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The World's Leading Transport and Transit Hub: Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Georgia

Abstract

In the new world order established after the collapse of the USSR at the end of the 20th century, mutual and beneficial cooperation between states located in close geographical proximity came to the fore. In this regard, the South Caucasus, as one of the most sensitive geopolitical regions of the world with rich resources, stands out. New formats of cooperation began to emerge in the Caucasus. Principally, high-level strategic relations have been established between Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Cooperation between the countries was expanded for the most part in the field of transport. Obviously, the creation of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Türkiye triangle was caused by historical and cultural ties, geographic neighborhood, being part of a single transit corridor, favorable conditions and political will. The territory of Georgia was especially stand in need of the general infrastructure transport projects implementation in the region. Due to the fact that Georgia is a transit country, that ensures the transition between Europe and Asia. Furthermore, the aggressive policy of Armenia, another South Caucasus country, made Georgia a country of convenience. All the same, the establishment of a railway connection between the three countries has formed a favorable ground for Central Asian republics, which have great transport potential, to Türkiye and other European countries. Currently, cooperation relations between the three states in both bilateral and multilateral formats are to be remained unaltered. In terms of transport and transit issues, the region will gain a more significant position with the implementation of projects between Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

Keywords: *Türkiye, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Historical Silk Road, TRACECA, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars*



Dünyanın Önde Gelen Ulaşım ve Transit Merkezi: Azerbaycan-Türkiye-Gürcistan

Öz

SSCB'nin 20. yüzyılın sonunda dağılmasının ardından kurulan yeni dünya düzeninde, coğrafi olarak birbirine yakın konumda bulunan devletler arasında karşılıklı ve faydalı işbirliği ön plana çıkmıştır. Bu bağlamda, zengin kaynaklara sahip dünyanın en hassas jeopolitik bölgelerinden biri olan Güney Kafkasya öne çıkmaktadır. Kafkasya'da yeni işbirliği biçimleri ortaya çıkmaya başladı. Öncelikle Türkiye, Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan arasında üst düzey stratejik ilişkiler kurulmuştur. Ülkeler arasındaki işbirliği çoğunlukla ulaştırma alanında genişletilmiştir. Azerbaycan-Gürcistan-Türkiye üçgeninin oluşmasında tarihi ve kültürel bağların, coğrafi komşuluğun, tek bir transit koridorunun parçası olmanın, elverişli koşulların ve siyasi iradenin etkili olduğu açıktır. Gürcistan toprakları özellikle bölgede genel altyapı ulaşım projelerinin uygulanmasına ihtiyaç duyuyordu. Gürcistan'ın Avrupa ve Asya arasında geçişi sağlayan bir transit ülke olması nedeniyle. Ayrıca, bir diğer Güney Kafkasya ülkesi olan Ermenistan'ın saldırgan politikası Gürcistan'ı elverişli bir ülke haline getirmiştir. Aynı şekilde, üç ülke arasında demiryolu bağlantısının kurulması, büyük ulaşım potansiyeline sahip Orta Asya cumhuriyetlerinin Türkiye ve diğer Avrupa ülkelerine ulaşımı için elverişli bir zemin oluşturmuştur. Halihazırda, üç ülke arasında hem ikili hem de çok taraflı formatlardaki işbirliği ilişkileri değişmeden kalacaktır. Ulaştırma ve transit konularında Türkiye, Gürcistan ve Azerbaycan arasındaki projelerin hayata geçirilmesi ile bölge daha önemli bir konum kazanacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türkiye, Gürcistan, Azerbaycan, Tarihi İpek Yolu, TRACECA, Bakü-Tiflis-Kar

Introduction

It is obvious that in the period of industrialization, the regions with oil, natural gas and all alternative energy sources and the region where the countries providing the transmission of these energy sources are located as a key point on the international platform. In this context, the significance of transport is reflected once again. Particularly, in the 19th century, the railway, which was as a sign of the political and economic power of the states, again became a strategic and preferred means of transportation in the world. As is common knowledge, there is a certain history of railway construction in the region. Railway construction in the South Caucasus was started not from Baku, but from the opposite direction - from Poti.

