ENERGY ASYMMETRY OF THE CASPIAN REGION. TRANS-CASPIAN GAS PIPELINE PROJECT: AN OPPORTUNITY TO STRENGTHEN THE SECURITY OF EUROPEAN ENERGY

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ABSTRACT

An undeniable fact of the 21st century represents the growing dependence of the world's economies on energy resources. The world economy still depends on oil and gas as basic energy resources, and the battle for resources dominates the geopolitics of the 21st century. The problem of resources has many facets, their deficit having an important role in triggering or amplifying conflicts, polarization and catalysis of forces. In this metamorphosis of the system of international relations, the Caspian Sea region appears as a space of security threats, but also an area of geo-economic opportunities. The system of international relations is undergoing dynamic, complex and asymmetrical changes.

The Caspian Sea area has entered global attention through two perspectives. On the one hand - the conflicts in the post-Soviet space and on the other - the large deposits of hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas). These two aspects have created a complex situation following the effect of the "Caspian dispute" on the part of several international actors. The essence of the "Caspian dispute" lies both in control over oil and gas production and in control over routes, mainly land and submarine pipelines, through which energy resources are transported to world markets.

Thus, the Caspian Sea region acquires in the current system of international relations a status of "energy ring" in central Eurasia, where investments, interests and initiatives of regional and global centres of power will be concentrated in the next decade. As a result, the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project becomes an opportunity to strengthen European energy security.

KEYWORDS

energy; Caspian region; natural gas; security; Tran-Caspian gas pipeline; Turkmenistan; Southern Gas Corridor; TAP; TANAP.

ЭНЕРГЕТИЧЕСКАЯ АСИММЕТРИЯ КАСПИЙСКОГО РЕГИОНА. ПРОЕКТ ТРАНСКАСПИЙСКОГО ГАЗОПРОВОДА: ВОЗМОЖНОСТЬ УКРЕПИТЬ БЕЗОПАСНОСТЬ ЕВРОПЕЙСКОЙ ЭНЕРГЕТИКИ

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Неоспоримым фактом XXI века является растущая зависимость мировой экономики от энергетических ресурсов. Мировая экономика по-прежнему зависит от нефти и газа как основных энергетических ресурсов, и борьба за ресурсы доминирует в геополитике XXI века. Проблема ресурсов имеет много аспектов, их дефицит играет важную роль в разжигании или усилении конфликтов, поляризации и катализе сил. В этой метаморфозе системы международных отношений Каспийский регион предстает как пространство угрозы безопасности, а также как область геоэкономических возможностей. Система международных отношений претерпевает динамичные, сложные и асимметричные изменения.

Район Каспийского моря привлек всеобщее внимание с двух точек зрения. С одной стороны – конфликты на постсоветском пространстве, а с другой – крупные залежи углеводородов (нефти и природного газа). Эти два аспекта создали сложную ситуацию под влиянием «каспийского спора» со стороны ряда международных субъектов. Суть «каспийского спора» заключается как в контроле над добычей нефти и газа, так и в контроле над маршрутами, в основном сухопутными и подводными трубопроводами, по которым энергоресурсы транспортируются на мировые рынки.

Таким образом, в сложившейся системе международных отношений Каспийский регион приобретает статус «энергетического кольца» в Центральной части Евразии, где в ближайшее десятилетие будут сосредоточены инвестиции, интересы и инициативы региональных и глобальных центров силы. В результате проект транскаспийского газопровода становится возможностью укрепления энергетической безопасности Европы.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

энергетика; Каспийский регион; природный газ; безопасность; транскаспийский газопровод; Туркменистан; южный газовый коридор; трансадриатический газопровод (TAP); трансанатолийский газопровод (TANAP).

INTRODUCTION

The system of international relations is undergoing dynamic, complex and asymmetrical changes. Thus, the multipolarity of the world appears as a result of the changes in the balance of power due to the economic development and the expansion of the political influence of some Asian countries such as China, India and Eurasian countries such as Russia. Therefore, the fulcrum of global politics and the economy is moving inexorably towards the Asian space. In this context, the global competition for access to natural resources is evolving, increasing in direct proportion to the level of demand for energy resources from countries with emerging economies, industrialization and increased consumption due to increasing population, living standards and the intensification of the society using the technology.

