

Between Corruption and *Soft Power* – Analysis of the Phenomenon of Azerbaijani Caviar Diplomacy

Między korupcją a *soft power* – analiza zjawiska dyplomacji kawiorowej Azerbejdżanu

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to characterize the phenomenon of caviar diplomacy, as well as to place it in the context of Azerbaijan's relations with the European Union. The main research hypothesis assumes that caviar diplomacy is an obstacle and a destabilizing factor in bilateral relations. The analysis of the issue was carried out using the latest European statistics, opinions of Azerbaijani and European politicians and experts, as well as based on examples of the most serious diplomatic scandals of recent years.

Keywords: caviar diplomacy, Azerbaijan, European Union, corruption

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest scharakteryzowanie zjawiska dyplomacji kawiorowej, a także umieszczenie jej w kontekście relacji Azerbejdżanu z Unią Europejską. Główna hipoteza badawcza zakłada, że dyplomacja kawiorowa jest przeszkodą i czynnikiem destabilizującym relacje dwustronne. Analizę zagadnienia przeprowadzono, wykorzystując najnowsze europejskie statystyki, opinie azerbejdżańskich i europejskich polityków oraz ekspertów, a także bazując na przykładach najpoważniejszych skandalów dyplomatycznych ostatnich lat.

Słowa kluczowe: dyplomacja kawiorowa, Azerbejdżan, Unia Europejska, korupcja

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the role of the South Caucasus in modern international relations has increased significantly. Today, the three independent states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – that have emerged in this region are home to strategic energy resources and are located on the border of Europe and Asia. Azerbaijan, the largest country in the region, seems to be taking advantage of this feature in a special way, and has been striving for a reputation as an ambitious and influential player for years. In doing so, it uses its energy potential, which is estimated at 1.3 trillion m³ of



natural gas and 7 billion barrels of oil (Garbaciak 2013). Although both values represent a small percentage of the world's total resources, respectively 0.6% and 0.4% (Garbaciak 2013), they are the foundation of the Azerbaijani economy and allow the country to engage in extensive energy investments. Thanks to this, Azerbaijan has a significant influence on the shape of political and economic relations in the South Caucasus today, as well as gaining importance in the context of energy supplies to the countries of the European Union (EU), especially in the face of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The phenomenon inherent in the growth of Azerbaijan's power and the development of its relations with European countries is caviar diplomacy – a foreign policy strategy consisting of inviting politicians and influential activists to state-funded exclusive events, as well as giving them expensive gifts, including cans of the iconic Astrakhan caviar. All this is aimed at gaining favour or inducing certain actions in the chosen cause. More broadly, caviar diplomacy is a fusion of corruption and costly PR tactics that allows you to shape relationships with other actors. All this takes place on the verge of legality and often leads to high-profile scandals and international affairs (European Stability Initiative 24.05.2012).

Since Ilham Aliyev came to power in 2003, Azerbaijan has more or less openly used this method of achieving its goals many times. This is primarily due to the need to create a facade of a modern, developing state and to encourage foreign partners to strengthen economic and political relations. It also seeks to conceal numerous abuses in domestic politics – from electoral fraud, to the elimination of the opposition, to the amassing of vast wealth by the Aliyev family and related clans (Wilson 2013).

It is worth adding that the term "caviar diplomacy" is more than an ironic term used in informal circumstances. In 2012, it was used for the first time in the official report of the European Stability Initiative to describe the relations of Azerbaijani officials with European politicians (European Stability Initiative 24.05.2012). Since then, the phrase has repeatedly appeared in the media, speeches, scientific studies, and even films, e.g., in a document *Caviar Diplomacy* of 2021, directed by Benoit Bringer.

The use of this term in a major EU report shows that caviar diplomacy has played a very important role in shaping Azerbaijan's relations with the EU. In recent years, we have witnessed numerous scandals at the highest levels of government, and many prominent European politicians have been accused of accepting bribes from Azerbaijan. All this is a huge obstacle to building healthy diplomatic relations between the two sides. Caviar

diplomacy complicates initiatives related to EU partnership programmes. It also affects the credibility, stability and internal cohesion of the member states.

