
Medvedev in central Asia for energy monopoly

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The Russian president visits Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan to convince them to send their gas through Russia, and reject the pipeline proposed by Europe. Baku's position is decisive, with pipelines already passing through into Turkey.

Ashgabat (AsiaNews/Agencies) - The trip of Russian president Dmitry Medvedev to central Asia continues, in an effort to maintain the country's monopoly over gas for Europe. Turkmenistan alone exports about 70 billion cubic metres of gas each year (equal to Italy's annual consumption), and the European Union and Western companies are proposing for Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan the creation of new pipelines that would bypass Russia, which currently transports their gas.

The EU is proposing to Turkmen president Kurbanguly Berdymukhammedov the creation of a pipeline under the Caspian Sea to Baku (Azerbaijan). The gas would then be pumped through the Nabucco pipeline, under construction, which will extend to Vienna. The country also wants to send gas to China (as of 2009, it should sell 30 billion cubic metres to China each year) and across the Indian Ocean. In March of 2008, Russia offered Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan "European prices" for their gas, after underpaying for years and using the cheap gas domestically, while it sold its own to the European Union at much higher prices. But now Medvedev is trying to stay below the prices that the EU and China are thought to be willing to pay. He observes that the planned pipeline through the Caspian Sea could also create environmental risks. With Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (the next stop on the trip), Russia will discuss rights to Caspian energy deposits, contested by the countries on its shore.

On July 3, Medvedev was in Azerbaijan to meet with president Ilham Aliyev. Aleksei Miller, head of the Russian company Gazprom, accompanied Medvedev and explained that "Gazprom and its counterparts in Azerbaijan have decided to begin talks over the conditions for buying Azerbaijani gas". In June, Miller was frequently in Baku and Ashgabat to prepare for the trip. The country's position is crucial, because Baku is the starting point for the pipeline that arrives at the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean, and also for the pipeline that goes through Tbilisi to Erzurum, and gas could arrive there from other countries, passing under the Caspian Sea.

The gas of the Shakh Deniz deposit should pass through the Nabucco pipeline. To prevent this, Moscow is willing to buy all of Baku's gas, more than 10 billion cubic metres per year. Moscow has said that it supports the country's claims over the Nagorno-Karabakh, currently controlled by Armenian separatists, which has won it words of gratitude from Aliyev. Various experts repeat, however, that it is in the country's interests not to bind itself to Russia, but to continue instead in the current state of uncertainty. (PB)
