
HUNGARY EYES TO BECOME AZERBAIJAN'S GATEWAY TO EU MARKETS

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The Ambassador of Hungary to Azerbaijan, Viktor Szederkenyi, tells Azernews about energy and transport cooperation, tourism ties, NATO, humanitarian and cultural aspects of relations, as well as business opportunities.

- 2017 saw the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and Hungary. How do you assess the current level of relations between the two countries? What, in your opinion, is the major joint achievement for the years of cooperation?

- Azerbaijan and Hungary had declared Strategic Partnership in November 2014. This, I believe is a major achievement for both countries. Our bilateral political relations are friendly and free of any disputes, the high-level dialogue is regular, our countries are cooperating well at the different international fora. Azerbaijan is key partner for us in the broader region in both political and economic terms. Our common historic roots and the sympathy between our people provide an excellent basis for this partnership and the development of relations in all fields of life: trade, culture, education, sports etc. Within the strategic framework of our bilateral cooperation we have signed numerous agreements to facilitate state-to-state and people-to-people relations. The Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation meets regularly, 200 Azerbaijani students receives free scholarships from Hungary annually, there is a direct flight from Budapest to Baku – just to name a few achievements of our cooperation.

- Is the current level of cooperation coincide with the economic potential of the countries? What steps can be taken to increase the trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Hungary?

- In my view, the current level of economic cooperation does not coincide with the potential of the two countries. It does not reflect the excellent political relations between our countries, either. The trade turnover has a modest positive trend but we are not satisfied with the numbers. Our political leaders had identified those areas that are best suited for joint cooperation and projects – like agriculture, ICT, transport, logistics, water management, etc. So, the political support is there, and I also devote a lot of time in my work to exploring the opportunities and encouraging the mutual exchanges between our business people. The main ingredients of the Hungarian export are: the well-known pharmaceuticals, agricultural products and technologies, electronic equipments, cars assembled in Hungary, food items, beverages, livestock. Apart from the increase in trade turnover our primary goal is the promotion of mutual investments, to develop project-based, long-term cooperation. Hungary is a good platform for Azerbaijani investors in the entire EU-market as well.

- Could you highlight joint business projects that are currently being implemented given the interest in promoting mutual investments and business doing?

- In the areas of cooperation that we consider as strategic, Hungary offers new cutting-edge technologies, high-level solutions and know-how. We've just started a common agricultural project in nearby Khizi district: we build a modern greenhouse complex with the financial support of the Export-Import Bank of Hungary. The Budapest Waterworks company has a long term cooperation with AZERSU Company in the field of water management. The EU E-Agriculture project in Azerbaijan has been implemented with Hungarian leadership. Recently a Hungarian company supplied a gamma sterilization equipment for the Azerbaijani National NuclearCenter. The HungarianWizzAir Company offers direct flights from Baku to Budapest and then to a huge number of European destinations in very competitive prices.

- What is the situation with the latest developments in the area of energy cooperation between the two countries?

- In our view, Azerbaijan plays a strategic role in the energy security of not just Hungary, but of Europe as well. And we are glad that through the TANAP and TAP Azerbaijani will reach the European markets. The Southern Gas Corridor (SGC) is highly important in the diversification of the sources and the routes as well. Linking Hungary to the SGC through interconnectors is currently under consideration.

- How do you assess the possibility of cooperation between Azerbaijan and Hungary in the field of transport within the framework of East-West corridor?

- For us every infrastructural project is important which connects Europe and Asia. We consider Azerbaijan as a gateway for us to the Eastern markets (as much as we want Azerbaijan consider Hungary as its gateway to the EU markets). In this regard, we attach great importance to Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway since this railway line will shorten the transportation distance and time to Asia, and as we know it provides a competitive tariff system.

- What work is done to expand humanitarian and cultural aspect of relations?

- In October 2012 the Governments of Hungary and Azerbaijan signed an Agreement on the Cooperation in the field of Education Science and Culture. Based on this Agreement, an educational program for the years 2014-2017 was later concluded and it was renewed for the next three years in December 2017 in Vienna, by our Ministers of Foreign affairs.

This program provides the basis for the 200scholarships in Hungarian universities I mentioned at the beginning. It is a highly popular opportunity among Azerbaijani students. In 2017, the number of applicants exceeded five times the number of seats provided. I believe that education is one of the best investments in our bilateral relations as the graduates may play a key role in enhancing our ties in the decades to come.

In 2013 the University of Foreign Languages of Azerbaijan and the Hungarian Balassi Institute signed a cooperation agreement based on which a Hungarian language instructor teaches Hungarian language to Azeri students started since 2014. We are planning to extend this agreement this year.

The Hungarian Cultural Days in Baku held in March 2017 had been also a great achievement in the field of culture. It was a major multiple cultural event, first among the eastern partnership countries. Eleven cultural events were conducted in two days and ended with a gala concert in the Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center with more than six hundred spectators attending.

Due to high level of mutual interest towards these particular areas of cooperation, an additional new diplomat, exclusively responsible for educational and cultural affairs, started to work at our Embassy. So, you can expect more regular Hungarian cultural programs in Baku, and hopefully outside Baku, as well.

- The two countries have already done a lot to boost cooperation in tourism. What can be done in order to give additional impetus to upgrade this sphere?

- In 2014, a cooperation agreement was signed in the field of tourism, between Hungary's National Economy Ministry and Azerbaijan's Culture and Tourism Ministry. Hungarian travel companies are showing increasing interest towards the Azerbaijani market. Until recently, Azerbaijani tourism to Hungary was primarily focusing on our capital, Budapest and our Lake Balaton, but currently, the interest for combined tours (for example, Budapest-Vienna), as well as for health and wellness tours to Hungary is also increasing.

Just like in the case of Azerbaijan, Hungary does want to develop tourism as a strategic, economic field. Tourism diplomacy became an essential part of our job, and our Embassy, too, will do its best to promote it through disseminating information and organizing specific events. The direct budget flight between our capitals is obviously contributing to the tourist flow.

- What contribution could Hungary, as an EU country, bring to the resolution of the long-lasting Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

- Hungary's firm position is that a peaceful solution of the conflict should be based on the full respect to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. In the Declaration of the EU's Eastern Partnership Summit held last year on November 24, the EU reaffirmed its commitment to support the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of all its partners. The Summit participants called for renewed efforts to promote the peaceful settlement of unresolved conflicts

in the region on the basis of international law.

- What work does the embassy carry out in the capacity of NATO coordinator in Azerbaijan? Could you please highlight on specific milestones of your activities in this regard?

- In our view, Azerbaijan is a reliable, strategic partner for NATO who is making highly important contributions through its cooperation with the Alliance to peace and security.

Hungary fulfils the role of NATO Contact Point Embassy in 2017-2018. Our specific role is mainly to support two-way communication between NATO and Azerbaijan, and support NATO delegations and NATO's public diplomacy objectives here. Of course with close cooperation with the Azerbaijani authorities. We initiated programs like the visit by NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, Mr. Tacan Ildem last year. This year we plan some public events to serve the better understanding of what NATO thinks and does.

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