

CURRENT ISSUES OF THE EU-TURKMENISTAN RELATIONS**Темиров Ануар**E-mail: temirov.ir@gmail.com

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Despite the relations between the EU and Turkmenistan have been developing since the collapse of the Soviet Union this topic is less been discussing in academic field. Turkmen leadership, proclaiming the policy of neutrality in the early 90-s, abstained from being involved in regional disputes but at the same time was interested in foreign direct investments as well as technologies coming from Europe. This redefined economic cooperation and energy sector as main dimensions in the EU-Turkmenistan bilateral agenda. Moreover, it is of particular importance to underline role of Turkmenistan in order to diversify gas imports for Europe. In 1991 Turkmenistan emerged as one of the most important players on gas market possessing 13,4 trillion cubic meters of proved gas reserves [1, p. 6]. Most importantly, the European Union perceived Turkmen gas as a strategic source to reduce its dependence on Russia. However, European policy-makers faced an issue of transportation of Turkmen gas to the EU which was exported via ex-Soviet pipelines located on the territory of Russia before Russian-Turkmen gas dispute emerged in 2016. Turkmen foreign policy on seeking new transportation routes coincides with the EU projects on diversification of gas suppliers.

The most important direction of the European policy towards Turkmenistan explicitly covers pipeline projects. Reiterating intentions from both sides to diversify energy routes, Turkmenistan and the EU signed Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of energy in 2008 which was a part of the EU strategy towards Central Asia adopted in 2007 [2]. The idea of Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, firstly advocated by the United States in 1996, to connect Turkmenistan with Azerbaijan through the Caspian Sea found its heavy support among the European Union. Caspian Sea convention signed in Aktau by all 5 littoral states gives a green light for negotiation processes regarding trans-Caspian projects as previous attempts failed because of lack of documents which determine the status of the sea. Nevertheless, Caspian energy expert Marika Karayianni argues whether the project is still necessary when Azerbaijan discovered Shah-Deniz gas field and launched Shah-Deniz 2 project in 2018 which is supposed to extract 16 billion cubic metres of gas every year [3]. Comparatively to Turkmenistan, Azeri officials have succeeded in diversification of transit routes bypassing Russia. The country is working on connectivity among pipelines of the so-called Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) which includes South Caucasus pipeline, Turkish Trans Anatolian Pipeline and Trans Adriatic pipeline [4]. Initially, Turkmenistan was viewed as a main participant in the SGC project as the European Commission started discussing possibilities of construction of Nabucco pipeline in 2002. According to the project, Turkmenistan needed to export 10 bcm of its gas via Nabucco pipeline [5]. Although, concrete steps towards implementation of plan have not been taken leaving Turkmenistan out of the EU energy diversification strategy. Nowadays, Turkmen officials actively invite European counterparts to invest in pipeline projects and gas fields. Highlighting importance of the second biggest gas field in the world Galkynysh as well as successful launch of East-West gas pipeline within the country in 2015 as a domestic preparation of Turkmenistan for further entrance to the European markets, head of national gas company “Turkmengaz” Myrat Archaev addressed the words to the participants of German-Turkmen business forum held in February, 2019. Nevertheless, Turkmen policy of strengthening its positions on international energy market did not meet the expectations. Moreover, while using successfully constructed direct pipeline, nowadays only China can be considered as a permanent client of Turkmen gas. While unresolved gas disputes with Russia significantly affected export capabilities of Turkmenistan, relationships with Iran, particularly in energy sector, have also deteriorated. It

signifies that Turkmenistan is facing geopolitical impasse in terms of transportation of its resources and it is unlikely that the EU would help the country to break it.

It is worth mentioning that the EU member states have still not ratified Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in 1998 which needs to be considered as a benchmark of relations between the bloc and the country. Furthermore, the EU ratified the similar agreement with 4 other Central Asian countries and, in case of Kazakhstan, even attained to increase level of cooperation by signing Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 2015. Instead of this, interim agreement on trade and trade-related matters, entered into force in 2010, serves as a basis for the EU-Turkmenistan trade relations [6]. One of the main obstacles to ratify the PCA is a deteriorating situation with respect to human rights and rule of law implementation within the country. The biggest trade partners for Turkmenistan within the EU are Germany and Italy. However, export of Turkmenistan in terms of bilateral trade with Germany does not reflect its capability, taking into consideration tremendous gas reserves in the country (Table 1).