The 294 km long Poti-Tbilisi railway was authorized in 1872 and in 1879, Czar Alexander II authorized the construction of the 548 km long Baku-Tbilisi railway. At the same time, a 105-km railway line was built from Samtredi station on the Poti-Tbilisi railway to Batumi port. From May 1883, the trains started operating directly from Baku to Batumi. Batumi, as a small settlement, soon developed due to Baku oil and became one of the world's major port cities (Dəmir yolu daşımaları, <https://socar.az/az/page/demir-yolu-dasimalari>). The Construction of

the South Caucasus or Baku-Tbilisi-Poti line was completed in 1883, thus, remained as the main railway in the region. After Russian Empire occupied a part of Eastern Anatolia in 1878, the construction of the branch from Tiflis to Marabda, Gyumri and Kars was completed in 1899. The Historical Silk Road, which lost its commercial and political value due to the discovery of new transport routes with Great Geographical Discoveries, as well as the rise and development of sea transport, has regained its essence as the “New Silk Road” for states in the 21st century. A part of the historic Silk Road, which plays a key role in the transport corridor, especially on the Eurasian continent, belongs to the Caucasus countries. Consequently, this region has the feature of being an economic center as a region that partially hosts energy sources and provides transmission. Türkiye is also among the states that recognize each of the republics that declared their independence as a consequence of the Soviet Empire collapse. Türkiye was the first country in the region that recognized the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia. The main objective in the direction of the Turkish government's foreign policy was to strengthen the integration of the region in the first place, in order to accelerate security cooperation in the South Caucasus. This period could be indicated as an opportunity for economic and trade relations. Concurrently, the Republic of Türkiye investigated to projects that ensure the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian Sea reach the European markets. From this point of view, Georgia and Azerbaijan have become one of the key countries in terms of energy projects as well as numerous transport projects. Accordingly, in addition to energy projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, TANAP and TAP, the territory of Georgia was especially a key place for the implementation of general infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. The revival of the Silk Road came up in the new historical conditions. In the past, this road was one of the longest and most important international trade routes in history, starting from Beijing, passing through Central Asia, one branch to Iran (Tehran-Tabriz and Dogubeyazid) and the Caucasus (Gumru-Kars-Erzurum), and the other branch to the south of Damascus (Doğanay, 1995). This region has the feature of being an economic center as a region that hosts energy sources to a certain extent and provides transmission.

1.The Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA)

The collapse of the USSR in 1991, created a geopolitical power gap in the Caucasus. In order to fill this power gap, regional and global powers tried to exert influence on the region in certain ways. The Caucasus and Central Asian countries located at the intersection of Europe and Asia contain 16% of the world's oil reserves. The desire of the European Union (EU) to

improve trade relations with this region necessitated the preparation and implementation of a new transport policy due to the geographical distance of the region. Many experts believe that the key reason for the European Union's attention to this region was precisely the energy factor. To achieve this objective, the European Union put forward the TRACECA project, which it called the "Silk Road of the XXI century". The mentioned project of the European Union furthermore aims to revive East-West trade on the Silk Road (Gorshkov & Bagaturia, 2001). The European Union's TRACECA – "The Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia" - program was proposed at the conference held in Brussels in May, 1993 with the participation of trade and transport ministers of the Caucasus and Central Asian countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). The Brussels Declaration was adopted by the participants of the conference, which provides for the implementation of the TRACECA technical assistance program. At the conference organized in Brussels in 1993, Türkiye's membership was not on the agenda. The EU intended access to the Caucasus countries through the territory of Georgia. At the next stage, the participation of Türkiye in the implementation of the projects considered as an essential step by EU. On September 7-8, 1998, an international conference dedicated to the restoration of the Historical Silk Road was held in Baku, with the participation of the heads of state of 9 countries (Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Romania, Türkiye, Uzbekistan, Ukraine), 13 international organizations and delegations from 32 countries; the main multilateral agreement "On International Transport for the Development of the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Corridor" was signed on the basis of the TRACECA Program; the Baku Declaration was adopted. In accordance with the multilateral agreement, in addition to the 8 countries that previously signed the TRACECA agreement, Türkiye, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria also signed up for that. It was decided to establish an intergovernmental commission to implement the provisions of the main multilateral agreement. Therefore, the TRACECA project has become one of the significant multilateral transport projects that both Türkiye and Georgia participated. Innumerable points stipulated in the main multilateral agreement that created favorable conditions for the implementation of Türkiye's Georgian policy. Primarily, the agreement envisaged the development of economic, trade and transport relations along the interregional geopolitical axis of the Europe-Black Sea-Caucasus-Caspian Sea-Asia line. This was in line with Türkiye's goal of accessing the Caucasian and Central Asian markets through Georgia. The TRACECA program, signed in Baku in 1998, soon began to be accepted as a cooperation format aimed at development in the field of transport along the Europe-Caucasus-Asia corridor and attracted other countries as well. Currently, TRACECA

transport corridor extends from Bulgaria, Romania, Eastern Europe, Ukraine to Türkiye. It is connected to the transport networks of the South Caucasus via the Black Sea from the ports of Poti and Batumi in Georgia.

