

# HISTORICAL

## AND MODERN GEOGRAPHY OF THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR: APPROACH FROM THE CONTEXT OF REALITIES

### GEOGRAFÍA HISTÓRICA Y MODERNA DEL CORREDOR DE ZANGEZUR: APROXIMACIÓN DESDE EL CON- TEXTO DE LAS REALIDADES

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#### ABSTRACT

The Zangezur region, historically part of Azerbaijani territory, has long held geostrategic importance by connecting mainland Azerbaijan with the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and linking Turkey to other Turkic-speaking states. While territorial disputes in the South Caucasus have been widely studied, the historical and geopolitical significance of the Zangezur corridor remains underexplored, particularly from a temporal-spatial perspective encompassing pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. This study examines the historical evolution of the region and the strategic implications of the proposed Zangezur corridor after the 2020 Second Karabakh War. It reveals that the Soviet transfer of Zangezur to Armenia in 1920 disrupted connections between Nakhchivan and Azerbaijan and fractured Turkey's links to the Turkic world. The collapse of the USSR and the ensuing First Karabakh War further entrenched this separation, closing vital transport routes and hindering regional cooperation. Before 2020, proposals to reopen these routes lacked political feasibility. However, Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War and the trilateral declaration signed on November 10th, 2020, with Russia and Armenia, made the corridor's realization possible. Opening the Zangezur corridor stands as one of the most consequential outcomes of the war, with the potential to enhance regional connectivity, stimulate economic integration, and drive geopolitical transformation in the South Caucasus and beyond, while reinforcing the territorial cohesion and strategic alliances among Turkic-speaking nations.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, Karabakh, South Caucasus, Zangezur corridor.

#### RESUMEN

La región de Zangezur, históricamente parte del territorio azerbaiyano, ha tenido una gran importancia geoestratégica al conectar Azerbaiyán continental con la República Autónoma de Najicheván y Turquía con otros estados de habla túrquica. Si bien las disputas territoriales en el Cáucaso Sur han sido ampliamente estudiadas, la importancia histórica y geopolítica del corredor de Zangezur permanece poco explorada, en particular desde una perspectiva espacio-temporal que abarca los períodos presoviético, soviético y postsoviético. Este estudio examina la evolución histórica de la región y las implicaciones estratégicas del corredor de Zangezur propuesto tras la Segunda Guerra de Karabaj de 2020. Revela que la transferencia soviética de Zangezur a Armenia en 1920 interrumpió las conexiones entre Najicheván y Azerbaiyán y fracturó los vínculos de Turquía con el mundo túrquico. El colapso de la URSS y la consiguiente Primera Guerra de Karabaj acentuaron aún más esta separación, cerrando rutas de transporte vitales y obstaculizando la cooperación regional. Antes de 2020, las propuestas para reabrir estas rutas carecían de viabilidad

política. Sin embargo, la victoria de Azerbaiyán en la Segunda Guerra de Karabaj y la declaración trilateral firmada el 10 de noviembre de 2020 con Rusia y Armenia hicieron posible la construcción del corredor. La apertura del corredor Zangezur se erige como uno de los resultados más importantes de la guerra, con el potencial de mejorar la conectividad regional, estimular la integración económica e impulsar la transformación geopolítica en el Cáucaso Sur y más allá, a la vez que refuerza la cohesión territorial y las alianzas estratégicas entre las naciones de habla turca.

**Palabras clave:** Azerbaiyán, Najicheván, Karabaj, Cáucaso Sur, corredor Zangezur.

## INTRODUCTION

Historical geography is conceived as the discipline that studies the spatial evolution of territories over time, paying attention to how political, social, economic, and cultural factors have shaped the configuration of a geographic space at different historical stages. This discipline transcends the purely descriptive analysis of space to delve into an understanding of the dynamic processes that have transformed territories, examining the interrelationships between time, space, and human societies. As a discipline, its importance lies in its ability to provide a diachronic perspective that allows us to understand not only the current state of a region but also the historical background that explains contemporary territorial configurations, population patterns, border dynamics, and spatial conflicts that persist today (Marković, 2024; Paniagua, 2021).

