

THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR: CULTURAL, INFORMATION AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND REGIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

O CORREDOR DE ZANGEZUR: INTEGRAÇÃO CULTURAL, INFORMATIVA E ECONÔMICA E OPORTUNIDADES REGIONAIS

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Abstract

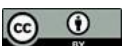
The Zangezur corridor possesses socio-economic, geopolitical and geostrategic characteristics connecting Central Asia, the Caspian region, Azerbaijan and Armenia with Turkey. This suggests that the corridor, which will expand the transport-logistics network between Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia and Armenia, will positively impact regional trade and play an important role in establishing economic cooperation in the South Caucasus. The Zangezur corridor is redrawing the economic and transport map of the South Caucasus. This project significantly increases Azerbaijan's geo-economic weight and influence capabilities in the region. By ensuring access to international markets for previously closed and economically isolated territories, regional economic dynamism is revitalized. Thus, Azerbaijan becomes an important logistics center at the intersection of East-West and North-South routes.

Keywords: Zangezur Corridor. Culture. Information. Economy. Regional Cooperation.

Resumo

O corredor de Zangezur possui características socioeconômicas, geopolíticas e geoestratégicas que conectam a Ásia Central, a região do Cáspio, o Azerbaijão e a Armênia com a Turquia. Isso sugere que o corredor, que expandirá a rede de transporte e logística entre o Azerbaijão, a Turquia, a Rússia e a Armênia, terá um impacto positivo no comércio regional e desempenhará um papel importante no estabelecimento da cooperação econômica no Cáucaso do Sul. O corredor de Zangezur está redesenhando o mapa econômico e de transporte do Cáucaso Meridional. Este projeto aumenta significativamente o peso geoeconômico e a capacidade de influência do Azerbaijão na região. Ao garantir o acesso aos mercados internacionais para territórios anteriormente fechados e economicamente isolados, o dinamismo econômico regional é revitalizado. Assim, o Azerbaijão se torna um importante centro logístico na intersecção das rotas Leste-Oeste e Norte-Sul.

Palavras-chave: Corredor de Zangezur. Cultura. Informação. Economia. Cooperação



Logistics. Azerbaijan. South Caucasus. Asia. Europe.

regional. Logística. Azerbaijão. Cáucaso Meridional. Ásia. Europa.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Zangezur corridor has the potential to exert specific political and economic influences on the countries of the region in different ways. For Azerbaijan, the political and economic impacts of this corridor can be grouped as follows:

1.1 Direct land connection with Nakhchivan is fully ensured

Air communication with Nakhchivan cost the state budget additional millions of dollars. The opening of the land route will reduce transport and communication costs by millions of dollars.

Nakhchivan's economic potential as a border country can be utilized more efficiently.

Diversification of Azerbaijan's international transport communication routes will be achieved, increasing its ability to hedge against possible dangers and risks.

1.2 Trade relations with Turkey will develop further

1.2.1 Access of Azerbaijani products to the East-West market will be fully ensured

Thus, these specific economic and political advantages created by the corridor for Azerbaijan demonstrate that it has multifaceted significance not only nationally but also on a regional scale. For this reason, the issue is evaluated not only within the framework of one country's interests but also in a broader — legal, geopolitical, and integration — context. In this regard, the Zangezur corridor also acts as a new legal-institutional platform for regional cooperation.

The Zangezur corridor has many regional advantages on a legal level. This is a great opportunity for countries in both the Caucasus and the Asian region. Thus, the

Zangezur corridor not only plays a role in the political aspect but can also be discussed as a solution to legal and economic issues.

The regional perspectives of the Zangezur corridor are outlined below:

- Increases the urgency of expanding international transport links.
- Creates a foundation for regional integration ties.
- Brings new dividends and investments to the region.
- Creates new geostrategic positions.
- Creates opportunities for multi-vector business cooperation in the region.
- Sovereign cooperation in the region expands in a new aspect.

2 DEVELOPMENT

The corridor will allow for the expansion of the railway network between Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, Armenia, and Iran, opening multiple trade routes connecting the Asia-Pacific basin to Turkey via Central Asia, the Caspian region, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. This will further strengthen the "East-West" corridor, the "North-South" International Transport Corridor, and the Caspian Transport Network. It will also facilitate the operation of the Oil and Gas Pipeline System from the Caspian to Europe. The opening of the corridor will increase the transit potential of the region, which plays a crucial role in the energy supply lines of the European Union, the USA, Russia, and China (AZERTAC, 2020).

