas and Melikishvili 2004, xx).

xi It was an official governing body under the strict control of Soviet authorities, established in 1943 with an aim to train Central Asian Muslim clergy for promoting Soviet-sponsored Islam. In 1990, Kazakhstan was the first state to remove its "Qaziat" (Muslim jurisprudents) from SADUM, established an independent forum (called Mufiate) for Kazakhstani Muslims (Gross 1992, 63).

xii Article 1 of Kazakhstan's Constitution declares: "The Republic of Kazakhstan proclaims itself as a democratic, secular, legal and social state whose highest values are a person, his life, rights, and freedoms" (Constitution of Kazakhstan 1995).

xiii Article 18: "The state shall guarantee freedom of religion and belief, and equality before the law. Religious organizations shall be separate from the state, their interference in the state affairs and carrying out the state functions shall be prohibited" (Constitution of Turkmenistan 2006 2016).
Article 41: "Each person shall independently determine his/her attitude toward religion, shall have the right to, individually or jointly with others, profess any religion or none, to express and disseminate beliefs related to attitude toward religion, to participate in religious observances, rituals, and ceremonies" (Constitution of Turkmenistan 2006 2016).
Article 75: "The violation of the right of citizens to confess any religion or none at all, to express and spread their convictions, in connection with religion, to participate in the carrying out of religious cults, rituals, and rites, to associate into religious organizations, and also the offense of religious feelings carries with it a warning or a fine in the amount of from 2 to 5 of the base value" (Constitution of Turkmenistan 2006 2016).

xiv Under this project, the European Cultural Heritage Campaign and European Common Heritage Program were conducted at schools and universities within Azerbaijan in 2003 that highly promoted a sense of

belonging to Europe among students. Likewise, two more events were held under this platform in 2005 with the title "Civilizations and peacekeeping processes" in Azerbaijan (European-Parliament 2006).

[xv] The ambassador of Kazakhstan to Russia, Adilbek Dzhaksybekov, stated in 2009 that "We would like to join in the future the European Union, but to join not as Estonia and Latvia, but as an equal partner" (Engvall and Cornell 2017) (Asim 2020).

[xvi] In response to Adilbek Dzhaksybekov, MEP Charles Tannock favored Kazakhstan's membership in the ENP. However, he emphasized that "there are still concerns regarding democracy and human rights in Kazakhstan" (Engvall and Cornell 2017) (Asim 2020).

[xvii] Article 11 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan provides religious freedom (Constitution of Turkmenistan 2006 2016).

[xviii] According to the Article 4 of Iranian Constitution, all civil, penal financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws are the subject of Mujtahid (elite clerics) within the Guardian Council (Constitution of Iran 1989).

[xix] The preamble of the Iranian Constitution discusses that "the constitution, having regard to the Islamic contents of the Iranian Revolution, which was a movement for the victory of all the oppressed over the arrogant, provides a basis for the continuation of that revolution both inside and outside the country. It particularly tries to do this in developing international relations with other Islamic movements and peoples, so as to prepare the way towards a united single world community" (Constitution of Iran 1989).

Moreover, Iranian revolution-oriented expansionism has been observed in the statement of Imam Khomeini as "We shall export our revolution to the whole world. Until the cry 'There is no god but Allah' resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle" (Teller 2020).

Similarly, Iranian efforts to export revolutionary sentiments on the basis of Vilayat-e-Faqih ideology to Iraq and Azerbaijan while interfering in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen can be understood in the light of another statement by Khomeini: "Establishing the Islamic state world-wide belong to the great goals of the revolution" (Bonney 2004, 251).

[xx] Article 12 of Iranian Constitution recognizes Twelver-Shia Islam as the official religion of the state while Article 5 of the Constitution adds the concept of Vilayat-e-Faqih within Twelver-Shia Islam. Moreover, Article 12 also delivers complete respect to the followers of only Zaidi-Shia Islam and all the four schools within Sunni Islam. On the other hand, Article 13 recognizes only Zoroastrian, Jews and Christians as religious minorities in Iran (Constitution of Iran 1989).

[xxi] Preamble along with Articles 5, 91, 99, 110, 115, 121, 144, 150, 162 and 176 of the Iranian Constitution only allows pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelver-Shia Mujtahids to hold key posts in Iran (Constitution of Iran 1989).

[xxii] As the Iranian province of Gilan has once experienced Soviet rule under the short-lived 'Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran/Gilan' during 1920-1921 while Azerbaijani- and Kurd-populated areas of Iran have experienced short-lived 'Azerbaijan Peoples Government' and 'Kurdish Republic of Mahabad' during W.W.II in 1945-1946, there is a little portion of people in respective areas who still idealize Soviet traits of governance or Islamic socialism. However, anti-Marxism views of Khomeini and the fear of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) are the biggest obstacle to expressing their views publically (Boroumand 2020).

[xxiii] Former President of Iran, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani favored a free market economy. Unlike the hardlines around Ahmadinejad, he espoused the World Bank's structural adjustment policies and desired a modern industrial-based economy to be integrated with global markets. His respective ideology triggered Iranian supreme leader Khamenei during the 2009 presidential elections to release a statement in favor of Ahmadinejad just one day before the poll. Hence, majority of pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelver population cast their vote in favor of Ahmadinejad while Rafsanjani received major victory from the areas with religious minorities (including Sunni-Muslims). His daughter Faeezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani is facing imprisonment since March 17, 2017 because of professing an anti-regime ideology (REFRL 2017).

[xxiv] Mehdi Haeri Yazdi (a student of Khomeini, the son of the founder of Qom Seminary, but inspired by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant) rejected Khomeini's concept of "Absolute Guardianship" or vilayat-e-faqih and declared it as contradictory to basic teachings of religion and a hurdle to modernity and democracy. In between 1980 to 1999, his opposition to Khomeinism or pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelver Shia-Islam generated a reformist attitude among Muslim youth in entire Iran (Boroumand 2020). Similarly, Abdolkarim Soroush rejected the clergy's monopoly on interpreting religion in the early 1990s. Although he was not a cleric, his views were acceptable among Muslim audience within the Iran (Boroumand 2020). Mohsen Kadivar, Mohamad Mojtahed and several other reformist religious scholar defended modern individualism, democracy and human rights against the authoritarianism, dogmatism and extremism portrayed by Khomeini and his successors (Boroumand 2020).

[xxv] A wave of cultural reformation along with anti-regime and anti-Vilayat-e-Faqih protests has been recorded in between 2017 to 2019 where some slogans like "Death to Vilayat-e-Faqih" and "Our enemy is here, they lie when they say it is America" indicated public demands for secularism and liberalism. Moreover, this period of time exhibited a trend of sectarian conversion from pro-Vilayat-e-Faqih Twelver Shia-Islam to Iran-based Gonabadi Sufi-Islam because of softness and openness in basic teachings towards other societies and religious communities. At the same time,

state-sponsored totalitarianism is also forcing Muslim youth (especially women) to be agnostic or atheist rather than to follow radicalization as a religion (Boroumand 2020).

[xxvi] Russia imports natural gas while, EU imports mineral fuels, oils, fertilizers, cotton and distillation products from Turkmenistan (Trading-Economics 2022).

[xxvii] On November 10, 2020, this agreement was signed by the Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan, the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and the President of Russia Vladimir Putin. Moreover, president of the self-declared Republic of Artsakh, Arayik Harutyunyan also showed their consensus on respective trilateral agreement (BBC 2020).

[xxviii] Although, Azerbaijan has supported Russian stance over Chechnya issue, and closed the office of Chechen rebel president Aslan Maskhadov's representative in Baku, but common Russians relate Azerbaijanis as militant as some of Dagestanis and Chechens (Djalilov 2019).

Geopolitics of Connectivity: Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea

Rahim Rahimov

Abstract

The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed by the littoral states—Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan—on 12 August2018. The negotiation process has been characterised by a number of geopolitical questions, most importantly the issue what the implications of the Convention will be for the connectivity systems in the Caspian region. This chapter argues that the littoral states collectively chose to avoid conflict initiation in favor of predictability and certainty in the Caspian. Therefore, the Convention formalized the already existing status-quo in the Caspian Sea instead of changing it. This conclusion is made as a result of analyzing the topic in four directions- the legal-technical status of the Caspian, military geo-strategy, seabed division, and trans-Caspian connectivity systems.

Methodologically, the chapter uses the concepts of change and maintenance of the two-goods theory of foreign policy with a view to exploring why the littoral states have collectively chosen to avoid conflict initiation by preserving the existing status-quo while individual disagreements still persist.

Keywords: Caspian; geopolitics; legal status; Russia; Iran; Kazakhstan; Azerbaijan; Turkmenistan.

Introduction

Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Turkmenistan signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian on 12 August 2018 following protracted negotiations that lasted for over a quarter of a century.[i] The signing of the Convention took place in the Kazakh coastal town of Aktau by the leaders of the five nations who hailed the event as a historic success (France24).

Questions concerning the legal status of the Caspian and related disputes had come to the fore with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the newly independent states of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Turkmenistan. Until then, commerce and navigation on the Caspian were regulated by bilateral agreements between the USSR and Iran, at the time the only two coastal states bordering the Caspian. As post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan joined the littoral states, the problem of the re-division of the Caspian popped up not least because it had never been demarked or delimitated among the littoral republics of the ex-USSR. Iran took the opportunity of the newly reshaping circumstances and staked its claims to those areas of the Caspian that had previously been under the control of the USSR. The disagreements can be loosely classified into two categories: first, contested maritime borders and related disputes over hydrocarbon fields; and second, construction of a trans-Caspian energy pipeline and the presence of non-littoral states in the Caspian Sea. The success of any littoral state in pursuing its goals hinges in part on whether the Caspian is legally recognized as a sea or a lake.

Conceptual Framework

A major argument in this chapter is that the Caspian littoral states have preserved and reinforced the status-quo by signing the Convention. This has enabled them to avoid conflict over various Caspian affairs. Such approach takes us to the two-good theory of foreign policy (Palmer and Morgan 2011), particularly the concepts of change and maintenance. According to the change concept of the theory, when a state conducts a foreign policy that seeks to alter some aspects of the status-quo in its international relations, this is likely to lead to opposition from the other concerned state. As a result, conflict starts and therefore, the change concept is associated with conflict initiation. As regards the maintenance concept, the other concerned state will resist and seek to maintain the status-quo vis-à-vis the change-seeking state. Therefore, the maintenance concept is associated with conflict reciprocation as contrasted to the change concept and associated conflict initiation. Since there are more than two littoral states involved in the Caspian and they pursue different, contradicting interests and goals, this represents a unique two-level case for the theory of foreign policy: on the individual level, littoral states individually try to change some aspects of the status-quo, and therefore effectively initiate conflict, facing opposition and conflict reciprocation from those states that seek to preserve the status-quo. Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan-Iran tensions over the disputed hydrocarbon fields are just a case in point. On the collective level, as this chapter argues, littoral states collectively chose to preserve and reinforce the status-quo and avoid embroilment in conflict. In doing so, they made certain trade-offs to come to a consensus or agreement. Trade-off is another important concept in the two-good theory of foreign policy. For instance, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan agreed to

the ban of military from non-littoral states and of vessels that fly the flag of non-littoral states in exchange for Russia's granting of access to the Volga River to be able to get to open seas.

Limbo Status

Under international law, different regulations apply to seas and lakes. At the meeting in Aktau it became apparent that while Iran favors the Caspian Sea as a lake, to get a bigger share of its resources and opportunities, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are for calling it a sea, for the same reasons, and Russia disagrees with either designation. If the Caspian was recognized as a sea, Russia would be obliged to grant foreign vessels access to it through the Volga River whereas the lake status would shrink Russia's share of it. Thus, the Convention reflects the existing "neither sea nor lake" status quo.

Conceptually, the term "Caspian Sea" is used throughout the Convention, but Clause 1 describes it as a "body of water," thus avoiding any formal designation. While Russian scholar Pavel Gudev regards the use of the "body of water concept" as a "specific compromise" (2022, 170), the Convention essentially imprints uncertainty on whether the Caspian is a sea or a lake which fundamentally blocks application of any relevant international laws or instruments applicable to seas or lakes. The special status of the Caspian, now fixed in the Convention, proactively prevents any littoral state from revising or amending the Convention in the future on the basis of international law concerning seas or lakes.

Military Geostrategy

Militarily, the most significant outcome of the Convention is the ban on the presence of armed forces of non-littoral states under Clause 3.6. Likewise, under Clause 3.7, no party to the Convention may offer its territory to other states for committing aggression or other military actions against any littoral state. This condition is quite ambiguous as it effectively extends the scope of the Convention off-shore the Caspian and is prone to contradictory interpretations in the future: anything whether an allegation, a report or an activity might be interpreted or misinterpreted as going against a littoral state. Russian and Iranian officials' accusations against Azerbaijan on the alleged transfer of fighters from Syria to the war zone during the 2020 Karabakh war are just a case in point (Rahimov 2020). Moscow and Tehran used those reports which they actively spread and which were condemned by Baku as fake news and as a disinformation campaign against Azerbaijan, to interpret and portray them as a threat to their national security.

The military aspects of the deal echo a narrative long propagated by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov: namely, in order to avoid conflict and maintain peace, there must be a legally binding agreement that NATO will not expand or penetrate into areas Russia considers its "sphere of interest." Indeed, Lavrov blamed the West, particularly the United States and NATO, for the non-resolution of conflicts in the South Caucasus and for the breakout of the Ukraine crisis. Had legally binding norms been introduced to maintain an equal and indivisible security space in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasia, then the conflicts such as the Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria would have been resolved long ago, according to Lavrov. "Our attempts to make those norms legally binding were rejected by Western nations" (Lavrov 2017a). In

other words, Russia wants legally binding obligations from the United States and its NATO allies that they will not further expand into what is seen by Russia as its historical sphere of influence. This echoes President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in which he accused the West of betraying Russia by expanding into post-socialist Eastern Europe. He quoted the former NATO General Secretary Mr Woerner's speech of May 17, 1990: "the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee." Then, Putin posed a rhetoric question: "Where are these guarantees?" (Putin 2017).

Iran's position overlaps with that of Russia on the issue of banning the Caspian and territories of the littoral states to the military of non-littoral states. From the perspective of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, the Caspian Sea would ideally be even a demilitarized zone. However, Moscow rejected the demilitarization option long ago (Azertag 2014). Indeed, the fact that Russian warships in the Caspian Sea launched strikes against targets in Syria underscores its military significance for Moscow. Since Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have joined the non-alignment bloc and Kazakhstan is home to Russian military bases through the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (SCTO), the absence of non-littoral states is acceptable to them for the moment. But the military conditions of the Convention weaken the bargaining power of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan in negotiating other significant issues that were left unresolved by the Convention, such as the construction of trans-Caspian pipelines or seabed division. It may even affect their ability to diversify their security partnerships in the future. That said, Clause 3.10 provides the littoral states with free access to and from the Caspian and transit between it and

other seas and oceans. It is the Volga River that gives landlocked Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan such access to international waters. This also means that the Convention closes the Caspian, under Clause 3.10, to even those vessels and ships that fly the flag of non-littoral states. And the fact that the Volga River runs through Russian territory provides Moscow with a strong advantage in negotiating agreements. Therefore, the flexibility of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan on the military provisions of the Convention is understandable from the perspective of access and transit to the Caspian via the Volga river.

Seabed Division

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, had earlier agreed through bilateral deals on a division of the seabed for mineral exploitation and fishing and had signed agreements on the matter. Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan had failed to reach similar agreements and experienced tensions over the disputed offshore oil and gas fields (Kucera 2012). Clause 8 of the Convention leaves the issue of seabed division to the concerned states to tackle among themselves for further bilateral resolution through agreements. Basically, the Convention fails to offer any solution to the problem of seabed division. It simply reaffirms the existing status quo. To support this argument, below is a comparative case study that juxtaposes the seabed division accord in a bilateral format between Azerbaijan and Iran, which was made in April 2018 in the lead-up to the signing of the Convention, to the one that was signed between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan in January 2021 following it. The case study also offers a glimpse of the Russian-Kazakhstan accords of 1998 and 2002 to bilaterally settle the seabed division disputes.

Case study 1: Bilateral settlements of seabed division disputes

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani paid an official visit to Baku on 28 March 2018. During the visit, Azerbaijan and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding on joint development of offshore hydrocarbon fields in the Caspian Sea (Presidency of the Republic of Azerbaijan. 2018). Remarkably, the names of the fields were not specified, though they were officially referred to as "relevant." In fact, these hydrocarbon fields are the ones long disputed by Azerbaijan and Iran in connection with the unsettled legal status of the Caspian. Baku and Tehran used a neutral term to refer to them, perhaps to avoid any discomfort associated with the related embarrassing incidents of the recent past. For instance, in 2001, Iranian gunboats and aircraft threatened Azerbaijani survey ships working on the Alov-Sharg-Araz structure contested by Tehran; and as a result, BP, the operator of the oil field, suspended its operations there (Karbuz 2016). The disputed fields have since remained undeveloped. President Rouhani's remarks that the "the fields should serve for the benefit of both nations instead of remaining locked up in the sea" echoes a certain level of pragmatism in making the bilateral deal (Presidency of Karlus the Islamic Republic of Iran 2018)

Azerbaijani-Iranian and Azerbaijani-Turkmenistani as well as Iranian-Turkmenistani disputes persisted over various hydrocarbon fields in the Caspian Sea. Russia and Kazakhstan also disagreed over the ownership of three fields—Kurmangazy, Khvalynsk and Tsentralnoye—in the northern part of the Caspian Sea. But Astana and Moscow managed to settle their disputes with agreements reached in 1998 and 2002. Under the Russian-Kazakhstani settlement, the three fields were to be jointly developed, with Kurmangazy falling

under the sovereignty of Kazakhstan, and Khvalynsk and Tsentralnoye under that of Russia.[ii] Similar issues and other details are yet to be worked out between Baku and Tehran. On top of that, Iran is reportedly preparing to develop a huge Caspian oil and natural gas field called Sardar-e Jangar. But Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan appear to also have claims to it—though so far low-profile ones. Nonetheless, the signing of the Azerbaijani-Iranian memorandum of understanding is a breakthrough in the long-deadlocked problem, as the dispute had been a sticking point.

The Azerbaijani-Iranian and Russian-Kazakhstani bilateral agreements have apparently served as convincing precedents for dispute settlement between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Indeed, Baku and Ashgabat signed a memorandum of understanding in January 2021 on joint development of the disputed Kapaz/Sardar field. The field is referred to as Kapaz by the Azerbaijani side and Sardar by the Turkmenistani side. A major dispute over the possession of the field first broke out in the 1990s, leading to serious tensions between Ashgabat and Baku in 2012. Starting from 1997, Azerbaijan offered to jointly develop the field with Turkmenistan. But Ashgabat never accepted the offer, claiming full ownership. Ashgabat and Baku have also renamed it as "Dostluq" [Friendship] to disassociate the past troubles similar to the case of disputed fields between Azerbaijan and Iran.

There are significant incentives for Ashgabat and Bakuto reach a deal on the joint development of the disputed Kapaz/Sardar field. First, as noted above, the pragmatism displayed in the earlier Russian-Kazakhstani and Azerbaijani-Iranian deals acts as a precedent. Second, Ashgabat lacks the necessary costly infrastructure and access from Turkmenistan to develop offshore oil reserves on its own (Lelyveld 2000).

Moreover, volatile energy prices in recent years have hit the economies of both Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, seriously undermining their ability to afford multi-billion-dollar investments in offshore development projects. Thus, taking into account the uncertainty over energy prices at present, joint development would also mean sharing the risk should the oil prices again begin to drop in the future. Third, delivering the offshore Caspian oil to global markets, particularly to Europe, would be a tall order for Ashgabat which is unable to export its natural gas to Europe due to the failure to construct a trans-Caspian pipeline (Shlapentokh 2017). Joint development of the fields with Baku would allow Ashgabat to transport westwards the produced oil directly from the field using Azerbaijan's existing transportation infrastructure without recourse to building a trans-Caspian oil pipeline or the need for laying a pipeline to the Turkmenistani shores of the Caspian. Azerbaijan has got a well-developed offshore transportation infrastructure which serves its nearby oil fields, particularly those operated by the BP-led consortium. Fourth, the Azerbaijani-Turkmenistani compromise deal on the dispute may play a positive or facilitating role in the development of a trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline to transit the latter's gas westwards (O'Byrne 2017).

The deal between Baku and Tehran caused an optimism expressed in December 2017 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov about the possibility of the signing of the Convention in the lead-up to the related summit of the Caspian littoral states (Lavrov 2017b). Indeed, this optimism was justified a few months later in August 2018. Therefore, the Azerbaijani-Iranian deal on the joint development of offshore hydrocarbon fields represented a considerable step forward, leading to the broader settlement of the legal status of the

Caspian Sea rather than vice versa. In this light, the framing of the Azerbaijani-Turkmenistan deal on joint development of the disputed Kapaz/Serdar field in the context of or even as a result of the signing of the Convention rather serves the strategic communication of the related governments.

Trans-Caspian Connectivity

The issue of construction of a trans-Caspian pipeline or cables has been a major point of contention. Russia and Iran have opposed construction of any trans-Caspian pipeline to transport oil and gas across the Caspian and effectively blocked such construction for many years. Furthermore, Moscow and Tehran have sought to ensure that the Caspian remains free of any military presence of non-littoral states (Lobanovsky 2014; Mehr News Agency 2017). Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have voiced no serious opposition to that. However, they would have used their consents to extract concessions from Russia and Iran on removing obstacles to the possible construction of a trans-Caspian pipeline and other related issues in exchange.