The purpose of this article is to characterise the phenomenon of caviar diplomacy of Azerbaijan, with particular emphasis on its role in building bilateral relations with the EU as a whole, but also with individual countries belonging to this organisation. The practices used by the Azerbaijani political elite were analysed on the basis of the latest European statistics, opinions of Azerbaijani and European politicians and experts, as well as examples of the most serious diplomatic scandals of recent years.

The work mainly uses the method of content analysis. It has been used in the development of reports published by European institutions, including the European Stability Initiative, the Blankspot organisation and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. The institutional-legal method was used to characterise the significance of the Council of Europe, as well as to describe the political system of Azerbaijan. In contrast, the decision analysis method was used to discuss the crisis caused by caviar diplomacy.

The sources that were taken into account in the creation of the work are the already mentioned reports of European institutions, as well as interviews with European and Azerbaijani politicians. It also analysed statistics from online research centres such as the Observatory of Economic Complexity, as well as scientific articles and monographs on Azerbaijan's economic and political position in contemporary international relations.

1. The Origins of Caviar Diplomacy Practices

It is worth starting the analysis of Azerbaijani caviar diplomacy practices by outlining its origins. The beginnings of these activities go back to the first years of the 21st century. In 2001, Azerbaijan joined the Council of Europe and after four years completed the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which allowed the transfer of oil from the Caspian Sea to Europe. Thanks to this, relations between Azerbaijan and the EU were established, which encouraged the Azerbaijani side to strengthen its position and maximise revenues from the export of energy resources to the West. The tool for achieving these goals has become the policy of building friendships and

concluding agreements, understood in a specific, Caucasian way. A very important element of the culture of Azerbaijani society is to show friendship by exchanging gifts and generous gestures, expecting, of course, a similarly generous attitude from the other side (Kazimova 2011). When these seemingly innocent traditions were joined by corruption, i.e., the exploitation of positions for private gain, caviar diplomacy was born.

To understand the origins of this strategy, it is necessary to put it in a broader context. In world politics, one can observe examples of similar procedures aimed at shaping the image and convincing one's own arguments. It is worth mentioning the Chinese "panda diplomacy," thanks to which Beijing arouses sympathy and often covers uncomfortable topics (Szczudlik 2017), or the policy of giving expensive gifts used by the Persian Gulf states (Lo 23.12.2017). Moreover, the aforementioned document by B. Bringer included the thesis that the practices of corruption and bribery in diplomacy are a permanent element of the policy of the Caucasus and Central Asia states, and therefore originate from the post-Soviet mentality (Bringer 2021). Caviar diplomacy is therefore not an isolated example, but its multifaceted negative impact on the EU certainly makes it unique.

This is well illustrated by the fact that the institution intrinsically linked to the emergence of caviar diplomacy is the Council of Europe, a structure very close to President I. Aliyev, who, even before taking power in 2003, was active in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE; Wilson 2013). The condition for joining the organisation is a democratic political system. At the time of its accession to the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan was seen as an "imperfect democracy" (European Stability Initiative 24.05.2012: 3) and, after long discussions, was accepted on condition of progress on democratisation, in particular on elections and the issue of political prisoners. Andreas Gross, one of the members of the reporting Committee on Azerbaijan, acknowledged at the time that Azerbaijan may not meet all the requirements set by the organisation, but "the decision to include this country is right if it seriously thinks about joining us on the long path of democratisation" (European Stability Initiative 24.05.2012: 6).¹

Over time, however, the atmosphere of hope for political change has weakened. In 2003, the presidential elections in Azerbaijan were rigged. They were groundbreaking because they ended the 10-year period of the presidency of Heydar Aliyev, who was forced to retire from politics due

¹ All own translations unless stated otherwise.

to health problems, and appointed his son Ilham as his successor. In the report of the organisation Human Rights Watch, which was engaged in election observation at the time, we can find information about numerous abuses, as well as about the fact that a large-scale “campaign of bureaucratic interference and political intimidation of the opposition was conducted in the state in order to support the candidacy of Ilham Aliyev” (Human Rights Watch 13.10.2003). After such manipulations and falsifications were publicised, the European public criticised the elections. It is precisely this criticism that Azerbaijan has decided to combat with the help of caviar diplomacy.