This perspective is particularly relevant for the analysis of the South Caucasus due to the complexity of the transformation processes that this region has undergone over time. It is well known that this geographical area has been the scene of multiple administrative reconfigurations, forced demographic changes, border modifications, and territorial disputes that can only be fully understood through a holistic approach that integrates temporal and spatial analysis (Seyidova, 2024). The overlapping of different political and administrative frameworks—from the Ottoman and Russian empires to the Soviet configuration and subsequent independent states—has generated a complex geography where multiple territorial narratives, historical claims, and collective memories coexist, directly influencing current geopolitical dynamics (Allworth et al., 2024).

In the specific case of the Zangezur region, applying a historical geography approach becomes essential to unravel the multiple layers of territorial meaning that converge in this space. Zangezur is an important region that has been influenced by many civilizations throughout its history and

has frequently changed hands due to its strategic position. With the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, the region came under the control of the Russian Empire. Zangezur, where Azerbaijanis were concentrated at the beginning of the 20th century, fell under Ottoman influence for a short time in 1918 when the Ottomans advanced into the region. As a result of the wars between the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and the Republic of Armenia in 1918-1920, the number of Azerbaijanis in the region decreased sharply due to the genocide and deportation policies implemented against Azerbaijanis in the region. Although most of Zangezur was given to the Armenian Soviet Republic as part of Stalin's border policy with the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1921, the Nakhchivan and Karabakh regions remained under Azerbaijani control. The transfer of Zangezur to Armenia resulted in the loss of Azerbaijan's land connection with Nakhchivan. Although there are Armenian studies that attribute long-standing historical and cultural ties to the Zangezur region, the fact that the Zangezur region is a historical territory of Azerbaijan is an undeniable fact, and attempts to prove this should not be considered a great merit. However, the transfer of these lands from Azerbaijani to Armenian control occurred in the early 20th century, resulting in the disconnection of mainland Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan exclave, which poses geopolitical and logistical challenges in an increasingly interdependent global context.

The economic evolution of the South Caucasus, and in particular the Zangezur Corridor, cannot be understood without considering the trade networks and productive activities that have served as the basis for regional development. Historically, Zangezur was part of caravan routes connecting the Mediterranean with the Caspian Sea, passing through the cities of Tbilisi (now Tbilisi) and with branches to Iran. During the Russian Empire, the construction of the Transcaucasian Railway—albeit with circumnavigating sections—substantially changed the economic structure, as it favored the transport of minerals (copper, gold) and agricultural products (coffee, tea, fruit). During the Soviet era, centralized planning policies led to the construction of strategic highways and the creation of industrial hubs, with the aim of integrating the Transcaucasian republics into economic circuits oriented toward the European USSR. Following the Soviet collapse and the independence of Armenia and Azerbaijan, transportation routes became fragmented: border closures and disputes over Nagorno-Karabakh disrupted the historical continuity of these land connections. However, the recent reestablishment of infrastructure corridors and projects (oil and gas pipelines, highways) has revived economic dynamics and redefined the strategic importance of Zangezur as a

link between the Caucasus, Turkey, and Iran (Gawliczek & Iskandarov, 2023).

Thus, these changes must be analyzed from a comprehensive perspective that considers political-administrative, historical, economic, cultural, and other aspects. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to shed light on the process of transferring the Zangezur region to Armenia, as well as to draw attention to the problems that arose from the separation of these territories from Azerbaijan and the separation of the Turkic world from each other. After the Second Karabakh War, a new geostrategic reality has emerged in the South Caucasus. The opening of this corridor is in line with the economic interests of the region's population and, at the same time, with global interests. The article draws attention to the changes that will occur in the region after the opening of the corridor.

