

**Forging Energy Partnerships: Unraveling the Potential of the Black Sea
Energy Submarine Cable Project for the European Union, Georgia and
Azerbaijan**
Rondeli Foundation.

Manelle Lepoix
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On 17 December 2022, an agreement was signed between Romania, Hungary, Georgia, Azerbaijan and the European Commission on the construction of an undersea cable. This project involves the creation of a submarine cable from Azerbaijan, via Georgia, to carry green electricity to the European Union, and possibly digital communications. This cable would link the two shores of the Black Sea, all the way to the Caspian Sea¹. In the Caucasus, energy is a central and pioneering issue. As far back as the 1990s, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project was seen as the “Deal of the Century”. Azerbaijan was to be the supplier, Georgia the transit country and Turkey the seaport. At that time, it was also a question of embodying a heavy weight in European politics, while thinking that Euro-Atlantic integration would be favored. The expectations of the project were perfectly in line with those of the European Union, which wanted to diversify its supplies. The three countries thus accepted serious risks to their own security in order to reach the European market. Yet the European Union was already dependent on Russia. Since then, ambitions have been modified: Georgia wants to convince Europe, Turkey has moved even closer to Russia and Azerbaijan is trying to improve its economic situation². However, the geopolitical situation has now changed, and the level of supply needs to be secured. This construction project comes at a time of energy crisis linked to the war in Ukraine. The winter of 2022 has been dreaded by many European countries, in view of the sanctions imposed on Russia, the European Union's main supplier before the war. Alliances are reshaping in the face of war. The Caucasus seems to want to join the European energy game. Thus, what are the interests in the construction of the submarine cable for the European Union, Azerbaijan and Georgia?

The Black Sea Energy Submarine Cable project.

The project is based on the construction of a submarine cable, linking electricity and possibly electronic communications as far as the European Union. The energy produced will be green and will contribute to decarbonization. To put it plainly, the project is in line with Europe's objectives: to build a green, secure Europe by promoting the diversification of energy supplies. Azerbaijan currently produces 27 gigawatts of wind and solar energy. The country is developing projects that should increase capacity by 4 gigawatts by the end of 2027. The project would create a green energy corridor for natural gas. Currently, 90% of Azerbaijan's electricity comes from fossil fuels, 7% from hydroelectricity. Wind and solar power account for just 0.5%. This means that if the project comes to fruition, the European Union will be a player that also promotes the ecological transition in third countries. Technically, the canal will also enable Ukraine and Moldova to secure their energy networks, which have been compromised since the war³. In addition to energy, analyses are being carried out to see whether the submarine cable can be fitted with a fibre-optic cable, which could provide a high-quality Internet connection between Romania and Georgia, at no extra cost⁴.

¹ “Hungary, Romania, Georgia, Azerbaijan agree to Black Sea electricity project”, EuroNews. December 17, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/17/hungary-romania-georgia-azerbaijan-agree-to-black-sea-electricity-project>

² “The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline: Oil Window to the West”, S. Frederick Starr, Svante E. Cornell, in Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, 150p. 2005. https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/2005_01_MONO_Starr-Cornell_BTC-Pipeline.pdf

³ “Hungary, Romania, Georgia, Azerbaijan agree to Black Sea electricity project”, EuroNews. December 17, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/17/hungary-romania-georgia-azerbaijan-agree-to-black-sea-electricity-project>

⁴ “Georgian-Initiated Black Sea Submarine cable to Boost European Energy Security and connectivity”, The Embassy of Georgia to the United States of America. March 13, 2023. <https://georgiaembassyusa.org/2023/03/13/georgian-initiated-black-sea-submarine-cable-to-boost-european-energy-security-and-connectivity/>

Georgia would therefore be the transit point since the cable would pass through the Black Sea and Georgian territory. The cable would then run to Hungary, before redistributing the electricity throughout Europe. Building this cable is becoming a challenge. It would be the longest cable ever created (almost 1,200 km long submarine cable, in which 1,100 will cross the Black Sea)⁵.

The interests of the European Union.

