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The energy crisis prompted the EU to seek closer ties with Azerbaijan. Here's why it's controversial

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'Green' Azeri energy isn't a magic bullet for EU dependence on Russia, experts say.

"Since the beginning of Russia's war, we have decided to turn our back on Russian fossil fuels and to diversify toward reliable energy partners."

Ursula von der Leyen's comments in December last year came at the signing of a deal to construct a new submarine cable under the Black Sea, one that will supposedly allow Azerbaijan and Georgia to supply green electricity to Hungarian and Romanian markets.

Despite the forthright and defiant tone of the European president's remarks, experts say the fanfare that's accompanied the so-called Black Sea Cable project belies the immense issues surrounding the initiative. Chief among these are its cost-effectiveness and the actual feasibility of stated environmental goals.

"The European Union was stupid to think this was a good idea," says Andras Perger, a climate and energy campaigner with Greenpeace Hungary. "There's too much talking about it, an uncertain project that for me, doesn't seem economically viable at all."

'Our glaciers are diminishing'

At present, more than 90% of Azeri energy comes from non-renewable sources, given the wind farms in the Caspian Sea that should feed the prospective cable do not, as of yet, actually exist. There's been talk of potentially also utilising Georgia's hydropower potential, but local environmentalists warn the country's capacity has long been generously overstated.

"We don't have any means of supplying European Union countries. Really, it'll be enough if we're able to satisfy our own needs," says Dato Chipashvili, an analyst at Green Alternative, a Georgian NGO. "The potential will be questionable in future too, due to climate change, because our rivers are glacier-based, and our glaciers are diminishing."

Even setting aside the work of building the necessary means of generation, previous studies suggest construction on the cable itself is likely to run upward of two to three billion euros, for a supply of electricity that threatens to fall considerably short of forecasted demand.

"They're [the signatories of the deal] saying that it will be a three-gigawatt capacity line, but international sources say it'll be just one gigawatt," Perger explains. "It's really nothing, from a European point of view."

Marian Mandru, a fellow Greenpeace campaigner, argues there's more scope for increasing sustainability locally in Hungary and Romania, both by improving energy efficiency and investing in domestic renewables. "I'm confident that if this money were put in better investments, and in particular more local investments, it would make a much bigger difference," he says.

'Civil society and media struggle to survive'

Other critics of the initiative have focused on what's perceived as an element of hypocrisy to the EU's goal of reducing energy dependence on Russia, arguing the initiative simply entails swapping out ties with one human rights violating dictatorship, engaged in an illegal war, for another.

Azerbaijan has long drawn international condemnation for its hostility toward dissenting voices, with tight restrictions on media freedoms, routine imprisonment of state critics, and repeat reports of torture used against detainees.

"The president has unchecked, absolute power in making all decisions," explains Giorgi Gogia, associate director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia division. "It's a situation where critics are often targeted on bogus criminal or administrative charges, and where civil society and media struggle to survive."

Take activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, who in April 2022 was kidnapped by masked men and taken to an undisclosed location after he criticised the country's interior minister. There, he was blindfolded, beaten, and threatened with assassination. Or opposition politician Tofiq Yagublu, who in January of that year suffered multiple injuries while in police custody. These were later written off by the prosecutor's office as "self-inflicted", not warranting further investigation.

As EU-Azeri relations have warmed amid the war in Ukraine, experts believe a lack of willingness to leverage Azerbaijan's interests in European markets represents a missed opportunity for curtailing such abuses under the Aliyev regime. "The closer ties should definitely be linked to conditions of concrete rights improvement in the country," Gogia says. "Unfortunately, we just don't see that at this stage."

Was it all just a message?

There's also the issue of Azerbaijan's long-running war with neighbouring Armenia over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnically-Armenian breakaway region within Azerbaijan, which in recent years has been the theatre of violent, deadly, clashes between the two sides.

According to Richard Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Centre in Armenia, the EU's apparent reluctance to factor the conflict into the terms of any energy deal "tends to vindicate the victory of authoritarian Azerbaijan over the struggling democracy in Armenia."

Whether the Black Sea Cable project has any real prospects for success will largely depend on the results of a forthcoming feasibility study, due for publication at the beginning of 2024. CESI, the Italian company commissioned to conduct the research, declined an interview for this story.

Overall, however, there's a feeling among some that ultimately, the initiative may well have served greater purpose as a convenient political statement rather than a genuinely viable alternative to Russian energy dependence.

"Last year, there was a certain desperation about showing off what Europe's options may be," Mandru says. "Personally, I doubt it will happen. They probably just wanted to send a message - that somehow, we'll manage."

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