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THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN IN THE EPICENTER OF GEOPOLITICAL STRUGGLE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Thanks to its oil and gas reserves, the Caspian basin has been included in the geopolitical interests of more than 30 states in the region and the world. It is no coincidence that the leaders of the Caspian states regard the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian as an instrument of the well-being of their countries, and also as a guarantor of stability and independence in the region. At the same time, the Caspian states (apart from Russia) are striving to join the ranks of equal subjects of international law, putting an end to their political and economic dependence on Russia in connection with the oil factor. Famous political changes that took place in the 90s XX century, led to the creation of three republics (Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia), which took different directions in the implementation of foreign policy. The region has become an arena for the struggle of large countries for Caspian oil and geopolitical rivalry. The main participants in this struggle were Russia, the United States, Turkey and Iran. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia fought to restore the lost positions and, together with Iran, to prevent Western countries from accessing Azerbaijan's oil. Meanwhile, the United States joined the struggle for the use of the region's energy reserves, the weakening of Russia's positions here, the isolation of Iran, and also through the strategic partner of Azerbaijan – Turkey, to establish its influence in the South Caucasus. In one of the strategically important regions of the world, the struggle for oil and geopolitical influence between the great powers of the South Caucasus began, which gradually grew into a powerful information war. Currently, the United States, Russia, Turkey and Iran play a key role in the information war in the South Caucasus, although the number of its participants is much larger. It was during this struggle for resources that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh became an instrument of influence on Azerbaijan in the hands of the opposing sides. However, as a result of the 44-day war, Azerbaijan ended its 30-year occupation and created a new geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus.

Key words: South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, information war, geopolitical competition, Caspian oil, Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia, USA, regional projects, foreign press, energy security, 44-day Karabakh war.

Абдуллаєва Фатіма Намік. Азербайджанська Республіка в епіцентрі геополітичної боротьби на Південному Кавказі

Завдяки своїм запасам нафти й газу Каспійський басейн перебував у колі геополітичних інтересів понад 30 держав регіону та світу. Не випадково лідери прикаспійських держав розглядають вуглеводневі ресурси Каспію як інструмент благополуччя своїх країн, а також як гарант стабільності й незалежності в регіоні. Водночас прикаспійські держави (окрім Росії) прагнуть поповнити ряди рівноправних суб'єктів міжнародного права, поклавши край своїй політичній та економічній залежності від Росії у зв'язку з нафтовим фактором. Відомі політичні зміни, що відбулися в 90-х рр. XX ст., привели до створення трьох республік (Азербайджану, Грузії та Вірменії), які взяли різні напрями в реалізації зовнішньої політики. Регіон перетворився на арену боротьби великих держав за каспійську нафту та характеризується геополітичним суперництвом. Головними учасниками цієї боротьби стали Росія, США, Туреччина та Іран. Після розпаду СРСР Росія вела боротьбу за відновлення втрачених позицій і спільно з Іраном – за недопущення країн Заходу до нафти Азербайджану. Тим часом США приєдналися до боротьби за використання енергетичних запасів регіону, спрямованої на ослаблення в ньому позицій Росії, ізоляцію Ірану та встановлення за допомогою стратегічного партнера Азербайджану – Туреччини – свого впливу на Південному Кавказі. В одному зі стратегічно важливих регіонів світу почалася боротьба за нафту та геополітичний вплив між великими державами Південного Кавказу, яка поступово переросла в потужну інформаційну війну. Сьогодні США, Росія, Туреччина та Іран відіграють ключову роль в інформаційній війні на Південному Кавказі, хоча кількість її учасників набагато більша. Саме в ході цієї боротьби за ресурси вірмено-азербайджанський конфлікт через Нагірний Карабах опинився в руках протидіючих сторін як інструмент впливу на Азербайджан. Однак у результаті 44-денної війни Азербайджан припинив 30-річну окупацію та створив нову геополітичну ситуацію на Південному Кавказі.

Ключові слова: Південний Кавказ, Азербайджан, інформаційна війна, геополітична конкуренція, каспійська нафта, Нагорний Карабах, Росія, США, регіональні проекти, зарубіжна преса, енергетична безпека, 44-денна Карабахська війна.