The long-proposed Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan gas pipeline is viewed in particular by Moscow as undermining Russian dominance over energy exports to Europe. Under Clause 14 of the Convention, a trans-Caspian pipeline can be laid with the agreement of those littoral states through whose territories the pipeline crosses. However, the Clause also states that the construction of pipelines or cables must satisfy environmental standards, particularly those set by the Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea of 2003 (Tehran Convention). This means that any Caspian state—which would most likely be Russia as well as Iran—may veto construction of a trans-Caspian pipeline. The Russian

team's lead negotiator, Igor Bratchikov, made this clear in his statement for the press (Russian Foreign Ministry 2018). Against this backdrop, almost the only hope for a trans-Caspian pipeline might have been connected to the circumstances surrounding the Nord Stream 2 project that is to deliver Russian natural gas to Germany via the Baltic Sea.

Two case studies are conducted below. The case study 2 [Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline] looks into the specific perspective of the long-proposed trans-Caspian gas pipeline to be laid from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan for further delivery to Europe. The case study 3 discusses Moscow's motives concerning trans-Caspian trade and connectivity issues.

Case study 2: Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline

In his speech on 19 June 2019 in Orlando, Florida, kicking off his 2020 presidential reelection campaign, Donald Trump mentioned his efforts to diversify energy sources for Europe: "I built up the military, imposed sanctions on Russia, and provided alternative energy sources for all over Europe that competed very, very strongly with Russia" (Factbase 2019). Earlier, in March and May,2019, he had sent letters to the presidents of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, respectively, to voice support for the transport of gas from Turkmenistan to the West via the Caspian Sea (Presidency of the Republic of Azerbaijan. 2019). The President's messages were regarded as stimulating for the long-proposed Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) project which is intended to deliver gas from Central Asia to Europe, bypassing Russia, to diversify supply sources and transit routes for Europe. The pipeline is designed to carry natural gas from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan for further transport through the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC).

Incidentally, the White House granted an Iran sanctions waiver to the SGC in August 2018 (Paraskova 2018).

The proposal to build a trans-Caspian pipeline emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. But the uncertain legal status of the Caspian Sea and contested delimitation of the seabed, with its rich oil and gas resources, had been used by both Moscow and Tehran to delay the project. President Trump referred to the Caspian Convention in his message to the President of Turkmenistan. During his Senate confirmation hearing on 16 May 2019, the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Turkmenistan, Matthew S. Klimow, emphasized support to the diversification of Turkmenistan's gas exports as a priority for his office Senate Foreign Relations Committee 2019). The littoral states except for Iran have ratified the Convention on the legal status of the Caspian as of 1December2021. Even Moscow has called upon Tehran to accelerate the ratification process especially in response to Tehran's objection to Azerbaijani-Turkish joint naval drills in the Caspian in September, 2021. Ratification is a quite complicated and long procedure in Iran due to its political system and checks-and-balances. Indeed, there is domestic opposition against the Convention in Iran which feels dissatisfied with it. And finally, environmental arguments remain a major tool that Russia can wield against implementation of the TCGP.

Even as the White House formulated an increasingly clearer position on the TCGP, European states and the EU also sent positive signals in support of it. The European People's Party (EPP), the leading party in the European Parliament, had issued its "Position Paper on the External Dimension of Energy Security" (EPP 2015). In this document, the EPP resolutely supports the proposed trans-Caspian pipeline. Notably, however, in the same document the EPP opposes the Russia-led

Turkish Stream and Nord Stream 2 pipeline projects, which were under construction and would carry Russian gas to Europe through the Black and Baltic Seas, respectively. The latter is to circumvent a Western ally, Ukraine, and to eliminate its role as a transit country (de Maio 2019).

A few days later, on 17 June 2019, the EU Council adopted a new EU strategy on Central Asia (Council of the EU 2019). The document supports the "implementation of joint energy and transport connectivity projects in which the bridging potential of the Black and Caspian Seas is fully used". It is hard to imagine full use of that potential without a trans-Caspian pipeline. The EU and the Government of Turkmenistan sounded keen on seeing the TCGP brought to fruition. Turkmenistan has invested billions of U.S. dollars in building an east-west pipeline to bring gas from its onshore fields to the Caspian coast. The pipeline remains idle because of failure to build the TCGP. An agreement of June 2019 to open a full-fledged EU Delegation in Ashgabat was seen as a step toward resolving this impasse (European Union External Action Service 2019).

A western ally, Georgia, which has been quite successful in implementing the Association Agreement with the EU, has promoted the TCGP. Georgia's role might increase, as there are plans to divide the pipeline on the territory of Georgia, with one leg continuing through Türkiye to Europe along the SGC and the other leg extending to Romania under the Black Sea, taking the place of the original White Stream project (Cutler 2019). Since the second leg would further extend to involve Ukraine and Moldova, the Council's statement also alludes to the prospect of linking Central Asia with Eastern Partnership countries. Incidentally, Azerbaijan already supplies Caspian crude oil to Ukraine and then Belarus by pipelines to Turkish and / or Georgian ports on the Black Sea and then by tankers across the

Black Sea circumventing Russia as both a transit route and supply source (Rahimov 2021).

All the Euro-Atlantic signals and messages in support of the TCGP came amidst troubling developments with respect to Nord Stream 2. Although Germany favored the development of Nord Stream 2, needing a reliable energy source for its large economy, there was strong opposition to it from within the EU and the United States (Vaughan 2019). Indeed, the United States had imposed sanctions on companies involved in Nord Stream 2 during the Donald Trump presidency, and President Joe Biden also initially threatened it by more sanctions to block it (Zengerle and Gardner 2021). Nonetheless, the US eventually dropped the sanctions against Nord Stream 2.

Russia found itself in a difficult position. On the one hand, it didn't have the necessary technology to build a deep-water pipeline on her own, and on the other hand, any possible U.S. sanctions would forbid western companies involved in the project from applying their technologies. These uncertainties and other difficulties delayed the rollout of Nord Stream 2 and caused a surge in the financial costs increasing the burden of it. But the Nord Stream was eventually completed since Germany is absolutely keen on completing the project to satisfy the rising gas demand of the German economy and businesses. A concession regarding the construction of the TCGP may have been obtained from Russia in exchange for a deal that the Americans and Europeans clear the way for Nord Stream 2. But this scenario in favor of TCGP never materialized.

A small but important detail to support the concessions scenario was that while the EPP position document opposed the Turkish Stream, calling on the European Commission to abandon it, the document nonetheless requested "to thoroughly assess the compatibility of the Nord Stream 2 project with EU

law and to ensure that all relevant EU legislation is fully respected." In other words, the EPP hinted at the possibility of a compromise on the Nord Stream 2 project despite objecting it.

In the 1990s and 2000s, a Euro-Atlantic unity under strong US leadership was crucial to the success of offshore developments in the Caspian Sea and the related construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and South Caucasus Pipeline oil and gas pipelines which today pass through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye to deliver Caspian energy resources to Europe. Whether the USA and Europeans are able to follow up their positive messages and signals regarding the TCGP with real actions is yet to be seen.

Case study 3: Understanding Russia's motives concerning trans-Caspian connectivity

The development of trans-Caspian connectivity systems between Central Asia and the South Caucasus runs against the interests of Russia for a range of reasons such as the following: the East-West Transport Corridor which passes through the Caspian constitutes an alternative to Russia's trans-Siberian transportation corridor connecting China to Europe via Russia; trans-Caspian connectivity systems would strengthen Central Asia's ties with Europe and Black Sea regions, hence contradict Moscow's interests with adversarial effects to Russia's regional and especially geopolitical significance.[iii] For better grasping Moscow's motives in blocking the trans-Caspian hydrocarbon pipelines specifically, here is an interesting dispute involving Azerbaijan and Russia over transportation of oil from Turkmenistan by tankers.

The Convention initially gave rise to some cautious optimism about the possibility of finally realizing the long-

proposed TCGP and underwater cable projects as well as settlement of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan's dispute over important offshore oil fields. Gazprom's sudden resumption of Turkmen gas purchases and Ashgabat's redirection of its oil exports via Russia away from Azerbaijan by tankers across the Caspian in 2019 are thus likely another signal that Moscow is still quite sensitive about the prospects of the aforementioned trans-Caspian projects (Gente 2018; Panfilova 2018). Finally, a Vitol-SOCAR story which is connected to redirection of transportation of oil from Turkmenistan via Russia away from Azerbaijan, developed against the background of the signing of the treaty on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in August, 2018.

The Swiss firm Vitol and Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR were embroiled in a quarrel over the transportation of crude oil from Turkmenistan (Ershov et al. 2019). While the respective companies and government officials from Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkmenistan kept silent on the matter, media outlets tended to suggest that the dispute was sparked by commercial concerns. Nevertheless, the preceding and ongoing developments surrounding the oil transit disagreement suggest that the issue has a considerable political dimension.

The Dragon Oil firm, which operates the Cheleken oilfield in Turkmenistan, granted an oil shipping contract to Vitol in January 2019 to transport locally produced petroleum by tankers to Russia's Caspian Sea port of Makhachkala, from where it is under control of the Russian pipeline monopoly Transneft. However, Vitol lacked tankers to deliver on the contract. Azerbaijan's SOCAR, which has built the largest fleet of small- and medium-sized vessels in the Caspian, categorically refused to rent its tankers to Vitol. Subsequently,

Turkmenistani oil exports dropped during January–February 2019, hence leading to accretion of oil in the country's storage sites. If the problem remained unsettled, Turkmenistan would have needed to slash its oil production levels (Chronicles of Turkmenistan 2019). Incidentally or accidentally, in early February, 2019, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development also canceled a loan intended to support maritime transportation for Turkmenistan because the funds were found to be "servicing Dragon Oil offshore oil development" (Zilberman 2019).

Oil produced in Turkmenistan had been shipped to international markets via the Russian route until 2016, when Ashgabat abandoned it amidst a natural gas price dispute with Moscow. At that point, Ashgabat granted the oil transport contract to SOCAR, which had, since July 2010, already been shipping some Turkmen crude by tankers to Azerbaijan across the Caspian Sea to fill the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline.

In November 2018, SOCAR announced that it was supplying the high-quality Turkmen oil to its newly inaugurated Star refinery in Türkiye (SNG.Today 2018). Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev paid a rare official visit to Ashgabat on 22 November 2018, to sign various documents on transportation and energy transit. However, no concrete statement or document was released specifically concerning the transit of Turkmen oil or gas via Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, the president of Russia's energy giant Gazprom, Alexei Miller, paid two visits to Turkmenistan in October and November 2018 to discuss gas issues. On February 6, 2019, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also visited Ashgabat. He stated that the two sides discussed "oil and gas issues" and "cooperation in the Caspian Sea." Despite some early characterizations of Lavrov's Ashgabat visit as an

exchange of "hackneyed," "throwaway" lines and criticism for the trip's alleged "lack of purpose" (Rickleton 2019) these assessments proved premature and superficial. According to Lavrov, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow voiced satisfaction with the way the gas problems were being treated now by Moscow and Ashgabat "with a focus on far-reaching major agreements" (TASS 2019).

Indeed, Russia and Turkmenistan reached a preliminary consensus to resume Gazprom's purchases of Turkmen gas, and to settle their gas dispute with the Stockholm arbitrage court through a reconciliation agreement. Indeed, Gazprom and Turkmenistan's state gas firm Turkmengaz signed an agreement to terminate the arbitration procedure (Turkmenportal 2019). As noted above, Ashgabat had originally stopped oil shipments to Russia in response to Gazprom's earlier cancelation of Turkmen gas purchases. So in this light, the transportation of Turkmen oil via Russia (through the intermediary Vitol) was likely part of a wider bilateral agreement.

Another factor that further politicized the Swiss-Azerbaijani row was that Vitol was reported to have allegedly chartered tankers from Russian companies under United States sanctions for oil delivery to Crimea and Syria (Pirweli Information Centre 2019). Vitol was reportedly also in negotiations with the US-sanctioned Russian firm Trans-Flot JSC to rent two tankers that had been in operation for more than 45 years and failed to meet environmental standards (News.ru 2019). Moreover, two top managers of Vitol were implicated in a US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) probe regarding a bribery case involving Brazil's oil company Petrobas (Brooks and McWilliams 2019).

Interestingly, Russian oil has also flowed through the BTC since 2014, and a new contract was signed on 23 August 2018, to supply Russian oil to SOCAR's Star refinery in Türkiye. This fact raises a logical question as to why Russian oil flows via the BTC while Turkmen oil is redirected away from the same BTC to the Russian route. The answer is geopolitical: By doing this, Russia seeks a presence in Azerbaijan's BTC pipeline, which is meant to serve European energy security; whereas, by purchasing oil from Turkmenistan, Russia seeks to similarly maintain its influence over other energy sources for Europe, counter Ashgabat's even stronger dependence on hydrocarbon exports to China and simultaneously discourage Turkmenistan's desire for the TCGP. Thus, Moscow gains further leverage over Azerbaijan and in particular Turkmenistan—two former Soviet countries that have, to date, refrained from joining Russia-led regional integrationist structures such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the CSTO. Against this backdrop, the Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan document on joint development of the disputed field signals that Baku and Ashgabat are determined to resist the Russian factor. That said, the sticking point in the future will be whether the document will translate into practical implementation of it and who—Russian or British or other companies—will take the lead in developing and operating the once disputed field between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

Conclusion

The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian is unique from the perspective of the two-good theory of foreign policy not least because it offers a two-level or two-layer case—individual and collective levels. Collectively they chose to initiate a change to avoid conflict initiation. But a major

downside of this collective approach is that it was not very successful in settling the disputes. Yet Iran has so far refrained from ratifying the Convention and Tehran has shown no sign that it may do so soon. As such the collective approach has also kept conflict potential among littoral states at individual level. Individually, disagreements and conflict potential between littoral states persist. The recent Iranian objection to Azerbaijani-Turkish joint naval drills in the Caspian is a case in point. Furthermore, problematic oil and gas transportation across the shores of the Caspian is yet another symptom of the individual disagreements. The incompatibility between the collective and individual approaches has made the application of the concept of trade-off, which is another important concept in the two-good theory of foreign policy, practically problematic, in the case of the Caspian convention.

In sum, rather than settling any disagreements among the five littoral states, the Convention formalizes the existing status quo, and the Convention merely fixed in place the existing disputes and controversies surrounding the use of the Caspian without laying out the means for disentangling and resolving their complexities. Until those issues are adequately addressed, the mere adoption of the Convention cannot be regarded as a solution. Moreover, the Convention itself must be ratified by all the Caspian states before it takes effect. And that ratification in turn may pivot on whether individual states decide to cling to "lake" or "sea" as a means of protecting their individual interests. As of 1 May 2021, Iran has avoided ratification. It remains an open question when or even whether Tehran will ratify the Convention.

Russia as well as Iran were rather geopolitically motivated in the negotiation of the Convention and continue to do so in their behaviors in the Caspian Sea. That said, they also hold

considerable economic interests. In contrast to Russia and Iran, other littoral states—Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are rather motivated for their connectivity and related commercial and economic considerations. Therefore, geopolitics and connectivity interests dominate the topic of the legal status of the Caspian and the related Convention. In particular, the Kremlin seems to have made concessions on connectivity issues in exchange for ensuring its geopolitical interests. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan look satisfied with that. However, Iran is conspicuously dissatisfied, and therefore, Tehran is very likely to use the ratification of the Convention as a bargaining chip in its efforts to maximize Iran's gains from the agreement.

Finally, the Convention is not a breakthrough on the matter and rather has formalized the status-quo in the Caspian that has been shaped for close to three decades starting with the demise of the former Soviet Union. Nonetheless, it has amplified the commercial competition and cooperation with geopolitical implications in the Caspian among the littoral states. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan have all developed brand-new ports or upgraded the existing ones in order to raise their benefits from the trans-Caspian trade and transits and in particular from the Chinese-led Road and Belt Initiative. Indeed, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have made a considerable rapprochement due to their interests as part of the East-West transport corridor. While Russia's upgrade of its Makhachkala port is a competitor to Azerbaijan's newly developed Alat International Sea Port. Tehran also tries to do something to benefit from the potential of the Caspian. The Iranian-Chinese deal on development of an artificial island in the Iranian sector of the Caspian is just a case in point.

A concluding point is that all these developments contribute to regionalization not regionalism in the Caspian region. And the littoral nations have so far focused on obtaining benefits from hydrocarbon resources and transit routes. Making use of the Caspian transits to produce added value of transits by creating related manufacturing or other spheres are far beyond the visions of the littoral nations at the moment.

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EU—Turkmenistan Energy Cooperation Failure: It is not only about Geopolitics

Leonardo Zanatta

Abstract

Despite having the world's fourth-largest gas reserves, Turkmenistan is struggling to emerge as a major energy player in the Eurasian region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The natural gas exports of the Central Asian republic continued to depend mainly on Russia and Iran until 2014, when China became its near-monopolistic buyer. Among the several external actors attempting to engage in energy dialogue with Turkmenistan, the EU is at the forefront as it needs to diversify its imports of natural gas bypassing Russian supplies. This paper investigates the current status of energy relations between the EU and Turkmenistan, namely the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline. This paper claims that, although the recent political events in the region have resulted in a more positive diplomatic environment for this infrastructure, discussing the TCGP merely in geopolitical terms does not explain why the EU has not managed yet to establish natural gas connectivity with Turkmenistan. It rather argues that EU energy policies and taxonomy and Turkmenistan´s approach towards foreign investments are the major factors holding back co-operation between the two parties.

Keywords: Turkmenistan; Central Asia; EU; energy geopolitics, oil & gas.

Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the oil and gas endowed Caspian Sea Basin was opened to the outside world after 150 years of containment within the Tsarist and the Soviet rule. The rise of three newly independent littoral states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan), together with Iran and Russia, and their willingness to use their oil and gas bonanza as a tool of foreign policy and economic development, immediately drew the attention of energy companies as well as of regional and non-regional powers. Between 1993 and 1997, US (Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Unocal etc.) and European (British Petroleum, Royal Dutch Shell, and Eni) firms took the lead in both the development of the most promising Caspian oil and gas fields in the Kazakh and Azerbaijani offshore sectors and in the construction of new pipelines which could bypass Russia.

The headlong rush into the region by external players, often compared to the XIX century's "Great Game" over Central Asia between the Russian and the British Empires, was driven by a twofold objective. On the one hand, to meet the rise in demand for energy, caused by the dynamic economic development and the growth of the world population during the '90s. On the other, to diversify the international sources of hydrocarbons supply and, consequently, to reduce OPEC's influence on the energy markets. As declared by Bill Richardson, the US Secretary of Energy under the presidency of Bill Clinton, in an interview with the New York Times in 1998, "The Caspian region will hopefully save the US from total dependence on Middle East oil" (Kinzer 1998).

Dealing with ever-increasing external interest in their energy sector, the three littoral countries have adopted different approaches towards the production, the development and the export of their oil and gas resources. Among the

different external actors engaging in energy dialogue with the post-Soviet countries surrounding the Caspian Basin, the EU has been interested in bypassing Russian supplies and diversifying its imports of natural gas. The EU Commission's commitment to enhance strategic co-operation with the Caspian countries has successfully led to the construction of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC)—a complex gas value chain of 3500 km crossing six countries (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Türkiye, Greece, Albania, and Italy) that could potentially bring 16 billion cubic meters (bcm) natural gas per year from the Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field to European markets. The commercial deliveries have started at the end of 2020.

When it comes to analyzing the chances of Turkmenistan–EU relations, a particular role is played by the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP), a 300 km underwater conduit envisioned to stretch between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan with a capacity of 30 bcm of natural gas per year. Once delivered to Sangachal terminal in Baku, Turkmen gas could reach the European markets through the SGC mentioned above. As this pipeline bypasses the two energy superpowers Russia and Iran, its huge significance in terms of regional geopolitics is immediately evident. When investigating the obstacles to the construction of this pipeline, experts and academics have dwelled on the complexity of the Eurasian geopolitical map.

Nevertheless, developments in the energy sphere and in the Caspian geopolitical arena have proved to be extremely fluid and changing. In 2018, the Turkmen and the Azerbaijani governments signed the "Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea" along with Russia, Iran, and Kazakhstan as well as a "Memorandum of Understanding" (MoU) concerning the joint development of a disputed offshore field in early 2021. Thus, the present paper aims at shedding light on the status of EU-

Turkmenistan energy relations, with the hope of offering a reflection on why, although the latest events in the region have resulted in a more positive legal and political environment for a potential TCGP, the EU still has not managed to establish natural gas connectivity with Turkmenistan. To answer such question, this work analyses the recent academic literature and the experts' discourses about Turkmen economy and politics, EU energy policies and energy security.

The present paper consists of three sections. The first section deals with the evolution of Turkmenistan's domestic and foreign energy policy, highlighting how the country's approach to foreign investment has represented a major factor discouraging co-operation in oil and gas projects. The second section analyses the evolution of the EU's discourse on its gas supply challenges and the EU Commission's Energy Policy for the Caspian Region. The third and concluding section offers an overall reflection on the obstacles which hold back co-operation between the two parties and advances some predictions on the feasibility of the TCGP.

Turkmenistan's Energy Wealth: Blessing or Eternal Curse?