An undeniable fact of the 21st century represents the growing dependence of the world's economies on energy resources. The world economy still depends on oil as a central energy resource, and the battle for resources dominates the geopolitics of the 21st century. The problem of resources has many facets, their deficit having an important role in triggering or amplifying conflicts, polarization and catalysis of forces (Chernow, 1998). In this metamorphosis of the system of international relations, the Caspian Sea region appears as a space of security threats, but also an area of geo-economic opportunities.

The Caspian Sea area has entered global attention through two perspectives. On the one hand - the conflicts in the post-Soviet space and on the other - the large deposits of hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas). These two aspects have created a complex situation following the effect of the "Caspian dispute" on the part of several international actors. The essence of the "Caspian dispute" lies both in control over oil and gas production and in control over routes, mainly land and submarine pipelines, through which energy resources are transported to world markets. Three of the top five countries with global natural gas reserves have access to the Caspian Sea. Russia ranks first with 38 trillion m^3 of gas, followed by Iran with 32 trillion m^3 of gas, and Turkmenistan ranks 4th with 19.5 trillion m^3 of gas (Fawthrop, 2021). Thus, the Caspian Sea region acquires in the current system of international relations a status of "energy ring" in central Eurasia, where investments, interests and initiatives of regional and global centres of power will be concentrated in the next decade.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES AND THE CONSTRUCTION CONDITIONS OF THE TRANS-CASPIAN GAS PIPELINE

Standard energy practice correlates new areas of opportunity with old areas of success. The Caspian region marks the latest case in this trend of the historical evolution of energy projects in the region. In the summer of 1906, the first oil pipeline in the South Caucasus was completed, connecting Baku and the Caspian Sea with Batumi and the Black Sea. The largest oil pipeline in the world at that time was 882 km long and 204 mm in diameter. Production capacity was 900 thousand tons of oil per year. In this context, it should be noted that the Caspian region, especially the oil fields of Baku, became the place where in 1863, Dmitriy Mendeleev proposed the idea of using a pipeline to pump oil (Транснефть…web).

Today, a century later, the pipeline built in 1906 has been replaced by a modern network of natural gas and oil pipelines connecting the South Caucasus to Europe through the TANAP and TAP energy projects, part of the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). However, in addition to the current pipelines in the region and those under construction (for example: Igdir-Sederek), there is another important piece that is missing: the Trans-Caspian pipeline, which can supply natural gas from Turkmenistan. A Trans-Caspian pipeline has the potential to significantly change the energy security situation of European states. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that the Caspian region has 48 billion barrels of oil and 292 trillion m^3 of natural gas in reserves. The Offshore fields account for 41% of Caspian total oil (19.6 billion barrels) and 36% of natural gas (106 trillion m^3). In general, a majority of offshore oil reserves are located in the northern Caspian Sea, while another majority of offshore natural gas reserves are located in the southern part of the Caspian Sea, where Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran are located. In addition, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) estimates another 20 billion barrels of oil and 243 trillion m^3 of natural gas in technically recoverable, as yet undiscovered resources. Many of them are in the southern Caspian Basin, where territorial disputes over offshore waters prevent their exploration (U.S Energy Information...web).

The outlook for Turkmen gas exports to European energy markets is based on the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) concept. First suggested by the United States in 1996, TCGP can deliver Turkmen gas through the Caspian Sea through the GSC pipeline network for terminals in Europe (Rahimov, 2019). Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Europe need the Trans-Caspian pipeline, with each actor in the international relations system following personal motives. Europe is actively looking for alternatives to energy resources imported from the Russian Federation in order to increase energy security. Azerbaijan is trying to strengthen its position as the largest exporter and transit country in the region. Turkmenistan is facing an economic crisis and is looking for new markets to sell its natural gas.

