

POLITOLOGY - ПОЛИТОЛОГИЯ**ELGUJA KAVTARADZE****Doctor of Political Science, Professor of Sukhumi State University (Georgia)****ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN IN A GEOPOLITICAL BATTLE. ZANGEZUR
CORRIDOR****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52340/isj.2024.29.12>**

Introduction. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of three independent states on the map of the South Caucasus was welcomed in Turkey and Iran, which had actually lost the fight for control of the region to Russia in the past. The new geopolitical situation is in their interests, as buffer states have emerged between them and their centuries-old northern rival. Tehran is also using the newly formed situation to its advantage. It has gained the opportunity to communicate with Europe through the South Caucasus, which can significantly reduce its dependence on cooperation in the field of transport with Ankara. One of Tehran's goals is to prevent Ankara from gaining strength in the region, which is beneficial for Russia, as it creates an opportunity to restore control over the region. On the other hand, if there is a prospect of creating a military-political union of the CIS countries led by Moscow, Iran can be safely listed as an opponent of such a union, as it will be perceived as a threat to its own national security. But, as such a union is not expected in the near future, then Iran can be perceived as a Russian ally in the fight against the spread of Turkish and US influence in the region.

In addition to neighbors, European countries and the United States are interested in the region. European countries prefer to act with the help of EU programs, which allows them to achieve better results at lower costs. It must be recognized that the South Caucasus is not a priority area in EU policy, so instead of large-scale investments from European companies, there is mainly technical assistance and educational programs, the main goal of which is to find internal resources in the countries of the region, optimize their use. The

main political goals of the EU must be recognized as maintaining the independence of the South Caucasus states, primarily from Moscow, as well as stabilizing the situation in them. However, the main goal of the EU in the region is to develop the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian Sea and ensure their safe transportation to European markets.

The United States of America, remaining the only superpower in the world, is striving to support the independence of the former post-Soviet republics from Russia in order to prevent the possibility of their integration around it. The existence of the Caspian hydrocarbon basin contributed to the change in the US position towards the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The US oil giants could not allow either Russian control over the oil fields or the dominance of European competitors. They forced Washington to take an active position in the region and declare it a zone of its vital interests. This is due to the fact that the US dependence on oil supplies from the Persian Gulf countries is great and threatens to exceed the fifty percent threshold. In addition, control over the Caspian basin fields will allow influencing the world oil market. So, as for the EU, it is necessary to recognize the main goals of the US as control over oil and gas reserves in the Caspian region and the creation of routes for transporting oil to the world market.

In such international relations and in the process of geopolitical struggle, the peoples and states of the South Caucasus have to live, while simultaneously fighting to preserve their geopolitical space.

Today, logistical geopolitics in international

relations is at the zenith of its struggle. Conflicts and geopolitical processes affect not only the transport architecture of the South Caucasus states, but also determine which geopolitical camp a particular country will be in. The South Caucasus, with its great transit potential, stands out for its uneven development of the transport infrastructures of all three republics in the region, which is mainly due to a complex of geopolitical problems, in particular the presence of a number of unresolved conflicts. The latter create significant obstacles both for regional transport integration and for the uniform involvement of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan in international transport communications.

Key words: *Zangezur Corridor*, «*Crossroads of the World*», *Geopolitics*, *international relations*.

Due to its geographical location, the South Caucasus is located at the crossroads of transport routes from East Asia to Europe (east-west), as well as from Russia and Northern Europe to South Asia (north-south). In the new geopolitical conditions, these transport arteries are acquiring a special role in the development of international economic cooperation. In these circumstances, some countries of the South Caucasus and neighboring regions (Azerbaijan, Turkey, Iran) are proposing various projects to create not just regional, but also world-class transport and logistics hubs on their territories.

Armenia has not remained aloof from these processes, presenting the “Crossroads of the World” transport project. It envisages the development of communications between Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran.

At the end of October, Armenia presented the “Crossroads of the World” project, which is essentially the Armenian version of the project to unblock communications in the region after the 44-day war. This is one of the components of the process of establishing lasting peace in the South Caucasus, and if implemented, it can change the status of Armenia, helping it to emerge from

isolation and become a logistics hub in the region.