When thinking of energy-endowed countries, the first thing that usually comes to mind is that the opulence of hydrocarbons represents a blessing for their economic fortunes. Nevertheless, there are cases where this abundance of natural resources is unable to generate wealth and prosperity for the country, ending up with directing it towards a point of no return. Van Der Ploeg (2011, 366) claims that in economically volatile countries with weak institutions and a lack of rule of law, energy wealth can cause real exchange rate appreciation, deindustrialization, and poor economic prospects. The present

chapter will try to demonstrate how, throughout its history as an independent country, the Turkmen leadership has managed to transform a blessing into a curse.

Turkmenistan is the southernmost and second largest country of Central Asia, after Kazakhstan. Bordering the Caspian Sea to the west, Iran and Afghanistan to the south, Uzbekistan to the north-east, and Kazakhstan to the north-west, the country is otherwise landlocked. Moreover, having a population of 6,031,000 people, of which roughly a million lives in the capital Ashgabat,[i] Turkmenistan is also one of the most scarcely inhabited states in Central Asia, as the Kara Kum desert occupies three-quarters of its surface. When it achieved independence on 27 October 1991, the country was the least developed next to Tajikistan on all key socio-economic indicators among the 5 Central Asian republics that broke away from the Soviet Union (Islamov 1998). Khalova et al. (1999, 13) point out that the economy of the Turkmen Soviet Republic was characterised by 1) the lowest number of people employed in trade, services, and other sectors of the non-industrial production sphere in the whole Soviet Union; 2) had one of the highest infant mortality indicators in the Soviet Union and one of the lowest levels of life expectancy; 3) suffered from underdevelopment of the trade, services, and public catering spheres as well as low relative proportion of these sectors in gross social product and national income.

Problems were not only economic, but also socio-political, as the country lacked a unified national identity. As pointed out by Edgar (2001, 266), the Bolsheviks had to deal with a population for whom genealogically defined tribes were the main societal reference point. Despite the attempts put in place by Moscow to create a common identity within Turkmenistan, the clan hierarchy survived the 70 years of Soviet rule. The

Tekke tribe from Ahal which controls the territory around the capital, has secured a hegemonic role in leading the country through its transition to independence.

Having the fourth largest natural gas reserves (480.3 trillion cubic feet) according to the 2021 BP Statistical Review of World Energy, namely 7.2% of global reserves (BP 2021), Ashgabat has placed its hopes on pursuing economic development in the huge untapped energy resources that lie beneath its desert. Unlike Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, which in the initial stages of the 1990s opened their energy markets through production sharing agreements (PSA) with international companies, aiming at pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy to balance between Russia, China, and the West, the newly independent Turkmenistan embarked upon a permanent neutrality course in foreign policy under the leadership of Saparmurat Niyazov, known also as the "Father of Turkmens" (Turkmenbashy). First Secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party since 1985, Turkmenbashy managed to preserve power after the Soviet Union's breakup and to rule the country until his death in 2006. This permanent neutrality policy, which was officially declared at the Helsinki summit of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1992, was recognized by the U.N. General Assembly in 1995. In this way, Turkmenistan did not take part in both Russia-led regional organizations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and in any other external initiative, such as the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO).

Isolating the country on the international arena allowed President Niyazov to set up a political system that relied entirely on repression and hydrocarbon wealth and avoided excessive external influence in the country's energy reserves.

On the one hand, Turkmenbashy used the revenues coming from the country's vast oil and gas assets to fund an internal security force as well as an ever-present propaganda machine. Not by chance, still nowadays Freedom House attributes to Turkmenistan a score of 2 out of 100 in its global freedom ranking,[ii] which measures the access of citizens to civil liberties and political rights. The country also ranks 169th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perception Index, which measures countries' performance by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, as determined by expert assessments and opinion surveys (CPI 2021). On the other hand, through subsidies for basic necessities, the same energy revenues were utilized to establish a measure of material well-being for the population. Indeed, every citizen was entitled for free to 35 kilowatt hours of electricity and 50 cubic meters of natural gas each month, as well as 250 liters of water per day (DW 2017). The data reported by the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) index tell us that, by 2019, the country ranked 104 out of 146 with a score of -0.67 (OEC 2021). This means that, under the profile of exports' diversification, Turkmenistan's performance has been one of the worst in the world. According to a 2019 report of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 91% of Turkmenistan's exports has consisted in mineral products, primarily natural gas (OECD 2019).

As private sector development has been hindered by the overpowering role of the Turkmen state in the economy, the country has been considered one of the most difficult business environments in Central Asia. Berdikeeva (2007 124) argues that the Turkmen government has never been able to create an investment climate that could inspire foreign confidence and, despite some steps it has made to implement domestic reforms,

significant dangers and obstacles have hindered foreign companies' activities in Turkmenistan.

The energy sector is no exception in this. Indeed, until 2016 the Ministry of Oil and Gas of Turkmenistan had been in charge of providing a unified policy on exploration, development, production of gas, oil, as well as other mineral resources. In addition to this, the Ministry had to deal with the oil and gas processing and transportation. As pointed out by Iwaszczuk et al. (2021, 3), following deterioration of the country's economic situation, due mainly to lower proceeds from natural gas prices, these functions have been transferred in part to the Department of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan, under the supervision of the Deputy Prime Minister since 2016, and in part to the state-owned Turkmengaz and Turkmenneft.

Besides maintaining a strong control over the economy, the Turkmen government has also imposed limitations on foreign direct investments on its oil and gas sector. In the early years following independence, instead of signing PSAs, thus awarding exploration and production rights to foreign companies in exchange for a share in profits, Turkmenistan decided to attract foreign investors exclusively to develop its offshore gas resources and to avoid any agreement for the onshore activities. With an increasing external presence in the Turkmen energy sector, Niyazov feared losing control over the country. This policy changed only slightly after Turkmenbashy's death. In fact, as reported by Raimondi (2019 44), two PSAs were awarded to China's CNPC for the Bagtyyarlyk in 2007 and to Italy's ENI for the Nebit Dag area in 2014. In this perspective, former dentist Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's rise to the presidency resulted in the overcoming of the excesses of the country's isolationist

tendencies, without abandoning the neutrality policy pursued by his predecessor.

State over-control of the economy and reluctance to sign PSAs with foreign energy companies go hand in hand with Turkmenistan's unwillingness to embrace gas production and revenues transparency. A report of Pirani (2019, 4) for the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies claims that there is insufficient information about the domestic gas sector of Turkmenistan to judge its progress over time. Onge (2015, 102) writes that, although the Central Asian republic joined the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1992, the latter withdrew in 2000 when Ashgabat refused to share financial data. Similar happenings took place with the World Bank. During the Niyazov era, this institution gave Turkmenistan only three loans: one for public resource management, one for financial transparency, and one for public transportation (ibid.). Nevertheless, this co-operation came to an end in 1997, when the Turkmen government decided not to sanction any new project. After Berdimuhamedov took control, the World Bank's relations with Turkmenistan improved slightly, and the Bank now provides technical assistance to the Turkmen government on revenue management and national wealth funds. Still, the IMF and World Bank cases show the lack of transparency of the Turkmen state over its economic performances.

In addition to the isolationist political approach, it is also geography which limits Turkmenistan in exporting its wealth in natural gas. As the majority of its bordering countries (Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) is hydrocarbons-endowed too, the country has found itself in a situation of regional competition with its neighbors over accessing gas markets. Turkmenistan has not the same

favorable geographic locations for exports that enabled Azerbaijan to become an important seller of oil and natural gas westwards, or which in the future could permit Iran, located between Europe and South Asia with access to the Persian Gulf, to become a leading energy exporter. Self-imposed political isolationism, geographic constraints, and the lack of necessary technology due to the small number of foreign investments, have always made it difficult for Turkmenistan to develop its oil and gas wealth and to convert it into a lucrative tool for pursuing economic growth (Raimondi 2019, 44).

In the very beginning, the country's energy exports were totally reliant on the transit into the former Soviet and then Russian pipelines' system, known also as the Central Asia-Centre Gas Pipeline (CAC). This complex consists of five branches; four conduits reach Russia from Eastern Turkmenistan across Uzbekistan's and Kazakhstan's territories, and one runs from Western Turkmenistan to Russia across Kazakh territory. Although the Central Asia-Centre Gas Pipeline was built with a maximum capacity of 90 bcm per year, it has always been used below its capacity. As reported by Raimondi (2019, 47), because of gas-pricing disputes between Turkmengaz and Russia's Gazprom, the Kremlin has never imported more than 45 bcm a year from Turkmenistan.

In the very first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin was profiting from selling Turkmen gas to Europe at high gas prices while paying Ashgabat much less (Frappi and Garibov 2014, 121). Gazprom used gas coming from Turkmenistan specially to supply countries in the former Soviet space, first and foremost Ukraine. For this reason, when Kyiv defaulted on payments in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Ukrainian energy crises became a reason of anxiety also for Ashgabat (ibid, 145). President Niyazov started to put pressure

on Moscow, asking to pay twice the previously agreed $18-22/thousand cubic meters (Stronski 2017). He did not even hesitate to halt exports to Russia for a few months in 1997. Overall, Turkmen natural gas production fell from 81.4 bcm in 1989 to 15.7 bcm in 1997 (ibid). However, the increase of oil and gas prices in 2004 finally helped Turkmenistan to re-negotiate the pricing formula and, two years later, a new price of $44/thousand cubic meters was agreed between the two parties (Vasánczki 2011, 9). The two parties also signed a 25-year co-operation agreement on natural gas and a long-term contract on supplies for the indicated period.

The beginning of the global economic crisis in 2008 and the second Russia-Ukraine gas dispute in 2009 further worsened the relationship between the two countries. Following a decrease in demand in both European and Russian markets, Gazprom diminished its purchases to 10-12 bcm/year (Pirani 2019, 12). Moreover, it asked Turkmengaz for a revision of the purchase's pricing formula. In 2009, following a blast that damaged the Central Asia-Center Pipeline, the Kremlin halted natural gas imports from Turkmenistan. Although purchases were resumed one year later, they never returned to the previous levels. In 2015, Russia stopped to import Turkmen gas altogether. After the signing of the Legal Convention on the Caspian Sea, in 2019 Gazprom and Turkmengaz agreed to resume exports under a five-year supply contract for delivery of 5.5 bcm between 2019 and 2024 (ibid.).

In 1997, when the first energy disputes between Turkmengaz and Gazprom occurred, the building of the Korpeje-Kurt Kuy gas pipeline marked a first success in the diversification strategy of the Turkmen leadership. With a project valued $190 million, Tehran started to import annually 5 bcm of gas from Turkmenistan to meet the energy needs of its

north-eastern part which was not connected to the rest of its domestic trunkline (Frappi and Garibov 2014, 146). The two countries continued their co-operation and, in 2010, under the presidency of Berdimuhamedov, the Dauletabaf-Sarakhs-Khangiran pipeline was completed. Iran increased its natural gas imports from Turkmenistan to 20 bcm (ibid.). Nevertheless, Ashgabat received only small revenues from these sales, as the two parties agreed on a gas-for-goods barter arrangement. The reason was two-fold: one the one hand, Iran was facing a huge internal economic crisis due to the U.S. sanctions; on the other hand, the Turkmen leadership's choice of depriving its citizens and private businesses of the possibility to exchange the currency at the official rate, together with a steep rise in the black-market rate, significantly increased the cost of imported goods, primarily food. In fact, Turkmen domestic food production only meets around 40% of national demand; with about 80% of imports coming from Iran (ibid.).

The energy relations between Iran and Turkmenistan, which in the very beginning had paved the way to Ashgabat's diversification policy, started to deteriorate in 2012. After the Turkmen decision to reduce gas supplies by some 50% without prior notice (Pannier 2017), Iran declared this as the result of a breakdown in negotiations over purchase conditions. In the meantime, having huge gas reserves of its own for its domestic use and export, Tehran started to build up infrastructure to supply its northern territories which were earlier depending on Turkmen gas imports. The state of energy relations between the two countries reached its lowest in 2016 when Turkmenistan claimed that Iran had to repay a $1.8 billion debt of gas (ibid.). The Turkmen leadership motivated these accusations with the argument that between 2007 and 2008 Iran continued to purchase Turkmen gas notwithstanding the international

sanctions that were undermining its economy and ability to pay for it. Iranian authorities refused to comply with the Turkmen request and filed a complaint with the International Court of Arbitration. By the beginning of 2017, Iran stopped to import gas from Turkmenistan.

Since 2006, China, moved by its growing domestic gas consumption, gradually advanced its ambitions to get hold of Turkmen gas and to engage large-scale co-operation with Ashgabat. In the framework of an official visit paid to Beijing in that year, President Berdimuhamedov signed a framework deal for $1.5 billion on exporting up to 30 bcm of gas for the next 30 years (Vasánczki 2011, 39). Moreover, the two parties agreed on the construction of a pipeline connecting the rich Eastern Turkmenistan's fields to China. Besides establishing itself as a buyer, Beijing also gained a relevant role in exploration and production. The construction of the so-called Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline which starts at the Turkmen-Uzbek border city Gedaim and runs for 1830 km through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan before reaching China's Xinjiang region, started in 2008. In 2009, Line A was inaugurated in the presence of the Presidents of China, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan who turned on the gas flow together. Line B became operational one year later, providing a delivery capacity of 30 bcm per annum. Signing bilateral agreements with each country involved in the initiative, Beijing secured itself a tighter control of the infrastructure and its flows. In June 2012, Chinese President Hu Jintao and his Turkmen counterpart Berdimuhamedow agreed on both increasing the volume of gas exported to 65 bcm per year by 2020 and on building a Line C of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline (Socor 2012). Provided with a capacity of 25 bcm per annum, the latter was completed in 2015. In 2013, new agreements between China and

Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were signed to build Line D to export an additional 30 bcm of gas. However, this endeavor has been so far incomplete, due to several delays and economic obstacles.

By 2017 China received around 94% of the volume of Turkmen gas exports (Jakóbowski & Marszewski 2021, 2). It proved itself to be the only actor showing the political commitment and the financial power required to build long-term alternative options for Turkmen gas and the only one to be able to overcome Russia's monopsony position. Of the 4.685 bcm of pipeline gas imported by Beijing in 2020-2021, Turkmen gas accounted for 60% of the supplies.

However, China has been pursuing efficaciously a strategy aimed at diversifying its energy imports, especially through an increasing purchase of liquefied natural gas (LNG). The burden of monopsony came into the spotlight in March 2021, when PetroChina was on the cusp of resorting to force majeure provisions to suspend natural gas imports from Turkmenistan.[iii]

Moreover, Turkmenistan was bound by credit agreements with Chinese banks which, since 2009, have provided financing for the development of gas deposits and the construction of the Turkmen segment of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline.[iv] In order to repay loans issued by Beijing for the construction of pipelines and the development of its most important fields, Turkmenistan had to sell its gas at a lower price (Jakóbowski & Marszewski 2021). During a visit to the country in 2011, China Development Bank's then-president Jiang Chaoliang said that the bank had loaned the Central Asian republic $8.1 billion for the projects.[v] Although in June 2021, Deputy Prime Minister Shakhym Abdrakhmanov[vi] said at a government teleconference that Turkmenistan has fully repaid the Chinese credit, it is

evident that the economic situation of the country is overwhelmingly dependent on gas exports to Beijing.

Van Der Ploeg's words thus seem to acquire a concrete meaning. Over-reliance on proceeds from natural gas exports and difficulties in the diversification of sales markets have made the Turkmen economy extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in energy prices. Turkmenistan continues to follow an isolationist approach which does not allow foreign (non-Chinese) companies to have a relevant role in the development of its gas fields and declines to embrace revenue and energy production transparency. This has a discouraging effect on the EU and on European private companies. Even if both Niyazov and Berdimuhamedov decided to pursue a policy of export routes' diversification in order not to lose their authoritarian control over the country, the rules dictated by the Turkmen leadership have not allowed Ashgabat to be become a friendly and competitive business environment for foreign businesses and to emerge as a main energy actor among the hydrocarbons-endowed countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East.

EU's Energy Dilemma: To Cross or not to Cross the Caspian Sea?

Natural gas, once praised as one of the main pillars of the energy transition in Europe, is increasingly falling out of favor. On several occasions, the EU Commission announced its intention to phase out natural gas and to increase the use of low-carbon gases such as biomethane and hydrogen. According to some declarations of EU Commission First Vice President Frans Timmermans in December 2021, EU member states would be required to cease all long-term natural gas contracts by 2049,

namely one year before the EU is expected to achieve carbon neutrality (Euronews 2021).

Notwithstanding the efforts to shift to a greener economy, imports of natural gas still remain fundamental to securing the EU in the upcoming decades. Cîrdei (2021, 1) argues that, due to its extraordinarily high economic and industrial potential as well as high living standards, the EU has only very limited own resources to satisfy its huge appetite for energy. In 2020, the EU consumed 394 bcm of gas, of which 14 bcm was coming from domestic production (Market Observatory for Energy 2020). Natural gas accounted for15.1% of total EU imports of energy products in 2020 (ibid.). Russia remains the EU's top gas provider, accounting for more than two-thirds of its gas imports. In 2020 Moscow ranked first with supplying 43.4% of the EU-28's natural gas import, while Norway and Algeria were the second and the third largest suppliers with 20% and 12% respectively.[vii]

According to the Quarterly Report Energy on European Gas Markets published by the Market Observatory for Energy (2020), Russia exports gas to the EU through three main supply routes: Nord Stream 1 which remained the most important supply route with a share of 37% (15 bcm) in the Russian pipeline imports, Ukrainian transit with 34% (14 bcm), Belarusian transit with 25% (10 bcm) and Turk Stream with 4% (2 bcm).

The EU-Russia energy relationship should thus be considered an entrenched dependency with serious geopolitical ramifications. Tensions in gas ties have been developing mainly because of the EU's strategic goal to unite member states' gas markets and to impose competitive and transparent trading conditions (Luciani 2015, 19). This became evident during the 2006 and 2009 gas disputes between Russia

and Ukraine. Moscow and Kyiv failed to agree a price for Russian gas supply to Ukraine and a tariff for the transit of Russian gas to Europe before previous agreements expired. Russian exports to Ukraine were cut off and exports to the EU member states were drastically reduced. The most seriously affected countries were in the Balkans. They experienced a humanitarian emergency, with parts of the populations unable to heat their homes. Significant economic problems were also caused in Hungary and Slovakia. As a response, the EU adopted comprehensive legislation on the internal energy market for electricity and natural gas and the security of gas supplies, with the aim of avoiding supply route disruptions. The 2006 and 2009 energy crises showed how supply security has represented not only a cornerstone of the EU's energy strategy, but also how this has played an increasingly crucial role in the EU's external relations in times of increased geopolitical tensions. Russia's aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, once again brought Europe's dependence on Russian energy into sharp relief and launched a race to search for alternatives.

For Central Asian gas, ensuring an outlet to European markets has traditionally represented one of the key objectives of Euro-Atlantic energy diplomacy from the initiatives of the Clinton Administration in the 1990s to the promotion of the Southern Gas Corridor, which started commercial deliveries at the end of 2020. In 1991 and 1996 the EU launched two frameworks of co-operation with Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region and Central Asia: TACIS ("Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States") and INOGATE ("Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe"). These programs aimed at both supporting the countries of these regions in decreasing their dependency on hydrocarbons and mitigating

climate change risks, as well as promoting energy co-operation between the EU and post-Soviet countries. Also, in this period the idea of implementing the TCGP was proposed for the first time, receiving the endorsement of the Clinton Administration. The idea was to build a 300 km underwater conduit with a capacity of 30 bcm of natural gas per year between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. In 1999, Turkmenistan's government consented to a feasibility study on the TCGP with General Electric and Bechtel Group. In the same years, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan inked numerous agreements on energy projects at an OSCE meeting in Istanbul.

The 2004 and 2006 1st and 2nd Ministerial Conferences on Energy Co-operation, held in Baku and Astana, demonstrated the EU's political commitment to expanding interactions in the energy field and shaping a new energy road map in the Eurasian landmass. In 2006, the first oil and gas were pumped through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and the South Caucasus Pipeline. This has represented a major peak in the convergence of the US' and EU's interests in the region. In 2007, "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for New Partnership", in which energy co-operation appeared as a priority subject, was presented by the EU Commission. The increased degree of importance of bringing gas from the Caspian to the European markets emerged also in the 2008 "EU energy security and solidarity action plan". In these five points' documents, the EU Commission stated how the implementation of a southern gas corridor "developed for the supply of gas from Caspian and Middle Eastern sources" was "one of the EU's highest energy security priorities" (European Commission 2008). This document also proposed the creation of a Caspian Development Corporation (CDC) to assist European gas companies to purchase gas from this area. Not by chance, Türkiye, Romania,

Bulgaria, Hungary, and Austria signed an intergovernmental agreement for the implementation of the Nabucco Pipeline in 2009. Although this initiative proved to be unsuccessful in the end, this was a first tentative step to carry natural gas from the Caspian area to the European markets and to lessen the EU's dependence on Russian energy. It should not be surprising that in 2011 the EU Foreign Affairs Council conferred a negotiating mandate to the EU Commission for opening negotiations with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan on the TCGP.

