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The Realisation of European Union Political Elites' Interests in the Caspian Region

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Abstract

One of the key issues for European Union political elites is determining how to engage with Caspian littoral states and increase their influence on Caspian regional politics. The main directions of EU activities in the region, its legal foundations and practical steps are analysed in this article. The author studies the main problems and difficulties faced by the political elites of the European Union in the Caspian region, and also considers the current challenges and prospects for the successful realisation of their interests.

The author substantiates the point of view that the influence of European elites on the policy of the Caspian countries is increasing every year, which is reflected in the political decision-making of the governments of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. At the same time, the main task of the EU is to weaken the influence of Russia and Iran, primarily in the energy sphere.

The aim of this paper is to study the directions of activity of the political elites of the European Union in the Caspian region and related political and economic processes. The research is based on an interdisciplinary approach, as well as systemic, comparative and institutional methods.

As a result of the analysis of modern domestic and foreign scientific literature and nor-mative legal acts, the main political-economic tasks of European elites in the Caspian region were identified. The research findings will allow us to continue studying regional political processes and forecast the ways of further development of relations between the represented parties.

Keywords

Geopolitics; European Union; Caspian region; political processes; cooperation; resources; transport corridors; elites; energy market; partnership

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Реализация интересов политических элит Европейского Союза в Каспийском регионе

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Аннотация

Одним из ключевых вопросов для политических элит Европейского союза является определение того, как взаимодействовать с прикаспийскими государствами и увеличивать их влияние на каспийскую региональную политику. В данной статье анализируются основные направления деятельности ЕС в регионе, его правовые основы и практические шаги. Автор изучает основные проблемы и трудности, с которыми сталкиваются политические элиты Европейского союза в Каспийском регионе, а также рассматривает текущие вызовы и перспективы успешной реализации их интересов.

Автор обосновывает точку зрения о том, что влияние европейских элит на политику прикаспийских стран с каждым годом возрастает, что отражается на принятии политических решений правительствами Казахстана, Азербайджана и Туркменистана. В то же время главной задачей ЕС является ослабление влияния России и Ирана, прежде всего в энергетической сфере.

Целью данной статьи является изучение направлений деятельности политических элит Европейского союза в Каспийском регионе и связанных с ними политических и экономических процессов. Исследование основано на междисциплинарном подходе, а также системном, сравнительном и институциональном методах.

В результате анализа современной отечественной и зарубежной научной литературы и нормативных правовых актов были выявлены основные политико-экономические задачи европейских элит в Каспийском регионе. Результаты исследования позволят нам продолжить изучение региональных политических процессов и спрогнозировать пути дальнейшего развития отношений между представленными сторонами.

Ключевые слова

Геополитика; Европейский союз; Каспийский регион; политические процессы; сотрудничество; ресурсы; транспортные коридоры; элиты; энергетический рынок; партнерство.

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Introduction

The Caspian region is an important geopolitical space of economic and strategic interest for many countries, including the European Union. The region is known for its significant reserves of oil, gas and other natural resources, which creates competition for access to and control over these resources.

In this complex and dynamic regional context, the political elites of the European Union are actively seeking to realise their interests, both economic and political. They seek to conclude co-operation agreements with the Caspian states and to strengthen their influence and presence in the Caspian space.

Energy security is an important issue for the EU, which is primarily linked to dependence on external supplies of oil and natural gas. Thus, according to full public data from the official statistical service of the European Union, Eurostat, the supply, transformation and consumption of natural gas at the end of 2022 was 13 716 462.561 Terajoule (Supply, transformation and consumption of gas, 2022), while oil and petroleum products totalled 469 859.613 Thousand tonnes (Supply, transformation and consumption of oil and petroleum products, 2022).

The relevance of the study is confirmed by the active discussion of the topic in the academic community. For example, the issues of implementation of the EU policy in the Caspian region have been addressed in their works by such scholars as D. S. Ayvazyan, Sh. Abbasov, N. A. Gegelashvili, A. Cenciarelli, M. Baldoni, A. Grigas, etc. On the other hand, there is a need to consider this problem from the perspective of the political elites of the EU and the Caspian Five countries.

In this regard, a detailed analysis of the EU's international energy policy and its legal aspects becomes relevant, which would reveal the main interests of political elites in the region.