## DEVELOPMENT

### Brief information about the history of Zangezur

The Kur-Arza region, including the Zangezur region, was part of the Median state in the 7th-6th centuries BC. In the 6th-4th centuries BC, it was part of the Achaemenid empire. Until the 3rd century BC, this region was under the control of the Parthian state. From 226-651, the newly formed Sassanid state controlled this region. As a result of the reforms carried out by the Sassanid ruler Khosrow I in the 6th century, the Adurbadagan province was created and the territories of Azerbaijan were united into a single administrative area. Musa Kalankatli, the author of the work "Albanian History", provided information related to this period and spoke about the existence of an independent Syunik principality in the 7th century. As a result of research, it becomes clear that this term is associated with the name of the Sakas. The fact that part of the Zangezur population adopted the Albanian wing of Christianity once again confirms that the people living in these areas have the same ethnic affiliation as the people living in Albania. The fate of Zangezur, which was part of the Albanian state, led to certain changes in connection with the Arab Caliphate's campaigns in the region. This nuance is reflected in the customs and traditions of the local population (Urud, 2016).

The situation that arose due to the influx of Arabs into Azerbaijan in the 7th century resulted in the vast majority of the region's population converting to Islam; however, a portion of the population of Zangezur did not convert to Islam and continued to practice Christianity. After the fall of the Sasanian Empire, the only rival of the Arabs in this region was the Byzantine Empire. The struggle of the Caliphate with Byzantium continued more in an ideological aspect. In Byzantium, the Orthodox sect of Christianity

was dominant during this period. There was a division within this sect. The dominance of the Dyophysite sect of Christianity in Albania and the Monophysite sect among Armenians led to the aggravation of relations between Albanians and Armenians. The Arabs benefited more from the Gregorian Armenians in the ideological struggle against Byzantium and tried to limit the powers of the Albanian church when appropriate. As a result of these processes, from the 7th to the 9th centuries, the Gregorian church was established in Zangezur and suppressed the Albanian church. Consequently, the Albanian church lost its power in Zangezur, and despite the strong protests of the Albanians, the Albanian church was replaced by the Armenian Gregorian church. Taking advantage of the weakening of the Arab Caliphate, the Azerbaijani people created independent states in the second half of the 9th century. As a result, this region was successively part of the Sajid, Salarid and Shaddadid states.

In the 11th century, the South Caucasus, including Zangezur, came under the control of the Seljuks as a result of the campaigns of Sultan Alp Arslan. After the Atabeys seized power in 1136, the Zangezur region came under their control. The territories of Zangezur continued to be part of the Atabey state until the Mongol invasions. After the Mongols invaded the South Caucasus in 1236, they established the Ilkhanate, the fifth Mongol ulus under Hulagu, in these territories. In 1385, the Timurids invaded the region and for a while ruled the Zangezur territories. Later, these territories were captured by the Jalayirid state during 1385-1410. At the beginning of the 15th-16th centuries, the Zangezur territory successively came under the control of the Qara Qoyunlu and Aq Qoyunlu dynasties. In 1431, during the reign of the Qara Qoyunlu ruler Qara Iskander, he brought a large number of Armenians from Sivas, Harput and Tarjan and settled them in Chukhur Sad and Syunik. Later, Zangezur became one of the important regions of the Aq Qoyunlu (1468-1501) and Safavid states (1501-1736), and later of the Nader Shah state (Urud, 2016).

Until 1828, Zangezur, which was a territorial unit of the Karabakh Khanate, was an integral part of Azerbaijan as a whole. Later, the expansion of Tsarist Russia into the region began, and the region's management policy was changed as it was included in the Yelizavetpol governorate. After the Turkmenchay Peace Treaty, many Armenian families were resettled from the Ottoman and Iranian territories, and the policy of armenization of the region was implemented. Due to the complexity of the natural geographical conditions and the colonial policy of Tsarist Russia, along with the intensification of the existing socio-political processes in Azerbaijan, the People's Republic lost

control over these territories at the beginning of the 20th century. In the first half of the 20th century, more precisely in 1920, these territories were transferred to Armenia by the Soviet leadership. We consider it appropriate to comment on this process in detail, since there are many irrefutable facts and archival documents regarding the Soviet leadership's seizure of Zangezur from Azerbaijan and its transfer to Armenia.