Firstly, before the Russian war in Ukraine in 2022, the European Union was largely dependent on Russian imports. In 2022, Russia accounted for 38% of European energy imports, well ahead of Norway, Europe's second largest energy exporter. Of all energy-importing member states, 41.1% of gas, 25.7% of oil and 52.7% of solid fuels were Russian. Overall, several countries were energy-dependent: Malta at 97%, Luxembourg at 92.5%, Cyprus at 89.56%. This trend towards dependence was growing, with Denmark, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Poland becoming increasingly dependent on energy imports between 2011 and 2021. This growth is due to the slowdown in primary energy production. Of course, there are disparities, with some countries seeing their energy dependency rate fall between 2011 and 2023 (Estonia, with a drop from 13.6% to 1.4%, Ireland with -13.4 points, Latvia with -21.6 points)⁶. Nevertheless, Russia was the main importer into the European Union. However, as a result of the war and the sanctions imposed by the European Union, Russia has threatened and even cut off its exports to Europe, leaving the territory in a fragile state.⁷ As a result, the European Union cannot depend on Putin, since a game of blackmail has been set up. Remaining under Putin's yoke in terms of energy is a miscalculation. This is all the more true given that, in moral terms, the efforts made towards Ukraine could be in vain, since the financial resources obtained by Putin would be reinjected into the military sector. To secure its interests, the European Union needs to diversify its supplies, and not just remain under Russia's almost monopoly⁸. In this sense, in May 2022, Brussels presented its REPowerEU plan to break away from dependence on Russian fossil fuels. In particular, the aim is to raise the energy efficiency target from 9% to 13%, and to increase renewable energy consumption to 45% of the energy mix by 2030. Thus, the clear benefit of this project for the European Union is to reduce its dependence on Russia, following the trend that the European Union has already started.

At the same time, this project may also serve broader geopolitical interests. Von der Leyen points to the idea that this project could strengthen ties in the South Caucasus and bring peace to the region. Prosperity in the region will be increased, enabling the implementation of a peaceful neighborhood initiative that promotes the interconnections and dialogue needed to achieve good, lasting relations. The European Union is securing its neighborhood, stabilizing it

⁵ "Officials meet in Tbilisi to discuss Black Sea submarine cable", Agenda Georgia. April 6, 2023. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/1384>

⁶ « La dépendance énergétique dans l'Union européenne », Toute l'Europe. February 14, 2023. <https://www.toutleurope.eu/environnement/la-dependance-energetique-europeenne/>

⁷ "Nord Stream 1: How Russia is cutting gas supplies to Europe", BBC. September 29, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60131520>

⁸ To be more precise, Gazprom is controlled by the Kremlin. At the start of the war in Ukraine, gas supplies to Germany via the Nord Stream I pipeline were interrupted. In fact, Russia tried to counter the sanctions. Lithuania was the first Member State to cut off its imports of Russian gas, which one diplomat described as "a second independence". To make up the shortfall, the European Union is turning to Norway, Algeria and Azerbaijan. At the same time, the European Union has also reduced its consumption.

« Les enjeux géopolitiques de l'approvisionnement énergétique de l'UE », Euractiv. March 27, 2023. <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/energie-climat/news/les-enjeux-geopolitiques-de-lapprovisionnement-energetique-de-lue/>

around “common interests”⁹, a rapprochement in the Caucasus. This would provide a basis for future initiatives aimed at obtaining green and sustainable energy resources¹⁰.

Also, this project is part of the European drive to make Europe greener. Once again, it fits in with the idea of REPowerEU¹¹, and all the European climate initiatives. In particular, there is the importance of producing or using green energy. As a result, the European Union has signed agreements with Israel and Egypt to export natural gas to Europe. The European Union, thus, concludes agreements around itself to ensure its green diversification of supply. This gas pipeline strategy fits in perfectly with Europe's climate objectives. This also explains the export of LNG from the United States. The main aim is to eliminate dependence on Russian gas, but it also refers to Europe's ecological ambitions. By 2021, exports had risen to 20 billion cubic metres, and by the winter of 2022 the figure had risen to 56 billion cubic metres. Clearly, to secure its energy infrastructure, the European Union is diversifying its supplies and trying to use sustainable resources. The submarine cable project therefore makes total sense in terms of Europe's ambitions and contributes to its goals¹². More generally, Von der Leyen even explains that this is a way of transitioning non-EU countries (notably Ukraine) towards green energy. In fact, it is also good for the economy of the participating parties, since clean energy creates qualified jobs¹³.