Year	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2018
Export	\$359,1 million	\$432,9 million	\$515,8 million	\$335 million	\$409,7 million	\$170,9 million
Import	\$52,4 million	\$65,5 million	\$12,8 million	\$10,5 million	\$6,5 million	\$2,9 million

Table 1. Trade between Germany and Turkmenistan (export from Germany, import to Germany) [7]

In terms of foreign investments, Turkmenistan has not become attractive for European companies which prefer other neighboring countries in the Caspian region. For instance, investments of the Italian oil and gas company Eni since the start of its operation in Turkmenistan in 2008 have exceeded \$ 2 billion while Kazakhstan has received more than \$ 15 billion of investments from this company [8, 9]. Lack of transparency, high level of corruption within the country as well as limited access to unbiased economic data are among crucial factors that create barriers for foreign investment flows [10, p. 36-37]. German company DEA, witnessing bureaucratic difficulties and not receiving permission for drilling, withdrew from the country in 2015 [11]. Negligence of government officials in cases of receiving work permissions and accommodating employees of the European companies ENI and Schlumberger resulted in expulsion of foreign workers from the country [12]. The EU countries, being main investors in Kazakh and Azeri economy, do not occupy high positions in Turkmenistan giving the way to China, Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan [13].

As mentioned before, Turkmenistan's unwillingness to improve situation regarding human rights blocks further aspirations of the country to become attractive destination for investors. Also, the improvement is a cornerstone in the field of realization of pipeline projects as the EU countries pay particular attention on following democratic principles and building open society. Human Rights Watch recent report shows that basic principles of freedom of expression and media are ignored by the government representatives [14]. The European Union is using traditional platform of Human Rights Dialogue for discussing relevant question and developments in human rights implementation with Turkmen officials. The 11th meeting in Ashgabat on March 29, 2019 was marked with preoccupation of European counterparts with lack of real improvements despite introduction of legal standards and adopting laws on protection of human rights [15]. Turkmen youth suffering from ban to leave the country or using credit cards while being abroad has recently faced another limitation. On February 4, 2019 the European Union prohibited Turkmen airlines to enter the EU countries [16]. It is questionable if the step is related to domestic policy features to follow authoritarian development path. In spite of this, the unilateral act creates more obstacles for young people to visit a continent which is perceived as motherland of democracy.

Since obtaining its independence, Turkmenistan has been positioning itself as a pivot in terms of containing spread of threats from Afghanistan which can easily reach Europe if the Central

Asian region plunges into instability. The right assessment of this factor by the European analysts is serving to avoid sanctions being put on the country which is already suffering from energy crisis. Turkmenistan not relying on Russian military presence in the region tries to create positive atmosphere in relations with Afghanistan. The state is pushing forward risky TAPI project to be implemented receiving commitments from the Taliban representatives who expressed its readiness to guard Afghan part of pipeline on the country's territory [17]. The European Union, being interested in increasing border security of Turkmenistan, supports Border Management Program BOMCA and Countering Drug Trafficking Program CADAP within the framework of the EU-CA relations. Two programs reflect interests of the EU to prepare Turkmenistan and other Central Asian republics for resolving crisis situations mainly on the southern borders with Afghanistan. Regional cooperation is based on strategies of the European Union towards Central Asia. The new document is in the process of drafting and it is important to highlight that Turkmenistan is actively participating in negotiations concerning the strategy. For example, opening Konrad Adenauer Stiftung seminar in Astana in 2019, special representative of the EU for Central Asia Peter Burian emphasized that the EU would aim to pay attention for the integrational processes within the CA region and summits of Central Asian leaders on the occasion of Nauryz celebration would receive more support from the EU. However, absence of Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov at the first meeting in Astana in 2018 put question whether Turkmenistan is willing to be engaged in regional affairs. P. Burian shed a light on Turkmen position explaining that Turkmen high-level official seeks stronger ties with partners in the regions but prefers experts and Foreign Ministries' representatives to prepare agenda of the summit in advance and to meet before the high-level talks, making cooperation more fruitful.

In conclusion, Turkmenistan, being viewed as important state, mainly in the Caspian basin as well as Central Asia, is losing its attractiveness for European investors as the country has not succeeded with fighting against corruption and has preserved authoritarian regime. Political will for openness and building democratic institutions will substantially increase prestige of the country abroad but the question is how long citizens will suffer from mismanagement within the system. Despite this fact, Turkmenistan stays as a vital partner for European countries, making efforts for stabilization of Afghanistan. After complete withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, Turkmenistan will be viewed as bulwark of stability in the region and the main aim of American and European politicians will be not giving a chance for the terrorists to reach gas-rich country's resources.

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