Caspian vector of the EU energy policy: legal aspect

The European Union pays great attention to the legal framework for its activities, based on International Law. It is important to note the development of International Energy Law, which is based on general principles of law: fairness, legality, non-interference in the affairs of states and non-use of force, sovereign equality of states, etc.

According to A.J. Bradbrook «Energy Law encompasses aspects of contracts, torts, property, constitutional law, administrative law, environmental law, international law and competition law» (Bradbrook, 1996, p. 211).

Energy issues fall within the competences of the EU and its members, as well as the European Commission can influence member states' energy policies through various legislative initiatives and policy decisions. Both the European Commission and the EU member states have the power to legislate in the energy sector, without contradicting each other. It is important to note that EU members acquire these

competences when they have not been exercised by the institutions of the European Union.

For example, the first major act in the energy sector was Council directive of 29 June 1990 concerning a Community procedure to improve the transparency of gas and electricity prices charged to industrial end-users (90/377/EEC), which established price controls on energy markets and levelled prices within the Community (Stern, 1998, p. 9).

One of the founding documents of the European Union's common energy policy is the Energy Charter or European Energy Charter of 1991, which is a political declaration proclaiming the desire for further energy cooperation between East and West. The main principles of co-operation under the charter are the interest in the stability of energy supply and the sustainability of economic development, and all problematic issues are to be resolved through international arbitration.

The Energy Charter constitutes the legal basis for EU energy policy along with the Energy Charter Treaty and the Energy Charter Protocol on Energy Efficiency and Related Environmental Aspects (PEEREA).

The Energy Charter Treaty based on WTO principles, etc.; aspects of freedom of transit of energy resources; energy efficiency and environmental friendliness; mechanisms for solving problematic issues between countries and disputes between investors and governments.

An updated version of the European Energy Charter - the International Energy Charter - was adopted in 2015, modernising existing aspects of cooperation between interested countries in the energy sector.

Expanding the European Union's energy market by exploiting its own potential, as well as diversifying sources of energy imports, including via cooperation with the states of the Caspian region, are important components of energy market liberalisation, as also reflected in a number of European Commission's documents:

-in the Green Paper «A European strategy for sustainable, competitive and secure energy». Argues that the EU seeks to integrate EU energy markets, including through the creation of a pan-European energy community.

-in the Presidency Conclusions of the Brussels European Council (23/24 March 2006). The need to intensify diversification strategies, as well as to search for other routes of gas supply from the Caspian Sea and North Africa, while developing European energy potential, has been expressed.

-in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions «Second Strategic Energy Review - An EU Energy Security and Solidarity Action Plan». The document states the need to develop and expand the southern gas corridor in order to supply energy sources from the Caspian region and the Middle East. According to the document, the EU's priority partners include Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran.

-in Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the

Regions On Security of Energy Supply and International Cooperation «The EU Energy Policy: Engaging With Partners Beyond Our Borders». The position on multilateral co-operation with the countries of the Caspian region and the Middle East was reaffirmed, with Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iraq named as the main suppliers of energy resources.

-in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council «European Energy Security Strategy». The idea of developing various European transport initiatives has been substantiated, with the intensification of activities in the Caspian region being able to ensure the development of the necessary infrastructure and a sufficient volume of exports.

-in Regulation (EU) 2017/1938 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2017 concerning measures to safeguard the security of gas supply and repealing Regulation (EU) No 994/2010. The willingness to further develop diversified energy supply routes was confirmed, which will be facilitated by the interconnection of gas networks, as well as the completion of the Southern Gas Corridor and the North-South Corridor.

- in Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions «EU external energy engagement in a changing world» of 18 May 2022. Diversified supply is recognised as key to European sustainability.

According to the European Energy Security Strategy, agreements that European Union countries sign with other states on energy issues cannot contradict EU legislation and policies on security of energy supply (European Energy Security Strategy, 2014, p. 18) . To this end, there is a mechanism for exchanging information on the signing of such documents between EU institutions and countries. Thus, in the Regulation (EU) 2017/1938 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2017 concerning measures to safeguard the security of gas supply and repealing Regulation (EU) No 994/2010 states that EU members should notify each other when signing natural gas supply agreements with partners both inside and outside the EU and assess the security of supply (Regulation (EU) 2017/1938, 2017, p. 8).

The documents listed control the expansion of energy imports and prevent excessive control of external suppliers, expanding the search for favourable supply conditions.