The signing by the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea (August 2018), which marked the distribution of each country's quotas in the Caspian Basin oil and gas fields and the construction of pipelines, allows Turkmenistan to register in the race for the supply of natural gas through the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) to the EU. As mentioned in the Convention document, the rules for the construction of gas pipelines provide for the agreement of only neighbouring countries and not all countries bordering the Caspian Sea (Министерство Иностранных Дел…web). Thus, after signing the agreement, Turkmenistan announced that it is ready to build the gas pipeline across the Caspian Sea. This can make significant progress towards the Southern Gas Corridor (GSC) project. The Trans-Caspian pipeline can increase gas transmission capacity from Asia to Europe by involving Turkmenistan as an additional gas supplier along with Azerbaijan.

Turkmenistan ranks 4th in the world in terms of the amount of gas reserves. Turkmenistan's participation in the GSC project could increase its natural gas supply, which is expected to reach 31 billion cubic meters in 2026 and 60 billion cubic meters in 2030 (Габриелян, 2017). In addition to these positive developments in regional energy cooperation, another factor contributing to the revitalization of the Trans-Caspian energy project is the convergence of the strategic interests between Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and the EU.

On 21 January 2021, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the joint exploration and development of the Dostluq / Dostluk (formerly Kepez) hydrocarbon field in the Caspian Sea (Report...web). The Dostluq / Dostluk field is located at an identical distance of 140 km from the land of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. The depth of the sea in the Dostluq / Dostluk area reaches 250 meters. The oil is found at a depth of 3.5 thousand meters. The field's oil reserves are estimated to be at about 60 million tons. At a depth of 4,000 meters, there are about 100 billion cubic meters of natural gas reserves. The Dostluq / Dostluk project opens up new opportunities in energy cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Azerbaijan has Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli submarine oil and gas pipelines in the Caspian Sea, so the country has the capacity to extract and deliver oil and gas quickly. The Memorandum signed by Baku and Ashgabat focuses on the interconnection of the hydrocarbon areas of Azerbaijan with those in Turkmenistan and is a tangible, fast and accessible way to demonstrate that the eastern part of the Caspian can be connected to the western part of the Caspian by a natural gas pipeline. Consequently, the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli pipeline and underwater infrastructure can be used to supply natural gas from Dostluq / Dostluk to the Southern Natural Gas Corridor. As mentioned by the Deputy President of the Turkmen state company "Turkmengaz", *the development of the Dostluq / Dostluk field in the Caspian Sea by Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan will allow the export of natural gas from Turkmenistan to the West.* The Dostluq / Dostluk field has long been a subject of dispute, which has not allowed Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to move to a practical solution on the issue of delimitation. The decision taken in January 2021 has indeed become a compromise and a benefit for both countries. Obviously, for Turkmenistan, this is a step forward in the sense that the share of oil and gas that will be produced will pass through the pipelines of the Southern Gas Corridor. At the 7th Ministerial Meeting of the Southern Gas Corridor Advisory Council (Azərbaycan Respublikasının Energetika...web), the Turkish Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Fatih Donmez drew attention to the agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan on the joint development of the Dostluq / Dostluk field in Caspic Sea. Fatih Donmez mentioned that the signed Memorandum will pave the way for the implementation of agreements on the transit of Turkmen gas to the Turkish and European markets. The minister added that Turkey is ready to provide all possible political, technical and economic support to both countries (Daily Sabah...web). In the Caspian energy geopolitics, Turkey is the most important transit state for Caspian hydrocarbons to the West and has close strategic ties with Azerbaijan - a state that provides energy resources from the Caspian. In this context, it should be noted that before the signing of the Memorandum between Baku and Ashgabat, in 2019 Ankara, Baku and Ashgabat signed a Declaration on energy development and cooperation, as well as the implementation of projects for the transportation and transit of energy resources (Kaya, İsmayılova, 2019).

