

Interview with H.E. Mr. Vaqif SADIQOV, Ambassador of Azerbaijan:

“There is a good potential to further develop economic relations between our two countries”

Q: Azerbaijan's economy is performing quite well with a growth around 5%. The GDP/capita has increased around 5 times between 1993 and today. What are the perspectives for, say, the next three years?

A: This year we observe positive trends towards the diversification of our economy. The mobilization of modern and sustainable sources of economic growth has led to a high dynamics in the non-oil sector of Azerbaijan today. If we look at the figures covering January-November 2022, Azerbaijan has recorded 4.8% increase in GDP compared to the same period of the previous year.

The growth rate of GDP in the next 3 years is predicted at the level of 5.7%, 3.7% and 2.2% respectively. I would like to stress that products worth \$24.17 billion have been exported to the EU countries in January-November 2022. This figure is \$12.67 billion more than the same period last year. Azerbaijan imported from the EU countries products worth \$2.059 billion in eleven months of this year.

Last July, during the visit of the President of the European Commission to Baku, Azerbaijan and the EU signed a new Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy. The implementation of this document, which has already started, will increase the volume of natural gas exported from Azerbaijan to the EU market, further contributing to Europe's energy security. Last year Azerbaijan's export of natural gas to the EU market was 8.2 bcm, and this year – 11.3 bcm. Next year it will be increased further.

Another milestone in our strategic energy partnership is the Agreement on a strategic partnership in the field of green energy development and transmission between the Governments of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Hungary signed on 17 December 2022 in Bucharest. This agreement is an important step in the creation of a green electricity corridor between Caspian and Black Seas, enabling new energy sources for Europe.

We are looking forward to further strengthen our strategic energy partnership with the EU and enhance this partnership to new cooperation areas.

Q: What role has the Eastern Partnership played in the development of EU-Azerbaijan relations? Is it still a valid framework for Azerbaijan?

A: Azerbaijan was a founding partner country of the Eastern Partnership (EaP)⁽¹⁾ in 2009 in Prague. Since then, the post-Soviet historical background of the partners has been a single common denominator of EaP. There have been notable differences amongst the partners in terms of their domestic situations, economic development and foreign policies. Therefore, for Azerbaijan the EaP has always been a framework supporting and complementing its bilateral relations with the EU countries. As far as relations amongst the partner countries are concerned, Azerbaijan has built and nurtured these partnerships, except with one country, much before the EaP had been set up, which embodies a strategic spirit.

After a long and challenging journey influenced by recent geopolitical developments in the neighborhood, the EaP ended up with 2 EU candidate countries and one country with a European perspective. In the meantime, Azerbaijan has put an end to almost 30-year-old occupation of its territories in 2020, which had been a serious impediment to the full-fledged sub-regional cooperation in the EaP.

Now, the EaP needs to embrace new realities in the region and adapt its policy to ever changing dynamic situation on the ground. In other words, the EaP needs to redefine its role in bringing added value to the existing bilateral track of relations of Azerbaijan with the EU.

It is noteworthy that the EU underscores the potential of the EaP to complement its other policy instruments. Major focus should be

made on building synergies with the EU's solid strategies, including on Central Asia. This issue has the potential to enrich the substance and increase the strategic importance of our relations with the EU in view of the EU's ambitious policy towards the revitalization of the Middle Corridor⁽²⁾ against the backdrop of shrinking space for large-scale East-West connectivity via northern Eurasia.

We have strategic initiatives which would revitalize and revive the EaP by promoting and reinforcing sub-regional cooperation as emphasized in the revised European Neighbourhood Policy back in 2015.

At the Summit of the European Political Community⁽³⁾ on 6 October 2022 in Prague, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan proposed to establish Azerbaijan – Georgia – Armenia regional platform which enjoyed popular support by Georgia. We believe that the EU should support this platform by promoting consensus among all stakeholders in order to foster peace, security and prosperity in the region which will benefit all.

