

The Russia-Ukraine War: Perspective of Azerbaijan

Vasif Huseynov*

For the three countries of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), the Russia-Ukraine war has been both a challenge for their national security and a test for the resilience of their foreign policies. Armenia, an ally of Russia with multiple institutional and contractual arrangements, and Georgia, a country with traditionally strong pro-Western aspirations, sought to remain cautiously neutral and supportive-at-a-distance, respectively, without unequivocally allying with one side against the other. For Azerbaijan, a country that has, since the mid-1990s, prioritized its national interests in pursuing its foreign policy (i.e., maintaining more-or-less equal distance from all major powers while avoiding any alliance or confrontation with one against the others, which is often portrayed as a 'balanced approach'), the tense security situation in the close neighbourhood caused by the war reaffirmed the utility of this strategy. Having signed declarations on allied cooperation with Türkiye (June 2021) and Russia (February 2022), Azerbaijan sought to minimize the threats to its national security – which was critical amidst occasionally escalating tensions with Armenia. This has been, however, a remarkable challenge for Azerbaijan's foreign policy as the country is in a strategic partnership with Ukraine and cannot ignore the security challenges and humanitarian tragedies Ukraine has faced. The analysis pursued in this paper is focused primarily on the policy responses of Azerbaijan vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine War. Through analysing how Azerbaijan reacted to this war, the paper argues that, although Baku continued to take a vigilant stance in the West-Russia standoff and sought not to provoke a negative reaction towards itself, it provided tangible support to Ukraine and declared support for the country's territorial integrity.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Balanced Approach, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia



* **Dr. Vasif Huseynov** is a Head of Department at the Center for Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center) and adjunct lecturer at Khazar University in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has caused a geopolitical earthquake in international relations, triggered the most severe confrontation between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War, and reverberated across the entire globe. The countries in Russia’s neighbourhood, particularly those that once belonged to the former

The South Caucasus, a region that is located between Russia in the north and Iran in the south, is one of those regions whose future fate is inextricable linked with the outcome of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Soviet Union, are among those most concerned about the existing dangerous security situation in the region and its future consequences. The South Caucasus, a region that is located between Russia in the north and Iran in the south, is one of those regions whose future fate is inextricable linked with the outcome of the ongoing war in Ukraine. For the three countries of the region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), a lot is at stake – a situation which requires them to

formulate their external policies with the utmost care not to jeopardize their independent statehood and sovereignty, regained at great cost in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Therefore, amidst the Russia–Ukraine war, each of the three countries, depending on their geopolitical weight, calculated its position (each to a specific extent) in a way that is intended to neither antagonize Russia nor undermine its relations with the West and Ukraine. Russia’s still strong political and military influence over the South Caucasus leave these countries few choices in this critical geopolitical upheaval.

This paper is primarily focused on an analysis of Azerbaijan’s reaction to the Russia–Ukraine war. The next section provides a brief overview

For Azerbaijan, however, its stance appeared more as a continuation of the conventional adept foreign policy (also interpreted as a ‘balanced approach’) that the country has undertaken since the mid-1990s.

of the approaches of the three countries of the South Caucasus vis-à-vis this war. It reveals that all three countries have sought to avoid totally allying with or antagonizing one side in the war against the other – a situation that is conditioned mostly by their geographic location. In the case of Armenia, this policy approach can be characterized as cautious neutrality, which is a relatively new phenomenon given Armenia’s participation in Russia-led political and military integration projects. Given Georgia’s aspirations to join the Euro-Atlantic structures, its stance was about being distantly supportive

towards Ukraine without radically provoking Russia. For Azerbaijan, however, its stance appeared more as a continuation of the conventional adept foreign policy (also interpreted as a ‘balanced approach’) that the country has undertaken since the mid-1990s. This approach, which tends to be conceptualized¹ by some Azerbaijani politicians also as ‘multivectoralism’, implies maintaining equal distance with major powers, pursuing mutually beneficial relations with them wherever possible, and avoiding any alliance with one geopolitical pole against the others. Accordingly, the rest of the paper, by closely following Azerbaijan’s foreign policy since the start of the Russia–Ukraine war on 24 February 2022 and primarily examining media news and the public statements of political leaders, explores how Azerbaijan applied the balanced approach in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war.