What emboldened Azerbaijani politicians was the confusion over the ratification of delegates’ mandates for the new PACE session in 2006. There were two coalitions at the Council of Europe. The first, headed by the aforementioned A. Gross, said that the Azerbaijani delegation was chosen by an undemocratic government and should not be accepted by the organisation. The other, whose face was Russian delegate Leonid Slutsky, argued that rejecting the Azerbaijani delegation would be a sign of discrimination. It is worth adding that several British and German politicians quickly joined the camp of defenders of Azerbaijan. In the end, the Council of Europe did not pass any sanctions.

After these events, A. Gross and other politicians who shared his view on the role of Azerbaijan in the Council of Europe resigned, and the organisation itself became more and more lenient towards the actions of I. Aliyev. For example, on the occasion of the 2008 presidential election, which once again failed to meet democratic standards, British delegate Mike Hancock said: “I positively assess the activities of the members of the electoral commissions. It is observed that they have mastered the instructions on the organisation of elections” (European Stability Initiative 24.05.2012: 18). Similar voices were heard during the 2010 parliamentary elections, but this time Pro-Azerbaijani delegates to the Council of Europe began to openly criticise the activities of another European institution, namely the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). In this context, the most active was the Austrian politician Wolfgang Grossruck, who accused the ODIHR of unreliability and bias in the election observation process in Azerbaijan (European Stability Initiative 24.05.2012).

As it turns out, the Council of Europe has not been able to force Azerbaijan to make changes related to democratisation and compliance with the standards of the organization. It also failed to pass sanctions against the Caucasian

republic, and the voices of criticism were quickly dominated by opportunistic, pro-Azerbaijani politicians. According to the European Stability Initiative report, this state of affairs was caused by a policy of bribery. The report states that “many MEPs were regularly invited to Azerbaijan and paid handsomely” and that the most popular gifts given to the president’s European friends included “expensive silk carpets, gold and silver items, drinks, caviar and money” (European Stability Initiative 24.05.2012: 1–2). The lack of consistency and effectiveness of such practices encouraged Azerbaijan to continue to use them, and the Council of Europe’s silencing procedure quickly turned out to be only the first chapter in an extensive history of caviar corruption.

2. The Most Serious Diplomatic Scandals of Recent Years Related to Caviar Diplomacy

Today, the phenomenon of caviar diplomacy goes beyond the Council of Europe and its institutions. According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), between 2012 and 2014, Azerbaijan made approx. 16,000 payments to European bank accounts and transferred almost \$3 billion (OCCRP 4.09.2017). A large part of the funds were used to stop PACE members from publishing a report on human rights violations in Azerbaijan. The rest of the money from the fund, referred to by OCCRP as the Azerbaijan laundromat, went to entities unrelated to the Council of Europe. For example, \$138 million was received by the pharmaceutical company AvroMed, co-led by an Azerbaijani MP, whose speciality is establishing discreet contacts with European partners (OCCRP 4.09.2017). Of course, all the payments described by OCCRP were made on the basis of multi-stage transfers, often through non-existent companies. Given that relatively little time has passed since the silencing of criticism at the Council of Europe in 2008–2010 until the launch of a large-scale money laundering mechanism in 2012–2014, we can talk about the growing importance of caviar diplomacy in the process of building relations between Azerbaijan and European institutions.