EU political elites and the Caspian region: from words to action

Numerous regulations prepared by the European Union institutions are the basis for the implementation of major transport projects. From a political point of view, the creation of such transport corridors from east to west will allow the European Union to diversify possible transport routes, which will ensure the energy security of the states. It will also change the transport system of the former USSR

states and ensure export control of Central Asian energy resources (Усманов; Великая, 2023, стр. 51).

One of the most important EU initiatives related to the Caspian region is the Southern Gas Corridor project, which is also of interest to another extra-regional state, Turkey. Turkish elites are keen to turn the state into an energy hub for gas supplies to Europe. To this end, as early as 25 October 2011, Azerbaijani President I. Aliyev and R. Erdogan, then Prime Minister of Turkey, signed an intergovernmental agreement concerning gas transit from Azerbaijan through Turkey (Гегелашвили, 2012, стр. 57).

An alternative to the Southern Gas Corridor was to be the Russian-Turkish project «The TurkStream Pipeline» from the Krasnodar region of Russia to Turkey. The second line of this pipeline is designed for Southern and Southeastern Europe. In January 2019, Russian President V.V. Putin announced the state's willingness to invest USD 1.4 billion to continue the gas pipeline to Europe via Serbia.

Given the needs of European countries, the Southern Gas Corridor and Turkish Stream pipelines could operate in parallel, expanding their own capacity. For the time being, due to the political environment, the project cannot be implemented in its original form.

In 2020, the transnational corporation British Petroleum provided information on proven oil and gas reserves. According to this data the total proven oil reserves in the Caspian region at the end of 2020 can be represented as follows:

Table 1. Total proved reserves of oil (at end 2020).

Country	Total proved reserves of oil, Thousand million barrels
Azerbaijan	7.0
Iran	157.8
Kazakhstan	30.0
Russian Federation	107.8
Turkmenistan	0.6

(Statistical Review, 2021, p. 16)

In turn, the volume of total proven gas reserves is shown in the Table 2.

Table 2. Total proved reserves of gas (at end 2020).

Country	Total proved reserves of gas, Trillion cubic metres
Azerbaijan	2.5

Iran	32.1
Kazakhstan	2.3
Russian Federation	37.4
Turkmenistan	13.6

(Statistical Review, 2021, p. 34)

Analysing the data from Tables 1 and 2 showed that Russia and Iran have the largest reserves of energy resources. In turn, proven gas and oil reserves in the fields of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan will not be able to fully meet the needs of the European energy market.

The strategy of the political elites of major European states is influenced by the internal elements of the political organisation of the Caspian countries, the remoteness of the region and the lack of close historical ties.

Despite this, European elites are keen to spread their ideas in Kazakhstan, which is increasingly gravitating towards Western values. This is evidenced by numerous joint international events and meetings. Thus, on 16 May 2023, in order to discuss measures to offset the impact of anti-Russian sanctions on the economy of the Republic, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Murat Nurtleu made a working visit to Brussels and held talks with senior representatives of the European Union.

On 2 June 2023, the Second EU-Central Asia Summit was held with the participation of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, who felt it necessary to discuss the issues of anti-Russian sanctions as well as the «democratization» of Central Asian societies.

The issue of rising crime in Central Asia, including in Kazakhstan, which is a major transit zone for drugs from the states, is also important for the European Union. European states are interested in addressing the causes of the growth in drug trafficking through the promotion of economic development and capacity building of structures at various levels in the Central Asian region.

The political framework for cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan in the energy sector is expanding every year. Thus, on 18 July 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Energy Partnership, confirming the Azerbaijani government's intention to increase gas supplies to Europe (EU and Azerbaijan enhance bilateral relations, 2022).

The willingness to cooperate comprehensively, primarily in the energy sector, was confirmed by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during an official visit to Italy from 1 to 2 September 2022. One of the main subjects of the meetings was the issue of increasing energy supplies from Azerbaijani fields (Bifolchi, Boltuc, 2022).

European elites are planning to strengthen their presence in all spheres of Azerbaijan's politics. This is evidenced by the meetings of high-ranking officials both in the territory of the republic and in the EU countries. On 4 May 2023, within the framework of the Fourth Security Dialogue between Azerbaijan and the EU, a meeting was held with the participation of Assistant to the President of Azerbaijan Hikmet Hajiyev and Deputy Secretary General for Political Affairs of the EU External Relations Service Enrique Mora. The main focus of the event was on comprehensive co-operation between the parties, primarily in the oil and gas sector and green energy.