Brief Overview of South Caucasian Countries’ Approaches

The political leadership of **Georgia** – the only country in the South Caucasus aspiring to become a member of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as the only country in the region in a conflict with Russia – initially held a rather restrained position that fell in the middle between that of Russia’s ally Armenia and the more balanced one of Azerbaijan.² Georgia is threatened, among other factors, by a possible escalation in its conflict with Russia and the annexation of its separatist (currently occupied) region of South Ossetia (Tskhinvali) by Russia. Hence, the government of Georgia refused to join the Western sanctions against Russia but, through the National Bank of Georgia, declared that it “cannot and will not help” anyone seeking to evade these sanctions.³ According to Georgia’s Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, alignment with the strictly imposed sanctions regime of the West would only damage Georgia and

1 Atlantic Council, *A Conversation with Hikmet Hajiyev*, *Atlantic Council*, June 11, 2019, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFC2hOVh-yQ&ab_channel=AtlanticCouncil (accessed: April 14, 2022).

2 Menabde, G., “Georgian Parliament Supports Ukraine, but Fears Mentioning Russia”, *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasian Daily Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 16, February 9, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/georgian-parliament-supports-ukraine-but-fears-mentioning-russia/> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

3 National Bank of Georgia (2022), “Statement of National Bank of Georgia,” available at: <https://nbg.gov.ge/en/media/news/statement-of-the-national-bank-of-geor-23> (accessed: April 12, 2022).

pressure Armenia to join the Russia-Belarus Union State.⁸ They believe this threat can be neutralized or mitigated through the normalization of Armenia's relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan. For example, an Armenian journalist from the media channel Hetq.am tweeted that “against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine”, the normalization of Armenia's relations with its Turkic neighbours “becomes vital” and could provide space for manoeuvring “should [Armenia] face harsh choices”.⁹

For **Azerbaijan**, the Russia–Ukraine war has been another test for the balanced approach of the country's foreign policy that it has maintained since the mid-1990s. As opposed to Georgia, a country that is in a conflict with Russia and as such is threatened by the situation in Ukraine, and Armenia, a country that is economically and militarily dependent on Russia, Azerbaijan has had much more room for manoeuvre through these troubled times. Being economically and politically more independent thanks to rich oil and gas revenues, a growing non-energy economic sector, and having a strong strategic alliance with Türkiye, combined with the authority Azerbaijan has in multilateral diplomacy, official Baku feels more confident in dealing with foreign policy challenges. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan remains vigilant in foreign policy performance to avoid risks that might undermine its national security. Azerbaijan works with its northern neighbour on a number of economic issues, which culminated in the recent declaration the country signed with Russia on allied interaction on 22 February 2022.¹⁰ On this basis, the country demonstrated support to Ukraine without provoking

Being economically and politically more independent thanks to rich oil and gas revenues, a growing non-energy economic sector, and having a strong strategic alliance with Türkiye, combined with the authority Azerbaijan has in multilateral diplomacy, official Baku feels more confident in dealing with foreign policy challenges.

8 Huseynov, V., “Post-War Status Quo in South Caucasus Trembles While Russia Fights on in Ukraine”, *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 47, April 5, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/amidst-russia-ukraine-war-armenia-seeks-to-normalize-relations-with-turkey/> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

9 Martirosyan, S., “Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations & eventually the establishment of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations becomes vital. If done properly & diplomatically, this could provide space for maneuvering should we face harsh choices”, Twitter, March 6, 2022, 12:15 a.m., Available at: <https://twitter.com/sammartirosyan9/status/1500203381469683712> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

10 Huseynov, V., “Azerbaijan and Russia Sign Declaration on Allied Cooperation”, *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 25, February 25, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-and-russia-sign-declaration-on-allied-cooperation/> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

discomfort in its relations with Russia. This paper will expand on the details of Azerbaijan’s policies vis-à-vis the Russia–Ukraine War and its implications for regional security in the South Caucasus.