By cooperating with Azerbaijan in the energy sector, Turkmenistan will be able to enter the European energy market and demonstrate its role as a major player in the EU's energy security. Officially, Ashgabat understands that this is an exceptional opportunity for Turkmenistan to develop its energy industry and increase its natural gas exports. On 11 February 2021, at the 7th meeting of the Ministers of the Advisory Board of the Southern Gas Corridor, the President of "Turkmengaz", Batyr Amanov, stated the following: *The southern gas corridor plays an important role in diversifying the European Union's energy supply, and the successful cooperation towards the Trans-Caspian pipeline can play an important role in the future in improving the energy security of Turkey and European countries. Turkmenistan, as an active participant in the system of international relations, also contributes to the development of global energy cooperation* (Президент Азербайджанской Республики...web).

EU-TURKMENISTAN NEGOTIATIONS

The countries of the European Union, whose main priority in the field of energy security is the diversification of energy supply sources, have supported the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project (Reuters, Exclusive ...web). EU representatives have repeatedly expressed their readiness to help attract investment and loans from European banks in implementing this project. Caspian oil and gas fields are relatively far from European export markets, requiring expensive infrastructure and large investments in oil transportation.

The basis for negotiations between the EU and Turkmenistan is the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2008 (European Commission…web). The document sets out the directions for the exchange of information on energy policy, the diversification of transit routes and the promotion of renewable energy and energy efficiency.

On 28-30 May 2019, the Turkmen delegation led by the President's Adviser of Turkmenistan on oil and gas issues, Yagshigeldy Kakaev, paid a working visit to Bruxelles (Ministry of Foreign…web). According to the Turkmen Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the visit, a technical meeting "Turkmenistan - European Union" took place with the participation of representatives of European Commission's General Directorate for Energy. Particular attention was paid to the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project. The parties discussed Turkmenistan's proposal to conclude a framework agreement on the energy partnership between Turkmenistan and the European Union. At the same time, issues related to the process of further approval within the EU of the framework agreement, the supply of natural gas to the EU and the Turkmenistan's position in the export of natural gas to European markets were taken into account.

The delegation from Turkmenistan also had a meeting with M. Shevchovich, the Vice-President of the European Commission for Energy Union and D. Ristori, the General Director of the European Commission's General Directorate for Energy. At the meetings, the parties discussed issues related to strengthen the cooperation between Turkmenistan and the EU in the energy sector. To this end, the parties reached an agreement on the continuation of a constructive dialogue between Turkmenistan and the EU, both at the highest level and in the form of a working group in Ashgabat and Bruxelles (Türkmenistanyň Daşary...web).

From the perspective of Ashgabat, the Trans-Caspian pipeline would also contribute to the diversification of its energy export market, but also to the European energy import market. Turkmenistan currently exports significant volumes of gas to Europe, indirectly through the Russian Federation's main transport network. A direct gas export corridor to the West would allow Turkmenistan to diversify its export routes, reducing the emphasised dependence of the natural gas exported to China.

The European Union, which has to import almost 80% of its natural gas, has implemented a legal policy to ensure the diversification of its energy markets (European Commision...web). The EU would like to reduce its dependence on Russian gas because of concerns about the monopoly of Russian supply to the European market. In 2018, Gazprom set the third consecutive record for natural gas exports to Europe and Turkey, delivering over 200 billion m^3 of gas, and in the coming years the figure may increase up to 35-38% in 2030 both in the volume of supplies and its share to the European market (Toporkov, 2019). It is therefore not surprising that Bruxelles is interested in continuing the SGC project route to the east, where the prospects for dialogue with Turkmenistan open up. However, regional competition in the Caspian Sea has limited Turkmen economic capacity, and the dichotomy of core values between the Turkmen regime and the EU presents substantial obstacles to the construction of a pipeline long before Turkmen gas enters the European energy market.