The EU's interests in Azerbaijan are not limited to economic aspects. One example of the involvement of European political elites in the internal issues of the state is the meeting on 16 August 2023 between Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Toivo Klaar, where the issues of normalisation of international relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan through EU mediation were touched upon. The events of September 2023 in Nagorno-Karabakh have also attracted the attention of European politicians: despite their ambiguous attitude towards the outcome of the conflict, the issue of imposing sanctions against Azerbaijan remains open. In our opinion, the implementation of the sanctions policy against Azerbaijan will be hindered by the close co-operation between Baku and the EU in the energy sector, which supports the desire of European states to limit the supply of Russian energy carriers to the EU.

Similar processes of European policy intensification can be observed in Turkmenistan. The Caspian state's relations with the EU are developing both bilaterally and in the Central Asia-European Union format. President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov has repeatedly noted that the country has successfully implemented technical projects of the European Union in the spheres of science and education, ecology, improvement of legislation, energy, and other areas.

On 29 September 2023, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Chairman of the Khalk Maslakhaty (the upper house of Turkmenistan's parliament), said in Berlin that the European vector was and remains on the agenda for Turkmenistan's international energy cooperation.

All these steps are also in line with one of the most important objectives of the European Union which is to pursue a policy of diversifying energy transportation routes from the Caspian region to the European states. In addition, it emphasises the desire of European elites to ideologically and politico-economically subjugate post-Soviet states that are susceptible to the imposition of Western values due to their own unresolved problems of internal instability.

Transnational corporations also play an important role in the European Union's policy in the Caspian region, allowing European political elites to intervene in the political and economic processes in the region.

The attractiveness of the Caspian region for large foreign corporations stems from the following:

- availability of oil and gas resources;
- access to world markets via the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea
- the lack of high-tech equipment necessary for oil and gas production in parts of the Caspian countries;
- political and economic interest in the region by the Great Powers;
- the Caspian states' desire to strengthen their political and economic sovereignty;
- the position of political elites interested in attracting foreign investment to the region.

Transnational corporations use various ways to exert pressure on the region's political elites:

- using their own financial resources and connections to lobby for interests in the region;
-forming public opinion through the media;
- funding research that supports corporate interests;
-using non-governmental organisations, etc.

In doing so, corporations become an instrument of states' foreign policy when other instruments lose their rationality. Through job creation, media support and structural power, TNCs create a positive image that allows them to expand their political influence.

Italy, France and Germany are highly politically active in the Caspian region. For example, the French government promotes the activities of the French oil and gas company TotalEnergies in the region.

Oil and gas production and refining corporations, engineering and service companies are operating in Azerbaijan. Thanks to their work, production of raw materials has increased and port infrastructure has developed: a large number of oil storage facilities have been created and loading equipment has been purchased.

Foreign TNCs in Azerbaijan's energy sector began to appear in the 1990s. Most of the investments are in the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli field, which involves the Azerbaijani firm SOCAR as well as American and European companies; the Karabakh project involving SOCAR, Russian Lukoil and Italian company Agip. In addition to Azerbaijani, Iranian and Russian representatives, the Norwegian company Statoil and the French TotalFinaElf joined the Shah Deniz project. The State Oil Company of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) also represents Azerbaijan's national interests. At the same time, production-sharing contracts have proved effective, enabling foreign companies to overcome domestic economic barriers.

The activity of foreign corporations in the Iranian sector of the Caspian Sea is lower due to the large number of sanctions, difficulties in the domestic legal regulation of TNCs and the peculiarities of Iranian policy. Despite this, the State Oil Company of Iran participates not only in domestic projects, but also in Azerbaijani projects related to the development of the Lenkoran-Deniz and Shah Deniz fields.

According to the Iranian constitution, foreign entities have no right to possess the country's natural resources, irrespective of the form of ownership. However,

this prohibition can be circumvented through a contractual form of «buy-back», which consists of the state, represented by the responsible ministry or a state-owned company, approaching a foreign company that performs exploration and exploitation services for a field. Upon completion, the government returns the field, while reimbursing the company for its costs, including in the form of hydrocarbon resources (Kuhn, Jannatifar, 2012, p. 220).