2.Baku-Tbilisi-Kars: "Iron Silk Road" between East and West"

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK) project is a significant part of this project for both Türkiye and the South Caucasus region. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which is part of the Middle Corridor project, connects Türkiye with Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and China through railways. While this project has a vital importance in terms of strengthening Türkiye's relation with neighboring geographies, its essential feature stems from its location in the middle of a huge transportation corridor that runs along the middle line of Eurasia (Özpay, 2018). It should be indicated that in this context, the issue of building a railway line connecting Tbilisi and Kars has been a topic of discussion since the 90s of the 20th century. The prospective plan includes delivering a second branch of the Kars-Tbilisi railway to Trabzon port. This was aimed at ensuring the connection of railways with the seaways. The commissioning of the railway was a significant event for Türkiye. Due the closed border with Armenia for many years, Türkiye communicated with the Caucasus and Central Asian regions through Iran (Özpay, 2018). At the same time, the key point is that, although the countries of the former Soviet Union are very rich in raw materials and energy sources, Türkiye has the food and consumer goods in the need of these countries and which may be difficult to meet for them from Western countries. In the economic and commercial sense, the main partner and target country of Türkiye is Azerbaijan. Georgia is a country that plays a key role in reaching Azerbaijan and the Central Asian markets from there, as well as reaching the northern and southern regions of Russia. The Turkish state rightly believed that the establishment of a railway connection between Türkiye, Georgia and Azerbaijan would form a advantageous ground for connecting the Central Asian republics with a large transport potential to Türkiye; from the transport and transit issues point of view, with the implementation of this project, Türkiye would gain a more important position within this framework, transport projects such as Pan-European and TRACECA (The Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia) were put forward in order to integrate the first transport corridors with Asian countries into the center of Europe. Among these projects, TRACECA, also known as the modern Silk Road project, is defined as the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor (Akbulut, 2010). After Armenia invaded Kalbajar in 1993, Türkiye closed the borders with the aggressor country. As an alternative to the closed road, the construction of a railway line between Azerbaijan and Türkiye

that passes through the territory of Georgia was discussed for the first time at the meeting of the Joint Transport Commission between Türkiye and Georgia held in Ankara on July 26-29, 1993 (Qasımlı, 2021). On July 20-21, 2002, at the meeting of the transport ministers of Türkiye and Georgia in Istanbul, the protocol signed on the mentioned project implementation and the protocol stipulated preparatory process (Taşkin, 2006). Since 2003, process has been started in the direction of re-realization of the project. The President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili discussed the issue with the then Prime Minister of the Republic of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, and with the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, in Tbilisi and emphasized the significance of the project implementation. The first official discussions on the project were held during the official visit of President Ilham Aliyev to Georgia on July 14, 2004. The construction agreement was signed between the three countries in January 2005. The Armenian lobby and diaspora, which opposed this project because it passes outside of Armenia, appealed to the US government not to allocate funds for the construction of the road. The United States and the European Union, which refused to finance the construction, demanded the opening of the Kars-Gyumru-Tbilisi railway line, passing through the territory of invader Armenia, instead of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway. The issue related to this project included in the the agenda of the 7th Türkiye-Georgia Joint Transport Commission held in Tbilisi on December 29, 2004. On February 7, 2007, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, Prime Minister of the Republic of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili signed the contract concluding the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway project between Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Georgia in Tbilisi. The foundation of the BTK railway project was laid in 2007 in Georgia, and in 2008 in Kars. The ceremony dedicated to the laying of the Georgian section railway foundation was held on November 21, 2007 at the Marabda station in the Tetri-Skaro region of Georgia. President Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Türkiye Abdullah Gul and President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili, as well as guests from the European Union, the United States and other countries attended the ceremony. The construction of the BTK railway project, implemented within the frame of TRACECA, had many problems for many years. Especially with the lobbying activities of Armenia, it was difficult to find financial resources from the West for the project. The state of Azerbaijan, which resolutely rejected the pressures of the United States, later undertook the financing of the railway line construction. Within the framework of the project, Türkiye and Azerbaijan financed the railways within their borders, while Georgia used a loan. Azerbaijan provided a loan of 220 million dollars for the railway construction of the part within the borders of Georgia (Hasanov, 2016). Georgia had to construct the approximately 30-