President Ilham Aliyev has noted the strategic importance of the Zangezur corridor in various regional and international forums, including his speeches at the 77th session of the United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. In his interviews and speeches, the President of Azerbaijan stated that the corridor will create new opportunities for Turkey, Azerbaijan, the region as a whole, including Armenia: "The construction of a railway between Armenia and Iran has probably been discussed for 20 years, but in reality, nothing exists yet. Because this project requires at least three billion dollars. But there is a railway line between Nakhchivan and Iran - they could use that" (President.az, 2021).

On June 16, 2022, during his speech at the opening ceremony of the IX Global Baku Forum on "Threats to the Global World Order," President Ilham Aliyev touched upon this issue, stating: "In the year and a half since Armenia signed the act of capitulation, the non-opening of communication to Nakhchivan is a violation of the relevant provision of the trilateral statement. We expect Armenia to adhere to the trilateral statement signed on November 10, 2020, regarding the opening of communications, the connection of Azerbaijan with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. Unfortunately, a year and a half has already passed since Armenia signed the act of capitulation, but there is still no passage. This is unacceptable. First and foremost, this is a violation of the provision of the trilateral statement by Armenia. It also creates an imbalance in the region because, according to the same statement, Azerbaijan undertook to ensure unimpeded passage from Armenia to the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, where the Armenian population lives. For a year and a half, Armenia has been using the Lachin road for this unimpeded connection. But Azerbaijanis cannot use the Zangezur corridor, the road through Armenia, that will connect us with Nakhchivan. This is not fair, and we will not agree with it" (a-r.az, 2022).

2.1 With this, the head of state once again expressed the official position of Azerbaijan

Both historically and in the context of changing geopolitical processes, the importance of the Zangezur corridor was highly assessed. The main obstacle reducing the possibilities of using the corridor was, undoubtedly, Armenia's aggressive policy, which was ended as a result of the "44-Day War." Therefore, the issue of opening the Zangezur corridor was brought to the agenda by the Azerbaijani side and included in the trilateral statement. The opportunities lost due to the closure of the Zangezur corridor for many years have now created a chance for all countries in the region to benefit. The opening of the corridor will fundamentally impact all countries in the region, their transport policies, and the overall transport architecture of the region. Therefore, to understand the new realities created by the opening of the corridor, both from a geopolitical and transport perspective, it would be useful to determine how the corridor affects each of the countries in the region.

Following the bitter defeat in the Second Karabakh War, attitudes towards opening new transport corridors and implementing integration policies in Armenia are not unambiguous. While Armenian radical nationalists call this situation geographical "suicide," proponents of integration want to turn the country into a socio-economic, geopolitical, and geostrategic power.

Although Armenia lost the war, it may gain geopolitically in the new process. We tried to find research works (in English, Russian, Azerbaijani, and Armenian) justifying the "negative aspects" of the Zangezur corridor for Armenia and its citizens. However, apart from a few rhetorical statements we encountered in various sources, there is not a single substantive study emphasizing these "negative aspects."

Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territories and its conflicts with Turkey and Georgia had isolated the country, destroying its political maneuverability. The results of the Second Karabakh War actually opened new opportunities for Armenia in domestic and foreign policy.

The Zangezur corridor is a way out of geopolitical isolation for Armenia. By improving relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, the corridor creates a geopolitical opportunity to benefit from emerging processes in the Caucasus. Armenia could develop relative economic prosperity, security, and good relations with the West, and prevent human migration by eliminating unemployment and mass poverty.

The head of the Armenian Exporters Union, Raffi Mkhchan, stated that opening the Armenia-Azerbaijan routes would turn the country into a "gateway to the Caucasus" (De Waal, 2021).

The conclusion is that opening the Zangezur corridor will be beneficial for Armenia. The closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan prevented Armenia from obtaining a safe and sustainable land route to Russia, its main economic partner. After the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict began, the railway providing movement from Armenia to Russia and vice versa was closed. The only existing land route goes through Georgian territory, is geographically difficult to traverse, and is usually closed in bad weather. This constantly causes disruptions in transportation from Armenia to Russia and vice versa. At the same time, political disagreements between Georgia and Russia have sometimes led to the closure of this road. Overall, the opening of the Zangezur corridor aligns with the policy of the Armenian authorities, who are seeking ways to eliminate or at least reduce

dependency. They are simply being cautious in this matter, wary of a reaction against the government. The opinions voiced against the opening of the corridor are mainly put forward by Armenian nationalists, supported by foreign actors (or rather, certain circles in Iran, Russia, and France). It has also become a tool for the opposition to influence the current government. Therefore, as soon as the political situation stabilizes and the benefits of opening the corridor are realized, Armenians will come to terms with it. So, if practical action does not follow political statements, it casts serious doubt on Armenia's national and political will, making Yerevan prone to foreign interference. Russian expert Yevgeny Mikhailov, emphasizing Armenia's propensity for provocations to delay the opening of the Zangezur corridor, states that this is Yerevan's dependence on external actors and claims it will not refuse to participate in such a promising project (Report.az, 2021).