In June 2013, the Shah Deniz consortium and its leading stakeholders concluded negotiations over the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). Moreover, the consortium approved a plan for developing the second stage of the Shah Deniz field, paving the way also for the construction of the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline (TANAP) across Türkiye. With the outbreak of new tensions in Ukraine in 2014, the EU Commission began to be concerned about its energy security once again. Russian supplies to Ukraine were frequently interrupted throughout that year until the EU succeeded in mediating between Moscow and Kyiv for solving the dispute on gas payments. In the same year, the EU Commission released the European Energy Security Strategy in which Turkmenistan was again explicitly mentioned. In 2015, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and the EU signed the Ashgabat Declaration (EU External Service 2015), expressing their commitment to improve energy co-operation.

In 2018, the TANAP was completed, and construction works on the TAP, the last segment of the Southern Gas Corridor, continued to advance. As the latter was finished in 2020 and thus Azerbaijan could start its first commercial deliveries by the end of that year, a new positive environment for the discussion on the introduction of Turkmen natural gas

into the Southern Gas Corridor started to gain ground. Nowadays, the more than 3,500-kilometre-long SGC consists of the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP), which runs from Azerbaijan to the Georgian–Turkish border, the TANAP, which crosses Türkiye from the Georgian–Turkish border to the Turkish–Greek border, and the TAP. In 2019, in the framework of the Caspian Economic Forum held in Turkmenistan, Peter Burian, the EU's Special Representative for Central Asia, said that the EU had resumed negotiations with Ashgabat on participation in the financing of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline (Eurasianet 2019). Once implemented, the TCGP could deliver Turkmen gas to the Sangachal terminal in Baku and from there it could reach the European markets through the Southern Gas Corridor mentioned above.

However, despite its commitments in words, the EU has not managed yet to cross the Caspian Sea and establish natural gas connectivity with Turkmenistan. If the first section offered some insights based on the Turkmen economic and political situation, the remainder of this second section will look at some of the latest practices of the EU Commission to understand why the TCGP project has remained dormant. Most of these practices regard the role which natural gas will play in the EU energy transition. If EU member states are supposed to cease all long-term natural gas contracts by 2049 and if the EU's goal is to decarbonize its economy through the Green Deal, a drastic reduction in the use of fossil fuels and, in particular, of natural gas, will be needed.

There are three significant events that confirm the EU Commission's intentions to move in this direction. The first is the adoption on 20 June 2020 of the Taxonomy Regulation (EU Commission 2022): a classification system that establishes a list of environmentally sustainable economic activities according to

six objectives. The latter (ibid.) are: 1) Climate change mitigation: 2) Climate change adaptation; 3) The sustainable use and protection of water and marine resources; 4) The transition to a circular economy; 5) Pollution prevention and control; 6) The protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems. Although on 2 February 2022, the EU Commission approved in principle a Complementary Climate Delegated Act including, under strict conditions, specific nuclear and gas energy activities in the list of economic activities covered by the EU taxonomy, it has been repeatedly stated that it will not back down on its decarbonization plans. As written by Brooks (2022), the leaked taxonomy act mirrors proposed gas market reforms that would replace much of the bloc's pipeline natural gas with gases such as biogas, bio-methane, and hydrogen that have at least 70% less greenhouse gas emissions than fossil natural gas across their full lifecycle.

The second event is the adoption in December 2020 of a revision of the 2013 rule on trans-European energy networks (TEN-T). The latter lay down criteria for cross-border energy infrastructure and outline the process for selecting projects of shared interest (PCI). PCIs are infrastructure projects that are deemed critical to achieving EU energy goals, such as improved interconnection between national markets, increased competitiveness, supply security, and the development of renewable energy sources (Wilson 2021). According to an article published by the Climate Action Network (2021), since entering into force in 2013, the TEN-T regulation had granted PCI status to 266 fossil gas projects and facilitated nearly €5 billion in taxpayer funded grants and subsidized loans to 41 fossil gas infrastructure projects. The 2020 revisions of these regulations updated the infrastructure categories eligible for

support with an emphasis on decarbonization, offshore electricity grids, and hydrogen infrastructure.

The third event is the European Investment Bank's (EIB) decision to abandon fossil-fuel-related programs. The EIB, which is the world's largest multilateral bank and the lending arm of the EU Commission, declared on in the end of 2020 that it will not provide funding for large-scale heat production based on unabated oil, natural gas, coal or peat, upstream oil and gas production or traditional gas infrastructure by 1 January 2021 (Taylor 2021). Although it is true that the TCGP got PCI status in 2017 and, on the same year, its Estonian-domiciled company W-Stream Caspian Pipeline Company Ltd received a grant of €1,871,725 for pre-Front-End Engineering Design (pre-FEED) on the pipeline from the Innovation and Networks Executive Agency (INEA), no progress has been made so far (INEA 2022). The FEED studies have not been published yet and the Estonian company's website seems to be inactive at the moment. Thus, even when an updated FEED study will be released, the EIB decision will have a considerable weight on the funding from both the EU and private European companies for the TCGP.

These recent practices are also due to the evolution in the EU's gas demand and imports diversification strategy. As said at the beginning of this section, the EU has still to deal with the fact that natural gas still occupies a privileged position in its energy mix. This is particularly relevant, as Russian invasion of Ukraine has put European policy makers on high alert because of possible major disruptions to the European energy market. Nevertheless, as well as it is true that Russia is the largest exporter of oil and natural gas to the EU, it is also true that much of Russian energy production goes to satisfying European demand, especially through the network of Soviet-era pipelines crisscrossing Ukraine and other Eastern European countries. As

claimed by Paillard (2010, 72), energy is the only economic sector in Russia that is reasonably efficient, together with arms. Thus, halting energy relations would be mutually destructive for the two parts in the short term. And even if this would happen, the European Commission would try to pursue more interim solutions such as the shorter, smaller and less expensive pipelines than the fully-fledged, shore-to-shore and large-volume TGCP. As declared by former US ambassador, Alan Mustard, and current EU ambassador to Turkmenistan, Diego Ruiz Alonso (EEAS 2021), implementing a Trans-Caspian connector, which in two years from the start of construction could begin deliveries of up to 12 billion cubic meters of gas to Azerbaijan, appears more realistic than the TGCP. The same Mustard is involved as co-manager in the Florida-based company Trans-Caspian resources (O'Byrne 2021). The latter was founded in April 2021 and has expressed its intention to build the connector (ibid.).

Moreover, the report of the International Energy Agency (IEA) for 2022 indicates that the EU's gas demand is not growing in such a significant way to justify the construction of the TCGP. Following a robust growth in the first half of 2021 (up 13% y-o-y), European gas demand decreased by over 5% in Q3 due to rising prices and held steady in the fourth quarter (IEA 2022). Gas demand in Europe should stabilize during the next decade, then decline sharply if the EU's goal for carbon neutrality is realized. This is far from being ideal for a pipeline that should carry more than 30 bcm per year like the TCGP.

The same IEA report (2022) argues that LNG inflows increased by 40% year over year in Q4, following a dip of 17% year over year in Q1-3 2021 (ibid). Stronger LNG deliveries were mostly driven by increased imports from the United States, which accounted for over 40% of net LNG supply

increases, followed by Egypt and Qatar (ibid.). In addition to new existing pipelines in the southern part of the continent such as the SGC and the TurkStream, the gas supply to EU markets could significantly exceed the actual demand. These aspects do not favor the implementation of the pipeline both in the medium and in the long term.

Another reason which could help to understand the EU Commission's decision to halt its support to the TCGP regards its strategy towards Central Asia. In its struggle to promote democracy in the region and, concomitantly, to pursue its energy interests, the EU knows very well the political environment of Turkmenistan. On the one hand, the gas coming from the TCGP could theoretically reduce the leverage of an authoritarian leader such as Vladimir Putin, who uses natural gas as a foreign policy weapon. On the other hand, it is also true that this would put the EU Commission to come to grips with the reputation of a country ranking among the worst countries in terms of respect of human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. In the framework of the 13th round of the EU-Turkmenistan Human Rights Dialogue held in July 2021, the EU called on Turkmenistan to bring its legislation and practices in line with international human rights standards in such areas as freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association (EEAS 2021). The EU also asked Turkmenistan to remove restrictions to access to the Internet and to set up a dialogue with independent civil society organizations (ibid.).

The EU has always marketed itself as a values-based organization dedicated to being a positive factor in global politics. It is unclear whether interest-driven engagement by the EU in the TCGP could foster its energy security and, simultaneously, permit an upgrade in the EU's normative agenda in Turkmenistan. Especially because Ashgabat could

use the generous inflows of money coming from the European continent to consolidate its authoritarian leadership, and not to promote political and economic reforms. In this view, Azerbaijan represents a perfect example of the failure of the EU's rhetoric of broad engagement and a multi-faceted Neighborhood Policy to exert pressure on human rights stances. Since the implementation of the 2006 Joint Action Plan, Azerbaijan has dropped from 135th to 167th place in the Reporters without Borders Press Freedom Index (2020). Freedom House (2021) depicts the country as an authoritarian regime where power remains heavily concentrated, corruption is rampant, and the formal political opposition has been weakened by years of persecution.

Nevertheless, the fact that EU policymakers decided to prioritize energy security and the implementation of the SGC ahead of human rights concerns does not mean that the Commission will follow the same line of Turkmenistan. Especially keeping in mind the major difficulties that establishing natural gas connectivity with the Central Asian Republic has.

At the end of this section, this paper argues that, behind the commitment expressed on many occasions by the EU Commission, there are practices that reduce if not nullify the likelihood of implementing the TGCP. The EU's plan to decarbonize its economy, as proved by the establishment of new TEN-T regulations, EU taxonomy, as well as by the EIB decision to stop financing new energy projects, seems to distance European policymakers from carrying out such a complex endeavor. Furthermore, the levels of current EU gas demand and consumption in the global energy market, the increasing LNG inflows, and the necessity for the EU of finding short-term solutions for the ongoing tensions with Russia must

be considered as decisive obstacles for the realization of the pipeline. Finally, also the EU Commission's strategy towards Central Asia plays a significant role in the issue. As the EU has tried to maintain a balance between European interest in energy resources and promotion of civil society and human rights in the region, European policymakers appear not inclined to grant agreements that are too favorable to the repressive and authoritarian Turkmen regime.

Conclusion

Intending to contribute to the debate on the failure of the construction of the TCGP, the present paper offered a different perspective to the more common explanations of the Eurasian geopolitical map. Doing this, it neither wanted to underestimate the complex geopolitical environment around the Caspian nor support the idea that geopolitics is not relevant to assess EU-Turkmenistan energy cooperation. It claims however that, given the recent geopolitical events in the area, other factors (the importance of the economic feasibility of the project, EU decarbonization policy, Turkmenistan's approach towards foreign investments) have gained more ground.

The first section has shown how Turkmenistan depends widely on hydrocarbon exports and, concomitantly, lacks financial and technological resources to implement investment projects without external help. Instead of easing the access of foreign capital to its valuable energy sector, the Turkmen leadership has enforced state control measures and exchange rate restrictions. This has to be taken into consideration together with the high rate of corruption and the frequent violations of human rights, in particular in the areas of freedom of press and association. For this reason, the present paper argues that Turkmenistan's approach to foreign investment

represents the major discouraging factor for cooperation in oil and gas projects with the EU. Despite some improvements achieved during Berdymukhamedov's administration, this work claims that the lack of international pressure from Western governments and industry made transparency improvements in Turkmenistan less urgent. Since large-scale investments are required to increase gas production to the level required for the TCGP, the lack of publicly available data on total gas production and energy revenues has represented an obstacle to any possible negotiation with the EU. This paper has also dealt with the evolution of the EU's discourse on its gas supply challenges and, analyzing the latest practices of the EU Commission, concludes that the EU could reassess the burden of importing Turkmen gas through the TCGP. Major factors for this are the EU's goal to decarbonize its economy by 2050, the increasing availability of LNG, and the EU's gas demand not following the expected growth trend that would justify the construction of expensive infrastructure projects. Furthermore, the EU does not look favorably at the political situation in Turkmenistan. Led by their interest in promoting human rights and civil society, European policymakers may not necessarily be willing to turn a blind eye without precise guarantees from Ashgabat.

Therefore, what the present paper adds to the existing debate on the topic is the view that the new spirit of regional collaboration in the Caspian has arrived too late. At the moment, the EU Commission's aims tend to misalign with Turkmenistan interests for routes diversification.

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The Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline: An "Asset" for Türkiye in her Relations with the EU?

Armağan Gözkaman

Abstract

The Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) is a project that highlights the importance of the Caspian basin for the European Union (EU). Its peculiar value also relates to the relations between Türkiye and the EU. The vulnerability of the EU in the energy sector increasingly provides Ankara with a strategic advantage, especially in an environment of "insecurity of supply" observed in the region. Within this context, Turkish authorities tend to conceive TANAP as a foreign policy tool vis-à-vis the EU.

Keywords: TANAP; Turkish foreign policy; European Union, Türkiye-European Union relations; natural gas; Russia; Ukraine.

Introduction

It is a truism to say that after the invasion of Ukraine the geopolitics of gas and oil will no longer be the same for the EU. There are at least two reasons for this. The first one concerns, simply put, the necessity to react. The so-called special operation that Russia has been carrying out since 24 February 2022 (as a supplement to the annexation of Crimea in 2014) is illegitimate and illegal. It started in a context in which the EU's dependence on natural gas was growing. EU fossil fuel imports from Russia are financing the Kremlin's war on Ukraine which

brings the necessity to cut them. The second reason is about preventing Putin from weaponizing natural gas and using it as an instrument of coercion against the EU member states. As will be reminded below, he has already initiated this process which will undeniably carry grave consequences for the EU member states.

In this context, alternatives for uninterrupted, adequate and affordable supply is what the EU wishes for, preferably in the short-term. This study focuses on one of them. A project connecting the natural gas supplies of the Caucasus region to the European mainland by crossing Türkiye falls in this category. In order to expose its importance for the EU, the first part of this study will focus on the EU's delay in developing diversification policies for gas resources. The second part will explore the technical and political difficulties of abandoning Russian gas altogether. Finally, the place of TANAP in Türkiye's relations with the EU will be discussed.

The EU's Slowness in Creating Alternative Natural Gas Routes

From a historical perspective, it would be logical to expect that the European project is built on some type of common energy policy. The European integration process began, on the basis of the ground-breaking declaration of Robert Schuman in 1950, by placing an emphasis on coal and steel. Schuman's invitation to European states was accepted by six European states that signed the Treaty on the European Coal and Steel Community in Paris in 1951. Six years later, the same states agreed in Rome on building up the European Atomic Energy Community. The treaties of Paris and Rome and the decades-long efforts of cooperation that materialized especially after the oil crisis of 1973 have made it possible for optimists to believe that energy

could become a matter of common policy. Yet, history has proved otherwise. EU member states have not been keen on making choices in the European framework to the detriment of their domestic energy policies.

Although the risks of dependence on Russian fossil fuels were already known in EU circles, elaboration of alternative plans has been slow. In fact, three Russo-Ukrainian gas disputes which took place between 2005 and 2009 clearly indicated that the EU had better stop considering Russia a viable partner. The fact that the European Commission came up with the *Southern Gas Corridor* (SGC) initiative in 2008 is therefore not a coincidence. It aimed to develop a corridor to receive gas from Caspian and Middle Eastern fields to make it a "significant part" of future provisions to the EU. The Commission categorized this objective as one of the "highest energy security priorities" for the Union and underlined its search for "firm commitments" from a number of countries including Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan without excluding the possibility of Uzbekistan and even Iran as potential future partners (European Commission 2008).

However, the SGC was not a complete success story. One of the gas pipelines that the corridor would have included was Nabucco. Conceived in 2002, it would have connect Türkiye to Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Austria (Reuters 2009). Its potential was evaluated for transportation of an approximate 30 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year. Yet, in light of the poor economic forecast and political considerations, the project failed (Skalamera 2018).

Obviously, the EU was candid to believe that the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines could secure a constant supply and prevent further aggression of Russia towards the Ukrainian territory. In the EU decision-making circles, the

dominant view was that mutual interdependence would keep Russia "on track" as a main supplier. Regrettably, it turned out to be a political miscalculation. As some scholars noted, energy presents a geostrategic dimension of Russian foreign policy (Maness and Valeriano 2015; Kandiyoti 2015). For a long time, European capitals have neglected this point. Today's crisis is thus the consequence of a mistake accompanied by complacency on the EU's side.

Since 1991, Moscow has elaborated various gas pipeline projects to bypass Ukrainian territory. Within a larger context and before waging war in Ukraine, Putin incrementally lowered Russia's dependency on the latter in providing the European continent with hydrocarbons. The Yamal-Europe pipeline (crossing Belarus and Poland to reach Germany), Nord Stream (that runs under the Baltic Sea) and Turkish Stream (constructed on the base of the Black Sea) have thus reduced the share of Russian gas deliveries crossing Ukrainian soil from 60% to 25% between 2009 and 2021.[i] In June 2022, the level of Russian gas transit via Ukraine fell to a record low, with 334 million cubic meters a day, in breach of the contract with the Gas Transmission System Operator of Ukraine (Le Soir 2022).

Most probably, the Kremlin believed that the Europeans would disregard the incremental drift between Russia and Ukraine as long as Gazprom's supply to the continent remained stable. According to this scenario, the EU would remain a loyal customer for at least two reasons. First, the illegal annexation of Crimea was a test. After the events of 2014, despite eloquent condemnations, there has not been a real awakening on the European side. It was not possible to observe serious initiatives that could lead to a rapid and substantial changes in the EU's dependency on Russian fossil fuel. As the International Energy Agency's (IEA) then executive director predicted, EU was "set

to be dependent" on the gas exported from Russia "for the foreseeable future" (Crisp 2014). Second, the Kremlin has assumed that, even if the EU member states had the will to break the dependency, they would not be able to find viable exporters to replace Gazprom.

In February 2015, the European Commission presented its Energy Union Strategy to ensure "secure, sustainable, competitive and affordable energy" (European Commission 2015). Against this background, in December 2018 a Regulation entered into force which assigned to member states the responsibility to report on their compliance with the Energy Union (European Parliament and Council 2021). At this point, it seems important to highlight that the *Energy Union and Climate Action* (EUCA) mechanism has also been set up. As the name suggests, integrating domestic projects that touch upon energy and climate projects was the *raison d'être* of the mechanism. The objectives that it laid down would be subject to evaluations in ten-year periods, beginning with the interval 2021-2030. This process was in line with a recent document of the IEA which forecast a reduction of 40% in the greenhouse gas emissions and 70% in the use of coal by 2030 (compared to the levels of 1990). As for renewable energy, expectations stand at 60% of total electricity production (IEA 2021b).

Yet, some re-evaluation seems necessary. According to the data provided by Eurostat, the EU's demand for natural gas has increased by 4.3% compared to the consumption measured in 2020. The dependency on foreign gas resources was of 83% for the same year. A limited source of optimism was provided, however, by the fact that 7.6% of the decrease in natural gas production was observed between 2020 and 2021 (Eurostat 2022).

The same necessity of revision may also apply to the EUCA for a more robust position in the field of energy. The EU could impose sanctions to Russia on oil, covering 90% of its imports from the country—with some transitional and temporary schemes to provide the possibility of alternative supplies to member states and prevent a negative impact on global markets (European Commission 2022c). Nevertheless, a similar decision concerning Gazprom remains elusive. In June 2022, media outlets were reporting that EU member states were far from reaching a consensus on sanctioning Russian natural gas. Austrian, Belgian, Hungarian, Portuguese and Belgian executives, *inter alia*, made it clear that it was not possible for them to support a gas ban on Russia (Meredith 2022; Tidey 2022). German policy makers adopted the same attitude because of economic considerations (TRT World 2022). Poland and the Baltic states were more prone to the idea of giving up on Russian hydrocarbons and stopping to finance Putin's war (Malingre 2022).

This divergence of positions seem to move the EU member states away from the objective set out in the REPowerEU project, which is based on the goal "to free the Union from its dependence on Russian gas by 2027" (Représentation en France de la Commission européenne 2022). In fact, even a staunch supporter of the REPowerEU such as Josep Borrell admits that preventing Vladimir Putin from using energy as a political weapon "[is] not an easy task". As he rightfully argues, this task is consistent with the EU's medium-term goal of becoming climate-neutral (EEAS 2022). Nonetheless, political divergences among the EU member states and economic difficulties that they (will) encounter make the 2027 objective announced by von der Leyen hardly attainable.

The EU's Woe: Being Sanctioned Before Sanctioning

Brussels is in search of alternatives but it seems difficult to compensate the Russian input. The EU would like to increase the importation of gas from Norway, if the production in that country had not already reached full capacity. Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre announced on various occasions that this scenario was not possible (Le Figaro 2022). Algeria, on the other hand, could increase its deliveries via the *Transmed* gas pipeline to Italy. The Maghreb-Europe pipeline -which connected Spain to Europe through Morocco for 25 years- cannot be considered an option either, because Algeria closed it in late October 2021 following a diplomatic crisis with Morocco (Euronews 2021).

It is also important to highlight the change in the natural gas environment in the EU that is underway during the last three decades. The EU's dependency on natural gas imports passed from 49% in 1993 to 90% in 2019. Gas power plants that were planned or under construction abounded in many member states -Germany, Belgium, Poland and Greece were among the prominent examples (Petkova 2022). In 2021, the EU had to import 155 billion bcm of natural gas from the Russian Federation, tantamount to 43.5% of its imports. Norway (23.6%), Algeria (12.6%) and the US (6.6%) were the other major providers (European Commission 2022b).