Azerbaijan is interested in building strategic partnership relations with the EU. Our strong intention is premised on numerous milestone achievements in our relations with the EU and its member states. Azerbaijan has strategic partnership documents with nine EU member states which makes one-third of the EU. In its quest of trustworthy and reliable partners, the EU turned towards Azerbaijan by signing the forenamed MoU on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy. Azerbaijan will further enhance the security of supply in Europe by doubling natural gas deliveries to Europe by 2030. It is not only about natural gas. The MoU also put so much emphasis on renewables.

The commitment of Azerbaijan to renewables was materialized by the signature of the "Agreement on a strategic partnership in the field of green energy development and transmission between Governments of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania and Hungary" in Bucharest on 17 December 2022.

Growing scope and quality of cooperation, as well as the spirit of our partnership with the EU points out to the need for upgrading our contractual relations with the EU. We hope to conclude negotiations on a new bilateral agreement with the EU in order to boost our dialogue and pave the way for more enhanced cooperation on key areas of mutual interest.

Q: Russia-Ukraine war has shattered the European security order with far-reaching implications for norms and principles of international law. How does Azerbaijan support Ukraine in countering devastating humanitarian consequences of war?

A: We have always advocated unconditional respect for the fundamental norms and principles of international law enshrined in the UN Charter and other UN documents, in particular respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of internationally recognized borders of States to remain the basis for cooperation between them. Azerbaijan has always been firm in its unequivocal support to these principles, and proceeds from the understanding that upholding these principles and ensuring strict compliance with them has to be our common highest endeavor whenever they are threatened or challenged.

It was President Aliyev who visited Kyiv on 14 January 2022 when Ukraine was calling for international solidarity to prevent imminent danger of war. In Kyiv, the Presidents signed the Joint Declaration where Azerbaijan reiterated its unequivocal support of territorial integrity, sovereignty and inviolability of internationally recognized borders of Ukraine. The position of Azerbaijan has never changed and it is continuously echoed in rostrums of all international organizations.

As a country that had lived through military aggression and occupation of its territories resulting in a forcible expulsion of 1 million Azer-

bajani refugees and Internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Armenia and Azerbaijan accompanied by total destruction and pillage, today my country feels the gravity of humanitarian situation in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the war, Azerbaijan has dispatched medical supplies, food, clothes exceeding €17.7 million to Ukraine.

Moreover, guided by principles of humanism Azerbaijani company SOCAR Energy Ukraine⁽⁴⁾ has provided free fuel for ambulances and other emergency services' vehicles. SOCAR also provided uninterrupted heating, internet connection and recharging services by means of its electric generators at its gas stations in Ukraine and created cash withdrawal opportunities. It has also restored the school named after Zarifa Aliyeva⁽⁵⁾ in the Ukrainian city of Irpin which was seriously affected during military operations.

Just recently, Azerbaijan dispatched essential electrical equipment – 45 power transformers and the first batch of 50 power generators with a total value over €365,000 to Ukraine which is aimed to restore a stable electrical power supply in affected territories. The second batch of 45 generators is expected to be delivered in the midst of January. In total, Azerbaijan will provide Ukraine with electrical equipment worth about €782,000.

Apart from the government-led humanitarian assistance, individual organizations have rendered their aid to the people affected by war too. The Heydar Aliyev Foundation, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Azerbaijan have provided socio-psychological rehabilitation for about 90 children from Ukraine who had lost their parents as a result of war.

Q: How do you see the role of the EU in the mediation process with Armenia?

A: Since the end of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in November 2022, the EU has demonstrated the increased interest to facilitate the normalization of relations between the two countries. The efforts and dedication of Mr. Charles Michel, President of the European Council have always been appreciated by Azerbaijan. A series of meetings between the leaders of both countries in Brussels has provided a credible platform for these efforts. The meetings mediated by the President of the European Council has delivered outcomes, including those relating to the opening of communications, delimitation and demarcation of the state border, peace treaty negotiations, demining, and humanitarian issues.

Notably, at the latest EU Summit on 6 October 2022 in Prague, Armenia and Azerbaijan have agreed to recognize each other's territorial integrity in line with the Charter of the United Nations and the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1991⁽⁶⁾. Brussels also hosted the third meeting between the border commissions of Azerbaijan and Armenia on 3 November of this year.

