

# Assessing the Strategic Implications of Aliyev's Visit to Bulgaria

## Capitalizing on the Deepening Energy Partnership with the EU

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Over the past several months, Azerbaijan has taken a number of steps to further anchor its position as one of the most reliable non-Western suppliers of hydrocarbons to the European Union and the Western Balkans, in accordance with a deepening strategic energy partnership between Baku and Brussels.

Perhaps the most illustrative recent example of how this is playing out is the set of outcomes achieved during Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's two-day official visit to Sofia, Bulgaria, that took place from 30 September to 1 October 2022.

On the second day of his visit, Aliyev attended a widely reported ceremony to inaugurate the Greece-Bulgaria Gas Interconnector (IGB), a key piece of energy connectivity infrastructure for a number of European countries that are currently experiencing serious problems with energy supply due to the West-led imposition of a sanctions regime against Russian natural gas. Bulgarian President Rumen Radev emphasized that the IGB is a "project of strategic importance for us [Bulgaria] and the European continent. Because by doing this, we are redrawing the energy map of Europe." The IGB is a 182-kilometer-long gas pipeline with a technical capacity of 3 bcm per year (its transmission capacity can be extended to 5 bcm per year) that allows Bulgaria, chiefly, to receive Azerbaijani gas via the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) segment of the Southern Gas Corridor.

It is important to emphasize that the Azerbaijani delegation arrived in Sofia in an expanded format. In addition to energy issues, there was a discussion of ways to develop economic ties and trade cooperation, including the transport sector. The talks that

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Azerbaijan's representatives held during this event involved not only leaders from the host country and the EU, but several other EU member states (most notably, Greece and Romania) as well as one or two Western Balkan states.

As befits decent diplomatic practice, Aliyev paid particular attention to enhancing relations with the host country. As he indicated during his visit, Bulgaria is a member of NATO and the EU and, therefore, the development of multifaceted cooperation on the basis of a formal strategic partnership signed seven years ago between Baku and Sofia is of great importance. In addition, Azerbaijan has a strategic position on the Caspian Sea whilst Bulgaria has one on the Black Sea, and the realization of relevant potentials creates new opportunities for both countries. As Aliyev stated, "the implementation of the Middle Corridor in the field of transport and the activity of the East-West transport corridor will certainly connect our bring even closer together."

Thus, the two-day visit was of exceptional significance, representing great prospects for the countries of Europe and Asia.

### *Europe Will Not Freeze! Azerbaijan Helping the EU in a Critical Moment*

The precipitating event to Aliyev's visit to Bulgaria was the 18 July 2022 signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on A Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy between Aliyev and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Baku. The myriad implications of this historical event were thoroughly examined by my IDD colleague Ahmad Humbatov in his 29 August 2022 analytical policy brief titled "Baku and Brussels Deepen Energy Cooperation: What to Expect from the Renewed Strategic Partnership?" and will not be repeated here. One of its most important clauses is a commitment by Azerbaijan to double the capacity of gas it supplies to the EU by 2027 in exchange for a commitment by the EU to reenable its member states to sign long-term contracts and secure the necessary financing from EU-controlled international financial institutions like the EBRD and the EIB. Much of the credit for this policy breakthrough goes to von der Leyen, who has time and again emphasized Azerbaijan's invaluable contribution to meeting the EU's diversification goals. As she stated during the IGB's inauguration ceremony, "I would say [that] today a new era for Bulgaria and Southeast Europe begins. Thanks to projects like [IGB], Europe will have enough gas for the winter."

The Sofia meeting is a paradigmatic example of how committed parties can move quickly to concrete deeds on matters of strategic importance in a matter of months. According to then-Caretaker Prime Minister of Bulgaria Galab Donev, "the new gas pipeline has sufficient capacity to meet all needs and ensure the diversification of natural gas sources and supplies to Bulgaria, which is of key importance for the country's energy security."

The onset of the present stage of the war between Russia and Ukraine significantly deepened the European continent's already-existing energy crisis. Political choices made by EU decisionmakers made matters even worse, which in turn at once accelerated long-term planning for a transition to green energy and heightened the geo-economic importance of contributions that stable non-Russian hydrocarbon suppliers like Azerbaijan can make to EU energy security. Existing infrastructure, a favorable geographical location and, most importantly, its reliability have made Azerbaijan the number one country that the European Union is counting on while working to reform its energy policy. To repeat what von der Leyen said in Sofia: reliable friends like Azerbaijan are helping to ensure that "Europe will have enough gas for the winter."

This is, of course, all well and good. But about one month after the Sofia meeting, one of Azerbaijan's deputy foreign ministers, Elnur Mammadov gave an interview to the *Financial Times* in which he cautioned that Baku will only be able to meet its commitment to double gas exports to Europe in the event the EU follows through on its own commitment to enable fresh investment in the Southern Gas Corridor and permit long-term purchase contracts. Mammadov was quoted as saying the following:

Whoever is interested in investing, whether it's public or private, they [must] put their money on the table in order for us to be able to increase their capacities. [...] I wouldn't say that there is a disagreement [with the EU], but this is [...] an important part of this puzzle. [...] Currently there's a desperate need for Europe to find alternative suppliers [and] we need to be sure that this [...] is not a sort of spontaneous demand in light of the war in Ukraine, which one day will end and then all of a sudden you start buying back from Russia and say, 'hey, well we don't now need the gas.'