Reassurance for a Balanced Approach in Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy

Azerbaijan is pursuing a policy of non-alignment in international relations, although unlike, for example, Moldova, its constitution does not prohibit joining military alliances. Since 2011, Azerbaijan has been a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an international movement uniting 120 member and 17 observer countries. Based on the understanding of non-participation in military blocs, the NAM was formally established by 25 states, including India, Egypt, and the former Yugoslavia, at the Belgrade Conference in September 1961. Azerbaijan has chaired the NAM since 2019 and actively promotes the goals and principles of the movement in international relations. Based on these principles, the government of Azerbaijan used to characterize its policy of non-alignment as an imperative conditioned by its geographical location. According to Hikmet Hajiyev, Azerbaijani presidential aide on foreign policy, the geopolitical realities of the region urge Baku to pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy course and develop close relations with various regional and global players.¹¹

In upholding these principles, Azerbaijan seeks to avoid allying with one geopolitical pole at the expense of the country’s relations with other actors.

In upholding these principles, Azerbaijan seeks to avoid allying with one geopolitical pole at the expense of the country’s relations with other actors. A quick overview of Azerbaijan’s foreign policies in recent years supports this inference. For example, in June 2021, Azerbaijan signed the Shusha Declaration on allied relations with its major ally Türkiye. The countries vowed to militarily support each other if either side is attacked by another state or group of states.¹² In February 2022, Azerbaijan signed another declaration with Russia in Moscow¹³ – a move that

11 Atlantic Council, *A Conversation with Hikmet Hajiyev*, Atlantic Council, June 11, 2019, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFC2hOVh-yQ&ab_channel=AtlanticCouncil (accessed: April 14, 2022).

12 President.az, *Azerbaijan, Turkey signed Shusha Declaration on allied relations*, June 15, 2021, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/52115> (accessed: June 3, 2022).

13 Mfa.gov.az, *No:056/22, Azərbaycan Respublikası Xarici İşlər Nazirliyinin Mətbuat xidməti idarəsinin məlumatı [No:056/22 Information of the Press Service of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan]*, February 22, 2022, available at: <https://mfa.gov.az/az/>

was interpreted by some Azerbaijani experts largely as a move for reassurance that Russia will not “pursue similar policies toward Azerbaijan [as Russia has carried out against Georgia and Ukraine] in exchange for Azerbaijan recognizing Russia as a dominant power in the broader former Soviet region”.¹⁴ However, this declaration does not bear the same legal status for Baku as the one signed with Ankara, which has been ratified by the parliaments of both states.

In March 2022, Baku made another important decision and signed a deal with Iran to establish new transport and electricity connections linking the western part of the main territory of Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic via the north-western region of Iran.¹⁵ This was a timely move that assuaged Tehran’s concerns regarding the transportation projects promoted by Azerbaijan after the Second Karabakh War and provided necessary opportunities for Iran to become part of the transit hub emerging in its northern neighbourhood.

Azerbaijan is also seeking to develop relations with the EU and is keen to sign a new framework agreement with this union in the near future.¹⁶ Azerbaijan is also negotiating with its European partners about the possibility of increasing natural gas exports to the EU and thus help the efforts of member states to mitigate the risk of dependence on single sources and supply routes.¹⁷

The tragic experience of Ukraine came on the heels of the country’s abandonment of neutrality and the launch of efforts to accede to the EU and NATO, and demonstrated the failure of the West to protect Ukraine against the threats and challenges this choice brought about. For Azerbaijan, this reaffirms the importance of the balanced approach in the

news/no05622 (accessed: June 3, 2022).

