Why Has Azerbaijan Not Joined the World Trade Organization?

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Official Arguments and the Political-Economic Reality

In the globalizing world economy, the World Trade Organization (WTO) is regarded as one of the central institutions in the legal regulation of international trade relations. At present, a significant share of global trade is conducted on the basis of rules established within the WTO framework, and the organization's more than 160 members include the principal actors of the global economic system.[1] WTO membership not only provides states with access to new markets, but also promotes the predictability of trade relations, the improvement of the investment climate, and the alignment of economic governance with international standards.

The Republic of Azerbaijan formally applied for accession to the WTO in 1997, and a working party was established in connection with this process.[2] However, the accession process has remained incomplete for nearly three decades. The relevance of the issue has increased particularly in recent years. Against the backdrop of the relative decline in oil revenues, the need to diversify the economy, and the reconfiguration of global trade routes, Azerbaijan's integration into the international trading system has acquired strategic significance. At the same time, the objectives of increasing the country's non-oil exports and attracting foreign investment have brought the question of WTO membership back onto the agenda.[3]

For many years, the Azerbaijani authorities have explained the delay in the accession process primarily by referencing the need to protect agriculture and defend the interests of domestic producers. According to the official position, WTO rules could weaken the local agricultural sector in the face

of foreign competition. However, an analysis of the economic and legal foundations of this argument shows that the problem is more complex and is not limited solely to agricultural policy.

The central research question of this article is as follows: What are the real reasons for the protracted nature of Azerbaijan’s WTO accession process, and to what extent do official explanations reflect this reality? Using comparative legal and political economic approaches, the article examines the history of Azerbaijan’s accession process, the arguments advanced by the government, and the compatibility of the country’s model of economic governance with WTO principles. In a comparative perspective, it also draws on the experiences of Georgia and Armenia.

The article’s central thesis is that the delay in Azerbaijan’s accession to the WTO can be explained primarily not by the protection of agriculture, but by the lack of full compatibility between the existing model of economic governance and the transparency, competition, and institutional constraints required by the WTO. In this respect, the question of WTO membership is not merely a matter of foreign trade policy, but also part of a broader debate about the character of state governance and economic institutions.

The World Trade Organization: Its Nature, Objectives, and Principles

The WTO is regarded as one of the principal institutions of the contemporary international economic system. The organization was established on 1 January 1995 and replaced the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which had been in force since 1947. The creation of the WTO was aimed at regulating global trade relations on the basis of more systematic and legally binding mechanisms. Today, the organization brings together the overwhelming majority of the

world's states, and the main share of global trade is conducted within its legal framework.

The principal objective of the WTO is to ensure the development of international trade on the basis of free, predictable, and non-discriminatory rules.[4] At the core of the organization's activities lies a system of multilateral agreements regulating the international circulation of goods, services, and intellectual property rights. In this respect, the WTO functions not only as a mechanism for trade liberalization, but also as an institutional framework that ensures the legal stability of international economic relations.

The functions of the WTO encompass several main areas. First, the organization oversees the implementation of multilateral trade agreements and serves as a platform for new negotiations. Second, it provides a legal mechanism for the settlement of trade disputes among member states. Third, by offering technical assistance to developing countries, it promotes their integration into the global trading system. Finally, the WTO monitors the trade policies of member states, thereby contributing to greater transparency in international economic relations.

The WTO's activities are based on fundamental principles such as non-discrimination, national treatment, transparency, and predictability. These principles are intended to create conditions for equal competition in international trade, reduce barriers to market access, and regulate trade relations on the basis of clear rules. At the same time, the organization provides for special concessions, transition periods, and technical support mechanisms for developing countries, thereby facilitating their integration into the global trading system.[5]

Thus, WTO membership is not merely a question of reducing tariffs or expanding foreign trade. The process also requires

the alignment of public administration, the customs system, the competitive environment, and economic institutions with international standards. In other words, accession to the WTO is not only a matter of foreign economic policy, but also a strategic choice concerning the character of the country's model of economic governance. It is precisely in this respect that the protracted nature of Azerbaijan's WTO accession process emerges not simply as a technical issue, but as one requiring institutional and political-economic analysis.