Introduction. Azerbaijan's role in the system of modern international relations is played by two important factors: oil and geopolitical position. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the struggle for both of these factors entered a new phase, as a result of which a number of innovations appeared in international relations. Among them, information warfare has become of great importance. Speaking about the peculiarities and limitations of the international struggle for oil, Rauf Garadagh, one of the Turkish authors, wrote that "oil is a raw material that has a huge impact on all aspects of human life <...> The controversy around it confirms the idea of the great influence of oil. The two largest oil companies in the world are still in a big and very serious struggle. This is a struggle between the giant trust Standard Oil Company, founded by the American billionaire John Rockefeller, and the Anglo-Dutch Royal Dutch-Shell Group and Russia" [1, p. 3].

Preconditions for the formation of modern regional political processes. The global changes that took place in Eurasia at the end of the twentieth century did not go unnoticed in the Caspian region, and the three republics of the region – Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia – declared their independence and joined the world community. *The New York Times* noted that "it is worth killing for Azerbaijani oil. Azerbaijan's three oil fields in the Caspian Sea are among the last undiscovered oil reserves in the world. An alternative to the Persian Gulf can be considered four billion barrels of oil reserves" [2, p. 139].

The geopolitical interests of both Azerbaijan and the major Western powers are determined by income from the sale of Caspian oil [3, p. 133].

That is, now the Caspian region has become a "testing ground" for world spheres of influence in the struggle for oil. As you know, this region connects Europe and Asia, including the Middle, and the Caucasus, while a road passes through it to China, India, the Middle East, and Azerbaijan has already become, one might say, the logistics center of the world. 33 developed countries today are on the difficult Great Silk Road (East-West and North-South), passing through this region, and each of them has a certain political concept and campaigns in relation to this path. Already in the first half of the twentieth century, the interest of large geopolitical players in the Caspian region was due to certain strategic and economic factors. British Foreign Minister Balfour once said that "the only thing that interests us in the Caucasus is the railway along which Baku oil goes to Batumi" [4, p. 43].

According to modern Western and Russian political science, the geopolitical rivalry around the South Caucasus associated with the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian Sea is primarily covered by the media: newspapers and magazines, news agencies, television and the Internet. After the well-known political changes of the 1990s, the events and processes around the Caspian basin, which is considered the "fifth energy reservoir" in the world, have been and remain associated with the struggle for oil. Under the influence of the concept of "oil and communications" of the national leader Heydar Aliyev, the world began to realize the importance of oil Baku, and on this basis the region became a field of geopolitical competition and information warfare. Note that, according to experts, the Caspian basin has more than 200 billion tons of hydrocarbon reserves, so the basin is included in the list of the world's largest energy sources. Azerbaijan accounts for about 5 billion tons of these reserves and 5–6 trillion cubic meters of gas, and the struggle to seize such enormous wealth has been going on for decades. This indicator, which accounts for about 4–5% of the world's energy resources, is of great importance both at the global and national levels and has a particular impact on Azerbaijan's position among the world powers [5, p. 6].

Over time, as the statistics of oil field development were updated, the circle of players interested in Caspian oil expanded, and new "oil players" began to appear. Dozens of multinational companies from all over the world have joined the ranks after the signing of the "Contract of the Century". Despite the fact that enough time has passed since the signing of the oil contracts, interest in this issue remains relevant. So, in the news feed *Earth Times* from 07.01.2008 under the heading "Turkey and Syria want to cooperate in the oil sector" there was a commentary on the decision of the oil companies of the two countries to cooperate, that is, to create a joint company for the extraction and exploration of oil. The parties discussed the establishment of joint cooperation on the import of oil and gas from Azerbaijan and Iran through the Turkish oil company, as well as the possibility of connecting Syria to the Turkish gas network. The report assesses the opinions of experts on the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Sea, touches on the participation of companies from Turkey and other countries in energy production, and also draws attention to the activation of "new oil players" in this work [6].