THE INTERNAL SITUATION IN TURKMENISTAN AND REGIONAL RISKS

In 2019, hydrocarbon exports accounted for 91% of Turkmenistan's exports, which have negligible economic diversity (OEC World...web). The Turkmen economy is among the least free in the world. Thus, energy companies will have to take serious risks if they invest in a Turkmen pipeline. In 2019, Ashgabat attracted a foreign direct investment contribution of only $ 2 billion, despite its significant natural gas potential (The World Bank...web). In context, Ukraine in crisis received $ 5.8 billion from foreign direct investments. Turkmenistan needs major investments to build the Trans-Caspian pipeline. By comparison, the SGC pipeline required $ 45 billion investments to export Azerbaijani gas to Europe (Bankwatch Network...web). Unlike Azerbaijan, which has received substantial tranches of investment from the European Central Bank and the Asian Development Bank, Turkmenistan is unlikely to receive such loans from other countries, with the exception of China. However, the volume of natural gas trade of the Chinese "Belt and Road" initiative with Turkmenistan has peaked. Taking into consideration that many countries have contributed to this type of high scale projects, Turkmenistan is expected to participate financially in the project. However, given the general state of the country's economy, it is expected that the project will most likely be implemented with the help of third-party financing institutions. In this context, the World Bank has offered to launch negotiations on Europe's supply of gas from Turkmenistan. In 2019, the World Bank's chief expert in oil and gas, Alexander Huurdeman, noted that "*the World Bank is ready to discuss with the Turkmen side the issue of natural gas supplies to Europe."* (RIA Novosti…web).

Turkmenistan currently supplies natural gas to markets in Russia and Asia, especially to China, through the "Central Asia-Central" gas pipeline, which has been operating since 1974. Although Russia has been the largest buyer of Turkmen natural gas until in 2010, price disputes and lower demand led Russia to reduce and eventually stop gas imports from Ashgabat in 2016 (Reuters...web). Moscow resumed imports of smaller quantities of gas in April 2019, with the Turkmen gas company Turkmengas signing a contract with Gazprom to supply gas until June 2024 (Gazprom...web). According to the contract, Turkmengaz will supply Gazprom 5.5 billion cubic meters of gas per year.

In search of new buyers of natural gas, Turkmenistan began negotiations in 2010 on the construction of the TAPI pipeline, a pipeline that crosses Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, from the Galkynysh field in southern Turkmenistan to the Indian city of Fazilka. However, due to the geopolitical situation in the region (the Taliban issue in Afghanistan, the tense situation between Pakistan and India), as well as the trade disadvantage of the project, the TAPI gas pipeline has not yet been built and remains suspended (Hydrocarbons Technology…web).

Thus, due to the lack of alternative routes and, consequently, alternative sales markets, despite huge natural gas reserves of around 19.5 trillion cubic meters, the volume of gas production and exports in Turkmenistan is modest.

In this context, the Government of Turkmenistan is considering other options for the supply of natural gas to world markets. The only possible way to export Turkmen gas to European markets remains the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline. Taking into consideration the growing demand for gas in Europe, whose growth is estimated at 19% by 2025 and 25% by 2030, the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project seems to be very relevant. However, the project must also be viewed in the light of regional risks (S&P Global Platts…web).

From a geopolitical point of view, Nagorno-Karabakh strikes the gas pipelines that start in Azerbaijan and head towards Georgia, Turkey, the final destination being the EU. The tense situation in Karabakh is destabilizing gas works and exports from Azerbaijan. In the event of a supply disruption due to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and a gas transit break, this gap can be filled by Russia through the TurkStream gas pipeline. The distance from the northern border of Armenia to the gas pipeline route in the South Caucasus is about 100 km. But, taking into account the last armed confrontations between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the summer-autumn of 2020, then we can mention that they started in Tovuz (the Armenian-Azerbaijani northern border). The Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline passes near Tovuz, which has its final destination in the EU. Moreover, the Tovuz region of Azerbaijan is strategically important for the implementation of large regional projects, with the participation of Turkey. In the event of hostilities in this part of the Armenian-Azerbaijani state border, Armenia could threaten critical energy infrastructure and transport lines to Azerbaijan, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the pipelines on the way to Georgia, Turkey and Europe. The only highway connecting Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia also crosses this region. Therefore, the escalation of armed confrontations in Nagorno-Karabakh can be seen in terms of

Azerbaijan's energy infrastructure, which is the key to the implementation of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline.