14 Huseynov, V., “Azerbaijan and Russia Sign Declaration on Allied Cooperation”, *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 25, February 25, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-and-russia-sign-declaration-on-allied-cooperation/> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

15 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev received delegation led by Iran’s Minister of Roads and Urban Development*, March 11, 2022, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55603> (accessed: June 3, 2022).

16 Apa.az, *Azerbaijani FM: “Signing of agreement between EU and Azerbaijan in 2022 is possible”*, February 4, 2022, available at: <https://apa.az/en/foreign-policy/azerbaijani-fm-signing-of-agreement-between-eu-and-azerbaijan-in-2022-is-possible-367613> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

17 Caspiannews.com, *Azerbaijan, EU Working to Expand Natural Gas Supplies to Europe*, June 4, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-eu-working-to-expand-natural-gas-supplies-to-europe-2022-6-2-30/> (accessed: June 10, 2022).

Azerbaijan's external orientation. Hence, the signing of the declaration with Russia can be interpreted, *inter alia*, as an attempt by Baku to ensure that Azerbaijan will not face any threats from the north similar to those faced by Ukraine and Georgia. This is critical for a number of reasons, but primarily because of the lack of any capable balancing power that would dare to openly and militarily confront Russia in the case of a challenging security situation that might involve Azerbaijan.

This cautious approach is related, among other factors, to the fact that Azerbaijan–Russia relations have had problematic phases, both historically and over recent years. Russia's traditional support to Armenia in the former Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, Moscow's military supplies to Yerevan prior to and during the Second Karabakh War, and the deployment of Russian troops as peacekeepers in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan after this war constitute the rationale for Baku's vigilance in its Russia policies. Although the bilateral political ties at the top level remain stable, there are political circles in Russia that have threatened Azerbaijan in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, and the situation became tense in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan in March 2022. For example, Russian State Duma (lower chamber of parliament) deputy Mikhail Delyagin, quite contrary to the spirit of the Azerbaijan–Russia declaration on allied interaction, threatened Azerbaijan on state television with “harsh and unequivocal punishment” if the country disobeys Moscow's demands and sides more closely “with Türkiye, an ally of the United States”.¹⁸ On the Telegram channel, Delyagin asked his followers whether they thought Russia should attack Baku's oil industry infrastructure with nuclear weapons in response to Azerbaijani “aggression” in the Karabakh region.¹⁹ Although he later apologized for this comment, and although the spokesperson of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied such plans against Azerbaijan,²⁰ the scandal caused concern among Azerbaijani society.

18 Ictimai TV, *Another provocation on the Russian state TV channel: a threat was voiced against Azerbaijan*, March 29, 2022, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLmJRhQpoEg&t=51s&ab_channel=İCTİMAİTV (accessed: April 14, 2022).

19 APA, *Russian state channels continue provocation against Azerbaijan: Proxy MP Delyagin on a leading role*, March 29, 2022, available at: <https://apa.az/en/political/russian-state-channels-continue-provocation-against-azerbaijan-proxy-mp-delyagin-on-a-leading-role-video-371972> (accessed: June 10, 2022).

20 Apa.az, *Mikhail Delyagin's statements about Azerbaijan are unacceptable - Russian MFA*, March 29, 2022, available at: <https://apa.az/en/cis-countries/mikhail-delyagins-statements-about-azerbaijan-are-unacceptable-russian-mfa-updated-372020> (accessed: June 10, 2022).