Finally, the financial benefits also seem undeniable. On an intra-European level, some countries are counting heavily on the creation of this project. This is the case of Orban, who hopes that this cable will bring down high energy prices in Europe and help fight inflation¹⁴. The European Union is still reeling from the energy shock caused by the war in Ukraine. The year 2022 was marked by high volatility in electricity and gas prices on the markets. 2023 opens with a lull, with a megawatt-hour trading at 77 euros on 2 January, compared with 342 euros at the end of 2022. However, households and businesses will not immediately feel the effects of a fall in wholesale prices, and secondly, the European Union could still have a shortfall of 27 billion cubic metres of natural gas to meet its winter needs in 2023-2024. This situation is therefore a source of concern for many Member States, but the project itself represents real hope.

The interests of the Caucasus.

Through this project, two Caucasus countries are key players in the European Union's electricity supply. Georgia and Azerbaijan obviously have different interests. But the Caucasus could become a major security asset for the European Union.

⁹ “Statement by President Von Der Leyen at the signing ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding for the development of the Black Sea Energy submarine cable”, European Commission. December 17, 2022.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_7807

¹⁰ “European Commission President: Black Sea submarine cable “window of opportunity” to turn Georgia into electricity hub”, Agenda Georgia. December 17, 2022.

<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/4922>

¹¹ « REPowerEU, Une énergie abordable, sûre et durable pour l’Europe », Commission européenne.

https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/repowereu-affordable-secure-and-sustainable-energy-europe_fr#diversifying_our_energy_supply

¹² « Le GNL américain « est un pilier essentiel de l’infrastructure de la sécurité énergétique » de l’UE », Euronews. April 07, 2023.

<https://fr.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/04/07/le-gnl-americain-est-un-pilier-essentiel-de-linfrastructure-de-securite-energetique-de-lue>

¹³ “Statement by President Von Der Leyen at the signing ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding for the development of the Black Sea Energy submarine cable”, European Commission. December 17, 2022.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_7807

¹⁴ “Azerbaijan and Georgia eye electricity exports to Europe”, Eurasianet. November 4, 2022.

<https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-and-georgia-eye-electricity-exports-to-europe>

- Azerbaijan's interests.

Azerbaijan would increase natural gas exports to Europe by at least 20 billion cubic meters a year by 2027, a significant economic contribution. In addition, this support protocol opens up new opportunities for developing green energy to support electricity exports. This means that exports could become more attractive. The country has embarked on a sustainable transition in the energy sector thanks to the creation of a green energy zone and the gradual process of decarbonization. Clearly, the implementation of this project can only support the country's green transition, since exports to the European Union will be encouraged.

Obviously, Azerbaijan would gain a pre-eminent status for the energy security of the region and the European Union. In this sense, the country could become one of the European Union's privileged partnerships. The project demonstrates the importance of Azerbaijan's geopolitics. Indeed, by supporting green energy, the country is balancing the use of natural gas and renewable energies in electricity production, thereby enabling Europe to speed up its transition to green energy. Indeed, this supports sustainable development and enables the European Union to achieve its ecological goals, while diversifying supply. Romania, for example, relies mainly on fossil fuels. Imports will therefore balance the electricity mix.

Azerbaijan also has a vested interest as it strengthens its partnerships. Indeed, because the country is committed to focusing on the development of renewable energies, the country has attracted international investment, particularly from the Gulf States, to launch its green projects.¹⁵ The country has already signed up energy companies ACWA Power of Saudi Arabia and Masdar of the UAE. The 230 MW solar power plant to be built by Masdar and the 240 MW wind power plant at Khizi-Absheron to be built by ACWA Power will enable Azerbaijan to establish itself in the sustainable energy sector and promote economic gains through exports. Azerbaijan is therefore becoming a key player in the international economic game. Thanks to these two projects, the share of renewable energy resources in the country's energy system could increase by 30% by 2030.

- Georgian interests.

Georgia is also at the heart of the project. Clearly, the country is becoming the key corridor between the Caucasus and Europe. Georgia is one of the pillars of the project. Without its cooperation, the project would not be possible. Nevertheless, Georgia accepts this role, because of the interests the country stands to gain.

