

# BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN ROMANIA AND AZERBAIJAN AS A BRIDGE FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN THE EXTENDED BLACK SEA AREA

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article explores the bilateral relations between Romania and Azerbaijan, positioning them as a bridge for regional integration in the extended Black Sea area. Since the proclamation of the independence of Azerbaijan, strong diplomatic bilateral ties led to 58 intergovernmental agreements, including a strategic partnership in 2009. All these make Romania the first EU nation to entertain relations at such level with Azerbaijan. Cooperation deepened across trade, energy, and transport, evidenced by rising trade volumes and the 2022 “Agreement on Strategic Partnership in Green Energy Development and Transmission”. Romania supports Azerbaijan within the Euro-Atlantic organizations and offers a model for EU/NATO integration. These relations foster enhanced EU-Turkic world cooperation and crucial connectivity between Europe and Asia.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Romania-Azerbaijan relations; strategic partnership; Black Sea region; regional integration*

## BILATERAL RELATIONS

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the former Soviet republics, as well as the fall of the socialist system in Eastern Europe, have opened new and vast opportunities for regional development between newly formed states.

Romania and Azerbaijan were fast enough to recognize each other’s independence, establish diplomatic relations, open embassies in the respective capitals, and begin to focus on the development of mutually beneficial political, economic and humanitarian ties. High level visits by the Presidents, Prime Ministers, Chairs of the Parliament and members of the Cabinet of Ministers as well as NGOs, academicians, media representatives and youth organizations have also taken place on a regular basis. By 2020, the two nations had signed a total of 58 intergovernmental agreements, including one on strategic partnership in 2009. In this respect, Romania became the first EU nation to sign such an agreement with Azerbaijan. These agreements have helped to deepen the cooperation in the fields of trade, investments, energy, transport, IT, agriculture, and connectivity.

As a result, the trade turnover between Romania and Azerbaijan increased steadily. Azerbaijani exports to Romania rose to US\$ 476.87 million during 2024, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade. Romanian exports to Azerbaijan in 2023 reached 43 million USD.

In 2023, the top exports from Azerbaijan to Romania were crude petroleum (\$273M), petroleum gas (\$171M), and nitrogenous fertilizers (\$37.4M). On the other hand, the top exports from Romania to Azerbaijan were refined petroleum (\$10.9M), hair products (\$5.88M), and packaged medicines (\$2.91M).

There are around sixty books covering the literary works of eminent writers and dramatists from both nations to have been translated to both Romanian and Azerbaijani languages under the initiative of the Romania-Azerbaijan Friendship Association and with the support of the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Romania. A bust of the national leader Haydar Aliyev was erected in Bucharest and a statue of the great Romanian composer George Enescu was erected in Baku. Currently, 44 fuel stations of the SOCAR brand are operating in Romania. Several Azerbaijani universities have engaged with Romanian universities in student/faculty exchange programs and research collaboration. Tourism has been on the rise between the two countries.

During the historic visit of President Aliyev to Romania in 2022, the “Agreement on Strategic Partnership in Green Energy Development and Transmission” was signed among Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary. Following this, Romania’s electric grid operator “Transelectrica” signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Azerbaijan’s “Azerenergy” OJSC, “Georgia State Electricity Network” and with Hungary’s MVM company on the creation of a joint venture dedicated to green energy, centrally located in Romania.

## REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Cooperation between Romania and Azerbaijan extends beyond bilateral relations to encompass collaboration within broader regional frameworks. Both countries are members of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, OSCE, Council of Europe and other Euro-Atlantic organizations. Within these organizations, they cooperate with other regional actors to develop energy security, trade, investment and economic projects, transportation corridors and other focus areas.

Romania, having successfully completed the accession to both the European Union and NATO often serves as a supporting country within these important institutions for Azerbaijani foreign policy. Both countries have cooperated within the extension programs of these organizations, such as NATO Partnership for Peace and EU Eastern Partnership program. Romania has supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan within these above-mentioned platforms and organizations and has advocated for the peace in the South Caucasus. Some analysts have claimed that Romania can serve as a role model for South Caucasus countries on the issue of integration with EU and NATO. Romania can also help build the capacity of these countries when it comes to the legislative reforms and understanding of EU rules and regulations.

