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Mixing geopolitics and business: How ruling elites in the Caspian states justify their choice of export pipelines[☆]

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ABSTRACT

As political elites in the Caspian countries see themselves as actors who determine the fate of their countries and not as mere objects of international power struggles or as managers of pipeline projects, this contribution examines how domestic elites assess different pipeline projects. Based on close to 1,500 TV reports from national TV stations, which are seen as the mouthpiece of the ruling elites, we analyze the arguments surrounding oil and gas pipeline debate and construction in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

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1. Introduction

Although the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Sea Basin are relatively small in global comparison, they are considered of major geopolitical importance by external powers, as they are not controlled by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) or by the Russian Federation. Therefore, they offer the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and China the chance to diversify their energy supplies. This opportunity has resulted in a geopolitical struggle over control of Caspian oil and gas production and transportation.

Accordingly, most existing publications on the topic analyze the exports of crude oil and natural gas from the

Caspian Sea region and the construction of export pipelines from a purely geopolitical perspective; nearly all accounts focus exclusively on the actions of big international players and refer to Caspian country's foreign policy options and preferences only in passing. Although the geopolitical perspective provides important insights, it oversimplifies international relations in the region and neglects Caspian countries as actors in their own right.

When Azerbaijan developed a more critical stance towards Western projects in the debate on the Nabucco pipeline and at the same time supported Georgia against Russian pressure, the deficit in the literature became obvious. This foreign policy move could not be explained by the increased influence of any one major outside power.

[☆] This article has been written within the framework of the international research project 'Internal discourses and foreign policy-making in the Caspian region: Export pipelines, geopolitics and cultural orientation in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan' which is being conducted by the Research Center for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany, since 2011. The project has received financial support from the Volkswagen Foundation, which is not related to the carmaker of the same name.

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Consequently, some researchers have started to examine Azerbaijan's foreign policy in its own right. Kjaernet comes to the conclusion that 'Azerbaijan has exploited its new situation to position itself as an increasingly powerful and independent actor in the South Caucasus. Due to its energy independence, Azerbaijan has been able to do this without suffering any reprisal from the Russian side' (Kjaernet, 2010: 158). Similarly, Ismayilov (2010: 4) argues: 'In an open effort to further diversify its linkages with the outside world and the ensuing dependencies and interdependencies that come from them, Baku is now keen to have its gas distributed among as many players in the region as possible, rather than limiting its exports to a single (western) market' (For a similar, but less pronounced assessment see Ipek, 2009). Franke et al. argue that in its policy towards the EU, Azerbaijan – confident of its potential for the export of energy resources – 'sees the EU on the receiving end of bilateral relations' (Franke, Gawrich, Melnykovska, & Schweickert, 2010: 149). Similar studies on foreign policy orientation have been conducted for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (cf. e.g., Ipek, 2007; Anceschi, 2008; Horák, 2012; Kubicek, 2013. An older work on the countries under study is Kuzio, 2000).

In a similar vein, we argue that political elites in these countries clearly perceive themselves as actors who determine the fate of their countries and not merely as objects in an international power struggle. These elites discuss their export options not only in terms of economic gains but also see their decisions on export pipelines as the bases for strategic alliances with broader implications. Thus, an analysis of their reasoning relating to specific pipeline projects will help to provide a better understanding of their perceptions.

This article continues with a brief description of the methodological approach. Then, a short overview of the pipeline options available for Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and their public assessment by the ruling elites of these countries is given. In the final part of the article, we present data on pipeline-related arguments and their connection to actual pipeline projects in order to draw some broader conclusions.

2. Methodological approach

The research project, on which this contribution is based, examines pipeline-related debates in three Caspian oil and gas states. It analyses mass media reporting on the issue, including TV, mainstream print media, business presses and news websites. The project also looks at selected decision-making processes through process tracing. In addition, interviews with relevant decision-makers and journalists have been conducted.

The objective of the analysis presented here is to study the arguments for and against specific pipeline projects or export directions as they have been voiced by the ruling elites of the three countries under study, i.e., Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and to put these arguments into a broader context. The period covered in the analysis commences from 1998, when the first new pipeline project started to gain momentum, until 2013, when decisions had finally been made on all major pipeline projects.

The ruling elite can be defined as a complex aggregation of powerful political, economic, and social actors, the inner leadership of which is located in a country's government and legislature (Higley & Pakulski, 2011: 951). Elite members 'are distinguished by their proximity to political decision-making and ability to influence political outcomes regularly and substantially' (Higley, 2011: 829). Notably, the composition of the ruling elites in the three countries under study has not changed substantially during the period under study (cf. e.g., Denison, 2012; Guliyev, 2012; Umbetalieva & Satpayev, 2012).

This analysis focuses on public statements of the ruling elites for two reasons. First, the (honest) private opinion of elite members is rarely accessible to researchers. Second, in order to understand political decision-making processes, it is important to understand the official positions of relevant actors, as these positions are used to legitimize policies and, thus, shape the policy output. We, therefore, think that in order to understand the rationales behind foreign policy concerning export pipelines in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, it is important to study how the relevant decision-makers publicly justify their decisions.

In order to establish the official view of the ruling elites, this study focuses on TV reporting for a number of reasons. First, as the issue of export pipelines is of major importance for all three countries, TV reports offer continuous coverage, whereas official statements are only released at the rarer moments when important decisions are being made, e.g., when a pipeline contract is being signed. Second, as TV is the by far most important source of news for the population in all three countries, political leadership has established rather tight control. As a result, TV presents only views accepted by the ruling elites, while – at least in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan – some print and internet media side with the political opposition and present views that are highly critical of the ruling elites (cf. e.g., Thomas, 2005; Freedman, Shafer, & Antonova, 2010; Anceschi, 2011; Junisbai, 2011; Kazimova, 2011; Freedman & Shafer, 2014).

The role of TV as the mouthpiece of the ruling elites is confirmed by our analysis. Out of a total of 954 quotes in TV reports on export pipelines in the three countries under study, not a single one is from an opposition politician, while 65% of all pipeline-related quotes on Turkmenistan's TV are from the country's president himself. In Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the share of presidential quotes is slightly over 25%. The total share of ruling elites in pipeline-related TV quotes amounts to some 75% in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and 85% in Turkmenistan. The remaining quotes are mainly from foreign politicians on the occasion of official visits.

The analysis of TV reporting on export pipelines is based on transcripts in an English translation provided by the BBC Summaries of World Broadcasts database, as no other source with such a broad coverage is available. Still, as the BBC does not offer full coverage of TV reporting, the text corpus does probably not contain all reports. However, with a total of 1,479 pipeline-related reports, the corpus provides a good impression of overall reporting patterns. The TV stations included are Turkmenistan's state TV

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