The term "information war" appeared in the mid-1970s, when the confrontation between the United States and the USSR, between socialism and capitalist systems, escalated again. The term was first coined by the American physicist Thomas Ron. He argued that the weakest point of all the armies of the world was information. The author compared the "information war" with a "double-edged sword" and argued that it can be used to justify and protect something, and also be used as a weapon of attack [7, p. 3].



In the 05.02.2008 issue of *Media Newswire of the United States*, information was provided on the book by Professor Ion Ratiu “The Spirit of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus” (Oxford University Press, 2008). The book examines the origins of conflicts in the South Caucasus, highlights issues related to the Caspian oil of Azerbaijan and its impact on the world market. The author objectively analyzes information on the distribution of Baku oil, the impact of this raw material on competition in the region, on the means of oil export and oil pipelines, and also gives a comprehensive analysis of Azerbaijan’s successful oil and communication policy based on the balance sheet policy in general [8].

Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, in the process of the transformation of the South Caucasus into a center of competition for various transnational companies and states, Russia, Turkey, the USA, Iran, EU member states and other sovereigns entered the arena of competition in the struggle “who will win”. As a result of the creation of an independent Azerbaijan state, as well as independent Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, these countries and Russia and Iran became the five Caspian states. Such a change in the geopolitical situation forced the United States to reconsider its geopolitical line in this direction, which was especially evident in August 1997, when three oil agreements were signed between Azerbaijan and the United States. Thus, the United States also included this region in the zone of its vital interests [9, p. 7]. Z. Brzezinski gave an objective assessment of the transformation in the late XX – early XXI centuries of Azerbaijan as the central state of the Caspian region into an arena of competition for major powers and one of the most important geostrategic centers of world politics. Thanks to its rich energy resources, it began to play a key role in the geopolitical processes of the region and the world. “This is a bottle cap that stores the wealth of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia” [10, p. 62]. It was noted that “if Azerbaijan is completely under Moscow’s control, then the independence of the Central Asian states can be considered practically meaningless. If the independence of Azerbaijan is annulled, its significant oil reserves may be under the control of Russia” [10, p. 62]. The region as a whole will fall under the sphere of influence of Russia.

It should be noted that in modern political science, the events around the South Caucasus, the conflict of geopolitical interests and the game around the production and export of hydrocarbon resources in the region are analyzed very seriously, justified by outputs and proved by various development scenarios. Demonstrating the position of the United States in the region, the American politician P. Goble emphasized the importance of Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus region, noting that “Azerbaijan is not a bridge between the West and Central Asia, but a serious barrier between the resource-rich East and Russia” [11, p. 82]. That is why the leading Western media are carefully analyzing issues related to Azerbaijan, especially trying to freeze the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in order to de facto consolidate the consequences of the aggressive policy of Armenia.

The growing interest of Western countries and transnational oil companies in Azerbaijan in national and foreign media since the first years of independence was primarily due to the role that the region’s energy resources will play in the energy supply of Europe. In this sense, the European policy of diversifying energy sources was in the interests of Azerbaijan. V. Guluzade, one of the Azerbaijani authors who approached the problem from this point of view, said in an interview that “the participation of the world’s largest powers in the economic projects of our region will create stability here, because their interests in the Caspian oil will not allow destabilization”. We can supply oil to Armenia, but they must leave our lands. Armenia is the second largest recipient of US aid after Israel. The settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict largely depends on the nature of the struggle for oil and the influence of the Armenian lobby in the United States [12].

National leader Heydar Aliyev proved the need to use oil, the national heritage of Azerbaijan, not only for economic, but also for political purposes, and expanded the activities of our national diplomacy in this direction. The main goal here was to achieve a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in favor of Azerbaijan. In an interview with national and foreign media, H. Aliyev has repeatedly stated that political chaos and instability in Azerbaijan are a direct result of the inability to pursue a correct policy towards Caspian oil [13, p. 5]. As a result, the leaders of Western countries with great interests in Azerbaijan, including the United States and Great Britain, made a number of statements on Nagorno-Karabakh, condemning the aggression of Armenia. Western countries, which openly opposed Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, indicated that they want to continue negotiations with the new government of Azerbaijan on an oil agreement [14, p. 28].