RUSSIA'S INTERESTS

As for the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline, Russia's interests are not seriously threatened. Considering that Russia through its energy routes, including "TurkStream" and "Nord Stream 2", is only able to exceed 65% of European gas demand, Turkmenistan through its interconnection to the SGC is not considered a strong competitor for Russia (Gazprom, Европейский газовый...web). Moreover, the launch of the Russian-Chinese energy project "Siberian Power 2" represents a new market for natural gas sales in Asia-Pacific for the Russian Federation. In this direction, in October 2015, Gazprom started the construction of the natural gas processing plant in Amur near the town of Svobodniy in the Amur region. The plant is one of the largest natural gas processing companies in the world. This is an important link in the technological chain of natural gas supply to China and Asia-Pacific through the "Siberian Power" gas pipeline. In June 2021, the first production line was launched. The launch of the next five lines will be synchronized with the increase in gas transport through the "Siberian Power" gas pipeline. From 2025, the natural gas processing plant in Amur will reach its maximum design capacity. The plant's processing capacity is 42 billion m^3 of gas per year (Gazprom, Амурский газоперерабатывающий...web).

There are other projects / agreements beneficial to Russia that affect the situation around the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline. For example, Gazprom and SOCAR have agreements on the supply of Russian gas to Azerbaijan. In November 2017, after an 11-year pause, the companies signed a contract to supply 1.6 billion m^3 of gas per year (Gazprom resuming gas…web). Azerbaijan is ready to purchase up to 3 billion m^3 of gas from Russia annually. Indirectly, this is a compensation for Russia, which remains outside the Southern Gas Corridor. Also, in the Caspian region in the energy direction are formed geopolitical triangles in the format Russia - Iran - Azerbaijan; Russia - Turkey - Azerbaijan. Thus, we can conclude that in the region there is an important advantage, the Caspian Sea creates an atmosphere of cooperation. The competition in the Caspian region predominates at the level of geopolitical strategies and investment portfolios and has no prospect of political-military exacerbation in the relationship between the five Caspian countries. However, third countries in the region, which do not share responsibility for security in the Caspian region, have other interests, which do not apply to the field of economic cooperation leading to a confrontation.

ROMANIA'S PERSPECTIVE IN THE TRANS-CASPIAN GAS PIPELINE PROJECT

In this energy equation of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline, Romania can play a special role, as the energy security center of South-Eastern Europe. In 2017, Turkmenistan's Deputy Prime Minister, Rashid Meredov, during a meeting in Bucharest with the

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, mentioned *that Romania is Turkmenistan's gateway to Europe for the export of Turkmen gas to Europe* (Președintele României...web). From this point of view, the interest in ensuring connectivity between Europe and Central Asia should be emphasized, by carrying out the Black Sea - Caspian Sea project, which can capitalize the direct connection over the Black Sea of Constanta seaport and Georgian ports Batumi and Poti. In this sense, Romania can implement the experience gained through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium project, which transports crude oil from Kazakhstan and Russia to the Black Sea. A similar consortium can be initiated to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan to the Black Sea from Georgian ports to the port of Constanta, or by connecting Turkmenistan to the AGRI energy project.

Romania is at a crossroads in terms of energy development. The country has a chance to take control of its energy future and become a model for other European countries seeking to secure new capital flows and energy efficiency. Moreover, Romania already has experience working with countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's national oil company (KMGI) has a growing central role in the growing public and private partnerships in the Black Sea region, which help fuel greater energy capacity and richer diversification. KMGI operates the largest refinery in Romania, Petromidia, where it has invested around $ 1.2 billion in new technologies and innovations, over a period of over ten years. KMGI has become the largest energy exporter in the country. At regional level, KMGI exports less than 20% of its energy resources, while the average for the whole of the European Union is close to 55% in terms of import dependence. Also, Romania, according to the OEC data from 2019, imports 45.8% of the oil needs (crude petroleum) from Kazakhstan (OEC, Romania Imports...web). Therefore, the network of common interest to Romania and the region is clear: Kazakhstan has energy resources, and Romania has the energy base and assets for the EU. Turkmenistan can be added to this network of interests, developing together with the Kazakh oil network, a gas pipeline consortium, forming an energy centre in Romania for the export of natural gas to South-Eastern Europe.