The History of Azerbaijan's WTO Accession Process and the Agricultural Argument

Within the framework of the Republic of Azerbaijan's WTO accession process, the government has carried out numerous legislative and institutional reforms. Certain parts of the normative legal framework in the areas of foreign trade, customs administration, technical regulation, intellectual property rights, and sanitary and phytosanitary measures have been brought into alignment with international standards. At the same time, bilateral market access negotiations have been conducted with various states, and numerous technical consultations have been held with the WTO Secretariat.

However, despite the nearly three decades that have passed, Azerbaijan has still not become a full member of the organization. During this period, most post-Soviet states have acceded to the WTO. Georgia became a member of the organization in 2000, and Armenia in 2003. Even Kazakhstan, whose economy is characterized by a significant role of the state and which possesses substantial energy resources, completed its accession process in 2015 after lengthy negotiations.[6] Azerbaijan's accession negotiations, on the other hand, have become one of the most drawn-out negotiations in post-Soviet space.

To be sure, the process of WTO accession is inherently complex and multifaceted. States acceding to the organization must

align not only their tariff policies, but also their domestic economic institutions with international trade rules. Nevertheless, it does not seem convincing to explain negotiations lasting nearly three decades solely in terms of technical difficulties. For this reason, we should examine the political and economic factors underlying the prolonged accession process.

For many years, the Azerbaijani government has presented the protection of agriculture and food security as one of its principal priorities in WTO accession negotiations. Official statements have placed particular emphasis on maintaining agricultural subsidies and ensuring that domestic producers are not weakened in the face of foreign competition. During the negotiations, the scale of agricultural subsidies and the mechanisms of state support for the sector have been among the most frequently discussed issues.[7]

At first glance, this argument may appear to have a certain logic. For developing countries, agriculture is not merely a sphere of economic activity, but also a matter of social stability, employment, and food security. For this reason, many states support the agricultural sector through various subsidy and protection mechanisms. However, the WTO's legal framework shows that the organization does not prohibit agricultural subsidies altogether.

On the contrary, the WTO provides for special concessions for developing countries. Under the Agreement on Agriculture, such countries are permitted to maintain subsidies within certain limits.[8] In particular, under the "de minimis" rule,[9] developing countries may provide state support amounting to up to 10 percent of the total value of agricultural production.[10] In addition, the special and differential treatment regime within the WTO framework provides developing countries with longer transition periods and additional concessions.

At the same time, it should be noted that the WTO system does not contain a single legal criterion for classifying states as “developed” or “developing” countries. As a rule, states designate themselves as they see fit. However, other member states may object to such self-classification or to the application of concessions arising from that status.[11] During Azerbaijan’s WTO accession negotiations, the country’s position regarding its status as a developing state has also been a subject of discussion. In particular, the United States has been identified among the states objecting to Azerbaijan’s recognition as a developing country and to its desire to benefit from the additional concessions arising from that status.[12] Azerbaijan has likewise sought to make use of these concessions in the negotiation process and has put forward specific conditions concerning the preservation of agricultural subsidies. This indicates that the issue is not the prohibition of subsidies as a matter of principle, but rather their scale and the mechanisms through which they are applied.

In this context, the scale of state support provided to agriculture in Azerbaijan is of particular significance. For example, in 2010, the volume of subsidies allocated to agriculture was reported to be approximately 14–15 percent of the total value of agricultural production.[13] This figure exceeded the 10 percent “de minimis” threshold provided by the WTO for developing countries and, to a certain extent, explains Azerbaijan’s efforts to secure broader concessions in the negotiation process.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan’s economic indicators also show that the agricultural argument has limited explanatory power. Over the past two decades, the relative weight of agriculture in the Azerbaijani economy has declined significantly. Thus, whereas the sector accounted for approximately 20 percent of GDP in 2000, this figure has subsequently generally fluctuated within the range of 5–7 percent.[14] This dynamic indicates that

agriculture has partly lost its former significance within the economic structure. At the same time, although the state has allocated subsidies to the agricultural sector for many years, the country has continued to remain dependent on imports for a number of strategic food products. This is particularly evident in the grain and wheat markets.