There is a golden opportunity to sign a peace treaty to end the decades-long confrontation. Armenians should think about this and not sabotage the Zangezur corridor by playing with words. The good thing in Kochinyan's statement is that time is against Armenia and "any concession possible yesterday is not possible today" (Jam-news.net, 2021) because the restoration of communications is vital for Armenia, which has suffered from an economic blockade for the last three decades. Former Armenian diplomat David Hovhannisyan, director of the Arabic Studies Department at Yerevan State University, says: "The Iranian government uses Armenia as a point of contact with the outside world; high-ranking regime officials go to Armenia to get a rare respite from the harshness of their own government, and they turn a blind eye to other well-connected Iranians doing the same" (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020, p. 25-33).

This means Iran is worried that it might be deprived of this amusement if the Zangezur corridor is established, which is a quite ridiculous justification. According to Armenia's former Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, "Since tensions in the region are still unresolved, the convergence of interests of Armenia and Iran in these circumstances apparently concerns the security of their common border" (Foreign Policy, 2022).

The delimitation process of the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia was last carried out in the 1970s. The original map prepared in connection with this during the Soviet era is kept in Moscow, with copies in Baku and Yerevan. In the current process, it is expected that this Soviet-era map will be taken as a basis for determining the borders

between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In 1929, a 657 sq. km land area of the Nakhchivan ASSR - 11 villages, and 3 villages of Zangilan district were given to Armenia. In addition, during those years, settlements like Aldara, Lehvaz, Astazur, Nuvadi, and others were also incorporated into Armenia's territory. In 1938, by decision of the Presidium of the Transcaucasian Central Executive Committee, certain areas around the Sadarak and Karki villages of the Sharur district were transferred to Armenia. Therefore, during this process, the Azerbaijani side should bring up the territories from after the Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan, i.e., up to 1974, not the 1974 map (Axar.az, 2022).

As can be seen, after the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict began, the closure of the main land routes between Armenia and its main economic partner, Russia, as well as Iran, deepened Armenia's blockade, forcing Armenians to use only the not very reliable Verkhny Lars road and unrepaired roads to Iran. Therefore, the opening of the Zangezur corridor could lead to Armenia freeing itself from the blockade and gaining the opportunity to access Russia, Iran, and the markets of the Eurasian Economic Union, of which it is a member, by land. Contemporary research also notes that in the post-war period, the restoration of communication lines in the region is an important factor affecting the balance of power not only economically but also in the political-information sphere (Talishinsky, 2023, p. 231-247).

Although the November 10 statement primarily led to the restoration of previously existing roads between regional countries, it will cause a change in the transport architecture. This is because these roads were closed for nearly 30 years, and during this period, transport policies and regional transport projects concerning the region were implemented without considering these roads (Azprint Publishing House, 2022, p. 178).

The Zangezur corridor also allows Armenia to balance its relations with Iran. On the other hand, the corridor can also help Armenia escape economic isolation by establishing trade relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. If Armenia develops economic cooperation with Azerbaijan, it will gain access to the East-West corridor, an important communication channel of the "Belt and Road" project (Rəşid, 2021).

If the planned Trans-Caspian gas pipeline between Central Asia and Turkey materializes in the future, Armenia could also be involved in energy transportation as a transit country. Additionally, the Yerevan administration could benefit from Azerbaijani investments in restoring regional railways.

The Zangezur corridor will reduce Armenia's economic problems in accessing the markets of Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Because the lack of a land route to its main trading partner negatively affects Armenia's economic relations and security. Moreover, this corridor will allow Armenia to establish a railway connection with Iran, another important trading partner.

From the ceasefire declaration signed between Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia on November 10, it is evident that Russia is interested in opening the Zangezur corridor. The text of the trilateral declaration states that the security of the Lachin corridor between Armenia and Khankendi, which is planned to be reconstructed, and the Zangezur corridor, which will connect Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan by land, will be ensured by Russian peacekeeping forces (Gazeta.ru, 2021).

Russia wants to both affirm its traditional activity in the Caucasus through the corridors and shape all transit, transport, and energy lines passing through the Caucasus as a geostrategic opportunity.

Russia's control over the corridor eliminates the possibility of any military operation against Zangezur.

For Moscow, establishing direct land communication between Russia and Armenia via the corridor is important. On the other hand, the corridor could be Russia's main route in the transport lines of the South Caucasus. Russian trains could go to the Middle East and other South Asian countries via the corridor.