As you know, as a result of long diplomatic and political negotiations, the first oil “Contract of the Century” was signed on September 20, 1994 in Baku on the Azeri, Guneshli and Chirag fields of the Caspian Sea. The analysis shows that in fact there was an information war to prevent the signing of the agreement. Russia, the United States and France, especially the Armenian lobby in these countries, tried to prevent the signing of the agreement by spreading rumors that the reserves in the Caspian Sea are many times smaller, that is, insignificant. After signing the agreement on September 20, BP President John Brown said: “Today the eyes of the whole world are riveted on Baku, because this agreement is a symbol of a new stage, new international



relations <...> Today we are one of the largest projects of the new century, we are laying its foundation. In particular, this will help change the form and content of business relations in the field of energy supply and, in general, ensure the long-term development of the Azerbaijani people" [15, p. 35]. The "Contract of the Century" has become a constant focus of attention of domestic and foreign media. Shortly after the agreement was signed, the British newspaper *The Independent* reported that Azerbaijan had divided its oil among several foreign companies to maintain the geopolitical balance in the region. The American side called it "a great turning point in the region", "an important moment in modern history" [16, p. 17]. It should be noted that the media of different countries assessed the importance of Caspian oil based on the interests of the state they represent, and there were media that considered the signing of the oil agreement contrary to international law and called for a boycott [17].

The signing of the "Agreement of the Century" meant not only the lifting of the information blockade around Caspian oil, but also the lifting of the blockade at all levels around Azerbaijan as a whole. It is no coincidence that in 1996–1997 several more oil agreements were signed. Russia, Iran and Turkmenistan disagree on the issue of determining the legal status of the Caspian Sea and how to deliver primary oil to the world market [18]. In the current situation, the national press is sensitive to the "games" around the Caspian oil and gives a detailed analysis of the dividends that oil contracts will bring to Azerbaijan.

Russian media coverage of the region's geopolitical and geo-economic situation underscores the importance of the region for Russia and other countries. The Republic of Azerbaijan, through which dozens of land and air routes pass, actually became the center of the region. This was recognized by both Western and Russian politicians, and the importance of the South Caucasus for Russia's national security was emphasized. One of the Russian researchers K. Hajiyev wrote that "Azerbaijan plays a central role in the Caspian Sea – Caucasus region. Azerbaijan is both strategically advantageous, and its main advantage is Caspian oil" [4, p. 410].

«Российская газета», «Российские вести», «Советская Россия», «Русский вестник», «Независимое военное обозрение», «Аргументы и факты», «Аргументы недели», «Коммерсантъ» and others waged a real information war with Azerbaijan from for the export routes of Caspian oil and the legal status of the sea, and it soon became clear that most of the biased media coverage were Armenian lobbyists or funded by Armenia. Armenian media, Russian and Arab media tried to convince Western oil companies that there is no oil potential in Azerbaijan, and sought to prove the inefficiency of the Baku-Ceyhan export pipeline, which was built on September 18, 2002. In those days, the Arab news agency MENA reported that 60 anti-BTC NGOs had approached the United States for funding, including the Friends of the Earth NGO, which was particularly active. The Armenian population of Javakheti in Georgia threatened to blow up the pipeline if it was built [19].

Influential Western media have combined the security of Caspian oil and the security of the South Caucasus in an attempt to create a fear syndrome, noting that the pipeline is under the threat of terrorism. In an analysis published on November 8, 2007, *Reuters* reported that Western embassies in the region would be targeted by terrorists. The report notes that Azerbaijan is of great importance to the West as an oil exporter, but the religious and secular situation here was presented as a potential threat. Zeyno Baran of the Hudson Institute, which studies Islamic radicalism in the region, said any terrorist attacks that can be prevented today could occur in the future and result in serious tragedies in the region. The author explained that he meant: "oil and gas pipelines in Azerbaijan are very well protected by the state, but they are in danger" [20].