During the early planning of the Southern Gas Corridor, some analysts and pundits have advocated for the construction of the gas pipeline from Azerbaijan to Europe via Romania, instead of Türkiye. This project even received a symbolic name: White Stream. It was widely supported by several countries and feasibility studies were conducted at the expense of EU member states. European Commission has also labelled the project as a priority and the Ukrainian government supported the extension of this pipeline to Crimea.

Eventually, the government of Azerbaijan decided to push for the pipeline going through the territory of Türkiye and further onwards to Greece, Albania, and Italy. Yet, the White Stream project showed the potential of Romania to be the critical transit country for the Caspian energy resources towards the European markets.

In fact, this same idea and route are currently being proposed by the governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, and Hungary for the export of green energy from the Caspian basin area towards EU region. The four respective governments have agreed on this project, which will derive solar and wind energy from Azerbaijan's newly signed projects with UAE company *Masdar* and Saudi Arabian company *Aquapower*. At the same time, Azerbaijan hopes to tap into clean electricity from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, within the newly signed trilateral agreement on transcaspian green energy corridor.

The war in Ukraine has shown once again the importance of the middle corridor in Eurasia to connect EU member states with China and Central Asia. The trade volumes via Azerbaijan have been steadily rising in the past years thanks to the construction of Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, the development of the Alat port, and of the free economic zone in the south of Baku. These are connectivity projects with Central Asia and China within the broader One Belt-One Road project. As EU wants to develop further trade ties with China, the role of Romania and Azerbaijan as connectivity bridges between two continents will further increase.

## PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE COOPERATION

The election of President Trump in the USA and the subsequent tectonic changes in the international politics open both risks and opportunities for the European security. For more than 80 years, Europe has been dependent on the USA for its hard, military security. NATO has been the guarantor of the European stability and the EU has been a dominant force for the economic development and integration. Under current realities, when both NATO and the EU are under attack, Romania and other members of the EU should and will look for other regional partners for security, cooperation, and development.

The Turkic world and, more specifically, the role of Türkiye and Azerbaijan will significantly grow in these new realities. Both countries have a good record of cooperation with European nations on matters such as migration, hard security, terrorism prevention, transit coordinators, energy issues, and connectivity with China and Central Asia.

As Washington decreases its support to and role in European security, EU members can deepen cooperation with the countries of Central Asia and Caucasus, as it was recently demonstrated by the joint summit of EU leaders and Central Asian chiefs of states. Progress in this direction would allow the EU to better connect to Central Asia and China on economic, trade and transit issues, to create a more aligned policy with regional governments on the matters of migration, knowledge and technology transfer, democratic reforms, modernization and prevention of radicalism, terrorism, and extremism.

Thus, Azerbaijan-Romanian relations can be an example and the backbone for this cooperation. In the past years, Hungary has been the forefront of the EU-Turkic world cooperation. Many inside the EU have even blamed the Hungarian leadership for this. Yet, time has shown that Hungary's outreach to the Turkic world has provided significant

political, economic, and trade advantages for the Hungarian state. Romania can similarly deepen cooperation with the regional powers and thus serve as a bridge between the EU and China via Caucasus and Central Asia.

Regional security in the wider Black Sea area will much depend on the outcome of the Ukraine-Russia war and the subsequent provisions of the peace agreement, which will determine the borders and spheres of influence in the region. Romania and Azerbaijan, alongside with Türkiye, can play an important role in the reconstruction of the Ukrainian lands, as well as in the restoration of peace, trust, and confidence in the region. They can also jointly support the developments in the Republic of Moldova, the stability and prosperity of this country being important for the sovereignty of both Romania and Azerbaijan. These countries have voiced strong support for the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.

## CONCLUSION

Enormous opportunities exist in the bilateral and multilateral tracks of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Romania, especially in the humanitarian field, where Romanian companies and organizations can share their experience with Azerbaijan and develop joint investment projects.

The Azerbaijani nation looks towards Romania with optimism and trust and, most importantly, believes that Romanian society better understands the challenges of transition and development in the post-Soviet space, and can help the countries in that space to better develop and prepare for the future.