Today, the geopolitical and other factors necessary for creating a common Turan space and implementing Turkey's integration program have taken shape. This refers to a space encompassing Turkey, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, with the prospect of expanding to regions inhabited by Turks in the Volga, Urals, and Southern Siberia. The latter mentioned areas are located in Russia. Therefore, integration of those areas into the Turkic world is not yet possible (Qarayeva, 2009, p. 4).

The establishment of land connections for Turkey will also help expand Turkey-Central Asia and Turkey-China trade relations. Currently, the trade turnover in this direction is Turkey-Central Asia \$6 billion, Turkey-China \$21 billion, and the Zangezur corridor promises long-term and serious growth in these directions as well. At the same time, the Zangezur corridor will create an opportunity to significantly increase cargo

transportation between China-Turkey and vice versa via Azerbaijan within the framework of the "One Belt, One Road" project (Musavat.com, 2021).

It should be noted that the integration process into the Turkic world is carried out by Ankara using non-military methods, within the framework of a detailed operational strategy in the geoeconomic field, employing high geoeconomic technologies to neutralize rival forces or inflict economic damage. Within this strategy, Turkey's main goal is to strengthen its influence in the markets of Central Asian countries and create new markets for products manufactured under the "Made in Turkey" brand (Walter, 2017, p. 42).

The Turkish leader, seeking to realize the creation of Turan, uses the most modern technologies to achieve geoeconomic integration in the region. It is precisely in this context that the Zangezur corridor comes to the fore and gains significance.

The Zangezur corridor signifies the economic and geopolitical transformation of Turkey's Caucasus policy. Through the corridor, the brotherly country will have a direct connection not only with Azerbaijan but also with other Turkic republics.

If the project is realized, Turkey-Azerbaijan relations will enter a qualitatively new phase. If land transport connection is established, relations between the two countries in political, commercial, economic, and geopolitical aspects will rise to a higher level. A new alternative route will also be created for Turkish trucks sent to Central Asia via Iran. Although the economic evaluation of this alternative is not fully calculated, it is estimated that Turkey's dependence on Iran will decrease.

Among the positive outcomes of the project are the increase of Turkish investments in Nakhchivan, the economic strengthening of Turkey's regions located on the Caucasus borders, and the creation of new cooperation in energy, transport, and logistics fields, as well as relations with Russia. We can consider the opening of the corridor as an important test for the improvement of Turkey-Armenia relations (Bayramov, 2021, p. 116-127).

The aforementioned corridor is vital for the trade volume between Turkey and Central Asia, as well as the Turkey-China trade volume, which was 21 billion euros in 2019. Moreover, it can be said that this will positively impact the new Central Asia corridor opened by Turkey. It is hoped that the Zangezur corridor will unite Turkic-speaking countries with a total GDP of \$1.1 trillion. It should also be noted that after the

corridor opens, Turkey will become a new logistics corridor connecting Central Asia with China.

Observations show that even the indicators of regional countries alone express the importance of the Zangezur corridor. Thus, even without considering trade turnover between distant countries, the economic potential and development level of regional states provide a basis for the Zangezur corridor to become significant. In other words, Zangezur will become an economic power factor, not just a geographical concept. In the region, there are dynamically developing Turkic-speaking states with a combined GDP of over \$1.0 trillion, and the potential capabilities of these states will ensure intensive use of the corridor. Turkey with \$761.5 billion, Kazakhstan with \$182.0 billion, Uzbekistan with \$58.0 billion, Azerbaijan with \$48.0 billion, Turkmenistan with \$48.0 billion, and Kyrgyzstan with \$8.5 billion GDP are dynamically progressing countries (Report.az, 2022).

3 CONCLUSION

Azerbaijan's territory has become the center of the region's transport hubs for international projects. In this regard, the Zangezur corridor could become a strategic transport corridor connecting Azerbaijan with the region, Asia, and Europe in several directions. In fact, the world's great powers accept this function of the Zangezur corridor and state their support. It is no coincidence that at the meeting of the US and Russian presidents, the necessity of opening communication lines in the South Caucasus was emphasized, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan discussed and agreed on this issue with the Russian and US presidents (525.az, 2021).

Besides Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Russia, and Iran, this corridor could greatly benefit the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Naturally, China stands to gain more here. The Zangezur corridor, being an important point on the China-Russia-Iran-Azerbaijan line, means new opportunities for Beijing's access to Europe and the Gulf countries and Africa via Turkey. This route is cheaper and shorter than others.

The Zangezur corridor could become a new transport project for Eurasia. Iraq has already stated that it could be a participant in the Zangezur corridor project. It is not excluded that Iraq will also join the Zangezur route that will connect East and West.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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