Thus, if the main problem was indeed the protection of agriculture, the question arises: Why are the concessionary mechanisms offered by the WTO considered insufficient? It is true that in recent years the government has continued to state openly its intention to pursue a broad subsidy policy in the agricultural sector. For example, at a meeting devoted to agricultural issues, chaired by President Ilham Aliyev in May 2026, emphasis was placed on food security, increasing state support for agriculture, and the adoption of a new State Programme aimed at developing the sector. In his speech, the president specifically noted that Azerbaijan applies extensive and multifaceted subsidy mechanisms in agriculture.[15] Nevertheless, the question remains open: Why are the special and differential treatment regimes, transition periods, and other concessions available within the WTO framework not regarded as sufficient to achieve these objectives? How was it possible for states such as Georgia and Armenia, with weaker economic potential and more limited resources, to accede to the WTO while still protecting their agricultural sectors?

These questions show that, although the agricultural argument partly explains the delay in the accession process, it does not constitute its principal cause. It seems more appropriate to look for the deeper causes of the problem in the model of economic governance, market access rules, customs policy, and the character of economic institutions.

The Real Reasons for Azerbaijan’s Non-Accession to the WTO: A Political-Economic Approach

The fact that Azerbaijan’s WTO accession process has continued

for nearly three decades without being completed indicates that this issue is not merely technical in nature. To be sure, accession to the WTO is a complex and long-term process. However, the fact that most states in post-Soviet space who have applied completed this process within a shorter period suggests that there are additional institutional and political-economic factors that explain Azerbaijan's situation.

Scholars of institutional economics emphasize that economic development depends not only on the availability of resources, but also on the quality of the institutional framework.[16] Economic institutions shape the behavior of market participants, determine the allocation of resources, and create economic incentives. In this respect, WTO membership is not merely a matter of trade policy, but also a process of aligning economic institutions with international standards.

It is precisely at this point that the question arises of certain contradictions between Azerbaijan's existing model of economic governance and WTO principles. The WTO primarily requires transparency, predictability, equal competition, and the expansion of market access opportunities. The implementation of these requirements, in turn, requires institutional changes not only in foreign trade policy, but in economic governance as a whole.

The Customs System and Informal Payment Mechanisms

One of the WTO's core requirements is that customs procedures be carried out on the basis of transparent, uniform, and predictable rules. Member states are required to determine customs tariffs in advance, conduct the valuation of goods in accordance with international standards, and create equal conditions for participants in trade.

The customs system is not merely a fiscal instrument for any state, but also an important element of economic policy. In economies such as Azerbaijan's, which are significantly

dependent on imports, customs policy has a substantial impact on the formation of the domestic market, price-setting, and foreign trade flows. In this respect, control over customs functions as one of the strategic elements of economic governance.

WTO membership, however, limits to some extent the state's scope for discretion in this area. The organization's rules require customs procedures to be conducted more transparently and in accordance with international standards. As a result, the role of individual or situational decisions in trade policy is reduced, while rule-based mechanisms of governance are strengthened.

In the economic literature, customs authorities are often characterized as one of the areas with a high risk of rent-seeking. Especially in import-dependent economies, control over customs functions not only as a fiscal instrument but also as an important institution affecting the allocation of economic resources. Under such conditions, the complexity of customs procedures, the breadth of administrative discretion, and the opacity of decision-making may create favorable conditions for the emergence of informal payment mechanisms.[17]

One of the WTO's core requirements is precisely ensuring transparency and predictability in customs administration.[18] The organization's Agreement on Customs Valuation provides for the determination of the value of goods in accordance with international standards and for the limitation of opportunities for administrative intervention.[19] In this respect, WTO membership could strengthen rule-based governance in the customs system by reducing the role of individual decisions.

For this reason, some scholars argue that WTO membership is significant not only from the perspective of trade liberalization, but also in terms of limiting opportunities

for rent-oriented behavior in customs administration.[20]

The practical implications of this approach can be observed in Georgia's experience. Following WTO accession, the country carried out a series of reforms aimed at simplifying customs procedures, unifying the tariff system, introducing electronic declaration mechanisms, and optimizing border-crossing procedures. As a result, the discretionary powers of customs authorities in relation to individual economic actors were limited, the role of humans in decision-making was reduced, and more uniform rules were established for participants in trade.