kilometer line from the Turkish border to Akhalkalek and rebuild the existing 160-kilometer line to the Azerbaijani border within the 25-year 220 million dollar loan received from Azerbaijan at the rate of 1% per year. The project was supposed to be completed in 2009. The construction of the Georgian section railway line was conducted by Azerbaijan's "Azerinshaat servis" company, and the construction of the 76 km section in Türkiye by Türkiye's "Ozgun Yapı Chelikler" company. However, the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 and the global financial crisis slowed down the construction process. In accordance with the preliminary estimates, 1.5 million passengers and 3 million tons of cargo should have been transported in 2010 and 3.5 million passengers and 16.5 million tons of cargo per year in 2034. A protocol was signed for Kazakhstan to join in this road (Əliyev, 2015). Consequently, despite all these difficulties, the Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Georgia triad started the BTK project with great determination. The first test passenger train from Tbilisi to Akhalkalek was launched on September 27, 2017. A railway line with a capacity of 1 million passengers and 6.5 million tons of cargo was commissioned in 2017. In 2034, it is aimed to increase the number of passengers on the line to 3 million, and the cargo capacity to 17 million tons. By virtue of the BTK railway, the connection with the Republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia is provided in a shorter time. In connection with this transport corridor, it is aimed to develop economic relations between European and Asian countries. The provided non-stop rail transport will also make an important contribution to the economic integration of the two continents. The BTK project implemented within the framework of TRACECA will provide the development of competition in international passenger and cargo transportation, as well as the gateway to the West for the Central Asian republics. The integration of this project with the Central Asian Republics will also develop the infrastructure of the states in that region. The construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway made it possible to further increase the turnover of goods between Türkiye, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The following points will serve to increase the transit potential of the countries of the region, accelerate the processes of integration into Europe, and further develop cooperation within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy: the implementation of the international project on the new Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line; the construction of a railway tunnel in the Bosphorus; the connection of the Trans-European and Trans-Asian railway networks; goods and passengers export to Europe and Asia by passing directly through the territories of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Türkiye; The project implementation is of great importance in terms of economic efficiency, speed and time frequency, safety and reliability. In the future, the attraction of cargo belonging to European and Asian countries to this railway

will increase the volume of intermodal and container transportation in both directions (Bakı – Tbilisi – Qars yeni dəmir yolu, <https://oilfund.az/>). Georgia gained political power through BTK railway. In addition, transit cargo and passenger transports not only contribute greatly to the economy of Georgia, but also have a great impact on the economic return. This is very important factor for Georgia. Another important economic benefit of the BTK railway to Georgia is tourism. Non-stop railway transportation from Europe accelerates the development of tourism in Georgia. At the same time, it makes a significant contribution to economic life, as it will provide development in various sectors for both Türkiye and South Caucasus countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategic partnership between Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Georgia positions these nations as a pivotal transport and transit hub at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Their collective efforts in developing robust transportation infrastructure, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway and the TANAP and TAP pipeline projects, have significantly enhanced connectivity and solidified their roles in global trade routes. Moreover, the establishment of advanced port facilities and logistics centers has further accelerated regional trade and economic growth. The cultural exchange fostered by this transport network not only enriches the lives of the people in these nations but also opens new avenues for collaboration and tourism, drawing visitors from around the globe. As these countries continue to invest in and expand their transportation capabilities, they are not only transforming the regional landscape but also contributing to a more interconnected world. the Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA) stands as a vital initiative aimed at enhancing connectivity and cooperation among its member countries. Established with a historical vision to foster economic growth and regional integration, TRACECA has successfully aligned its objectives with the evolving needs of international trade and transport. The corridor not only facilitates the movement of goods but also plays a significant role in strengthening geopolitical relationships and promoting stability in the region. As infrastructure development continues to advance, TRACECA presents substantial investment opportunities, further solidifying its importance in the global transportation landscape. By prioritizing collaboration and mutual benefit, TRACECA is not just a physical corridor but a catalyst for economic prosperity and sustainable development in Europe, the Caucasus, and Asia. the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project stands as a significant milestone in the ongoing evolution of the Iron Silk Road, bridging the gap between East and West. By linking Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, this railway not only enhances regional connectivity but also serves as a vital artery for trade, fostering economic growth and development in the surrounding areas. Moreover, the project promotes cultural

exchange, allowing for a richer understanding and appreciation of the diverse heritages across these regions. While it is crucial to address the environmental and social considerations that arise from such large-scale infrastructure developments, the potential benefits of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway are substantial. As it continues to take shape, this project will undoubtedly play a pivotal role in shaping the future of trade and cultural collaboration across Eurasia, reaffirming its status as a modern-day Silk Road. As might be expected, these projects executed in a multilateral format will play a crucial role in the restoration and reconstruction of the historical Silk Road, and will greatly increase the strategic significance of the Caucasus region and Türkiye. Another important point is that, in this context, Türkiye and the Caucasus countries have become a convenient transport corridor for issues such as the development of international transportation of hydrocarbon resources, transport safety, environmental protection, and the creation of equal competitive conditions between different types of transport. Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and other transnational transport and communication projects not only boosted the development of transport between Türkiye, Georgia and Azerbaijan, but also increased the reputation of all three countries in the world, including Azerbaijan, as an international energy and transport hub.

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