However, the OCCRP case is not the only case of corruption of European partners that has seen the light of day in recent years. One of the loud scandals were group trips for foreign journalists interested in the course of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, organised in 2020. Willing representatives

of the European media could fly to luxury hotels at the expense of Azerbaijan and take advantage of a wide range of VIP attractions (Canbäck 16.10.2021). The aim of the project was to promote the Azerbaijani view of the conflict with Armenia. However, the whole case ended with protests from European audiences and reprimands and dismissals for the journalists involved. The investigation led by Swedish journalist Rasmus Canbäck, whom Azerbaijan also offered to leave, had a big impact on this turn of affairs. It is worth mentioning that the reporter in his texts drew attention to the fact that the invited journalists had no prior knowledge of the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict and that is why they were recruited. What's more, invited guests were only allowed to go to specific places, meet with designated people and very quickly let them know what results the hosts wanted.

Another example publicised in R. Canbäck's reports is the so-called academic lobbying, i.e. the practice of corrupting European academics to promote Azerbaijani assumptions like journalists. The institution best known for its academic lobbying is the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy (ADA), which in 2014, by special decree of I. Aliyev, was granted the status of a university operating in cooperation with the foreign ministry. According to Gubad Ibadoglu, an Azerbaijani researcher who is now a political prisoner in Azerbaijan, ADA received as much as 35% of the total state budget for education annually (Canbäck 6.02.2024). The most notorious scandal related to the activities of ADA University was the corruption of the Swedish think tank Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP). The institute was supposed to receive large funds from a construction company that belonged to the Aliyev family. Moreover, Frederick Starr, one of the ISDP's chief Caucasus researchers, served on the Academy's board, and "Dutch politician René van der Linden, who served on the ADA board, was PACE's chairman during some of the worst years of caviar diplomacy" (Canbäck 6.02.2024).

It is also worth mentioning the German affair of 2021. Several members of the Bundestag have been investigated for accepting bribes and taking part in a money laundering scheme in Azerbaijan. The most high-profile protagonist in this scandal was Axel Fischer, a politician from the Christian Democratic Union (German: Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands – CDU), whose immunity has been lifted and who has been accused of bribery and corruption. Also involved in this affair was TV Berlin, a local channel that became famous for publishing biased interviews promoting

Azerbaijan's vision of the conflict with Armenia and supporting the official foreign policy line of I. Aliyev (Martirosyan 2025).

Another example of caviar diplomacy is the case of several MEPs travelling to Baku, described in January 2023 in a report by the Swedish-German organisation Blankspot. The authors of the report found that the trips of the politicians were partially funded by the government of Azerbaijan, and took place without the relevant declarations required under the transparency policy of the European Parliament. Moreover, the trips affected the position of the deputies towards Azerbaijan - those who had previously voiced criticism of I. Aliyev in the parliament, changed the front and began to support his actions in their speeches. It is worth adding that another report by this organisation showed that Polish MEP Tomasz Poręba was also involved in similar procedures as those of 2019 (Canbäck, Düerkop 2024). The scandal surrounding the departures of members of the European Parliament provoked a discussion in the media about the credibility of the body itself, and over time questions arose about the meaning and enforcement of codes of ethics.

The cases described represent a small percentage of the caviar diplomacy practices of recent years. However, they allow us to show the extent of such activities. Today, Azerbaijan is able to effectively block inconvenient publications or voices of criticism. It also has committed supporters in European organisations, and has a multi-tiered network of bank accounts for multi-million dollar transactions. Only NGOs seem to be an obstacle to the effective corruption of European partners, whose investigations often lead to serious charges and trials.

3. The Impact of Caviar Diplomacy on Azerbaijan's Relations with the European Union

The long-standing use of caviar diplomacy has a very significant impact on the whole of Azerbaijan's relations with the EU, as through these practices Azerbaijan often manages to achieve its foreign policy goals. At this point, I would like to say that these are primarily short-term goals, since every scandal and revealed case of bribery is an obstacle to the development of the bilateral relations in question. However, it is worth considering whether this is actually the case. Does the exposure of these scandals really have

the potential to thwart Azerbaijan's plans and does the EU have the tools to counter caviar diplomacy?