Azerbaijan and Ukraine are Strategic Partners

Thus, amid Russia's war against Ukraine, the geopolitical situation in the neighbourhood has forced Azerbaijan to maintain the balanced approach in foreign policy that this country consciously adopted in the mid-1990s. Despite this balance at the geopolitical level, the political leadership of Azerbaijan, albeit it has refrained from openly criticizing Russia, has declared indirect support to Ukraine by highlighting the importance of international law, especially sovereignty and territorial integrity, as the basis for achieving a ceasefire between the conflicting parties. Azerbaijan and Ukraine officially consider each other 'strategic partners' and have consistently supported each other's territorial integrity and the inviolability of their internationally recognized borders.²¹ This has been critical in the context of the occupation of part of Azerbaijan's sovereign territories by Armenia in the past and Russia's occupation of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.²²

Despite this balance at the geopolitical level, the political leadership of Azerbaijan, albeit it has refrained from openly criticizing Russia, has declared indirect support to Ukraine by highlighting the importance of international law, especially sovereignty and territorial integrity

The continuation of this support amid the Russia–Ukraine tensions came as a surprise for many observers, who expected Azerbaijan to unambiguously side with Russia in all critical international issues following the Moscow Declaration of February 2022. Just a month before the breakout of the war, and amidst the escalation of hostilities, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev was conspicuously the only leader from the post-Soviet space (excluding the Baltic States) who travelled to Kyiv, where he signed a number of agreements on deepening bilateral cooperation with Ukraine and declared his support for the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty.²³ The visit was also seen as an attempt of Baku to mediate between Kyiv and Moscow,

21 President.gov.ua, *Presidents of Ukraine and Azerbaijan signed a Joint Declaration on Deepening Strategic Partnership*, January 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezidenti-ukrayini-ta-azerbajdzhanu-pidpisali-spilnu-deklar-72389> (accessed: June 4, 2022).

22 Azernews.az, *Baku: Ukraine crisis should be solved in line with int'l law*, 25 February 2022, available at: <https://www.azernews.az/nation/189785.html> (accessed: June 4, 2022).

23 President.gov.ua, *Presidents of Ukraine and Azerbaijan signed a Joint Declaration on Deepening Strategic Partnership*, January 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezidenti-ukrayini-ta-azerbajdzhanu-pidpisali-spilnu-deklar-72389> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

the national digitalization goals as a part of the e-governance strategy.⁶¹

Huawei, with extensive project experience innovative and intelligent solutions across the globe,^{62 63} is now leading efforts to build smart settlements and the broadband ecosystem that will accelerate the spread of solid internet connections in the highlands and mountainous areas of the Karabakh region with innovative yet affordable devices.⁶⁴ In this context, Huawei's digital solutions are being employed to track, accumulate and diagnose issues in agriculture, healthcare, and the environment to improve food safety and availability in relatively unpopulated rural areas.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, Huawei has deployed its AirPON end-to-end (E2E) hardware solution – a newly developed gigabit optical network services introducing speedy internet connection – in Aghali village of Zangilan district of the East Zangezur economic region of Azerbaijan.⁶⁶

In the wake of massive reconstruction works, Huawei's smart village concept and the digital services that envisage bolstering the revitalization of rural industries and the resettlement of IDPs are also being applied in Aghali village, specifically in the agriculture, education, healthcare, rural estate management, and renewable energy sectors.⁶⁷ In practice, Huawei's smart village concept, combined with powerful data analysis platforms, remote diagnostics services, surveillance tools, solid internet networks, and AI-enabled frontier technologies, can improve the quality

61 Anews.az, *Azerbaijani State Customs Committee introducing innovative technologies*, September 12, 2019, available at: <https://anews.az/en/azerbaijani-state-customs-committee-introducing-innovative-technologies-photo/> (accessed: March 19, 2022).

62 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev visited Jabrayil and Zangilan districts*, April 26, 2021, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/51295> (accessed: March 10, 2022).

63 Ping. G., “Go far and build a smart city with a sense of gain, happiness and security”, *Huawei*, available at: https://e.huawei.com/cn/publications/cn/ict_insights/ict31-digital-government/cover/smart-city (accessed: March 7, 2022).

64 Guliyev, V., “How Huawei contributes to digitalization in Karabakh”, Op-Ed, *Daily Sabah*, January 11, 2022, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/how-huawei-contributes-to-digitalization-in-karabakh> (accessed: March 3, 2022).