Firstly, Georgia's role in international security has been strengthened. Indeed, the country is becoming the key corridor for ensuring the European Union's energy security. This naturally leads to stronger ties with the European Union, so important in the current context of waiting for candidate status. More generally, the aim is also to show that Georgia is still determined to join the European Union and stand up to Russia. Clearly, Georgia is helping to weaken Russia's monopoly on energy supplies to the European Union, which suggests that the country is taking a direct stance, and not hesitating to put its own interests first. This is not insignificant, especially when the Georgian government is criticized, in some respects, for drawing closer to Russia. Georgia thus seems keen to build up a network of stable allies, and above all to forge even closer links with the European Union. Clearly, this gives Georgia a "new European purpose". The country is increasing its role in ensuring Europe's energy security and is emerging as a reliable transit country and exporter of renewable energy. The country is part of the renewal of Eurasian transport routes and is helping to diversify corridors. The increase in freight flows is in line with international sanctions¹⁶. Georgia's strategic location would make it a hub for the

¹⁵ "Azerbaijan and Georgia eye electricity exports to Europe", Eurasianet. November 4, 2022.

<https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-and-georgia-eye-electricity-exports-to-europe>

¹⁶ "Black Sea submarine cable project gives new European purpose to Georgia – FM", Agenda Georgia. March 25, 2023.

development of green energy. Overall, the country will need to strengthen and develop appropriate infrastructures to ensure the transport of green energy from the Southern Caucasus to Europe. This will contribute to the security of both the European Union and Georgia. Also, Georgia could gain access to additional income¹⁷.

Secondly, Georgia could find a role in international security more generally. Indeed, in addition to stabilizing the region, Garibashvili has proposed his initiative to host a dialogue between Azerbaijan and Armenia to restore confidence between the two parties and in the region. Indeed, if the Caucasus has wider ambitions, the region needs to be pacified and stabilized. In this sense, Georgia's role could increase and the country could establish itself as a major mediator for international security. Also, Georgia would become a regional energy interconnection point, and the country could join the European electricity market. Georgia - and the Southern Caucasus as a whole - would move closer to the European Union. Moreover, Von Der Leyen points out that "the two shores of the Black Sea have never been so close". Georgia would thus be bringing electricity to its Balkan and Ukrainian neighbors. The country would be a major hub for electricity and, as a transit point, would play a part in rebuilding Ukraine's energy system and the country as a whole.¹⁸

Finally, taking part in a project whose aim is to transfer green energy makes total sense in terms of Georgia's new projects. Georgia seems to want to go green. Involvement in the project is clearly part of its strategy. It could even encourage efforts towards an energy transition, and act as a catalyst for further reforms¹⁹.

The main challenges for a deeper partnership.

Azerbaijan & Georgia would thus become main of the pillars of the project. However, in order to become a special partner of the European Union, countries still face internal challenges.

- Azerbaijan.

Firstly, Azerbaijan faces problems with regard to freedom of demonstration, speech²⁰, association and respect for media independence²¹. There is still persecution of activists on political grounds.

<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/1222>

¹⁷ "Georgia can play key role as regional hub for green energy development- Deputy Economy Minister", Agenda Georgia. June 8, 2023.

<https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/2259>

¹⁸ "Statement by President Von Der Leyen at the signing ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding for the development of the Black Sea Energy submarine cable", European Commission. December 17, 2022.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_7807

¹⁹ "Georgia's move towards a green economy: possibilities, drawbacks and structural challenges", Gamjashvili Lasha, in New Eastern Europe. August 16, 2022.

<https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/08/16/georgias-move-towards-a-green-economy-possibilities-drawbacks-and-structural-challenges/>

²⁰ « L'Azerbaïdjan est une dictature mais ça ne dérange pas l'Europe, Interview of Leyla Yunus », Libération. April 9, 2018.

https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/04/09/l-azerbaïdjan-est-une-dictature-mais-ca-ne-derange-pas-l-europe_1639516/

²¹ « En choisissant l'Azerbaïdjan comme fournisseur de gaz, Ursula Von Der Leyen affaiblit l'Union européenne », Le Monde. July 29, 2022.

https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2022/07/29/en-choisissant-l-azerbaïdjan-comme-fournisseur-de-gaz-ursula-von-der-leyen-affaiblit-l-union-europeenne_6136544_3232.html

Secondly, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh also remains a challenge for the feasibility of the project. This applies both to the use of the Zangezur corridor and to human rights²².