Liquefied natural gas (LNG), transported by special carriers between the continents, provides for the possibility to diversify the sources of supply by remedying to some extent the problem of distance. Statistics show that this strategy paid off to some extent. A Brussels-based think-tank reports that between 2021 and 2022 the share of Russia's part in the EU's gas provision fell from over 40% to almost 20%. To compensate

the 80% of the gap, the Union profited from LNG importation (McWilliams and Zachmann 2022).

Nevertheless, LNG presents disadvantages as well. The above-mentioned briefing rightfully asserts cost as the main problem. Technical difficulties that are not easy to overcome merit attention as well. To reach a destination, natural gas must be liquefied at -162 degrees. Then, specific reservoirs are necessary to store and regasify the imported volume. Because these procedures require costly infrastructure, pipelines have constituted the most preferred option.

The uneven distribution of LNG storage facilities within the EU is also problematic: Spain possesses almost 37% of the total capacity (tantamount to 60 bcm), with limited infrastructure to distribute the gas to the rest of the Union's territory. France's potential is almost half of Spain's (33 bcm), with Italy (15 bcm), Netherlands (12 bcm) and Belgium (11 bcm) consecutively. The fact that Germany relies entirely on pipelines, because of the inexistence of LNG storage infrastructure, is also noteworthy. Likewise, the South-Eastern Europe depends heavily on Gazprom's delivery (European Parliamentary Research Service 2022).

It is also important to underline that LNG supply is characterized by long-term contracts that aim to guarantee the stability of provision. Australia, Qatar and the United States -as the world's three biggest LNG exporters- have already reached the maximum level of production. Hence, it is difficult for the EU to receive large volumes of LNG in the short term.

Under these circumstances, one can see why the Europeans have favored Russian gas and have found themselves in the current situation of heavy dependence on Gazprom. Admittedly, the gas dependence levels are different in the EU. For instance, Latvia is 100% dependent on Russian

gas while Finland is nearing the same score with 97.6%. The advantage of Helsinki, however, is that gas represents 6% of its industrial consumption (YLE 2022). Hungarian, Romanian and Italian governments are also preoccupied because they too are very dependent on Russian gas. Hungary and Slovakia share the same approximate level of 85% while Austria aims to reduce the part of Russia in its total gas consumption from 80% to 70% (Janicek et al. 2022; La Tribune 2022; Reuters 2022a). The situation is also dire for Germany, although it managed to lower its dependence on Russian gas from 55% in 2021 to 40% in the first quarter of 2022 (Reuters 2022b). France is in a better position with 17% (Janicek 2022). This outlook explains why agreeing on a common boycott of Gazprom is not an easy task for EU member states.

Ironically, Russia hit the EU with gas sanctions before being a target of the EU. In the European continent, there is the well-founded expectation that gas shortages may appear as a problem in the winter of 2022-2023. By now, many political figures are preparing the Europeans for such a scenario. According to the European Commission's President, Ursula von der Leyen, the EU must be ready for more shortages and even "a complete cut-off" of gas brought in from Russia (RFERL 2022). German Vice-Chancellor and Economy Minister Robert Habeck's statement was in the same vein. According to him, by taking into consideration Moscow's attitude so far, it would not be very surprising that some "small, technical detail" be found by the Russian authorities to declare that they cannot resume the gas delivery anymore (RTÉ 2022).

In July 2022, disruptions were already, and in varying degrees, a reality in 12 of the EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and

Slovakia. In Bulgaria and Poland, for example, the cut is total. The fact that the Nord Stream gas pipeline was undergoing maintenance work strained Gazprom's delivery further. However, it is also clear that Putin does not (and will not) hesitate to use the "gas weapon" in his fight against the sanctions, as his statement below clearly indicates:

> (…) [S]anctions on Russia end up causing much more harm to those countries that impose them. The further use of sanctions could lead to even more severe consequences, even, without exaggeration, catastrophic consequences on the global energy market (Sheppard and Ivanova 2022).

The 'Energy Dimension' in Türkiye-EU Relations

A long time candidate for membership, Türkiye had complicated relations with the EU. She applied for accession to the European Community in 1987, for a number of reasons including the amelioration of relations with the Community via a sort of "shock therapy" (Erhan and Arat 2009). This request was rejected by the European Commission two and half years later. The EU granted Türkiye the status of a membership candidate 20 years after this rejection. At present, it is not possible to be optimistic about the finalization of the accession process. The analysis of the "Turkish case" goes beyond the scope of this study, but reminding of some problems that the membership issue poses for the EU seems appropriate. Discussions revolve around Türkiye's democratic and human rights record, the "balance sheet" of the prospect membership, economic indicators, geography and identity-related issues—including the adoption of European values- and the Cypriot question.

On the other hand, Türkiye's membership would be beneficial for the EU in a number of respects (Nugent 2017).

Besides, since 2021 Türkiye seems to have entered into a new rapprochement with the EU. According to a statement made by Ursula von der Leyen, its main pillars are the economy (including the modernization of the Customs Union between Ankara and Brussels), high-level dialogues (where climate change and public health stand out), social contacts (accompanied by the expansion of mobility opportunities) and irregular migration (European Commission 2021).

Türkiye's moves in the field of energy (especially natural gas) complements this new opening. At this point, it seems pertinent to focus on a thought-provoking report recommending the intensification of Germany's relations with Türkiye. According to the document that Konrad Adenauer Foundation researchers have prepared, Putin's "special operation" could increase Türkiye's potential to become an energy hub. They recommend a greater cooperation centering on energy and security issues simultaneously, by accentuating "concrete opportunities" provided by Türkiye for the goal of rapidly substituting Russian resources. The authors of the report also emphasize Türkiye's increasing strategic importance as a relay between the European continent key geographies such as Caspian and Eastern Mediterranean basins, the Middle East and Central Asia (TRT Français 2022).

A transit of hydrocarbons guaranteed by Türkiye would enable Europe to reduce its reliance on Russian hydrocarbons. As the former European Commissioner for Enlargement rightfully put, energy is one of the areas where deeper cooperation plays simultaneously in favor of the EU and Türkiye (European Commission 2007). As highlighted by the EU on various occasions, energy constitutes a "topic of key interest" in its relations with Türkiye. The significance of the latter can be maintained both in energy security and energy

diversification objectives of the EU. In the recent past, forecasts of increase in gas consumption have already put Ankara in a special position for Brussels. The country's geographical proximity to the South Caucasus and Central Asia, the two alternative natural gas reserves for the EU, certainly matters. To note, Türkiye is part of the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative.[ii]

The EU's plans to reduce its natural gas dependence on Russia puts Türkiye in a particular position. What is more, after the "special operation" that Moscow has been carrying out since 24 February 2022, Türkiye has gained a new importance as a transporter of energy, especially of natural gas. The crisis in Ukraine has constituted a period without open conflicts between Ankara and Brussels. One can legitimately maintain that it has also provided an environment where the two capitals may envisage more opportunities to grasp together.

In this context, it is tempting to take advantage of the energy factor in the accession negotiations with the EU. Türkiye wants the opening of the energy chapter while categorically refusing to join the Energy Union. Its reluctance on the latter cooperation scheme relates to the necessity of getting in line with the *acquis communautaire* -which would mean to provide the EU with all the security guarantees for the transit of gas- with no guarantees for the accession negotiations in return. Once put in place, such a link between the two sides would mean the end of energy as an asset for Turkish accession to the EU. In light of reactions[iii] brought to the Türkiye-EU Customs Union in force since 1996, one can legitimately assume that entering into a new binding structure with the EU -without taking part in the decision-making mechanisms- may be highly problematic for any Turkish government.

Brussels, for its part, has never been keen on opening this chapter. As expected, senior figures in Ankara have been vocal in condemning this attitude on various occasions, as the following statement from the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan illustrates:

> Turkey will be a powerful energy actor on a global scale with its robust and developing economy, geostrategic position as an energy bridge and objective of becoming an energy hub. In fact, within our vision of the EU, this energy-related strategic position occupies an important place. Those who make of Turkey's EU membership a matter of debate, use it for daily politics and create obstacles by imposing new conditions can unfortunately not exhibit the necessary vision and horizon. Those who are still reluctant to open this chapter are actually using it as a threat against Turkey. [That is] not appropriate. (…) With Turkey's membership, [both Turkey and the EU] will win. Yet [the EU] will be too late on this issue (Dünya 2010).

Despite the objections of Ankara, the EU's position vis-à-vis Turkish membership will not change as long as Ankara fails to fulfil the political criteria of accession. Turkish policymakers hope otherwise for at least two reasons. One of them is their country's geographical and political position vis-à-vis the energy question. The other one is an infrastructure that builds a gas connection between the Caucasus and Europe.

Natural Gas in Turkish Foreign Policy

Türkiye is highly dependent on importation to satisfy the domestic consumption of fossil fuels. For oil and gas, the 2021 report of the IEA presents the import rates as 93% and 99% respectively. Most of the imports originate from Russia (Enerji Piyasası Denetleme Kurumu 2021). The production volume of 2021 was 394 million cubic meters while the amount of importation was above 58.7 bcm. Russia has the largest share in it, with almost 45 percentage points. Then comes Iran

(16.07%), Azerbaijan (13.6%), Algeria (10.2%) and Nigeria (2.13%). The remainder (13.13%) is provided via "spot imports" from various countries. As shown on the table 1, although Türkiye's dependence on Russian natural gas decreased almost every year between 2013 and 2020, an increase of 11.28 percentage points occurred between 2020 and 2021 to reach a level of almost 45% of the total importation -not far from that of 2018.

Table 1: Natural Gas Importation Amounts for the Years 2011-2021 (Million Sm^3)

Country	Russia		Iran		Azerbaijan		Algeria		Nigeria		Other**		Total	Change Compared to the Previous Year
Years	Amount	Share (%)	Amount	Share (%)	Amount	Share (%)	Amount	Share (%)	Amount	Share (%)	Amount	Share (%)	Amount	
2011	25.406	57,91	8.190	18,67	3.806	8,67	4.156	9,47	1.248	2,84	1.069	2,44	43.874	15,35
2012	26.491	57,69	8.215	17,89	3.354	7,3	4.076	8,88	1.322	2,88	2.464	5,37	45.922	4,67
2013	26.212	57,9	8.730	19,28	4.245	9,38	3.917	8,65	1.274	2,81	892	1,97	45.269	-1,42
2014	26.975	54,76	8.932	18,13	6.074	12,33	4.179	8,48	1.414	2,87	1.689	3,43	49.262	8,82
2015	26.783	55,31	7.826	16,16	6.169	12,74	3.916	8,09	1.240	2,56	2.493	5,15	48.427	-1,7
2016	24.540	52,94	7.705	16,62	6.480	13,98	4.284	9,24	1.220	2,63	2.124	4,58	46.352	-4,28
2017	28.690	51,93	9.251	16,74	6.544	11,85	4.617	8,36	1.344	2,43	4.804	8,7	55.250	19,2
2018	23.642	47,02	7.863	15,64	7.527	14,97	4.521	8,99	1.668	3,32	5.061	10,21	50.282	-8,99
2019	15.196	33,61	7.736	17,11	9.585	21,2	5.678	12,56	1.756	3,88	5.260	11,63	45.211	-10,08
2020	16.166	33,59	5.321	11,06	11.548	24,00	5.573	11,58	1.358	2,82	8.159	16,95	48.126	6,45
2021	26.343	44,87	9.434	16,07	7.986	13,60	5.987	10,20	1.249	2,13	7.706	13,13	58.704	21,98

** Countries that provided Spot LNG imports until 2020 and countries where spot LNG/pipeline gas imports are made in 2020.

Source: Enerji Piyasası Denetleme Kurumu 2021

It is in this context that Türkiye's ongoing efforts to develop relations with states that have fossil reserves should be evaluated. As mentioned above, Russia is the biggest gas exporter to Türkiye. This, together with the overall foreign trade, creates a reciprocal dependence: While Turkish consumers badly need the natural gas extracted from Russian fields, Russia is economically dependent on Türkiye as well. In 2021, Türkiye was the second largest gas buyer from Gazprom after Germany (Statista 2022a) and had an important place in Russian foreign trade as the fourth largest importer with a volume above 26.4 billion dollars (Statista 2022b).

This is a crucial parameter for the relations between Moscow and Ankara. As the President of Türkiye has made the point, Türkiye cannot replace Russian supply when almost half of her imports come from there. That is why he describes the gas trade with Russia as a "matter of strategy" and "strategic relationship" (Dossou 2022; Hessoun 2022). What media outlets have reported in early January 2022 confirms that Russia will preserve its main supplier status in the years to come: Turkish state-owned pipeline corporation (BOTAŞ) and Gazprom signed a contract guaranteeing up to 5.75 bcm of gas for the period 2022-2025 (NTV 2022).

Here, the word strategy can be taken in a broader sense: Ankara and Moscow share a highly sensitive political agenda together, despite serious divergences on a variety of points. Syria and Lebanon are the prominent cases where Turkish and Russian security and geopolitical interests intersect. It will not be wrong to claim that the success of Ankara's policies regarding these regions relies significantly on the Kremlin's consent. From this standpoint, natural gas trade is more than an economic issue for Turkish policymakers. Paradoxical as it may seem, one can even assume that Ankara can capitalize on the above-mentioned energy dependency in its search for Russian support for matters of national interest.

Azerbaijan is another 'energy partner' of Türkiye which stands out for the purposes of this study. Relations between the two states are very strong, to the extent that the former President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, was able to mention "one nation, two states" when he was referring to them. There is a plethora of cooperation areas between Ankara and Baku, complemented by infrastructure and energy projects such as TANAP, the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline (that transports the Azerbaijani gas to Türkiye via Georgia, through the Baku-

Tbilisi-Erzurum line) and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline. The Shusha Declaration of June 2021 is an "Allied Declaration" that focuses on defense, regional stability, prosperity and transportation (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı). For both Ankara and Baku, the concern for stability in the region relates to the security of the fossil fuel infrastructures as well: The crisis of 2008[iv] had forced the closure of the South Caucasus and the Western Route Export pipelines.

Israel is another case that deserves special attention. For the time being, the energy dialogue is "postponed" to later high-level meetings (Hayatsever 2022). All the same, Ankara has a strong desire to articulate the normalization of relations with the exploration of possible gas-pipeline construction projects. Back in 2016, the two sides agreed to study the feasibility of a submarine pipeline to Türkiye and Europe, albeit with no progress so far. (Arab News 2022). There are two other possibilities for the delivery of Israeli gas to the European continent. Using the already existing Egyptian trajectory is one of them. According to this plan, higher amounts can be liquefied and shipped to Europe. There is a downside, however: The significant increase in the volume to be sent requires major investments (France 24 2022). The *Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline Project* (also known as EastMed) is another option. Yet again, the cost comes out as a problem. It is not "economically viable" either. Furthermore, it is not an alternative that will quickly serve the European interests (The Times of Israel 2022). Thus, Turkish policy makers keep their hope alive for a possible agreement with Israel, in an environment where the necessity to reconsider the future of energy supply weighs heavily on the EU.

TANAP: More than a Gas Pipeline for Türkiye

TANAP links Georgia to Greece by traversing 1850 kilometers of Turkish territory (Golder Associates 2017; Anadolu Ajansı 2015). It took approximately a decade to build the pipeline that connects the largest natural gas field of Azerbaijan, Shah Deniz, to Europe. The connection between the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP)[v] and TANAP was successfully completed in November 2018 with the "golden weld" (AzerNews 2018). As of 31 December 2020, the flow of gas to the European continent via TANAP started. On the first day of 2022, the pipeline's yearly volume of gas transportation capacity reached 16 bcm (Temizer 2022). Of this volume, 6 bcm are destined for Türkiye and the remaining 10 for the EU territory.

The Shah Deniz field of Azerbaijan stands indeed as an important gas provider. The EU's urgent need to move away from Russian gas fields makes the Shah Deniz field in Azerbaijan and the Southern Gas Corridor all the more interesting. The European Commission considers the country as "the substantial contributor" and "enabler" of Caspian-origin gas deliveries to the EU (2012b). Nonetheless, one must admit that for the time being the field's reserves remain inadequate compared to the volume needed by the EU. Yet, additional investments can raise its total delivery capacity to 31 bcm (BBC Türkçe 2019).

Current developments in the region point exactly in this direction. Increasing the capacity of TANAP is technically possible, and it is on the agenda in Azerbaijan and in Türkiye. Turkish Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Fatih Dönmez, is reported to declare that Azerbaijan's President and Energy Minister are working on exploration and further production activities which could bear fruit in a relatively short timeframe (Bloomberg HT 2022).

Increase in production may also be attained with Turkmenistan's support. In political terms, a memorandum of understanding co-signed by the presidents of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan in January 2021 has paved the way for the cooperation on Dostlug (Friendship) Offshore Field.

One may thus expect that, in the relatively near future, TANAP will connect not only Caspian but also Central Asian gas producers to the EU. Such a move would indeed be strongly in line with the EU's interests. As one of the SGC's components, TANAP must be considered within the framework of the EU's energy security and resource diversification strategies. It will provide an alternative route for energy to the EU in a period where it has to bring in more resources from abroad as soon as possible and "find new suppliers in a coordinated way" (EEAS 2022). As the former European Commissioner for Energy Günter Oettinger mentioned ten years ago, "it is necessary to provide the Southern Gas Corridor (…) with a new gas pipeline which will cross [Türkiye] and thus contribute to the security of energy supplies for the EU and [Türkiye]" (European Commission 2012a).

It is possible to catch the echo of this thought nowadays. For instance, Kadri Simson -who currently fills the position that Mr. Oettinger held- represents a similar view. In her opinion, the SGC positively affects the economies of the partner countries and makes a major contribution to "reliable, competitive and affordable supply" on the European continent. In addition to its strategic importance and to the security of supply that it provides, it has also a particular meaning under the current gas market conditions in the EU which are characterized by soaring prices and resource scarcity.

These points beg the question on whether the SGC's capacity may increase to make up the losses due to the Russian

factor. At this point, Simson expressed her optimism by pointing out the Azerbaijani efforts to meet this demand as rapidly as possible. Indeed, the EU is also keen on exploring the medium and long term possibilities of EU-Azerbaijan cooperation schemes on energy—including both the provision and transition arrangements (European Commission 2022a). One can thus draw some parallels between Simson and the Turkish Minister of Energy.

Conclusion

Türkiye's interest in being a party to TANAP is manifold: having access to gas resources to quench its increasing need to boost economic growth, becoming an energy hub for fossil fuel deliveries to the European continent (which, according to Ankara, will provide the opportunity to revitalize relations with the EU) and creating transit revenues. TANAP has the potential to supply the European market with a significant share of its annual gas imports.

It would not be wrong to assume that the EU goes through one of those periods when energy security is the most important item on its agenda. The EU tends to reduce its energy dependence vis-à-vis Russia by increasing the number of hydrocarbon suppliers and carrying out a green transition. Time is pressing, and the EU must grasp all the opportunities available.

On the EU side, quick replacement of the losses incurred due to the new Russian reality does not seem likely. In addition, green transition on the European continent will take time, in spite of all the declarations that highlight the necessity of its acceleration. Entering into an energy dialogue with Türkiye as a follow-up to the perspective drawn by Ursula von der Leyen in 2021 may be beneficial for the EU. At the same time, it can

lead to the improvement of Türkiye-EU relations. Stronger ties in the energy sector can create a win-win situation for both sides.

Energy diversification imperatives put the Union under stress. Fossil fuel provision seems to have the potential to have importance for the future of Türkiye-EU relations. On the European side, an inclination to keep contact with the Turkish government outside the formal accession process is perceptible. It is not difficult to envisage, however, that Ankara prefers to situate this contact within the membership perspective—as any contribution to this process is of crucial importance after years of political hardship that has marred the latter.

The EU has every right to seek solutions to the "Russian problem" and its member states seem to have understood the importance of acting together despite their divergences. Although how to ensure energy security is not a matter of consensus among the 27, an "energy diplomacy" will certainly prevail in the agenda of Brussels and lead to the re-evaluation of various geographies. The Union will definitely have some interest in anchoring Türkiye into the European system. Most certainly, Ankara will seize the opportunity that lies before her. In this new geopolitical environment, Türkiye will endeavor to maximize its interests and constantly put forward its demands of stronger political ties with Brussels. The road will definitely be arduous, because the difference of perspective is clear. Türkiye has a strong desire for the opening of the energy chapter, but the idea does not find its echo on the European side.

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i Nord Stream 2, where German involvement particularly stands out, would also count among such projects, if it had not been abandoned as a reaction to the 'special operation'.

ii Also known as the "Middle Corridor", the transportation line links Türkiye to China by crossing the Caucasus region, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia and reaches China. Reviving in a way the historical *Silk Road*, the rail and road network is also appealing to the countries of the region, particularly those that are landlocked (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

iii Since its inception, the Customs Union has been subject to criticism from various political and social groups because of the fact that Türkiye, as a non-member of the EU, does not take part in the decision-making process. In fact, the Customs Union between the EU and Türkiye is the only example of this sort.

iv During the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, BP had shut these two pipelines as a precautionary measure (Reuters, 2008).

v Connected to TANAP at the Greco-Turkish frontier, the TAP crosses northern Greece westwards to the border with Albania. From there, it reaches Southern Italy through the Adriatic Sea. See the official website of TAP.