After lengthy internal discussions and rebranding of the «Crossroads of Peace», Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan presented it to the international community for the first time at the Tbilisi International Forum, which was also attended by the head of the Azerbaijani government Ali Asadov. This was an attempt by Armenia, on the one hand, to counter Azerbaijan’s accusations against the Armenian side in preventing the unblocking of communication channels. On the other hand, to finally formulate its own agenda in the changing region, defending its importance in the context of the implementation of large international logistics projects.

Within the framework of this project, it is planned to create a new transport infrastructure in Armenia, which will require repairing or rebuilding an entire network of roads and railways, laying pipelines, underground cables and building power lines. At the same time, what is very important is that the entire transport infrastructure must function within the jurisdiction of Armenia, which will, through its state institutions, carry out border and customs control, as well as ensure its security.

Armenia is already ready, according to its leader N. Pashinyan, to establish 7 checkpoints on the borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as begin the restoration of four railway sections with a total length of 130 km, which will ensure communication between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey, including between Azerbaijan and its exclave, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (NAR). In the future, according to the authors of the PM project, the modernized transport system of Armenia can become an important link in the transport routes that will connect the Caspian Sea with the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf with the ports of the Black Sea. The total cost of the project, according to the most preliminary (possibly incomplete) estimates, will be \$ 500 million. The Armenian government assures that already in the first year of operation, the transport system of Armenia will be able to

ensure the transit of 4.7 million tons of cargo and 300 thousand passengers, and by 2050 the volume of cargo transported through the territory of the republic can increase to 10 million tons. The «Crossroads of the World» transport project is beneficial only to Armenia for the restoration of its economy, which is experiencing major problems. However, Azerbaijan does not intend to restore the Armenian economy and without resolving the Zangezur issue, Armenia will not receive any projects.

The Zangezur corridor is a road that is planned to be built through the territory of the Syunik region of Armenia to connect the main part of Azerbaijan with the Nakhichevan exclave. It borders Turkey, so if transport communications are built, Baku will receive a direct land connection with its ally. For its part, for Ankara, if the corridor is built, communication will be simplified not only with Azerbaijan, but also with the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia. Therefore, the Armenian project will remain a project. In addition, Azerbaijan and Turkey have been successfully building transport communications bypassing Armenia all this time.

Secondly, close transport cooperation between neighboring states, and especially the implementation of joint projects in this area requires a different level of trust. All three countries, especially after Armenia's defeat in the war and the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, are not yet able to interact based on compromises and consideration of each other's interests, as shown at least by the progress of negotiations on the conclusion of a peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Iran is another important actor in the processes taking place in the South Caucasus region. It is very interested in promoting its goods to world markets, so it is looking with interest at all regional transport projects. Iran is ready to deliver its goods through the territory of Armenia to the Georgian Black Sea ports, but it is unlikely to be inclined to lose part of the transit, which, if the project is successful, will go to Armenia. Therefore, although Iran verbally supports the

project as a guarantee of peace and stability in the region, Armenia will most likely not be able to count on its financial assistance.

As for Armenia's Western European partners, the «Crossroads of the World» project was presented at the Global Gateway investor forum held in Brussels, but so far nothing is known about any interest in the project from any European countries. It should be noted that for Armenia, the project they presented is important not so much for economic gain, but has political significance, since its appearance is associated with Armenia's attempt to solve the problem of the Zangezur corridor once and for all. As is known, Baku accuses Yerevan of not complying with paragraph 9 of the trilateral statement of November 9, 2020, which stipulates that all economic and transport links in the region should be unblocked, and Armenia undertakes to guarantee the security of transport links from Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan. Until now, it was possible to get from Azerbaijan to the NAR either through Iran (700 km) or through Georgia and Turkey (1200 km).