These changes did not eliminate the state's function of regulating foreign trade, but they did alter the ways in which that function was exercised. Whereas administrative intervention and individual decisions occupied a broader place in the previous model, the new model placed greater emphasis on procedures established in advance by law, electronic control mechanisms, and transparent accountability. For this reason, WTO membership leads not only to technical changes in the customs system, but also to institutional transformations, requiring the state to exercise its influence over economic processes increasingly through rule-based mechanisms.

Inconsistencies in Foreign Trade Statistics

One of the issues discussed in relation to Azerbaijan's foreign trade statistics concerns the discrepancies observed between official import data and the export figures reported by the country's trading partners. According to the "mirror statistics" method, widely used in international trade research, a country's import data are compared with the export figures of its trading partners. Some studies conducted with respect to Azerbaijan indicate that, between 2010 and 2015, there was a discrepancy of approximately USD 24,8 billion between the country's official import statistics and partner states' reported exports to Azerbaijan.[21] Although a certain

portion of these discrepancies may be explained by statistical methodology, transportation costs, and reporting periods, their scale requires further explanation and a higher degree of institutional transparency. At the same time, in recent years a significant reduction has been observed in the differences between the UN Comtrade database and national statistical reports, which can be explained by the convergence of statistical methodologies and the improvement of reporting systems.[22]

Nevertheless, the full harmonization of internationally comparable trade statistics remains one of the areas requiring further institutional development. In this respect, the standards and transparency mechanisms adopted within the WTO framework constitute an important institutional instrument for further strengthening statistical consistency and accountability.

The Competitive Environment and the Problem of Monopoly

Numerous studies on the Azerbaijani economy identify limited market access, the insufficient institutional development of the competitive environment, and the high level of concentration in certain sectors as systemic problems.[23] For the effective functioning of a market economy, equal market access for entrepreneurs, the protection of competitive conditions, and the minimization of administrative barriers are of crucial importance.

The WTO legal system consists precisely of multi-layered mechanisms aimed at ensuring these principles at the international level. In particular, the most-favoured-nation (MFN) principle[24] prohibits discrimination by requiring the application of the same tariff and trade regime to all member states, thereby legally precluding preferential or restrictive treatment toward individual countries. In addition, the WTO Agreement on Government Procurement (GPA) [25] establishes as legal obligations such core principles as transparency in

public tenders, pre-announced and objective selection criteria, and the elimination of discrimination between domestic and foreign companies. This mechanism moves public procurement away from the sphere of closed administrative decision-making and brings it closer to competition-based market procedures. At the same time, the WTO legal framework on trade in services, in particular the Reference Paper on Telecommunications[26], establishes important regulatory principles that limit the abuse of market power by operators holding dominant positions in this sector. The document requires the protection of competition, the institutional independence of the regulatory authority, and the prevention of non-transparent and discriminatory approaches in tariff policy.

In the Azerbaijani context, however, institutional transition in this area is not straightforward. High levels of concentration in certain strategic and highly profitable sectors of the economy, the influence of administrative resources on market behavior, and the weak institutional independence of competition mechanisms constitute factors that limit full adaptation to the open and predictable market model required by the WTO. For this reason, WTO accession is not merely a matter of technical tariff adjustment, but a comprehensive reform package that requires the restructuring of relations of economic power.

In this context, although the Competition Code adopted in 2025[27] formally expands the institutional foundations of competition law, the central issue remains the real independence and enforcement capacity of its implementation mechanisms. As the experience of many countries shows, the mere existence of competition legislation does not in itself ensure market liberalization; the decisive factor is the extent to which it is independent of political-economic power structures.

As a result, the structural differences between WTO principles

and the national model of economic governance make Azerbaijan's accession to the organization conditioned not merely on technical adjustment, but on deep institutional transformation. This, particularly in the areas of competition policy and market access regimes, is one of the key factors increasing the likelihood of serious political-economic resistance.

A Rent-Oriented Economy and the Oil Factor

One of the key features of the Azerbaijani economy is the high share of revenues derived from energy resources over many years. In the economic literature, such systems are often characterized as rent-oriented economies. In this model, a significant part of the state budget and economic activity is formed on the basis of revenues generated from natural resources.[28]

One of the characteristics of rent-oriented economies is the relatively weak incentive for institutional reform. Since revenues derived from natural resources can ensure economic stability in the short term, reforms aimed at developing a competitive environment and promoting economic liberalization may proceed more slowly.