Romania has the capacity to take control of energy development and to become a catalyst for economic and energy integration in the European Union and in the Black Sea region. The assets and advantages of the geographical location and of the supply for establishing the connection between east and west are in Romania. Finally, Romania has the potential to become the energy centre of the Black Sea and the connecting state of the Black Sea - Caspian Sea, which can ensure energy security in the region in close cohesion with economic security and higher investment flows, which contributes to social protection and national growth.

Thus, the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline offers Romania a new agenda for discussions with Ashgabat, which includes an exchange of views on the stage and prospects for consolidating bilateral partnership relations in the energy directions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can mention that Turkmenistan has the capabilities to become the leader in natural gas exports from the Caspian region to Europe. After several years of analysing all possible export options, developments are gravitating towards the most logical of new possibilities, a Trans-Caspian pipeline to Azerbaijan and further through the already existing energy infrastructure to Europe.

Turkmenistan is the only state in the region that does not need other producers to achieve adequate export volumes, able to meet a certain demand on the European market.

However, the positions of potential participants in the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project are ambiguous. Turkmenistan, although it has shown its readiness to supply Turkmen gas to the European market, is still considering other options for new export routes. China remains the main consumer of Turkmen gas, and Ashgabat is in no hurry to provide energy concessions and direct access for Western companies to Turkmen gas fields. However, the works on the Azerbaijan - Turkey - Turkmenistan energy triangle shows enthusiasm for the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline, as its construction will inevitably lead to increased revenues and, most importantly, the geostrategic role of Baku, Ankara and Ashgabat for the European energy market. With regard to the EU, Bruxelles interest in the Trans-Caspian pipeline continues to be explained by the desire to reduce dependence on Russian gas supply by creating alternative supply routes. It is a topic that is repeatedly attracting attention, as the EU wants to increase its energy security.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly clear that Russia and Turkey, although they have a strained relationship on certain geopolitical issues, are still trying to negotiate and find common advantageous solutions in areas where their interests intersect. This creates a new security threat in the wider Black Sea region, and provides the parties with the necessary leverage to control the energy routes in the South Caucasus that have their final destination in Europe/ the EU.

The economic characteristics of the Caspian Sea region are an asset, but more precisely, the strong point of this region is the energy resources. The signal of "self-sufficiency related to the principle of state independence", exposed by Nursultan Nazarbayev, (Mansurov, 2014) is indirectly addressed to the EU, which in the event of the loss of energy resources in the Caspian region is doomed to energy dependence on imports only from the Russian Federation. Thus, the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline is seen as an opportunity and an inevitable vibration of the balance of supply and demand on the European energy market.

Completion of the construction of the Azerbaijan Southern Gas Corridor in Italy should lead Turkmenistan and Europe to make progress in the development of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline. The Memorandum signed by Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan in January 2021 opened a new era of energy cooperation in the Caspian Sea. This cooperation can create the basis for the Trans-Caspian pipeline, as well as improve energy security in the region. Moreover, following the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the summer-autumn of 2020, Azerbaijan has changed the geopolitical alignment in the region. Now, the opening of transport links and the strengthening of regional economic integration are of great importance for the consolidation of peace and the development of the region. In addition, the Trans-Caspian pipeline will be able to allow Armenia to buy gas from Turkmenistan, alternatively, the supply to Armenia can be made through the territory of Georgia, if the pipeline is built on the established route Azerbaijan - Georgia - Turkey. In conclusion, the

Trans-Caspian pipeline project has important potential for strengthening peace, security, economic cooperation and development in the South Caucasus. At the same time, it will help meet the EU's energy needs in the most economical way and without violating the principles of the European Green Pact.

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