Recognizing Azerbaijan's successes and prospects as a transit country, the influential US Intelligence and Analysis Center *Stratfor* emphasized the importance of oil and geopolitics, Russian-Western cooperation and said that if Russia joins the BTC, the pipeline will work at full capacity. The state can earn at least \$ 9 million a day. The center noted that once Russia was against the idea of building a pipeline, but now it makes no sense, the pipeline has been launched, and Russia can take advantage of it. Analysts believe that this option could be much cheaper for Russia, because transporting 250 000 barrels of oil a day promises great economic benefits. Russia should change the direction of the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline and transport oil to the West via Azerbaijan, since there is no alternative to the Azerbaijan-owned pipelines [21].

A successful policy towards Azerbaijani oil has led to the emergence of new players in the geopolitical arena of the South Caucasus, and Turkey has worked especially hard in this direction. Thus, in the issue of the "Zaman" newspaper dated 14.12.2007, a report on the visit of Turkish President A. Gul to Kazakhstan was published. At a press conference in Astana, President Nazarbayev answered a question about the prospects for transporting Kazakh oil through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline: "According to our estimates, Azerbaijani oil will not be enough for the BTC pipeline. Without Kazakh oil, this pipeline will be empty. We now have pipelines to China and Russia. We have also started building ports on the Caspian Sea. As soon as the work is completed, Kazakhstani oil will be transported by tankers via the BTC pipeline" [22]. The arrival of China in the South Caucasus as a geopolitical player was in Turkey's interests. China was seen as a strong adversary



to Russia. On the other hand, if the statement that Caspian oil would not fill the BTC were real, Western companies would not be interested in its implementation. Turkey tried to attract China to the region as an active player after the implementation of the BTC, which would make Turkey's position more stable in relation to Russia and the West.

The influential American newspaper *The Wall Street Journal*, referring to the geopolitical situation in the Caspian basin, stated that competition for energy resources makes it impossible to transport Turkmen gas to Europe. It seems that Russia and Iran will not allow the transportation of Turkmen gas through the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, and from there to Europe through Russia, and uncertainty about the legal status of the Caspian Sea will be used as a good reason. On the other hand, the West was concerned about the resumption of the dispute between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan over the fields in the Caspian Sea and the inability of the parties to compromise, although the United States and Europe supported Azerbaijan. The newspaper explains Turkmenistan's 25-year gas contract with Russia and the construction of a new pipeline to China by geopolitical competition, which has made the idea of a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline vague and unrealistic [23]. It is no coincidence that the *Nabucco* project could not be implemented in the course of this struggle, but the support of the West made it possible to implement the TANAP-TAP project, which replaces it.

Although Western and Russian media gave priority to the struggle for control over the energy resources of the Caspian, the issue of geopolitical dominance in the region was directly related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Despite the efforts of Western diplomacy, it was not possible to force Russia to retreat on this issue. Having political superiority in the region, the Russian elite could not block economic projects, was forced to lag behind in commercial matters and thus worked into the hands of Azerbaijan. After the discovery of BTC, Robb Sobhani, a professor at Georgetown University in the United States, wrote an interesting article in the *Washington Times*. According to the author, BTC is of great importance not only economically, but also politically and diplomatically, and "in order to maintain this strategic advantage, necessary for energy security, Washington should consider some initiatives. In particular, the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh should be a priority for American diplomacy" [24]. It is clear that both Russia and the West have turned the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict into an instrument of geopolitical struggle in the region.

Conclusions. As the projects on the transit of energy carriers through the South Caucasus were implemented, materials about Azerbaijan created an interesting mosaic in almost all world media. Kamal Eyvazli, one of our compatriots living in England, told an Azerbaijani journalist: "I think there are two factors that make independent Azerbaijan so popular in Europe: oil and politics. National leader Heydar Aliyev laid the foundation for influential politics. The European and American press, speaking about Azerbaijan, also pays more attention to these two factors" [25]. It should be added that the current President Ilham Aliyev is successfully continuing Heydar Aliyev's oil diplomacy. It was thanks to the power of oil that Azerbaijan defeated Armenia and its allies in the diplomatic and political struggle, creating a new geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus, clearing Nagorno-Karabakh of Armenian bandits as a result of a "lightning-fast" 44-day war in September – October 2020 [26].

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