Azerbaijan proposes to build a road connecting it with Nakhichevan through the Syunik region of Armenia. In Azerbaijan, this road is known as the Zangezur Corridor. The new road will shorten the route from Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan. Baku is extremely interested in building the road in the near future for many reasons, both political and economic. First of all, unblocking transport links between the main territory of the republic and its exclave will allow Azerbaijan to have a direct land connection with its main partner and ally, Turkey, with its Mediterranean ports. According to expert estimates, this will lead to an increase in the country's exports by \$710 million. In addition, Azerbaijan expects that the Zangezur Corridor will facilitate access of its oil and gas to Western European markets. Currently, gas is supplied through Iran, which takes 15% of the Azerbaijani gas exported through its territory as a transit fee. In addition, the Zangezur Corridor could play an important role in the implementation of Azerbaijan's large-scale plans to turn the country into a world-class transport and logistics hub.

It is no coincidence that even before the final decision on the Zangezur Corridor, in May 2021, construction of a railway and road on the Horadiz-Agband section began in the NAR near the Armenian border, the latter of which should be commissioned this year. However, the implementation of such a beneficial project for Azerbaijan runs into the position of Armenia, which is not satisfied with the status of the road proposed by the Azerbaijani side. Initially, it was assumed that goods and passengers from Azerbaijan were to cross the territory of Armenia freely, without any customs or border inspection. The operation of the road and its security were also to be carried out by the Azerbaijani side. Thus, the railway and the land on which it is located practically became the property of Azerbaijan. At present, Baku has somewhat reduced its demands, having abandoned the extraterritoriality of the road, but still demands free passage of trains along the Zangezur railway. At the same time, Azerbaijan still directly links the lifting of the transport blockade of Armenia with the construction of the Zangezur corridor.

True, for some time now Azerbaijan has begun to avoid the term «corridor». But even this concession has changed almost nothing in Armenia's position. Moreover, Yerevan has started talking about Azerbaijan's claims to the southern part of Armenia, which before Azerbaijan joined the USSR was part of the then Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, whose successor modern Azerbaijan considers itself.

And although Baku denies any additional territorial claims to Armenia, the distrust and suspicion in the relations between the two countries are so strong that they often hinder a rational approach to solving problems.

However, for some time now Azerbaijan has started talking about the fact that the Zangezur corridor project is already losing its relevance. This is due to some interesting proposals that Iran has recently put forward. The fact is that Iran has always been very wary of the construction of a road from Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan through the territory of Armenia with an unclear status for

both economic and political reasons. On the one hand, Iran fears losing its role as Azerbaijan's main transit partner, thereby weakening its leverage over it. Turkey's role will only increase, which will only intensify the rivalry between the two countries for influence in the region. On the other hand, Iran feared that the extraterritorial road could cut Iran off from its important economic and political partner, Armenia.

As a result, bearing in mind Armenia's continued intransigence on the Zangezur Corridor issue, Iran proposed that Azerbaijan build a railway and road route (slightly longer than Zangezur) through its territory. This project, called the «Araks Corridor» or «Iranian Route», was also supported by Turkey. It is hardly possible to say that Azerbaijan has finally abandoned the idea of the Zangezur Corridor, and its widely announced cooperation with Iran in this area may be more of a demonstration. Armenia is once again being warned that if the Zangezur Corridor issue is not resolved, the country will finally find itself on the sidelines of global transport flows, if its transport blockade is lifted at all. It must be said that in the «Crossroads of the World» project, Armenia undertakes to connect Azerbaijan with Nakhichevan through its territory, although this route lies away from the main routes proposed in the project. Yerevan's main condition is that the road must be under the jurisdiction of Armenia. Azerbaijan is not yet ready to agree to such conditions, demanding additional security guarantees and free passage of goods. Russia is closely monitoring the transport situation in the region. It is interested in the earliest possible opening of a land route to Turkey through Azerbaijan, and the construction of a route linking the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic with the rest of Azerbaijan via Khangezur is entirely consistent with these interests. Of course, the Crossroads of the World project also looks promising, but its full implementation is still in great question. In order for at least one of these projects to work, steps towards each other will be required from the two neighboring states of the South Caucasus. However, we are convinced that

Azerbaijan will achieve its goal and the new route will be laid through Zangezur, which will also be the final geopolitical victory of Azerbaijan.