Connectivity Narratives as Social Imaginaries: The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway and Its Bare Material Infrastructure

Andrea Weiss[i]

Abstract

This chapter analyzes connectivity between the South Caucasus and its neighborhood by examining the case of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK). It does so through an anthropological lens but with a non-anthropological readership in mind. The article asks what dominant understandings and presumptions underlie the far-flung expectations that accompany the newly-evolving connectivity paradigm and more specifically the BTK. It critically examines the ambitious and deeply symbolic imaginaries that the BTK as a large-scale infrastructure project (also dubbed the "iron silk road") has been characterized with, while pointing to the bare material infrastructure by which it is constituted. Trans-boundary infrastructure projects like the BTK alter spatial relations and therefore also reshape scale—that is the relations between places across space. Considering the case of the BTK, the chapter highlights the important role of two main scalar imaginaries—imaginaries of geopolitical significance and of prosperity. These scalar imaginaries contain developmentalist claims about connectivity which the BTK is unlikely to live up to.

Keywords: Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway; scalar imaginaries; discourse; relationality.

Introduction

Platforms like Youtube display futuristic video clips of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK), complete with grandiose, fast-moving images and underpinned by colorful maps and dramatic musical intonation. The clips promote the new linkages—inter alia among Europe and China—which the BTK promises to create (e.g. TCDD 2019; Özkök 2017). Watching some of these evokes a sensation similar to leafing through glossy magazines. The images are prone to easily captivate the spectators' attention and help them vividly visualize the 21st century iron silk-road as a steady iron track that firmly cuts its way through a virtually virgin landscape. This notion of visionary and pioneering spirit, of converting soil imagined as untouched might seem to apply in particular to the 105 kilometers of newly-built railroad, stretching between the Georgian border town of Akhalkalaki (in Turkish Ahılkelek) and the city of Kars in Eastern Anatolia (CESD 2012, 12), linking already existing tracks in the South West of Georgia and in Eastern Anatolia. One of the mentioned videos portrays the BTK as the last gap closed in a direct railway line between China and London (Özkök 2017). The video displays the colorful image of passenger trains, providing a rapid and comfortable connection between these places, as well as the ones in-between, in the very near future. Imaginaries such as these imply a promise of progress by indicating that the BTK will ensure global connectivity to "peripheral" outposts by providing a comfortable and smooth link to the wider world.

But can the bare material infrastructure of the BTK live up to the ambitious and deeply symbolic imaginaries associated with the "iron silk road"—as the BTK has been called many times (see for instance Lussac 2008, 37)? In order to shed light on this issue, this chapter asks what the dominant tacit

understandings and presumptions are that underlie these far-flung and symbolically-laden expectations towards the BTK. More broadly, it interrogates some of the circumstances of these expectations for the newly-evolving connectivity paradigm in the South Caucasus. The social role of narratives and imaginaries—specifically scalar imaginaries of geopolitical significance and of future prosperity—serve as the lens through which to examine these high expectations.

Narratives and social imaginaries are but part and parcel of social practices—including connectivity practices—by providing discursive repertoires (and spaces) for exercising these practices. Noel Salazar defines social imaginaries as "socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings and are used as world-making and world-shaping devices" (Salazar 2012, 864).[ii] Analogously to the scale of a map, scale as a concept in the social sciences refers to socially constructed levels of spatial representation, for example, local, national, regional, global (Van Schendel 2002, 658). In the context of large-scale transport infrastructure projects and the connectivity paradigm socially shared mental maps are redrawn. Powerful scalar imaginaries accompany this (re-)configuration of spatial relations, or, in other words, alter imagined as well as tangible relations between specific places.

Connectivity has become a buzz-word not only in the repertoire of policy-makers in the South Caucasus region and its neighborhood (see for instance Rzayev 2019, Tsereteli 2021) but globally. With few exceptions (Gambino 2019a, 2019b, 2021), researchers have tackled transport connectivity predominantly from policy and technocratic perspectives (for instance Tsereteli 2021). They have by and large uncritically

adopted tacit social imaginaries and (self-)representations that dominate the societies concerned.

The prominence of scalar imaginaries in connectivity discourses is explained by the domination of geopolitical reasoning in and about the Caucasus as a crucible (Broers 2015, Toal 2017, Smolnik and Weiss 2017) as well as strong historical legacies of developmentalist states. The South Caucasus countries can draw on enthusiasm and an ample discursive reservoir in terms of developmentalism through rich experience with infrastructure and other megaprojects in their Soviet past (Derluguian 2005; Humphrey 2005; Laszczkowski 2011; Schweitzer et al. 2017; Povoroznyuk 2021), as likewise Türkiye can do with Kemalist legacies of developmentalism (Esen 2014; Firat 2016). In the regional context of the South Caucasus, ambitious transboundary connectivity projects co-exist with—occasionally not only virtually—clashing national(ist) narratives and relative backwardness and remoteness in infrastructural terms. Hosting the stretch of a railway that connects China with Europe is therefore vastly symbolic.

In line with several predominantly anthropological scholars (cf Wolf 1982; Saxer and Andersson 2019; Gambino 2021), this chapter contends that any in-depth analysis of connectivity concepts as well as any evaluation of specific connectivity projects requires a perspective that takes historical transformations and local dynamics beyond the allegedly obvious and given. Such a perspective should consider the ways in which connectivity has become a new paradigm in the making that omits disconnectivities.

Even though connectivity is a new buzz word that seemingly refers to a qualitatively new phenomenon, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at its predecessors. In the 1970

and 1980s, before globalization discourses rose to prominence, several anthropologists (e.g. Wolf 1982), analyzed the history of the rise and success of capitalism in "global systems" (Friedman and Friedman-Ekholm 2013). In Wolf's language, the drivers of integrative processes into global systems usually are "projects of political integration" and "projects of economic integration". These so-called projects are open-ended processes, not necessarily advanced by one single driving force—which is especially the case for projects of economic integration, and best analyzed in long-durée perspective (Wolf 1982).[iii]

Palpable connectivity projects such as the BTK railway, pipelines such as BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) or TANAP (Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline), form part of larger and less visible projects of economic—and sometimes even political—integration. Such large-scale infrastructure endeavors span long periods of time and they include the inversion of large sums of money. The BTK's tracks were completed and freight trains have been running on them since 2017, but it remains still incomplete as an infrastructure mega-project. In the vignette of the introductory paragraph, I referred to the glossy imagery that the BTK is represented with and highlighted how expectations towards the impact of the BTK are high and far-flung. Multi-tiered large-scale infrastructure projects—or mega-projects as they are also called—never really fail at the same time as they never really succeed either (Müller-Mahn et al. 2021), but the imaginaries accompanying them are highly seductive.

This chapter illustrates how two sets of scalar imaginaries—imaginaries of geopolitical significance as well as imaginaries of prosperity—are crucial for the idea of connectivity, as it has gained prominence in national and

international policy-making communities of the South Caucasus and its neighborhood in the past couple of years.

Imaginaries of geo-strategic importance are essential for self-identification and self-representation of projects of political integration like (nation-)states. In other words, imaginaries such as the ones described before forge belonging. The (self-)representation of the (South) Caucasus as a crucible of historical and geopolitical global importance is a prime case in point. Such (self-)representations account for why a geopolitical lens on the region has remained so prominent in academia, international policy-circles and beyond (Broers 2015; Jones 2015, xxi; Toal 2017).

Multi-tiered large-scale infrastructure projects such as the BTK and the connectivity narrative also entail imaginaries of economic prosperity. Hope for and expectations of future economic prosperity are powerful drivers. The material structures of infrastructure projects lead their own social life (Pelkmans 2003). They embody a constant hope-generating mechanism in societies with firmly and deeply engrained beliefs about development as (linear) progress. These "promises of the future" (Anand et al. 2018) serve imaginaries of economic and social transformation and their underlying tacit assumptions about the nature of social transformations as improving livelihood.

This chapter shows how the prevalent circulating imaginaries tacitly proliferate in and help shape a technocratic modernist and developmentalist mindset. This mindset operates upon the taken-for-granted assumption that the BTK project has been successfully implemented. This assumption includes the lingering promise of beneficiality for the many and also forms part of the belief in seamlessness, smoothness and

ties characterized by equal opportunities that connectivity imaginaries purvey.

"Tracking" Connectivity: The Spell of Bare Tracks

The BTK is a recently built railway connection linking Baku in Azerbaijan to Kars in Eastern Türkiye, via Tbilisi and the town of Akhalkalaki, both in Georgia. The BTK consists of the refurbishing of the existing Baku-Tbilisi and Tbilisi-Akhalkalaki railway segments, as well as the construction of 105 kilometers long stretch between Akhalkalaki, in Georgia, and Aktap near Kars in Eastern Türkiye, 76 kilometers of which are located on the Turkish side between Canbaz[iv] and Aktap (CESD 2012, 12). The latter segment, finished and opened in October 2017, closed a missing link between the Turkish and the South Caucasian railway networks. In the course of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict the Turkish-Armenian border was officially closed in 1993. This also meant that the Tbilisi-Gyumri-Kars, the historical Tiflis-Alexandropol-Kars railway opened in 1899, ceased to operate. The opening of the BTK marked the first time since the Karabakh war that a railway links Türkiye to the Caucasus. While this is first and foremost a local project funded by Azerbaijan and Türkiye, its construction aims to form part of a larger "story" of East-West transport corridors. These corridors—like the BTK itself—are part of projects of economic integration. The so-called 'Middle Corridor', of which the BTK is the integral element, is the only railroad link between Europe and Asia that does not run either on the territory of Russia or Iran. Accordingly, Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Georgia emphasize that the BTK provides an alternative to existing transport corridors, meaning the so-called "Northern Corridor" of China-Europe transport links through Russia.

Scalar imaginaries as part of the promise of infrastructure also entail scalar claims which in relation to the BTK have been far-reaching. After more than a decade of construction—and with several years of delay, the BTK was finally opened in 2017 and freight services started immediately. Azerbaijan invested the largest chunk of its construction: it gave Georgia two loans worth more than 700 million USD in total in order to refurbish the existing line to Akhalkalaki and to build a connection to the Turkish border (CESD 2012, 14). For the first time since the official closure of the railway linking Gyumri in Armenia and Kars in Türkiye in April 1993, Türkiye and the Caucasus became once again linked by rail. Bypassing Armenia—and its historical railway link—via the territory of Georgia, for Türkiye and Azerbaijan this railway has been intended as the prime transport corridor between the two self-styled Turkish brother states, a function that it has started to take up. According to expectations that the Turkish government expressed in 2017, some 1 million passengers and 6.5 million tons of cargo will be transported with the activation of the line. The emergence of such potential for international transport would reach a volume of 50 million tons per year in the future (Daily Sabah 2017).

Despite completion of a system nucleus, final systemic completion to the extent envisaged in original project plans might never entirely occur because projects are embedded into larger sets of conditionalities contingent upon other elements. The completion of the BTK was flamboyantly celebrated on 30 October 2017 in Alyat, Azerbaijan, by Azerbaijan's President, with participation of the Turkish President as well as the Prime Ministers of Georgia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Daily Sabah 2017). Still before Covid-19, regular freight traffic started on the completed track and reached a level of at least one train per week each direction by the beginning of 2019. Since November

2019, when the first train actually travelled all the way from China to the EU along the BTK, traffic increased to two trains each direction on average per week. The operation of traffic entails a change of gauge from broad gauge (standard gauge in post-Soviet countries) with 1524mm track gauge to European standard gauge with 1435mm. This requires the change of bogies—that is the lower part of the railway car—at Akhalkalaki, where the break of gauge is located. In the future, Türkiye plans to install a dual gauge on the single track railway even up to the Palandöken Logistics Centre near Erzurum which means that there will be three rails in one track bed.

Passenger traffic was due to start in fall 2019 according to official announcements (Azernews 2019). Azerbaijan had ordered a state of the art train with sleeperette, sleepers and dining coaches from Stadler in Switzerland. Further, a gauge changing facility had been installed in Akhalkalaki. The train already circulated for trial purposes between Baku and Kars in summer 2019. No official information was publicly available as to why operations were not resumed. Original concerns about the safe operation of the train's braking system on the Turkish stretch seemed to have been resolved. Some rumors pointed to protest by Armenians in Javakheti, the majority-Armenian populated region in Georgia where the BTK passes through (see Gambino 2019a). But the lack of soft infrastructure of the railway line has been the most obvious reason. Later with the Covid-19 pandemic domestic long-distance passenger rail traffic in Türkiye was also cancelled. When it resumed in 2021, no final plans to resume operation of transboundary passenger traffic along the BTK was made public.

The operation of the railway line is not based on signalling technology, but on telecommunication between dispatchers located at train stations along the route. The continuation of the

BTK inside Türkiye operates on this principle between Kars and Sivas. While there are at least three potential future passing points or stations between Akhalkalaki and Kars, they only consist in bare parallel tracks, without any station building or other adequate soft infrastructure. Until these passing points have a station building that is staffed with a dispatcher operating some telephone or radio technology system, practically only one train a day per direction can run between Akhalkalaki and Kars, for the lack of operable passing points in between. One of these passing points at Canbaz was equipped with a couple of containers in summer 2020, and a crane with low capacities started to operate there in order to shift some freight from already gauge-changed Azerbaijani or Georgian freight cars onto Turkish ones. However, by summer 2020 Canbaz still lacked anything resembling a custom building that it was supposed to have for passenger traffic.

The image of just-in-time logistics and its smoothness (Gambino 2019b) differs strikingly from the state of the BTK. Between Akhalkalaki and Kars the BTK consists mostly of hard infrastructure in the form of a bare track, while other elements such as station buildings, e.g. at the Canbaz border crossing point, remain missing. These bare tracks metaphorically represent an empty vessel into which collective hopes for the future can easily be projected.

Overlapping Projects of Economic Integration and the BTK

While the BTK was built and financed as a trilateral transport infrastructure project involving Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Georgia, several other projects of economic integration that overlap each other underlie the BTK. In order to assess the scalar claims underlying the BTK, we can think of different

layers of connectivity as a series of overlapping (immaterial) projects of economic integration, with an emphasis on their open-endedness and unfinishedness. As I have already outlined, integration here must be read as—not always—direct intentional, political and diplomatic efforts, but as the preliminary result of an interplay between hegemonic claims, their scales and political and economic processes—of a dialectic nature—and in flux. Here, we can discern a number of overlapping and cross-cutting projects of economic (and political) integration with varying degrees of ambition and realization—as well as scale. Among them are China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, formerly also known as One Belt One Road, or OBOR), the EU's Europe-Asia connectivity (now "Global Gateway"), the trilateral axis Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Türkiye's brotherhood, Türkiye's "Neo-Ottoman" policy towards Central Asia as well as on-going projects of domestic economic integration—especially of Türkiye.

The BTK is the product of a new historical period, one in which China increasingly successfully attempts to assert global hegemony. Large-scale infrastructure projects financed and often even carried out by Chinese labor are a major vector of its BRI (see for instance Smolnik et al. 2019 for the Caucasus). While the BTK was primarily financed by Azerbaijani as well as some Turkish capital, these countries have happily joined the new silk road branding advanced by China and accepted to market the BTK as the so-called "Middle Corridor" (Bittner and Ibrahimli 2018, 3-4). While the war in Ukraine has re-shaped geopolitical realities, the current state of material infrastructure cannot be changed overnight.

Looking at the BTK's connectivity dimension, it is not only a major Azerbaijani-Turkish endeavor, but also one whose

emphasis lies on its role for EU-China relations. The BTK has been styled and messianically celebrated as part of an alternative railway transport corridor between China and the EU. While this might make geostrategic sense, up until the war in Ukraine and the EU's response through sanctions for Russia, the BTK was in no way a rival to the "Northern Corridor" through Russia (and Kazakhstan). As circumstances have now dramatically changed, the Middle Corridor might become competitive in China-Europe rail cargo transport, but it is unable to expand its capacities at the desired pace.

The EU realized the need to address transport networks and infrastructure in and to the Caucasus (and Central Asia) after the collapse of the Soviet Union and implemented its TRACECA initiative already in 1993. But as the BTK was planned to bypasses Armenia, the project did not receive funding through TRACECA nor any other European funding (Lussac 2008). In September 2018 the EU presented its "Connecting Europe and Asia Strategy". In the current world (re-ordering), deeply shaped by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and an even more evident by the rise of China as a global power, more voices inside the EU have started to push for a more proactive policy of infrastructure investment. Scalar claims are implicitly and explicitly expressed in both the EU and China's policies, and they appear to be larger (and more pervasive) than their current and possibly also future scope. Their underlying imaginaries once again illustrate the promise of infrastructure, meaning the hope for prosperity that these imaginaries are imbued with.

The most important project of economic integration is obviously the one central to this chapter: the BTK as material infrastructure on the trilateral axis between Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Yet, in this relationship Georgia as a

country has been a far less enthusiastic partner than the other two, both trilaterally as well as in the BTK in particular. Georgia's junior role has significantly been driven by necessity, based on Georgia's geographical position (Ter-Matevosyan 2014); in major decisions Georgia played the role of starlet rather than of star (Cecire 2016). The Georgian political establishment feared that the BTK might be detrimental—or at least less beneficial—to its position as a transit country and to take away potential revenues from transit of goods through its ports, particularly the one in Poti (Di Puppo 2007). The BTK was also greeted with mixed feelings by the predominantly Armenian-populated area of Javakheti, the main town of which is Akhalkalaki. Local populations retain some skepticism due to historical memory, as the majority of today's Javakhetian population are descendants of refugees from the Ottoman Empire. The faint prospect that freight transit—and especially the reloading of cargo that the change of gauge entails so far—could potentially replace the revenues from the former Russian base in Akhalkalaki has been unable to impress the locals (Gambino 2019a). Yet, another element of the trilateral axis is the deliberate exclusion of Armenia from this project of economic integration (Lussac 2008).

Azerbaijani-Turkish relations are the most solid among the projects of economic integration underlying the BTK, maybe because they are to some extent also a project of political integration. Behind the rhetoric of brotherhood and the two-languages-one-nation-catchphrase and similar metaphors stand a series of cooperation in various spheres from all over the economy to the military, to migration flows (Demirdirek and Gafarlı 2016) as well as massive investments. While historically Türkiye has in all respects been the older brother (Meyer 2014), the situation has been slightly shifting. The focus

of said investments over the past years has shifted from Turkish investments in Azerbaijan to Azerbaijani investments in Türkiye, particularly in Turkish infrastructure—e.g. ports— as well as in oil and petroleum products. Mirroring to some extent the permeability and mobility that existed for Turkic speakers—particularly from what is today Azerbaijan—to the Ottoman Empire, the historical roots of this project of economic and political integration are deeply grounded (Meyer 2014).

By comparison, two other projects of economic integration have not yet received the attention they potentially merit. The BTK is part of a railway link that connects Türkiye to Central Asia on the one hand and to China on the other. Regarding Central Asia, Türkiye aspires to have a stake as a regional hegemonic power. The underlying—and more remote—project of political integration is vested with pan-Turkic and Turanic overtones. Over time, the BTK will most likely gain more regional importance for the transport of goods between Türkiye and Central Asia. By comparison, the project of economic integration between Türkiye and China advanced by the BTK has yet to be evaluated, but freight traffic has resumed in December 2020 transporting Türkiye-produced fridges to China (Mammadli 2020). The traffic volume is in no way comparable to sea transport volumes, but it is the novelty of direct rail traffic, where despite the existence of other routes (via Eastern Europe and Russia), due to major infrastructural weaknesses in the connecting branches no feasible rail alternative existed previously.

The last but definitely not least important project of economic integration is a domestic one. In Türkiye, center-periphery relations and their imaginaries have played an important role in public discourses (Mardin 1973; Bakiner 2018). The country also offers an interesting case of railway

politics. Roughly in the 1940s Türkiye changed from a country with pronounced railway ambitions for domestic economic integration as part of its developmentalist stance and policies, into one that heavily and almost exclusively prioritized road transport and neglected railway transport to such an extent that investments into the network ceded almost completely and the share of railway transport for domestic freight traffic became insignificant. It was only in the past decade that Türkiye has again reverted to ambitious railway projects, both for freight and passenger transport.

The former Kemalist developmentalist stance, with its deeply-held belief in technology, large project-scale and material structures (Esen 2014), has made its come-back even before the current economic crisis, albeit in a slightly reconfigured manner. In the past couple of years the country's leadership became almost obsessed with (infrastructure) construction. However, it was not the Kemalist developmentalist state that figured as its driver, but a neoliberal as well as nepotistic state that permitted large-scale accumulation by private companies, most ostensibly through construction works. The object also changed: while earlier infrastructure projects had focused on roads and buildings (Firat 2016), it is now also railways and particularly passenger transport which are receiving attention. The BTK is part of these changes, reconfiguring domestic center-periphery relations and thus the on-going project of political and economic integration. Locally in Kars, the BTK is absent from the mental maps of large parts of the population, contrary to the Doğu Express, which is the passenger train that links Kars to Ankara (and formerly to Istanbul) and which has become a tourist attraction in the years up to the Covid-19 pandemic. Shortly before the pandemic a touristic version of the Doğu

Express has also started circulation. Kars has made use of this potential to market its multicultural heritage as an exotic tourist destination on a national scale.

Scalar Imaginaries of Geostrategic and Geopolitical Significance: The Return of (Classical) Geopolitical Ideas Through Connectivity

At the BTK's opening ceremony in 2017 Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev declared:

> "[t]he Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is the shortest and most reliable route connecting Europe with Asia. […] The cooperation among all the countries using this road will deepen further. This road will serve stability and security. I am convinced that this road will also trigger the development of tourism and the number of tourists will increase. Of course, the successful operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway will enhance the geopolitical significance of our countries and create additional opportunities for us."[v]

The main imaginaries employed are the same as the ones of the China-London train video. The central scalar claim that both imaginaries purvey is the role and importance of the BTK, not only for projects of economic integration on a smaller scale, but for China-Europe connectivity.