65 Azertag.az, *Huawei to apply its most advanced technologies in Karabakh*, April 28, 2021, available at: https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Huawei_to_apply_its_most_advanced_technologies_in_Karabakh-1767419 (accessed: March 4, 2022).

66 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev visited Jabrayil and Zangilan districts*, April 26, 2021, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/51295> (accessed: March 10, 2022).

67 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev viewed works done under the “smart village” project implemented in Aghali village, Zangilan district*, October 21, 2021, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/53631> (accessed: March 12, 2022).

as President Aliyev telephoned the Russian leader Vladimir Putin on his return from Ukraine.²⁴

In the course of the visit, the leaders of Azerbaijan and Ukraine expressed readiness to intensify cooperation in almost all spheres of their relations, including in fighting hybrid threats and, in the defence industry field, by completing current and developing new joint projects. For Paul Goble, a former US diplomat and presently an analyst at the Jamestown Foundation, “the fact that Aliyev went to Kyiv at this point, even though he and [President of Ukraine Volodymyr] Zelensky met as recently as at the end of last year in Brussels, underscores how resolutely Baku backs Kyiv on the issue of Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea.”²⁵

This closeness in relations was also reflected in the desire expressed by President Aliyev and President Zelensky to establish a transport corridor that would link the countries of the GUAM group together and with Europe.²⁶ The group, which includes Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova and was established in 1997, had mostly focused on economic affairs in recent years. The GUAM group has been traditionally seen by Moscow as a ‘Western-backed attempt’ of these four countries to form a counterweight against the Russia-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).²⁷ The mention of this format in the “Joint Declaration of the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Ukraine” during the January visit was largely interpreted as an attempt to reinvigorate GUAM. The possibility of Türkiye’s joining GUAM or the establishment of trilateral strategic cooperation among Türkiye–Ukraine–Azerbaijan has also been on the agenda of expert discussions in recent years.²⁸ Therefore, it is no coincidence that Russian political

24 President.az, *Ilham Aliyev made a phone call to President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin*, January 18, 2022, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55276> (accessed: June 10, 2022).

25 Goble, P., “As Tensions Over Ukraine Rise, Baku Signals Support for Kyiv, Worrying Moscow”, *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 19, No. 6, January 25, 2022, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/as-tensions-over-ukraine-rise-baku-signals-support-for-kyiv-worrying-moscow/> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

26 President.az, *The Presidents of Azerbaijan and Ukraine made press statements*, January 14, 2022, available at: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/55259> (accessed: June 4, 2022).

27 Radiokp.ru, *Voennyi ekspert Aleksandr Jilin: Vizit Aliyeva v Kiev - eto podgotovka k reanimatsii antirossiyskoy organizatsii GUAM*, January 17, 2022, available at: <https://radiokp.ru/podcast/utrenniy-mardan/543158> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

28 Goble, P., “Turkey seen seeking to reanimate GUAM as anti-Russian alliance,” *Euramaid Press*, February 27, 2016, available at: <https://euromaidanpress.com>

observers became alarmed that these ideas, if realized, would deal another blow to Russia's influence in its neighbourhood.²⁹

The bilateral relations between Ukraine and Azerbaijan in the fields of food security, agriculture, and energy are also of strategic importance for the sides. Azerbaijan is a major and reliable exporter of crude oil to Ukraine. Prior to the latest Russia–Ukraine war, 80% of Ukraine's total oil purchases were provided by Azerbaijan, which made Ukraine one of the top three buyers of Azerbaijani oil.³⁰ In 2021, Ukraine purchased about 850,000 tonnes of oil for \$373.4 million. Ukraine also expressed interest in buying natural gas from Azerbaijan in an attempt to diversify its energy sources away from Russia.³¹ The sides made the first practical steps in this direction in 2020 by carrying out reverse-flow deliveries of gas from Türkiye through the Trans-Balkan gas pipeline into the gas transmission system of Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania and on to Ukraine.³²