Despite Iran's strict domestic policy, foreign firms such as Spain's Esproenko Pars and JC Valves, France's Bureau Veritas, Germany's Bauer Kompressoren GCC FZE and Eisenmann Co. and others operate in the state.

Among the TNCs operating in Kazakhstan, apart from Chinese and US companies, there are European ones: Italian Agip at the Karachaganak field, French Total-FinaElf and Italian ENI at the Kashagan field.

In order to coordinate financial flows in Kazakhstan's energy sector, a consortium, the North Caspian Operating Company (NCOC), which includes European companies in its management, has been initiated.

Italian analyst Luca Urciuolo notes Europe's desire to reduce oil supplies from Russia and strengthen energy cooperation with Kazakhstan. At the same time, the European policy of diversifying energy routes faces the problem of a lack of alternative transport systems not linked to Russia or China (Urciuolo, 2022).

Their activities in Turkmenistan are important for European TNCs. Since Turkmenistan's oil and gas production and transportation equipment is obsolete, there is an urgent need for modernisation technologies, which has led to the emergence of a large number of corporations, including German ones, in the country's energy sector. For example, the German companies LURGI and LINDE specialise in refinery construction.

State companies Turkmengaz and Turkmenoil seek to exclude foreign capital from the oil and gas sector. In spite of this, the Italian corporation ENI is involved in the development of the Cheleken field.

The cultural and civilizational proximity of states has a great influence on cooperation between states. For example, the spread of Islamic traditions in the spheres of society has brought Iranian and Arab corporations closer to Turkmenistan. At the same time, political risks and the strict centralisation of the economy cause low investment activity by foreign TNCs in Turkmenistan.

The Russian sector of the Caspian Sea is avoided by big TNCs when the issue of transit of resources arises. This is because they may lose the support of their lobbies in the state structures of their countries. On the other hand, in exploration and development, foreign companies face competition with Russian companies controlling the core zones. These reasons have determined the forms of TNCs' activities in this part: in the form of joint projects, functioning of consortia, and supply of equipment and necessary materials.

Despite a number of difficulties in relations between Russia and Europe, economic cooperation between the parties continues today. An example of cooperation is the implementation of joint projects by Italian and Russian companies in the

Astrakhan Region. One of the residents of the Lotos Special Economic Zone is a company with Italian capital, Naval Design LLC, and Technologies-XX Century JSC, founded by the major Italian company «Ferragu Abrasivi».

Italian analysts believe that the process of diversifying routes and increasing the production of energy resources on a scale that could supplant and replace Russian oil and gas is not possible in the near future (Boltuc, 2022).

Conclusion

Political and economic interests of regional and global actors intersect in the Caspian region. The European Union's political strategy in the Caspian Sea region is more focused on cooperation in the areas of energy, transportation, and trade, and is tied to technical assistance, investment, as well as in the political and cultural spheres.

The aim of the European Union's policy in the Caspian region is to expand bilateral and multilateral co-operation with the Caspian littoral states, as well as the desire to create and quickly launch alternative routes to provide the European community with energy resources, which is supported by the political decisions of a number of Caspian littoral states.

The Caspian states, in turn, have managed to use the European Union's interest for their own purposes: to address domestic and foreign policy objectives. For Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran, hydrocarbon resources have become major elements of economic development, leading to an increased share of the fuel and energy sector in total industrial output. The overestimation of reserves by these countries has helped to attract investment aimed at developing the fields, which has had an impact on intensifying economic and political processes in the region and diversifying foreign policy contacts.

At the present stage, the European Union has several challenges to address, including the formation of a common European approach to policy in the Caspian region, as well as the expansion of cooperation with the Caspian littoral states and the circle of investors in the transit-transport and energy sectors. The problems of the region's transport infrastructure and the absence of a full-fledged international mechanism concerning environmental management in the Caspian Sea complicate the tasks of co-operation for European elites.

Competition with other states and powers in the region can have a significant impact on the strategies of European political elites and the ability to achieve their goals. The large-scale transport initiatives proposed by Turkey and China are supported by the Caspian region states and hamper the implementation of EU policies.

It is obvious that European elites maintain the illusion of interest in the development of a number of countries in the Caspian region, which in fact manifests itself in the use of their energy resources and economic potential in order to weaken Russian positions in the region. This problem can only be solved by uniting

the forces of the Caspian political elites capable of defending the interests of their own states and preventing dependence on Western policies.

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