The previous section has outlined that the BTK as a connectivity project simultaneously encompasses various partly overlapping projects of economic and political integration. Specific projects of integration come with and build on distinct scalar imaginaries. Regardless of whether the imaginaries focus more strongly on geostrategic or economic dimensions, they encompass the idea of how space is (re)configured through altered relations. Embodying these relations, connectivity imaginaries also convey claims about

belonging (to some places or certain relationships and configurations). Critical geopolitics has long ago demonstrated that just as geopolitical imaginaries are often dominant narratives about an entity's place in the world, they also constitute moments within the expression and construction of 'national', imperial or, more generally, hegemonic identities (e.g. Sidaway and Power 2005; Sidaway and Woon 2017; Toal 2017). By emphasizing one's own centrality for larger connectivity paradigms, the entities concerned—in this case Georgia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye—manage to create narratives that write these countries into (global) relations and carve out or "make" their own "place" for themselves. Scalar imaginaries entail claims to centrality and belonging as a message communicated not only to an audience beyond state boundaries, but even more importantly to a domestic one. Not only do they entail spatial claims, but also a pronounced temporal component—promises of and for the future. Yet, spatial and temporal claims are also two different aspects of instilling hope and the promise of a prosperous future.

The emphasis on specific scalar imaginaries differs between Türkiye, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Although Azerbaijan's president in its inaugural speech alluded to both, domestic discourses diverge slightly from foreign policy discourses

Several scholars have pointed to the fact that scholarship on the Caucasus is heavily burdened by the pre-eminence of geopolitical reasoning (Jones 2015; Broers 2015; Toal 2017). Said geopolitical logic has prevailed not only in Caucasus popular discourses, but is in consequence also coupled with academic discourses on the Caucasus. To a large extent developments around the connectivity paradigm also mirror this bias; they neatly fit into the dominant tradition of

geopolitical perspectives on the Caucasus. Discourses of connectivity have been effectively and nicely integrated with narratives such as the Caucasus as geopolitical crossroads, which functions as a bridge between Europe and Asia—irrespective of where exactly the boundary between the two might be drawn (Firat 2016). Imaginaries of geopolitical significance also allude to economic prosperity. Indirectly, significance and centrality among its neighbors—be it in the discursive space of the South Caucasus countries or specifically in a country like Georgia—is the ascription of a specific place and role; a belonging which becomes equated with prosperity.

Particularly in the South Caucasus countries, the logistical turn (Gambino 2021) draws heavily on the imaginaries of the Caucasus' geopolitical significance. In these imaginaries the geopolitical and geostrategic cross-roads and bridge function is slightly converted and marketed as the one of logistical hub, with an emphasis on the circulation of goods. In them the South Caucasus countries present themselves as natural global hubs (in already existing as well as potential networks of circulation). By default, the historical experience anticipates a future dense circulation of goods, and therefore equates the geopolitical significance with a prosperous future just around the corner. Ironically, this geopolitical focus might be a result of the fact that many politicians as well as scholars see in Georgia's geographical position its most important resource (Broers 2018); or else, the fact that the South Caucasus countries are smaller and unlike Türkiye cannot claim to be a regional power. Through geopolitical imaginaries, they can reassert their significance and (global belonging) with an emphasis on their role in the neighborhood and beyond.

Türkiye's discourse emphasizes connectivity as future prosperity embodied in development narratives instead of

imaginaries of geopolitical centrality. The AKP-led governments of the past two decades have brought about a construction boom, mainly of roads and the building sector more generally, but recently also in metro and railway construction. This boom reflects a long tradition of developmentalist policies and the corresponding narrations about the future (Esen 2014; Firat 2016). By contrast, imaginaries of Europe-Asia-connectivity and the BTK's global dimension seem far less pronounced. Yet, Turkish imaginaries do not entirely lack the spatial element: major spatial imaginaries lie with partial—particularly economic—domination of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Türkiye is in search of geo-economic significance in this neighborhood, and the BTK offers a potential scalar alteration in the form of new ties forged (cf Mammadli 2020). Illustrative of this strive for geo-economic significance is the media representation of the first train that exported Turkish refrigerators to China.

Scalar Claims Based on the Social Life of Bare Infrastructure: Imaginaries of Prosperity, Development Taxonomies and the Future

The surge in rail infrastructure in Türkiye, which is part of a paradigm shift from an exclusive focus on roads back to a mixed model, also includes the construction of 21 logistics centers across Türkiye's territory (Uysal 2017). One of them is the Kars Logistics Centre (KLC), located to the North West of the city center and the train station. In late August and early September 2020 the KLC was a huge construction site in full swing, with dozens of workers hustling around occupied with fixing a number of basic construction works. Merely one building was standing like a lost, characterless, inconspicuous and abandoned house on a vast territory with more than a dozen

parallel tracks. Work was carried out on the many parallel rails that had been laid. No sign indicated that the construction site was anywhere near completion, not to speak of any other logistical infrastructure that would convert this construction site into a logistics center. Railway workers said that they were told to be soon moved to the KLC where in the future all freight trains would be handled and also undergo customs inspection. Until then, these tasks had been performed at the few tracks of the Kars station. The word "soon" had already been used for several months to temporally designate the event of moving. At a railway event in Istanbul in late October 2020, which I attended, the Minister of Infrastructure uttered the magic words that the KLC was "ready" ("hazır"). In early December TCDD officially inaugurated the logistics center in a public ceremony (TCUAB 2020). It took several months more until finally in April 2021 freight operation really moved to the new KLC. An earlier moving-in of freight operations units had not been possible because infrastructure essential for operation, such as for instance telephone lines, had not been completed earlier.

The saga of an infrastructure element that allegedly is just about to be "completed", but the opening of which takes several months more, is illustrative of how "bare infrastructure" serves literally as the empty embodiment of imaginaries of a prosperous future: infrastructures as instances of material structure that possess the power to nurture these imaginaries. They do so particularly in environments with a long and intense history of developmentalist imaginaries, for instance due to a socialist legacy (Humphrey 2005; Laszczkowski 2011). In a chapter of his borderland-ethnography about Adjara, the Georgian Autonomous Republic at the Turkish border, Pelkmans (2003) relates how a newly completed building that

for many years has not been put to its designated use becomes the material embodiment of a pending bright future in peoples' imaginaries, which he calls the "social life of empty buildings". Similarly, the tale of the KLC, which symbolically stands for Türkiye's connectivity policies, is such an instance of the social life of bare infrastructure.

As the videos that I have described in the beginning of the text highlight, connectivity imaginaries and the scalar claims that come with them do not only narrate a story about spatial belonging, but also about temporal belonging in terms of a transformative economic effect. More specifically, these scalar claims speak about the collective future of particular places (or entities) and subsequently, promise a re-positioning vis-a-vis one's own past trajectory based on altered spatial relations through spatial (self-)repositioning in regional or global perspective. In short, connectivity imaginaries can also be seen as spatial imaginaries through the formation of which (positively) altered spatial relations in turn change economic relations and produce a (positive) transformative effect in a particular place. Above mentioned projects of economic (and political) integration that are part of BTK imaginaries, such as the so-called trilateral axis involving Azerbaijan, Türkiye and Georgia or the Turkish-Azerbaijani brother state ties, come with distinct visions for and of a bright and prosperous future.

While the case of the KLC as one minor BTK project component remains selective, it is illustrative of further important conditionalities that would need to be fulfilled for the BTK to live up to the scalar claims attached to it. The perspective which this chapter has highlighted does not deny the potential role the BTK might play in global logistics in the future. But it emphasizes the need to analytically deconstruct far-flung expectations and the almost magical potential

ascribed to the BTK's bare tracks to bring about large-scale economic development of quasi-exponential extent, the effects of which are insinuated to magically trickle-down to a large share of the population. Thereby the collective imaginaries of success and a brighter future become imbued with hope for chances of individual improvement.

Scalar claims and development taxonomies are intimately related. Assumptions about the nature of economic development and development processes more broadly are deeply engrained in scalar imaginaries and their associated claims. Scalar claims regarding development and the BTK contain two major delusions: first, the self-reinforcing expectation that if a supply of infrastructure exists, it will automatically draw demand; second, a tacitly assumed trickle-down effect of economic development. The first assumption is irrespective of whether the particular piece of infrastructure is capable of competing with alternative transport routes, in the given case e.g. the Northern Corridor via Russia in China-Europe traffic, and whether it can fulfil the capacity promises made. In the case of the second assumption, development to the benefit of a country—and presumable all its inhabitants (evenly)—it is powerful public imaginary that obscures the effects of such alleged or real development. The nature of such assumptions is comparable to wishful thinking. Post-WWII economists assumed that once development benefits hit the (upper) middle class or a restricted segment of a more privileged part of the population these benefits would then trickle down to other parts of the population who are less well-off (cf Arndt 1983, 1).

A lesson that could eventually be learned from the construction of high-speed rail lines in European countries like Spain would be that the expectations by stakeholders for a

dynamic economy are "the somewhat naive and common belief in the economic benefits of transport infrastructure" (De Rus 2017, 7-8). Bare infrastructure cannot be easily transformed into development without carefully planned and accorded measures because contrary to commonly held imaginaries and beliefs, large-scale infrastructure projects are neither self-reinforcing processes nor do they by default trigger such processes. These beliefs in the benefits of infrastructure investments—the bigger and faster, the better—are rooted in what Kuran and Sunstein (1999, 685) call availability cascades, which are "[...] cascades, through which expressed perceptions trigger chains of individual responses that make these perceptions appear increasingly plausible through their rising availability in public discourse." Public narratives enforce this belief and present little relevant short-term demand effects as long-term project benefits. Availability cascades in turn form part of development taxonomies, in which the investment in public infrastructure leads to growth and job creation, which is automatically equated with long-term public benefits.

So far the most prominent scalar claim about the BTK project is its readiness to fulfil all boldly uttered expectations towards its economic effects. The perspective given in this chapter highlights the imaginaries behind these magic promises and that the BTK does not consist of a mere completed track, but of a variety of other components in the absence of which the BTK is unlikely to work as the global logistics project envisioned. Correspondence or discrepancy between the scalar claims and the current state of the project need to be continuously re-examined to ensure that the process is assessed accurately.

Conclusion

This chapter sheds light on connectivity in the South Caucasus and its neighborhood from an anthropological perspective, with the BTK serving as a case in point. It takes a few steps back and looks at the wider panorama of the current connectivity hype, pointing out a new paradigm in the making which might potentially replace the globalization paradigm. Further, it has dissected some wide-spread and far-flung expectations that exist towards the BTK and the still bare material infrastructure that it constitutes.

The BTK as a large-scale infrastructure or mega-project is entangled in a number of non-material projects of economic—and to some extent political—integration, among them the trilateral axis Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Türkiye as brother states, the Chinese BRI, and the EU's Global Gateway strategy. Each of these integration projects is constituted by visions and claims about how to re-shape spatial relations and about one's own positions therein.

Scalar imaginaries which are social imaginaries about reconfigured spatial relations, play a major role for the BTK as they do for any other large-scale transport infrastructure project. In the connectivity paradigm there are scalar imaginaries of (and implicit claims to) geopolitical significance and centrality as well as imaginaries of prosperity which generate social hope through underlying developmentalist promises. Scalar imaginaries of geopolitical significance are particularly prominent in the comparatively small South Caucasus countries. They reflect an overall dominance of geopolitical reasoning concerning this region by policy makers and scholars alike. At the same time, Türkiye is a country with regional power aspirations, which tends to take its geopolitical significance and its own resulting scalar claims more for

granted. Consequently, discourses in Türkiye cultivate imaginaries that are bent on developmentalist promises, particularly targeting its domestic audience.

The connectivity paradigm fosters the development of mega-projects. Such large-scale infrastructure projects or mega-projects are materialized structures which are never entirely completed. Through their incomplete state they embody a pending promise of and for the future, like the BTK's rudimentary infrastructure in the form of bare tracks. Similar to this aspect of always pending completion, immaterial projects of political and economic integration are far-flung and entail scalar claims their patrons promulgate as if they were to be taken for granted, while they will most likely never be fulfilled.

In the last section of this chapter, the KLC served as a case in point to illustrate how scalar claims are intertwined with the hope for development and how material structures in the form of the social life of bare infrastructure literally embody this hope. It has outlined the social life of bare infrastructure by describing the spell material infrastructures acquire through the modernist and developmentalist beliefs underlying them.

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[ii] I treat the term "discourse" as more overarching comprising narratives and imaginaries. While I envision "imaginaries" as more flexibly appropriated, a more mobile as well as more visual concept, "narrative" is any account of a series of related events or experiences. In my understanding narratives—loosely based on Somers' (1992: 592-593)—are particular stories the sequence and logics of which are widely employed in specific social contexts in the form of master-narratives, such as specific ways in which modernity is imagined for instance or other ideas that are hegemonic in specific contexts.

[iii] While states are prime cases in point of projects of political integration, it is mostly through narratives and social imaginaries that states wish to mark themselves as sharply distinct from other types of hegemonic projects (of political integration). It is crucial to note that the understanding of both projects of political integration and projects of economic integration in a Wolfian understanding are deeply processual (Wolf 1982). Especially when states are concerned, political anthropologists (for instance Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005) conceptualize and approach them as always on-going processes, because integration processes are never entirely completed, even when integration seems largely achieved discursively and contestations are no longer visible at first sight.

[iv] The future station and passing point is located near the villages of Yukarı and Aşağı Canbaz, sometimes also spelt Cambaz.

[v] Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the opening ceremony of Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, 30 October 2017 at https://president.az/en/articles/view/25701.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Towards a More Geopolitical EU in Connectivity?

Thomas Kruessmann

Abstract

The EU has come a long way from starting as a purely sub-regional integration project to becoming a leading player in promoting values throughout the world. On this journey, the first significant wake-up call was the unfolding of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, the second one Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Brussels now likes to be seen as a serious geopolitical player, but it is not clear how much substance there is to this claim, especially when it comes to connectivity. This chapter argues that despite having a dedicated framework on connectivity ("Global Gateway"), the EU Commission often succumbs to the idea of scoring short-term successes. Conceptually much better founded is the European Green Deal which projects the internal market's values abroad. As a result, the EU's brand of geopolitical activism is slightly erratic but for the most parts unfolds in a non-confrontational manner by seeking alliances with like-minded countries.

Key words: Connectivity; Belt and Road Initiative; Global Gateway; TEN-T; TRACECA.

Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine which culminated in the attack of 24 February 2022 represents a tidal change (*Zeitenwende*) for peace and security in Europe. Its

consequences range from EU member states finally ratcheting up their NATO contributions to increased efforts to strengthen the EU's territorial defenses. But while the EU's "geopolitical awakening" is now trumpeted throughout the halls of Brussels and beyond, the question is whether the policy failures of pre-24 February, i.e. why the EU was unable to prevent Russia's military aggression against Ukraine from happening, are continuing even beyond the 24 February. According to one observer, the EU's slow and at best careful approach provides "limited evidence" that the EU "will project a stronger or different form of power internationally—that is, as an emergent geopolitical actor—than it did before the war" (Youngs 2022).

A harbinger of this proclaimed geopolitical assertiveness is the issue how the EU would respond to the connectivity challenge of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The 2018 Joint Communication "Connecting Europe and Asia" (EU Commission et al. 2018) is widely considered to be the first coherent expression of policy on this matter. It rests on the assumption that by enhancing connectivity with Asia the EU would contribute to "peaceful political cooperation, fair and stronger economic relations, comprehensive societal dialogue and collaboration on international and regional security." This Joint Communication claims that "Europe and Asia, together, can be the engines of a more cooperative approach to world politics, global stability and regional economic prosperity." While this is plausibly so and has been reiterated in a number of bilateral and regional meetings following the adoption of the Joint Communication (e.g. EU—Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting 2018), Russia's aggression against Ukraine has proven that no connectivity framework and not even the BRI, despite China's substantial political weight and its investments in Ukrainian warehousing and port infrastructure (Sanders

2021), has been able to stop the Russian military plans from being realized. So, one may suggest that, when even the Chinese were unable to hold back Russia from its military adventure, what geopolitical leverage could any connectivity scheme offer, even if the EU aspired to become a serious geopolitical actor?

This chapter will examine to which extent the EU has managed to "geopoliticize" its approach to connectivity. It will firstly do so by tracking the evolution of the EU's response to the BRI. China has always presented the BRI as an inclusive "win-win" opportunity (Picciau 2016, 11), but with regard to the EU mostly for individual EU member states and associated countries in what was originally the 16+1 format, and only reluctantly accepted the EU as a relevant counterpart.[i] Even after entering into the EU-China Connectivity Platform (Makocki 2016, 70), China did not accept the EU as its only interlocutor and continued wooing individual states into preferred relationships (Wang, Ruet and Richet 2021, 250).

The EU, by contrast, moved only slowly towards a more coherent approach. Whereas originally it had proposed its own connectivity idea as a complementary, yet better version of the BRI, it finally acknowledged that there is actually competition with China and that it should seek global partnerships with like-minded countries to build a more exclusive connectivity agenda. Secondly, the EU appears to be de-emphasizing infrastructure projects and giving preference to the export of "soft infrastructure" including regulatory regimes. Using the metaphor of the level playing field, this approach has initially been rather dormant, but recently it became charged with the rhetoric of supply chain due diligence, requiring business enterprises involved to observe ESG criteria in their dealings with third countries. And finally, in a point particularly relevant to the South Caucasus, this chapter will look at the emerging transport corridors both inside the EU and in relation to third

countries. The Trans-European Network for Transport (TEN-T) and TRACECA are both older than the BRI, but they may come under pressure by the changes in patterns of shipping that the BRI will bring. After all, for small countries in a geopolitically fractured region, it would be important to see that transport corridors do not merely pay transfer fees, but create the basis for value-added production, bringing income opportunities to economically weak regions and promoting economic self-interest.

Evolution of the EU's Connectivity Approach

Joint Communication "Connecting Europe and Asia"

The EU's thinking on connectivity found its first coherent expression in the 2018 "Connecting Europe and Asia" Joint Communication. To understand the thinking behind this document and indeed the evolution of the EU's approach, it is helpful to look at its origins in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) format. On its dedicated website, the EU External Action Service (EEAS) describes ASEM as "a unique, informal platform for dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe on the big challenges of a fast-changing world, such as Connectivity, trade and investment, climate change" and others.[ii] Founded in 1996, it began to develop a strong focus on connectivity issues, reflecting China's announcement of its BRI agenda in 2013. Within ASEM, the EU was at first mainly taking a "wait and see" approach, often appearing "unable to choose between competing and cooperating with China in third countries" (Gaens 2019, 21). It was only in the run-up to the 2016 EU Global Strategy that the ground was prepared for a more coherent and conceptual answer to the BRI. Ultimately, the Global Strategy declared:

> "The EU will engage China based on respect for rule of law, both domestically and internationally. We will pursue a coherent approach to China's connectivity drives westwards by maximising the potential of the EU-China Connectivity Platform, and the ASEM and EU-ASEAN frameworks." (EU HR/VP 2016, 38).

"Engaging" China thus became the main motivation of the EU in its quest for an original approach to connectivity, although at the time it was still unclear whether this approach related to any third country (e.g. in Africa) or whether it was strictly limited to Asia. Further groundwork was performed by the so-called ASEM Pathfinder Group on Connectivity (APGC) between 2017 and 2018. Most importantly, APGC emphasized the need for market principles, agreed international rules, norms and standards, and the link with sustainable development for achieving the UN 2030 Agenda. Thus, it did not come as a surprise that the EU's signature approach, as formulated in the Joint Declaration of 2018, emerged as a counterpoint to the BRI: the idea of sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity. It focuses on "building efficient connections between Europe and Asia" (EU Commission et al. 2018), highlighting the need for transport, digital and energy connectivity as well as people-to-people contacts. Finally, the 2018 Joint Communication proposed different ways of establishing connectivity, i.e. both bilaterally and regionally. In doing so, it essentially foreshadowed the idea of bilateral connectivity partnerships (Japan, India) as well as cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). China was mentioned several times as a partner in realizing projects, primarily based on the EU-China Connectivity Platform of 2015, but with no explicit mentioning of the BRI itself. So, the BRI became something of an "elephant in the room" which dominated all considerations without ever being addressed openly (Kruessmann 2018; Sobol 2022).

"Engaging China" thus carried a clear geopolitical message. But even in this early approach the EU avoided to address China in a confrontational way. It merely created the trajectory for a better alternative, possibly even with a complementary proposal. Some observers see the EU Commission using a more hardline approach to China only in the area of controlling foreign direct investment (FDI) and countering the divisive policies of what was originally the 16+1 initiative (European Court of Auditors 2020; de Lombaerde et al. 2022, 14).

Council Conclusions "A Globally Connected Europe"

Starting in late 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic created a major challenge for the globalized economies of the industrial world. In Europe, it came as a surprise for many that even simple products like face masks could not be instantly produced, as all production had long been moved to China. In addition, the rigorous lockdown in China, coupled with limited availability of containers for shipping, led to a huge disarray in supply chains. So, the Council Conclusions "A Globally Connected Europe" of 12 July 2021 (EU Council 2021) stand at the beginning of what may be called the post-Covid era, critically examining the approach to connectivity defined in 2018, overcoming the narrow focus on Asia and requesting the Commission and the HR/VP "to start work on a joint communication on an EU global connectivity strategy with a view to its presentation by spring 2022 at the latest." This fresh mandate called for a "geostrategical approach" with "long-term implications for advancing the EU's economic, foreign and development policy and security interests and promoting EU values globally."