Looking for an answer to this question, it is worth paying attention to three aspects. Firstly, caviar diplomacy covers very many areas of public life – money laundering, corruption, financing of trips and contacts with entities. Secondly, not every report and investigation ends in actual consequences, and I. Aliyev himself has never been the subject of any sanctions from the EU (European Stability Initiative 24.05.2012). Thirdly, the two sides are linked by many investments, primarily in the energy sector.

The European Union is Azerbaijan's most important trading partner and accounts for 48% of its total foreign trade. Member States' foreign direct investment in the country was as high as EUR 4.7 billion in 2013 and increased steadily in subsequent years (The Observatory of Economic Complexity n.d.). It is also worth mentioning the Southern Gas Corridor, a pipeline system which, from 2020, is responsible for supplying energy resources from Azerbaijan to Italy, from where they go to other European countries (Kajmowicz 14.01.2021). The opening of this network was the next – right after the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan connection – stage of building an alternative power line to Russia. Therefore, when the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war began in 2022, European countries, wishing to become independent of Russian supplies, became more dependent on the Azerbaijani offer. It is therefore not surprising that Azerbaijan's gas supplies to the EU have increased by almost 40% in 2022 compared to the previous year (Żamejć 28.03.2024), and in July 2022 the two sides reached an agreement to double gas supplies by 2027 (Kolarska 26.07.2022).

Azerbaijan also has a number of partnership programmes with the EU. Since 2004, it is the subject of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and in 2009 it became part of the Eastern Partnership. Moreover, the development of this cooperation, taking into account all three republics of the South Caucasus, is slowest on the EU-Azerbaijan line. Negotiations for the conclusion of a comprehensive partnership agreement have been ongoing for many years, while in 2017 Armenia already concluded talks and signed an identical agreement (Rada Unii Europejskiej 2022).

This situation shows that Azerbaijan wants to focus primarily on economic relations and is not interested in political dialogue in the form that the EU seeks. Ilham Aliyev resolutely avoids commitments that would require a declaration of democratisation or protection of human rights. At the same time, it adopts a number of assistance packages related to

technology and development issues to help Azerbaijan meet the conditions necessary to join the World Trade Organization. At the moment, the country in question has observer status and is undergoing the process of preparing for accession (World Trade Organization 2024).

It should also be said that, despite the lack of agreement on the partnership agreement between the parties, meetings of the Cooperation Council regularly take place. The last one took place on July 19, 2022, and the talks focused on energy issues and prospects for easing the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict. Conflict itself is also an important component of the relationship. Faced with the seizure of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan in 2023, Ursula von der Leyen condemned the action of the government of I. Aliyev and expressed the need to respect Armenia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Council of the European Union 2024).

The EU's relations with Azerbaijan therefore consist of several significant elements – energy investments, partnership programmes lacking current agreements, as well as aid and development cooperation packages. Azerbaijan is becoming an alternative to Russian gas for European countries, and Baku is aware of the advantage this situation generates. It is for this reason, among others, that caviar diplomacy is profitable for the Azerbaijani side while publicising scandals and lawsuits seem to have little impact on the course of energy cooperation. Moreover, mutual relations are already strained by the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh. Indeed, the European Union has been trying to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan since 2021, which the government of I. Aliyev perceives as biased and pro-Armenian, and the statements of U. von der Leyen have further deepened this reluctance (Górecki 7.06.2023). In addition, the process of negotiating new agreements is very slow, and political agreements are secondary for the Azerbaijani side. All this means that caviar diplomacy is practised somewhere in the background of official bilateral relations. For this reason, it is a dangerous phenomenon for the European side.

4. Azerbaijani and European Narratives of Caviar Diplomacy

An additional aspect to be taken into account is how these practices are perceived by both stakeholders and the public. In international relations, official communications are of great importance and can influence public

perception. For this reason, for the EU, the voices of politicians at the head of key institutions will be important. It is also worth paying attention to the voices coming from the Council of Europe, and therefore the organisation that has been struggling with the problem of caviar diplomacy for the longest time.