Azerbaijan must also resolve gender equality issues. Women do not have full access to education, healthcare, housing, and health. There are 204 professions forbidden to women²³, and women journalists are particularly affected (see Fatima Moylami, Sevinj Sadigova, Ayten Mammedova etc).

- Georgia.

Georgia is seeking candidate status for the European Union. The main challenges are set out in the Twelve Priorities proposed by the European Union. These are, in fact, twelve improvements that Georgia must make in order to obtain Candidate Status. They include, in particular, desoligarchisation, strengthening press freedom, transparency and efficiency of the judicial system, achieving a pluralistic media environment, and strengthening gender equality²⁴.

Conclusion.

The Black Sea Energy Submarine Cable Project would therefore have many advantages: geopolitical, green transition, economic and good for European integration, particularly for Georgia. The countries would thus embark on a green energy transition, while forging solid partnerships that would be good for their respective economies. The main benefits for the European Union would therefore be green energy security and reduced dependence on Russia. Implicitly too, it is interesting to draw a parallel with the populist crisis in Europe. As we know, some countries, such as Hungary, are becoming increasingly reluctant toward the European Union. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that at national level, the Member States stand to gain. The European Union is thus showing its capabilities, especially as this project would probably not have achieved such unanimity without the consensus of the Member States of the European Union. It is also, in a sense, a way of solidifying the European leadership. As far as Azerbaijan is concerned, the gains are just as numerous: its position in the international game, particularly in terms of the sustainability of its choices, economic gains, and the restoration of its image, rather damaged by the bombings in Armenia. The President of Azerbaijan explains that the country's plan is to become a major supplier of green energy to Europe, thanks to its renewable potential (27 gigawatts of wind and solar energy abroad and 157 gigawatts of wind energy in Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea region). For Georgia, by virtue of its location and transit role, the country strengthens its links with the European Union, prepares for the green transition, and gains economic and political benefits if it takes on the role of mediator in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict. Georgia will therefore be the key corridor, the main area for political decision-makers and businesses, fostering Euro-Atlantic community.

However, there are still a number of dark spots. Firstly, Azerbaijan would have to use the Zangezur corridor, on Armenian territory, in the Nakhchivan enclave. To date, however, there is no ceasefire agreement. This could compromise the project.²⁵

²² “Amnesty International Report 2022/2023, the State of the world’s human right”, Amnesty International, 412p. 2023.

²³ « Azerbaijan », Amnesty International. 2022

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/azerbaijan/report-azerbaijan/>

²⁴ “The Twelve Priorities”, Delegation of the European Union to Georgia. September 20, 2022.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/twelve-priorities_en?s=221

²⁵ “Azerbaijan and Georgia eye electricity exports to Europe”, Eurasianet. November 4, 2022.

<https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-and-georgia-eye-electricity-exports-to-europe>

Secondly, the European Union is not completely free of Russian gas. Since the start of the war, the European Union has paid just under 140 billion euros in exchange for Russian fuel. Russian fossil gas escapes sanctions, and there is nothing to rule out the possibility that, in the event of a serious crisis, the European Union will have to turn to this source of supply. Clearly, European objectives cannot be secured immediately, despite the diversification of supplies already underway. The cable solution cannot meet the challenges of today, only those of tomorrow.²⁶ Also, the Black Sea remains a coveted and sometimes endangered area. It is also important to keep in mind that some of Europe's interests could be affected by the geopolitical situation in the Caucasus, and in particular by Putin's actions.

Thirdly, and on a more moral perspective, the European Union wishes to avoid any dependence. This explains why it concludes agreements with the United States, Egypt, Israel and Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that this cable would be an important resource in its energy security, which raises the question of its privileged links with authoritarian countries. Of course, the European Union would not be totally dependent, but the objectivity of the European Union's reactions to events within Azerbaijan could be questioned.

²⁶ « Les enjeux géopolitiques de l’approvisionnement énergétique de l’UE », Euractiv. March 7, 2023. <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/energie-climat/news/les-enjeux-geopolitiques-de-lapprovisionnement-energetique-de-lue/>

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