It may be argued that this factor has also played a certain role in the protracted nature of Azerbaijan's WTO accession process. For many years, energy revenues served as the main source of economic growth and partly reduced the need for full integration into the global trading system. Nevertheless, in recent years, fluctuations in oil prices and the need to diversify the economy have raised new questions about the sustainability of this approach.

Economic Liberalization and Institutional Transformation

WTO membership is not limited to tariff reductions or the simplification of customs procedures. The process entails a broader institutional transformation. Transparent governance,

legal certainty, independent arbitration mechanisms, and a predictable economic environment are considered core requirements of the contemporary global economy.

The political economy literature notes that there is a reciprocal relationship between economic openness and institutional reform. Integration into the global economic system can stimulate not only an increase in foreign trade, but also changes in domestic economic institutions. For this reason, WTO membership is in some cases regarded not only as an economic decision, but also as a strategic choice concerning the model of governance.[29]

It is precisely in this respect that Azerbaijan's WTO accession should not be assessed solely in the context of agriculture or tariff policy. The issue must be considered within a broader institutional framework. The available evidence suggests that the deferral of accession is closely linked not only to technical difficulties, but also to the model of economic governance and the depth of institutional transformation required.

Thus, the question of Azerbaijan's non-accession to the WTO is not merely a matter of foreign trade policy, but also part of a broader debate about the country's model of economic development. The issue is not merely economic, but also institutional and political in nature.

The Experiences of Georgia and Armenia: Comparative Analysis and Conclusions

In order to assess Azerbaijan's WTO accession process more fully, it is useful to consider the experiences of other states in the region. The examples of Georgia and Armenia are particularly significant in this regard. In the early years of independence, both states faced serious economic difficulties, possessed limited financial resources, and carried out the transition to a market economy under complex geopolitical conditions. Nevertheless, both countries completed the WTO

accession process much earlier than Azerbaijan.

Georgia became a full member of the WTO on 14 June 2000, while Armenia did so on 5 February 2003. It is noteworthy that, at that time, the economic potential and financial capacities of both countries were significantly weaker than those of Azerbaijan. They possessed neither Azerbaijan's energy resources nor its substantial oil revenues. Nevertheless, these countries identified integration into the global trading system as a strategic priority.

Georgia's experience is particularly noteworthy. As a result of these reforms, Georgia expanded its integration into *global value chains* in certain sectors and strengthened its role as a regional transit platform, particularly in services and logistics. In the structure of exports, the share of agricultural products and tourism-related services increased, bringing the country's economic model closer to a more open and service-oriented pattern. Following WTO accession, broad reforms were carried out to simplify customs administration, liberalize trade procedures, and improve the business environment. To be sure, it would not be accurate to explain these outcomes solely by reference to WTO membership. Nevertheless, accession was one of the important factors that accelerated the transition of economic relations toward a rule-based system.

Armenia's experience also offers an interesting basis for comparison. Despite structural problems such as regional blockade, limited transport links, and a small domestic market, following WTO accession the share of information technology and manufacturing products in Armenia's export structure increased, while international cooperation expanded particularly in the sectors of *business process outsourcing* (BPO) and IT services. This process created conditions for the country's more active integration into global service value chains.[30]

To be sure, WTO membership does not automatically ensure economic development or prosperity. Integration into the global trading system is not the sole factor determining the success of reforms. However, international experience shows that a rule-based trading system can contribute to improving the investment climate, expanding market access opportunities, and making economic relations more predictable.

The comparative analysis shows that it is difficult to explain the prolongation of Azerbaijan's WTO accession by a lack of economic potential or by technical difficulties. On the contrary, the experience of regional states with more limited resources suggests that the central issue is related less to economic capacity than to institutional adaptation and political will.

Thus, Azerbaijan's accession to the WTO is not only a matter of foreign trade policy. It is part of a broader strategic choice concerning the future direction of the country's economic development model, the character of state governance, and the place it seeks to occupy in the global economic system. In this respect, perhaps the more important question is not "When will Azerbaijan become a member of the WTO?" but rather: What model of economic relations does Azerbaijan intend to choose: a more closed model based on administrative control, or a more open, competitive, and rule-based economic system?

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