In the case of Azerbaijan, however, the messages of I. Aliyev and his administration will be important since the country in question is a presidential republic. This means that the president, elected for a seven-year term, is the head of state and the head of government. He also has veto power and acts as commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces (Konstytucja 1995). Ilham Aliyev, therefore, has a great deal of power, especially in the field of foreign policy. In addition, what distinguishes the political system of Azerbaijan is the participation of the president's family in the exercise of power, e.g., the first lady Mehriban Aliyeva simultaneously serves as vice-president of the state (Sheptytsky 2020/21). Of course, to get a full picture of the attitude of the Azerbaijani side to caviar diplomacy, one should also pay attention to the activities of state organisations, such as The Azerbaijan European Society (TAES), operating in 2008–2018.

However, it is difficult to find direct references to caviar diplomacy in Azerbaijan. First and foremost because it is, by definition, an implicit practice. All information leaks and scandals are silenced for this reason. In this case, the government of I. Aliyev chose the tactic of ignoring the problem and remaining silent for as long as possible. At the same time, Azerbaijan is trying to respond to allegations of corruption with special government actions that illustrate the state's fight against bribery.

A good example of such a campaign is the 2014 report produced by TAES for the European service LobbyFacts. Although the Azerbaijani organisation has repeatedly been involved in caviar diplomacy, the report states that its purpose was only to promote Azerbaijan, raise awareness of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, provide the necessary information and "build a bridge based on mutual relations, understanding and common values" (LobbyFacts 2018).

At first glance, the report appears to be ordinary PR content. However, when combined with the considerable effectiveness of caviar diplomacy and the passive attitude of European states, it turns out that TAES tactics are a factor that makes the situation of the European side even more difficult and complicates the issues related to the resolution of the caviar crisis.

It is also worth mentioning the statement of I. Aliyev from 2020. According to the State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the president gave an interview in August this year on the fight against bribery. This is another example that illustrates Azerbaijan's attitude to the allegations related to caviar diplomacy. The words of I. Aliyev that "the fight against corruption and bribery in Azerbaijan is not done with words, but with deeds" or "there is zero tolerance in Azerbaijan on these issues" (State Security Service 24.08.2020) are an important element of the Azerbaijani narrative, which consists in running away from the truth and creating a fictitious image.

On the European side, the narrative is somewhat different. In January 2024, PACE held a vote to reject the mandate of the Azerbaijani delegation for the third time in its history. This time, the main motive was to prevent the Assembly from observing the presidential elections that took place in February this year. This time Azerbaijan did not resort to corruption and managed to obtain the necessary majority, as a result of which the parliamentary mandates were not ratified (Canbäck 6.02.2024). At a press conference held shortly after the vote, Azerbaijani MPs said that "Baku no longer needs the Council of Europe" (Mammadov 23.01.2024). PACE's stance is a belated but firm voice of opposition to caviar diplomacy and forms an important part of the latest European narrative.

Another part forming a European attitude to caviar diplomacy is the statement by U. von der Leyen, who – on the occasion of the signing of the next energy agreement in 2022 – described Azerbaijan as a solid partner. She also said: "The European Union is turning towards more reliable and trustworthy partners, I am glad to include Azerbaijan among them" (Komisja Europejska 18.07.2022). These words are another example of why Azerbaijan can use its energy resources to hide corruption, and the EU is not able to counter them without jeopardizing energy agreements.

The above examples show that we cannot talk about specific and explicit narratives about caviar diplomacy today. Azerbaijan consistently pursues a strategy of avoiding the topic and publishing predictable PR content. On the other hand, the EU cannot openly and at the highest level oppose corruption on the part of Azerbaijan, because its priority is a stable alternative to Russian energy resources. The only official voice of criticism and opposition emanating from Europe is the PACE forum, however, given the new channels of application of caviar diplomacy, it is not up to date.