The EU representatives at various levels have frequently visited the region and discussed several aspects of the Brussels peace agenda with both authorities. As the result of the EU-mediated meeting between the two leaders in April this year, the first-ever official direct telephone contact took place between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia on 11 April 2022. Following the meeting in Brussels on 30 August 2022, the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Brussels received instruction to start working on draft texts of the peace treaty.

Regretfully, the progress achieved through these efforts has often been challenged by the revanchist forces in Armenia aiming to derail the peace process and seriously undermine the abovementioned efforts. We hope that the political will and constructive steps from both countries and the consistent support of the European partners will eventually contribute to peace, cooperation and sustainable development in the region.

Q: How are the relations between Azerbaijan and Luxembourg?

A: The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg recognized the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan on the 31 December 1991. Bilateral diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and Luxembourg were established on 1 June 1992. In 1992, the Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Ger-

many was also accredited to Luxembourg. Since 2005, ambassadors of Azerbaijan to Belgium are traditionally accredited also Luxembourg. Ambassador Vaqif Sadıqov has presented his credentials to HRH the Grand Duke of Luxembourg on 12 November 2022.

In recent years, a number of bilateral high-level visits took place between Azerbaijan and Luxembourg, such as the President of Azerbaijan's visit in 1996, the Prime Minister of Azerbaijan's visit in 1999, four visits of Ministers of the Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan between 2001 and 2018. In 2002, Ms. Lydie Polfer, former Minister of Foreign and European Affairs paid a working visit to Azerbaijan. In 2015, the Grand Duke visited Azerbaijan to attend the opening ceremony of the First European Games. Azerbaijan-Luxembourg bilateral political consultations at the level of foreign ministries took place on 15 April 2016 in Luxembourg.

Given the importance of interparliamentary relations, Azerbaijan-Luxembourg Interparliamentary Relations Working Group was set at the *Milli Majlis* (parliament) of Azerbaijan. The Chamber of Deputies of Luxembourg does not practice setting of identical bilateral working groups.

The trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Luxembourg is very low, and in 2021 it was only \$30 million, though there is a good potential to further develop economic relations between our two countries. The Azerbaijan-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce has been functioning since March 2007. About 25 Luxembourgish companies which mainly include trade, services, banking and transport are functioning in Azerbaijan. Cargolux Airlines is among the biggest companies from Luxembourg which operates 20 flights a week through Baku including seven commercial stops originating from Luxembourg.

As to the bilateral legal framework, there are three documents signed between Azerbaijan and Luxembourg, these are: Joint Declaration between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Belgium-Luxembourg Union (13 April 1998); Agreement on Mutual Promotion and Protection of Investments between the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union (18 May 2004); Convention between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg for the elimination of double taxation with respect to taxes on income and on capital and the prevention of tax evasion and avoidance (16 June 2006).

On 1 September 2021, the exhibition *Terre d'Origine* opened in Esch-sur-Alzette by artists Sandy Flinto and Pierrick Grobety who collected samples of soil from countries whose citizens live in Luxembourg. Azerbaijan was represented by a volcanic fragment from the Durandag mountain. On 11-13 November 2022, together with 60 other countries Azerbaijan participated in Bazar International de Luxembourg organized under the auspices of the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg. Prime Minister of Luxembourg Xavier Bettel visited the Azerbaijani stand which enabled visitors to enjoy the performance of famous Azerbaijani musicians Isfar Sarabski and Bahruz Zeynal.

NdlR:

1) The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint initiative of the European External Action Service of the European Union (EU) together with the EU, its member states, and six Eastern European partners governing the EU's relationship with the post-Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Partnership_-_cite_note-EU-1 The EaP is intended to provide a forum for discussions regarding trade, economic strategy, travel agreements, and other issues between the EU and its Eastern European neighbours. It also aims at building a common area of shared values of democracy, prosperity, stability, and increased cooperation.

2) The Middle Corridor or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route starts from Southeast Asia and China, runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and further to European countries.

3) The European Political Community (EPC) is an intergovernmental forum for political and strategic discussions about the future of Europe, established in 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

4) Zarifa Aziz gizi Aliyeva (1923-1985) was an Azerbaijani ophthalmologist, academician of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan and professor She was the wife of third President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev and the mother of the fourth President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.

5) The founding declarations and principles of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).