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ЭЛЬГУДЖА КАВТАРАДЗЕ

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АРМЕНИЯ И АЗЕРБАЙДЖАН В ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ БИТВЕ. ЗАНГЕЗУРСКИЙ КОРИДОР

Резюме

Распад Советского Союза и появление на карте Южного Кавказа трех независимых государств было с радостью воспринято в Турции и в Иране, которые фактически проиграли России в прошлом борьбу за контроль над регионом. Новая геополитическая ситуация отвечает их интересам, т.к. между ними и многовековым северным соперником появились буферные государства.

Тегеран также использует вновь сложившуюся ситуацию в своих интересах. Он получил возможность сообщения с Европой через Южный Кавказ, что может существенно снизить его зависимость от сотрудничества в области транспорта с Анкарой. Одной из целей Тегерана является недопущение усиления Анкары в регионе, что является выгодным для России, т.к. создает возможность для восстановления контроля над регионом. С другой стороны, если появится перспектива создания военно-политического союза из стран СНГ во главе с Москвой, Иран можно будет смело записывать в противники подобного объединения, т.к. оно будет восприниматься им как угроза собственной национальной безопасности. Но, т.к. подобного объединения в ближайшее время не предвидится, то Иран можно воспринимать как российского союзника в борьбе против распространения влияния Турции и США в регионе.

Кроме соседей, к региону проявляют интерес европейские страны и США. Европейские страны предпочитают действовать с помощью программ Евросоюза, что позволяет им добиваться лучших результатов при меньших затратах. Необходимо признать, что Южный Кавказ не является приоритетным направлением в политике ЕС, поэтому вместо масштабных инвестиций от европейских компаний, следуют в основном техническая помощь и образовательные программы, основной целью которых является изыскание внутренних ресурсов в странах региона, оптимизация их использования. Главными политическими целями ЕС необходимо признать сохранение государствами Южного Кавказа независимости, в первую очередь от Москвы, а также стабилизацию ситуации в них. Но все же основной целью ЕС в регионе является разработка углеводородных ресурсов Каспийского моря и обеспечение их безопасной транспортировки на европейские рынки.

Соединенные Штаты Америки, оставшись единственной сверхдержавой в мире, стремятся поддержать независимость бывших постсоветских республик от России, чтобы не допустить возможности их интеграции вокруг нее. Изменению позиции США в отношении стран Южного Кавказа и Центральной Азии способствовало существование каспийского углеводородного бассейна. Нефтяные гиганты США не могли позволить ни сохранения российского контроля над месторождениями нефти, ни доминирования европейских конкурентов. Именно они вынудили Вашингтон занять активную позицию в регионе и объявить его зоной своих жизненных интересов. Это связано с тем, что зависимость США от поставок нефти из стран Персидского залива велика, и грозит преодолеть пятидесятипроцентный рубеж. Кроме того, контроль над месторождениями каспийского бассейна позволит влиять на мировой рынок нефти. Так что, как и для ЕС, необходимо признать основными целями США контроль над запасами нефти и газа в каспийском регионе и создание путей транспортировки нефти на мировой рынок.

В таких международных отношениях и в процессе геополитической борьбы приходится жить народам и государствам Южного Кавказа, параллельно вести борьбу за сохранения своего геополитического пространства.

Сегодня логистическая геополитика в международных отношениях находится в зените своей борьбы. Конфликты и геополитические процессы, влияют не только на транспортную архитектуру государств Южного Кавказа, но и определяет в каком геополитическом лагере будет находиться та или иная страна.

Южный Кавказ, обладая большим транзитным потенциалом, выделяется неравномерным развитием транспортных инфраструктур всех трех республик региона, что преимущественно обусловлено комплексом геополитических проблем, в частности наличием ряда неразрешенных конфликтов. Последние создают существенные препятствия как для региональной транспортной интеграции, так и для равномерного вовлечения Армении, Грузии и Азербайджана в международные транспортные коммуникации.