The Sofia event, whose centerpiece was the IGB's inauguration ceremony, took place against the backdrop of a major accident on the Nord Stream gas pipelines, which the Russians attributed to sabotage, and the cessation of Russian gas supplies to a number of EU member states in response to the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime. This event once again emphasized the crucial importance of existing Southern Gas Corridor infrastructure and the aforementioned agreement to double the capacity of Azerbaijani gas flowing through the expanded pipeline network in less than five years' time. A very important factor in this calculus is that IGB has become the first project that ensures real diversification and energy independence of natural gas sources for Bulgaria and several of its neighboring countries.

In a recent IDD analytic policy brief, my colleague Damjan Krnjević Mišković has assessed two of the Azerbaijani president's cornerstone principles of statecraft thusly: "Aliyev keeps his word and Aliyev does not bluff." Baku's rock-solid reliability is highly valued not only by the EU but also by non-EU countries in Southeast Europe. For example, noting the importance of the launch of the project for official EU candidate state Serbia, its president stated the following during the IGB inauguration ceremony: "I have to say that without [the] presence of our friend Ilham Aliyev, it would not be easy for all of us to count on diversification of gas supply and power supply as well. And I see my dear friend that you became very popular in Europe."

During the working visit to Bulgaria, the opening of a SOCAR representative office in the country was also discussed. “I believe that this can be a sign of our fruitful cooperation,” said Radev. Aliyev echoed his Bulgarian counterpart’s assessment, adding that such a decision demonstrates the intention of the parties not to limit energy cooperation only to the export of natural gas. Azerbaijan’s president said that he and Radev also discussed the “export of electricity and mutually beneficial cooperation in this field, the transportation of crude oil to Bulgaria, and the possible participation of SOCAR in the renewal of energy infrastructure in Bulgaria.”

By launching IGB, Azerbaijan managed to rally several European countries around a common goal and spearhead the joint development of a new energy policy agenda. In this way, Baku has helped the EU, its member states, and several of its candidate countries move closer together in terms of concretely demonstrating solidarity towards one another in matters of energy policy. While some of these countries had in the past completely entrusted their energy security to Russia, others had preferred to look for new allies. The IGB as well as the Southern Gas Corridor project in its entirety has become a proof of responsibility and solidarity between Greece and Bulgaria. As Donev put it during the inauguration ceremony: “the interconnector will ensure diversification of sources and routes of supply of natural gas not only for Bulgaria but also will allow the transfer of natural gas from Greece to Romania, Moldova, Ukraine and to Central Europe.” In turn, the President of North Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski, expressed the opinion that “the new interconnector has come at a very important time for both the region and the continent.” Pendarovski congratulated Azerbaijan “for its constructive role in the whole process, as well as Bulgaria and Greece, which, by expanding their energy infrastructure, are helping to connect the whole region.”

Summing up the results of the IGB launch, Radev stressed that this critical piece of infrastructure had already significantly changed the energy map of Europe. Referring to a letter of proposal received from gas transmission companies and suppliers from four countries (i.e., Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia), a proposal was made to increase the volume of gas supplied by Azerbaijan in furtherance of the terms of the July 2022 MoU between Brussels and Baku.

### *New Impetus for Developing the Middle Corridor*

Another strategically important topic that was discussed during the Sofia meeting involved enhancing transportation connectivity within the framework of the Middle Corridor.

Azerbaijan has already created a modern transport network, which includes railways and roads. Its new international seaport at Alat allows for the dramatic increase of the volume of transit cargo through Azerbaijan. In his speech in Sofia, Aliyev stressed that, already “this year, the volume of transit cargo has increased by approximately 50 percent.

In the future, this number will be even greater. Therefore, Bulgarian and Azerbaijani transport workers will come together and exchange ideas about long-term and large-scale future cooperation.”

Within the framework of a meeting between Aliyev and the heads of several leading companies in Bulgaria, the deepening of cooperation in the field of economy and investment was also discussed. Bulgarian companies received an open invitation to carry out large-scale work in Azerbaijan, including in the territories liberated from the Armenian occupation.

The Middle Corridor project can bring cooperation between Azerbaijan and Bulgaria in the field of transport to a new level. At this stage, containers from Black Sea ports, including those located in Bulgaria, are already being delivered to the Port of Baku at Alat. Moreover, the existing joint land border with Türkiye allows Bulgaria to become a kind of gateway to the European Union.

The transport and logistics capabilities of Azerbaijan are of great importance in international cargo transportation from the Silk Road region. Against the background of the new geopolitical reality associated with the war in Ukraine, this entire region has become much more important not only for the transportation of energy resources, but also for international cargo transportation along the East-West route. For instance, the readout of a recent meeting between Aliyev and Chinese president Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Samarkand that took place in mid-September 2022 stressed the importance of cooperation within the framework of the Middle Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative projects.

This, of course, adds to the already numerous arguments in favor of launching the Zangezur Corridor, a connectivity route connecting mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave through the sovereign territory of Armenia. Actualizing this project, which is both an international obligation and a de facto prerequisite to signing a peace treaty between Yerevan and Baku, would not only provide the most direct and shortest route from Türkiye to Azerbaijan, but also between China, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Anatolia, and the European continent. Its eventual launch thus represents the only remaining opportunity for Armenia to integrate its economy into the logic of both the Middle Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative.

The big picture takeaway is that a failure to do so would harm Armenia and very few others. After all, a slightly longer route through Georgia already exists. All other states in the Silk Road region would manage quite well, as they have for the past three decades, in the event that Yerevan fails to fulfill its obligation for reasons that call to mind the English expression “to cut off your nose to spite your face.” At the end of the day, this is a chief consequence of the Sofia event: Azerbaijan’s growing geo-economic reliability and importance is entirely separate from Yerevan’s vacillations in the ongoing peace process. The sooner Armenia understands this, the better off it can become.