Compared to the earlier theme, the Council's brand of geostrategy appears to be much less obsessed with countering China (which was not a single time mentioned in the

document), but in promoting human rights and the rules-based international order. This "soft" approach was also expressed by the fact that the Council called on the Commission to consider the investment in regulatory frameworks as equally important as in "hard" physical infrastructure. So, if we assume that "geostrategical" is the broader and more long-range approach, it also relinquishes the earlier focus on "engaging China".

In fact, the Council Conclusions opened the door to an engagement that connects to all international organizations and "like-minded countries and regions" which whom the EU wishes to collaborate. Naming the United States as a particular case in point, the Council Conclusions connected to the G7 and what simultaneously emerged as the "Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership". They also explicitly connected to the G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investments (QII Principles), adopted at the G20 Osaka Summit in 2019. Another call for initiatives was of a bilateral type, consisting in the desire to "fully operationalize" the EU partnerships with Japan and India as well as to pursue a connectivity partnership with ASEAN. While disregarding in this context the "mother of all connectivity partnerships", i.e. the one with China, the Council was happy to promote the same model with at least the one partner country that is clearly "like-minded", i.e. Japan. The "Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between the EU and Japan" was concluded on 27 September 2019. Observers see it as a milestone in defending the values of multilateralism at a time when US-China rivalry emerged as the dominant topic (Esteban and Armanini 2019). In their opinion, the EU-Japan partnership was also presented as a "quality alternative" to the BRI, not explicitly directed *against* China, but one which might lure China into adopting similar quality and transparency standards.

With India, the situation was more difficult. EU-India trade talks were frozen in 2013, but resumed in 2020 with a joint commitment "in ensuring security, prosperity and sustainable development in a multi-polar world" (Emmott and Strupczewski 2021). India is widely considered as the world's largest democracy, but it is also aligned with China and Russia in the BRICS group of states. Its relationship with China is particularly complex due to border disputes and fears over economic competition. Unlike Japan it is clearly not a "like-minded country", but of course it has an enormous potential for economic cooperation. The "Comprehensive Connectivity Partnership" between the EU and India was announced on 8 May 2021. However, to this date there is very little information beyond a fact sheet, illustrative lists and project examples, not to mention any scholarly engagement with this topic.

Establishing a Connectivity Partnership with ASEAN seems even further down the road. The Council Conclusions mention ASEAN explicitly by referring to a Joint Ministerial Statement on Connectivity from December 2020, but it seems that beyond a fact sheet little progress has been made. ASEAN itself presents an ambitious "Master Plan for Connectivity 2025", but this plan does not make a reference to the EU's connectivity agenda.

In any case, the Council Conclusions appear to be unpacking a connectivity agenda which is more expansive, global in nature and much less focused on "engaging China". At the time, observers held that the Council sent the Commission into a "race against time" by demanding a joint communication on an EU global connectivity strategy by spring 2022 at the latest (Pleeck and Gavas 2021). So it was quite a surprise that the Commission managed to come up with its Joint

Communication "The Global Gateway" already by 1 December 2021 (EU Commission et al. 2021).

Joint Communication "Global Gateway"

In presenting the idea of a "Global Gateway" the EU Commission, while following its Council mandate, is arguably offering a divergent emphasis. Core elements of the EU's connectivity philosophy such as "level-playing field" and "sustainability" remain the same, of course. But there is a different emphasis in both substance and mode of delivery.

In terms of substance, the "Global Gateway" is much stronger rooted in the EU's common market and the current "European Green Deal" than in the 2016 Global Strategy on foreign and security policy. Among the investment priorities are digital networks and infrastructures including an open internet as well as climate- and energy-related projects. Transport only comes third. It is easy to see that the EU Commission is taking a leaf out of its book on internal market reforms, thus returning to the idea in the 2018 "Connecting Europe and Asia" Joint Communication that the internal market is the greatest inspiration for any connectivity agenda (Kruessmann 2018). The proposed priorities reach out "to improve people's lives around the world" (EU Commission et al. 2021, at 1.), but they also mean that classical development policy towards the "Global South" becomes submerged in a wider agenda. This issue becomes particularly relevant when considering the engagement of the EU with autocratic countries, e.g. in terms of energy security. Ranking transport projects third is an important signal to autocrats what *not* to expect from the EU, as experience has shown that certain types of regimes are more interested in large-scale hard infrastructure projects with the opportunity of lavish kick-

backs (Mardell and Stec 2021). On the other hand, from a development policy point of view the criticism is raised that if the "Global Gateway" intends to use EU development funds to leverage private capital, it may inadvertently support autocratic prestige projects because there is no clear distinction drawn in the "Global Gateway". And "it is more likely that human rights and environmental concerns will be sidelined before projects are abandoned and private capital is lost" (Furness and Keijzer 2022).

Still, the danger of stabilizing autocratic regimes is probably counter-balanced by the flavor of democracy promotion that is inherent in the "Global Gateway". The first sentence is quite programmatic:

> "Democracies—and the values that underpin them—must demonstrate their ability to deliver on today's global challenges." (European Commission et al. 2021, at 1.)

The Joint Communication is thus (again) primarily addressed to "like-minded partners", and its catalogues of key principles starts with "democratic values and high standards". It is not far-fetched to say that under the "Global Gateway" approach connectivity becomes a tool for democracy-promotion. This more belligerent stance is also expressed in a paragraph which takes a direct swipe against China:

> "The EU will offer its financing under fair and favorable terms in order to limit the risk of debt distress. It will help build sustainable infrastructure with the support, skills and the finance needed to operate it. Without proper transparency, good governance and high standards projects can be badly chosen or designed, left incomplete or be used to fuel corruption. This not only stunts growth and deprives local communities but it ultimately creates dependencies, which can limit countries' ability to make decisions." (European Commission et al. 2021, at 1.)

For all the negative experiences that are commonly associated with the BRI, this paragraph shows the EU Commission's desire to take China head-on and to team up with the B3W format and other related initiatives. So, while relying on the dichotomy of "geopolitics" vs. "geostrategy" is perhaps an overly crude approach, it may still help to characterize the turn which the "Global Gateway" is taking. It is more geopolitical in that it clearly driven by values and is meant to address and benefit the people in "like-minded countries". Thus, it is more strongly designed to shine a light on the liberal achievements of the EU and promote them abroad.

To conclude this chronological overview, it should be noted that the "Global Gateway" concept was issued shortly before Russia's attack on Ukraine. Since then it can be safely said that there has been a major shift in priorities for the EU. While the "Global Gateway" remains on the books, it is increasingly unrealistic that the EU is able devote the same amount of energy and financial resources to its global connectivity projects, not to mention the idea of leveraging private capital. What has taken top priority in 2022 so far are building LNG shipment terminals and the expansion or re-opening of gas pipelines. So, instead of promoting connectivity projects on a global scale, the EU is for the time being concerned with its own energy security.

"Geopoliticization" by Transporting Values?

The "Global Gateway's" goal of improving peoples' lives around the world comes with a focus on digital, climate and energy, and it does not prioritize transport. Needless to say, there is plenty of hard infrastructure required for building next generation digital networks, underwater cables or climate adaption and mitigation measures, just to name a few. Even more than "hard

infrastructure", regulatory regimes and normative frameworks (so-called soft infrastructure) constitute the key selling proposition of the EU. It has already been mentioned that the EU is actively promulgating the QII Principles, and there is a host of approaches also in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Customs Organization (WCO) to which the EU subscribes.[iii]

Values are at the core of any regulatory framework, and by providing technical assistance, donating technology and setting up systems the EU is actively promoting its own values in cooperation with global partners. The same goes for the less-prioritized "transport" dimension of connectivity. "Transport" can relate to people-to-people contacts, and so visa liberalization and re-admission agreements as well as face-recognition / scanning technologies and database exchanges form an important part of the legal framework behind the smooth operation of border crossings. "Transport" can also relate to trade, and it can include customs "one-stop shop" formalities, scanning and tracking devices and much more. A good example of the lack of soft infrastructure is the BTK where the lack of signaling equipment has led to a dramatic under-utilization of this railway link so far.

But there is also a different dimension to "transport", and one that has its origin in the EU Commission's "European Green Deal" as a tool for shaking up the EU to face the challenge of climate change. Coincidentally, the EU has embarked on legislation that will have a fundamental effect on the way European companies do business abroad. The centerpiece of this effort is the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence of 23 February 2022 (EU Commission 2022a). Outside the normal debate on connectivity, it is taken into

account here to give an as complete as possible evaluation of the EU's efforts "to improve people's lives around the world".

Critical logistics in social science have elaborated that supply chains tend to have a highly regulated part, but that politics and profits mostly reside at the far end where unregulated and often illicit production takes place (Tsing 2015). This tenet of critical logistics is not, of course, something the corporate mainstream would subscribe to. But never-ending scandals around child exploitation, forced labor, inhumane working conditions etc. have begun to enter the corporate world either from the angle of the UN's Business and Human Rights agenda or from a corporate social responsibility perspective. It is safe to say that since the 2000s knowledge of the capitalist production's (ab)use of lower standards for the sake of higher profit margins has become not only widespread, but has reached Western consumers' awareness and is often crucial in the decision which product to buy.

Concerns for the environment, social rights and governance (ESG) as well as sustainability have been high on the agenda for two decades now, but since legislators were slow to take up this trend, it was mostly stock exchanges which used their power to establish reporting requirements for listed companies. The argument was that there is a demand from investors to know how companies would address ESG criteria and to use this knowledge for informed investment decisions. So, the idea of reporting became popular for those type of business enterprises which depended on the capital markets. Outside this logic, and for all other kinds of enlightened management, reporting was a way of communicating to stakeholders and ultimately, very much in the spirit of corporate social responsibility, to preserve the value of the business enterprise in the markets. By assuming even the

voluntary obligation of reporting, it was held, business enterprises would become sensitive to their corporate footprint and would adjust their internal workings in a way that such information would be systematically collected and passed on to management. But there was no direct, vertically-imposed obligation on companies except on those which would have to satisfy a stock exchange's listing requirement.

The EU has its own track record in obliging certain types of business enterprises to engage in ESG reporting.[iv] But the most recent proposal for a Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence of 23 February 2022 promises to become a game-changer. Whichever way it will be ultimately adopted, its core is imposing on Member states' legislators the obligation to integrate into their corporate laws the obligation for certain types of business enterprises to conduct a human rights and environmental due diligence. This obligation shall in particular comprise the following actions:

- to integrate due diligence into their policies;
- to identify actual or potential adverse impacts;
- to prevent and mitigate potential adverse impacts, and to bring actual adverse impacts to an end and minimize their extent;
- to establish and maintain a complaints procedure;
- to monitor the effectiveness of their due diligence policy and measures;
- to publicly communicate on due diligence. (EU Commission 2022a, at Article 4 para 1).

It is a long way from an EU directive proposal to actually becoming binding law in the EU Member states. But it is clear that the EU is trying to push its values into the supply chains and make them a reality in the far-flung places where

production is being effected and where third companies are working for EU companies. This "push effect" means that connectivity, esp. in the global value chains, becomes a carrier of EU values and will inevitably lead to clashes with local governments, eager to offer lower standards to attract business.

In an even more recent initiative the EU is now topping up on its commitment to establish values in the corporate supply chains by taking action against forced labor.[v] The Commission proposal for a Regulation on prohibiting products made with forced labor on the Union market of 14 September 2022 (EU Commission 2022e) is described as a complementary piece of legislation, one that addresses economic operators directly by prohibiting them from placing and making available on the Union market or exporting from the Union market products made with forced labor. The bulk of the proposed Regulation, however, consists in the establishment of an elaborate system of competent authorities to conduct risk-based examinations. A harbinger of future forced labour-related investigations is the pressure Volkswagen has come under for its car production in the Uighur Autonomous Republic in China.[vi] It is clear that in the future electric cars produced in China will come under heavy human rights scrutiny. But even for less sophisticated products and components, the dream of just-in-time production will need to stand the test of ESG criteria. Coming from an entirely different background, the development described above will actually turn the EU into a value-based connectivity actor and perhaps even sharpen its profile in a geopolitical sense.

"Geopoliticization" by Strengthening Transport Networks?

TEN-T and FDI screening

The idea of injecting geopolitical thinking into the development of the Trans-European Network for Transport (TEN-T) has made headlines in summer 2022 when the EU Commission announced its Action Plan for "Solidarity Lanes" with Ukraine[vii] and amended a proposal from December 2021 to overhaul EU Regulation 1315/2013. This earlier proposal had basically been a reflection of the European Green Deal and the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy in order to overhaul the EU network of infrastructure (European Commission 2021). Now, in light of the war in Ukraine, the EU Commission proposed an upgrading of four European Transport Corridors to various cities of Ukraine and a simultaneous downgrading of cross-border connections to Russia and Belarus. It also addressed the problem of different rail gauges which makes connectivity with the Ukrainian railway system difficult (European Commission 2022b).

However, while this revised proposal clearly bespeaks its geopolitical motivation, it does not per se turn the Union into a geopolitical actor. Instead, the issue is now with third countries challenging the TEN-T by establishing connectivity patterns which affect the volumes of shipping, air and rail underlying the Ten-T calculation. The prime case for this scenario actually predates the BRI, but it has subsequently become its most visible example (Schüller 2023, 143). In 2009 the Chinese company COSCO Pacific obtained a concession from the Greek government to operate part of the container terminals of Piraeus (Athens) for a period of 35 years. At the time, COSCO Pacific was majority-owned by independent investors, 43% of

its stock was indirectly held by Cosco Group in Beijing (van der Putten 2014). Buying out the Port of Piraeus container terminal operation was later described as part of the BRI strategy, and it was followed by a Chinese-sponsored agreement to upgrade the railway between Budapest and Belgrade outside of TEN-T and as part of the larger idea of connecting the Port of Piraeus to Central Europe (Wang, Ruet and Richet 2021, 256). Measuring the effects of this BRI-sponsored initiative on the TEN-T had been a difficult task even before the Covid-19 pandemic (Dunmore, Preti and Routaboul 2019). It became even more difficult when in 2020-2021 Covid-related lockdowns, in particular in China, as well as the shortage of containers threw the entire operation of multimodal transport into disarray. Finally, whether the Port of Piraeus has profited from shipping volumes originally planned to be delivered by rail via Russia and Belarus is not clear.

Against this background of momentous change, a related issue had been preoccupying EU decision-makers, and it is one with a clear geopolitical connotation: how to make sure that FDI originating in third countries is not undermining the cohesion of EU policies such as the TEN-T? On 19 March 2019, Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council established a framework for the screening of FDI into the Union. This Regulation entered into force on 11 October 2020, recently the EU Commission presented its Second Annual Report on the operation of this mechanism (EU Commission 2022b). Obviously, while FDI screening must not be used discriminately and cannot focus on Chinese BRI investment alone, the Report highlighted that compared to the U.S. and UK as top foreign investors in the EU in 2021, China had remained below its 2020 level. It took only 2.3% of all foreign acquisitions in 2021 (down from 3.4% in 2020) and 6% of the greenfield investments

(down from 7.1% in 2020). It also failed to take off in dealmaking, despite some large announced M&A and greenfield investments (EU Commission 2022c). In none of the cases notified pursuant to Article 6 of the Regulation, the European Commission has made use of its powers under Article 7 to screen investments *ex officio* and independently of the question of whether or not a Member state has its own screening mechanism. Whereas FDI from China has not raised concern during 2021, the EU Commission is now calling upon Member states to remain vigilant regarding FDI from Russia and Belarus in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (EU Commission 2022d). To this end, the Commission published a special Communication to Member states, pointing out the possibility that the governments of Russia and Belarus may use established business contacts and interfere with "critical activities" in the EU (EU Commission 2022d, 2). Whether those are connectivity-related or not is not clear. But the attacks against the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines show that nothing should be excluded.

While the recently introduced legal tools for screening FDI have become operative, there is in the field of connectivity an additional innovation which is quite intriguing. The aforementioned proposal of December 2021 to update the TEN-T Regulation contains a new clause that is without analogue in the earlier regulation. This new Article 47 entitled "Risks to security or public order" obliges Member states to notify the Commission "of any project of common interest in their territory with the participation of or contribution of any kind by a natural person of a third country or an undertaking of a third country with a view to allow assessment of its impact on security or public order in the Union" (Article 47 para 1). And if, on the basis of information provided by Member states, the Commission concludes that the situation "is likely to affect

critical infrastructure on the trans-European transport network on grounds of security or public order", it may issue an opinion addressed to the Member states where the project is to be realized (Article 47 para 4.). Interestingly, this track is explicitly outside the FDI screening mechanism discussed above. Obviously, the question is why does the Commission find it necessary to have a screening mechanism for projects affecting the TEN-T on top of the general FDI screening test?

Once the TEN-T Regulation 1315/2013 becomes updated, it is quite possible that the FDI screening mechanisms will be streamlined and merged. However, the strength of Article 47 is that it gives a definition of the term "critical infrastructure" which goes beyond the general FDI-screening Regulation. According to Article 47 para 4.:

> "Critical infrastructure thereby means an asset, system or part thereof used for transport purposes and located in Member States which is essential for the maintenance of vital societal functions, health, safety, security, economic or social well-being of people, and the disruption or destruction of which would have a significant impact in a Member State as a result of the failure to maintain those functions."

In protecting critical infrastructure, the EU would surely become a more geopolitical actor, if not the scope of the provision was limited to infrastructure "located in Member States".

TRACECA

There is another venue for coordination which should not go unmentioned: the Intergovernmental Commission (IGC) "Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia" (TRACECA).[viii] Originally conceived of as an inter-regional technical assistance project financed by the EU, the beneficiary countries soon established the IGC as a coordinating body. Since the project

start in 1993, there have been subsequent rounds of expansion, and the IGC TRACECA is now coordinating a total of 14 member governments from the region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as the original members, joined by Ukraine and Moldova in 1996-1998, by Bulgaria, Romania and Türkiye in 2000 and by the Republic of Iran in 2009). The IGC has a Permanent Secretariat, hosted by Azerbaijan and opened in February 2001 with EU support. Its legal basis goes back to the September 1998 Summit in Baku where 12 TRACECA countries signed the "Basic Multilateral Agreement on International Transport for Development of the Europe-the Caucasus-Asia Corridor" (MLA).

The EU Commission, while technically only represented by its Member states Bulgaria and Romania, has been sponsoring IGC TRACECA throughout. Beyond the original TRACECA, this was later through the technical assistance project LOGMOS which helped to develop a TRACECA Master Plan which in turn served as the basis for adopting the Strategy for development of the international transport corridor Europe-the Caucasus-Asia for the period 2016-2026.

At this stage it is hard to forecast whether TRACECA will be a suitable vessel for the EU's value-driven aspirations. *Kaw* holds that the original success formula for TRACECA was that the EU "dispensed its role in geopolitics and geo-economics" to bridge the many bilateral conflicts among states and overcoming the realist belief that security can only be created at the expense of a partner (2019, 422). In general, there is very little scholarly analysis of TRACECA, as the governments appear to prefer to work behind closed doors.

Conclusion

It is fair to say that the EU has finally "woken up" to the geopolitical challenges that China's BRI and the war against Ukraine pose. At times, however, it appears that the EU and foremostly the EU Commission is too eager to promote this image of "acting tough" by introducing short-term measures with no real substance. This can be said for the proposed prohibition on placing forced-labor products on the EU market when the entire idea of supply chain due diligence is meant to be eradicating forced labor in third countries. The same is true for introducing a mechanism for screening FDI into critical infrastructure while a general mechanism for screening FDI is already in place.

The "Global Gateway" as a policy framework had been presented before Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, and it appears that the many challenges emanating from this war, especially Europe's energy security, are now taking full attention and financial resources. Much of what had been promised—connectivity partnerships with Japan and India as well as ASEAN and also the G7 B3W initiative—lie rather dormant, the TEN-T has been highlighted only for populist announcements on cutting back on connections with Belarus and Russia while expanding into Ukraine, and TRACECA operates without any pronounced European leadership (which, arguably, it was always meant to). Much of what can be seen is reactive and ad hoc, and there seems little desire to follow through with the "Global Gateway" concept of improving people's lives around the world.

The "European Green Deal", by contrast, appears to have much greater longevity in advancing change. In particular, the EU's leadership in going beyond ESG reporting and mandating supply chain due diligence will become an absolute

breakthrough in changing corporate culture. This vindicates the argument that the EU's internal market is the best model for promoting connectivity. The EU would be well-advised to build on its strengths in offering what it has achieved rather than promoting foreign policy initiatives which it does not have the resources to realize and ending up seeking short-term populist "successes". There is a certain twist in the argument that promoting connectivity is a way of addressing even climate change. But if this helps to place the EU's initiatives into a sensible framework, so be it.

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i For more background, see Wang, Ruet and Richet (2021) 256.

ii Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) | EEAS Website (europa.eu).

iii See the analysis of the relevant frameworks with regard to another part of the BRI, the so-called Polar Silk Road, at Kruessmann (2021).

iv See the overview at Corporate sustainability reporting (europa.eu).

v Commission moves to ban products made by forced labour (europa.eu).

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