Against the backdrop of such a strategic partnership developed between the two countries, Azerbaijan did not confine its support for Ukraine only to political statements amidst the country's war with Russia. On 26 February 2022, Baku donated a reported €5 million (\$5.6 million) worth of medicine and medical equipment as humanitarian relief to Ukraine.³³ Georgia was the only other country in the South Caucasus that sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine, though in a smaller amount of

com/2016/02/27/Turkey-seen-seeking-to-reanimate-guam-as-anti-russian-alliance-euromaidan-press/ (accessed: June 10, 2022).

29 Radiokp.ru, *Voennyi ekspert Aleksandr Jilin: Vizit Aliyeva v Kiev - eto podgotovka k reanimatsii antirossiyskoy organizatsii GUAM*, January 17, 2022, available at: <https://radiokp.ru/podcast/utrenniy-mardan/543158> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

30 The Tribune, *Azerbaijan to suspend oil exports to Ukraine due to security risks amid military conflict*-source, February 25, 2022, available at: <https://www.thetribune.com/azerbaijan-to-suspend-oil-exports-to-ukraine-due-to-security-risks-amid-military-conflict-source/> (accessed: April 14, 2022).

31 Report.az, *Ukraine may receive gas from Azerbaijan through Trans-Balkan pipeline*, June 18, 2021, available at: <https://report.az/en/energy/ukraine-may-receive-gas-from-azerbaijan-through-trans-balkan-pipeline/> (accessed: June 4, 2022).

32 Report.az, *Ukraine may receive gas from Azerbaijan through Trans-Balkan pipeline*, June 18, 2021, available at: <https://report.az/en/energy/ukraine-may-receive-gas-from-azerbaijan-through-trans-balkan-pipeline/> (accessed: June 10, 2022).

33 Caspiannews.com, *Azerbaijan Sends Humanitarian Aid to War-Hit Ukraine, Vows to Supply Ambulances With Fuel Free of Charge*, February 28, 2022, available at: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-sends-humanitarian-aid-to-war-hit-ukraine-vows-to-supply-ambulances-with-fuel-free-of-charge-2022-2-28-0/> (accessed: June 10, 2022).

approximately \$315,000, while Armenia did not send any.³⁴

The aid by Azerbaijan was announced by Ukraine's President Vladimir Zelenskyy on Twitter soon after his telephone call with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev on 26 February 2022, two days after the war started. In another tweet, Zelenskyy stated that all the gasoline filling stations of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) in Ukraine has been instructed to provide free fuel for ambulances and emergency vehicles, adding that the first plane with medical assistance from Azerbaijan was expected to arrive in the early hours of 27 February. Considering that there are more than 50 SOCAR gas filling stations in Ukraine, this assistance cannot be underestimated.

On 28 March 2022, President Zelenskyy further announced in a tweet that Azerbaijan will also provide fuel for Ukraine's agricultural needs during the sowing campaign. The announcement came two days after Zelenskyy told the Russian media that Russian forces had carried out attacks on fuel depots in Ukraine that were supposed to be utilized for sowing. It is worth noting that, over recent months, Azerbaijan has demonstrated increasing interest in cooperation with Ukraine in the agricultural sector and has sought to increase its wheat imports from Ukraine in order to diversify its supply sources and reduce its dependency on imports from Russia (currently 95%). This was on the agenda of President Aliyev's latest visit to Kyiv in January, in the course of which Azerbaijan agreed to lease an unspecified amount of farmland in Ukraine for sowing wheat and to deliver manufactured products to the country.³⁵

Azerbaijani society was much more vocal in their support to Ukraine. On 28 February 2022, a large number of Azerbaijanis gathered outside the Ukrainian Embassy in Baku and chanted pro-Ukrainian slogans. Political analysts and some Azerbaijani politicians expressed support for the people of Ukraine and condemned the war. This support in the Azerbaijani media was of such an extent that Russia blocked a number of Azerbaijani news websites. The Azerbaijani Press Council protested this decision of the Russian authorities, declaring that "Russia clearly neglects freedom of speech and expression and pluralism."³⁶ Russia's

34 Civil.ge, *Georgia Sends Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine*, February 27, 2022, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/475744> (accessed: June 4, 2022).