5. Prospects for the Development of the Caviar Crisis

Caviar diplomacy is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. This includes energy links and the Russian-Ukrainian war, which has caused most European countries to focus on finding an alternative to Russian gas supplies. For this reason, there seems to be a lack of effective methods to combat caviar diplomacy. In addition, the events related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict force the EU to balance on the international arena between economic cooperation with Azerbaijan and promoting itself as a reliable political partner for Armenia.

On the Azerbaijani side, too, there is no prospect of any de-escalation of the crisis, especially after I. Aliyev once again won the presidential election in early 2024. The authoritarian nature of power and the tangible benefits of caviar diplomacy mean that Azerbaijan has no reason to change its methods or try to change its image. In this context, Azerbaijan seems to embody the premise of the classical realism of Hans Morgenthau, who believed that states seek to maximise advantage and dominance over other players. This is primarily evidenced by the constant lack of a new, comprehensive agreement on the Eastern Partnership and Azerbaijan's attitude to the values promoted by the EU.

According to R. Canbäck, the European side should focus on the activity of independent journalists, closing legal loopholes and gradually building a new, uncompromising attitude (Canbäck 6.02.2024). In his latest report, compiled during the presidential election in Azerbaijan, a Swedish journalist wrote that "foreign journalists face the challenge of giving a voice to the people of Azerbaijan, not allowing the regime's program to control analysis and reporting" (Canbäck 6.02.2024). Thus, he clearly stressed the importance of promoting reliable information, especially in Azerbaijani society. It should be noted that the ways to combat caviar diplomacy described in the report may be the only viable alternative to direct criticism of Azerbaijan. In this way, long-term and often ineffective investigations can be replaced by amending the regulations, and the work of journalists will help to raise awareness of the dangers of caviar diplomacy and to some extent mitigate the consequences of the conformist attitude of the EU.

Conclusions

As it turns out, therefore, European-Azerbaijani relations in the 21st century are closely linked to caviar diplomacy. Its origin is connected with the internal conditions of Azerbaijan – its culture, energy potential and system of government. However, the phenomenon itself fits into the broader, post-Soviet practice of corruption and bribery.

The beginning of caviar diplomacy is the history of the activity of Azerbaijani delegations in the Council of Europe, especially in PACE. Observing the functioning of this institution, one can see the key stages of the development of this practice, as well as the process of spreading Azerbaijani influence in the EU.

Today, the term “caviar diplomacy” refers both to classic corruption involving the transfer of large sums of money and to less obvious initiatives such as organising trips or lobbying academics. All this has an impact on Azerbaijan-European relations and projects. Caviar diplomacy has led to a cooling of political cooperation between the parties, as illustrated by the still unfinished negotiations of a new cooperation agreement. Energy trade agreements, which prevent the EU from firmly fighting corruption, are also very important. Elements seemingly unrelated to caviar diplomacy are also important, including the EU’s position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Russian-Ukrainian war. Both of these factors make it possible to popularise certain views on the conflict with Armenia and to build even greater economic dependence of European countries.

What further complicates the caviar crisis are the unclear or incomplete narratives of both sides. For years, Azerbaijan has consistently avoided direct references to the subject and has only made vague statements to its European partners. The EU, on the other hand, cannot afford to openly object, which is why in its comments it proclaims a false vision of sincere and mutually beneficial relations.

Caviar diplomacy is a very dangerous practice that seems to be in the background on the international stage. In addition, the caviar crisis is currently so complex and multifaceted that it is impossible to end it in the near future (Canbäck 6.02.2024). This situation raises questions about the future of the EU, especially in the context of energy decisions. In the coming decades, we will undoubtedly see the European Community continue to struggle with the threats posed by corruption. We will find out which side will be able to stand on its own and dictate the terms. What is certain, however, is that caviar diplomacy is a huge obstacle to building healthy diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and the EU.

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