35 Haqqin.az, *Ilkham Aliyev beret v arendy zemli Ukraini dlya Azerbaydjana*, January 14, 2022, available at: <https://haqqin.az/news/231638> (accessed: June 3, 2022)

36 Trend.az, *Azerbaijan's Press Council makes statement on Russia blocking access to*

ambassador to Azerbaijan, commenting on the blocking of Azerbaijani news websites, said, “We are surprised by the large number of materials in the Azerbaijani media that biasedly criticize Russia’s position and leadership”, adding that “We have repeatedly had to draw the attention of the Azerbaijani government to the anti-Russian hysteria raging in the local media.”³⁷

Azerbaijani society was much more vocal in their support to Ukraine. On 28 February 2022, a large number of Azerbaijanis gathered outside the Ukrainian Embassy in Baku and chanted pro-Ukrainian slogans.

Conclusion

The launch of Russia’s war against Ukraine caused alarm signals across the neighbouring regions, including the South Caucasus countries. The geopolitical restrictions caused by their location in a widely contested region where Russia still enjoys strong influence shaped the responses of these three countries to the war.

Concomitantly, there has been some variation in this context. While Georgia was careful not to provoke Russia but at the same time not to alienate its Western partners, Armenia had to demonstrate limited support to Russia, dictated by its alliance with Moscow within the EAEU and the CSTO and its dependence on Russia in military and economic terms.

Azerbaijan found more room for manoeuvre thanks to the country’s economic independence, traditionally balanced approach in foreign policy, and recently reinforced strategic alliance with the NATO member Türkiye. Baku has, nevertheless, been vigilant enough not to provoke Russia and has sustained economic ties with Moscow, which were further cemented in their joint declaration on allied interaction signed on 22 February 2022. The declaration was largely seen by Azerbaijani political experts as reassurance that Russia would not pursue similar policies vis-à-vis Azerbaijan as it did in its relations with Ukraine and Georgia. This reflects the geopolitical situation around Azerbaijan when two of the country’s post-Soviet partners

several Azerbaijani websites, March 28, 2022, available at: <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3573923.html> (accessed: June 4, 2022)

³⁷ Musavat.com, *The reasons for Russia’s discontent with Azerbaijan became known – reactions* (translation from Azerbaijani), April 1, 2022, available at: https://musavat.com/news/rusiyenin-azerbaycandan-naraziliginin-sebebi-bilindi-reaksiyalar_879277.html (accessed: April 14, 2022).

(Russia and Ukraine) clashed in a violent war in late February 2022.

Although Baku had to refrain from moves that would cause a backlash from its powerful northern neighbour, it did not remain indifferent to the troubles of Ukraine. The relations between Azerbaijan and Ukraine have been built on the basis of a strategic partnership that was boosted by the visit of President Aliyev to Kyiv in January 2022 amid rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Following the start of the war on 24 February, Azerbaijan carefully measured its support to Ukraine. Azerbaijani officials underscored the importance of territorial integrity and the inviolability of internationally-recognized borders in the context of the Russia–Ukraine War. Baku also provided humanitarian assistance and ordered its gas filling stations, numbering more than 50 in Ukraine, to fill the tanks of ambulances and emergency vehicles free of charge. Azerbaijan is also providing fuel for vehicles in Ukraine that are involved in the agricultural sector. Azerbaijani society and media have been more vocal in their support of Ukraine, which resulted in the ban Russia imposed on some leading Azerbaijani news websites.