After the collapse of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the Armenian government began to make new territorial claims against Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani government stated that it wanted to resolve the disputed issues diplomatically. On April 30, 1920, it sent a note to the governments of Armenia and Georgia. It stated that "1. Withdraw your armies from Karabakh and Zangezur; 2. Retreat to your own borders. 3. Stop the interethnic massacre. Otherwise, the Revolutionary Committee of the Azerbaijan SSR will consider itself at war with the government of the Republic of Armenia." The Armenian Foreign Minister, distorting historical facts, declared Zangezur and Karabakh to be Armenian territory. A. Ohajanyan wrote in his response note on May 3: "We do not have an army in Azerbaijani lands. The forces of the Musavat Party that you defeated are in the territories of Armenian Karabakh; they are killing hardworking Armenians, and in Shusha, they have destroyed many villages in the regions inhabited by Armenians. The issues between Azerbaijan and Armenia must be resolved peacefully. The people living in Karabakh want to live under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Armenia. However, Azerbaijan has not been able to establish its own government in Zangezur. It is not legally and tactically corrected to call Zangezur Azerbaijani territory. Our army has never entered the borders of Azerbaijan. The massacres were organized by Musavat and the Turks." Taking advantage of the complex international situation, the Armenian government proposed that "1. All military operations be stopped; 2. Negotiations be initiated to resolve border issues and establish good-neighborly relations" (Gasimli, 2016).

As can be seen from the official negotiations, the territories in question were not part of Armenia in the 20th century. The complicated international situation brought about by the First World War further inflamed their desire to possess these territories. Although the separation of these territories from Azerbaijan was carried out on the direct orders and instructions of V.I. Lenin, N. Narimanov, who led the Bolsheviks in Azerbaijan at that time, played a certain role. Although he tried to make a decision in favor of Azerbaijan in this matter, his resistance was broken at the last moment and he agreed to give these territories to the Armenians. In this matter, Narimanov wrote to V.I. Lenin,

blaming G. Chicherin: "If it is profitable for the Center to sacrifice Azerbaijan and keep only Baku - the oil - and to abandon the Eastern policy, let it be, but I warn you: it is impossible to keep Baku in the neighborhood of traitorous Dashnaks and Georgian Mensheviks without the whole of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, I want to learn from you how the Center views us Muslims and how it can solve such important issues without us. The Center may not believe us, but responsible comrades like Ordzhonikidze and Mdivani also do not agree with the Center's decision. The Center took our weapons from us and strengthened the Musavat provocation with its decision on Karabakh, which, as they always say, shows that Muslim communists sold Azerbaijan to Russia. Russia recognizes the independence of Georgia and Armenia, but for some reason considers the undisputed territories in Azerbaijan before the establishment of Soviet power to be disputed (Gasimli, 2016).

The solution to the territorial issue largely met the expectations and desires of the Armenians. By the summer of 1920, Narimanov, still under pressure from Ordzhonikidze, was forced to promise to cede the territories of Zangezur, Karabagh, and Nakhchivan to Armenia. In 1921, the party's Caucasian Bureau insisted that Nagorno-Karabagh be part of the Armenian Soviet Republic. However, Narimanov managed to get this decision reconsidered. During this period, the Armenian invasion of Nakhchivan and the entry of Greek troops into Turkey led Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to approach the Bolsheviks. At the same time, he planned to use the potential of the Bolsheviks to save the Turkish territories. Kâzım Karabekir Pasha, the commander-in-chief of the Turkish troops in Eastern Anatolia, sent impressive telegrams to Baku in 1920. In them, he acknowledged the tender feelings of brotherhood that had formed towards the allies and expressed confidence that the Russian-Turkish alliance would be long-term.

At first, some government circles in Soviet Russia supported Narimanov. They expressed the opinion that it would be more expedient for Nakhchivan and Zangezur to remain within Azerbaijan. Through these territories, Soviet Russia would be able to provide land communication with Turkey via Azerbaijan. Otherwise, the Azerbaijan Revolutionary Committee could refuse to support the Moscow center. However, Stalin and Ordzhonikidze opposed this policy. The Armenian government initially did not want to let the Bolsheviks into the country. However, fearing a possible war with Turkey, it allowed the Red Army into its territory. Following this development, according to a secret agreement reached between Russian and Armenian representatives in Tbilisi, the Soviet delegation promised to keep the issue of the territorial status of



Karabagh, Zangezur and Nakhchivan open until a peace treaty was signed. Narimanov learned about this secret agreement after it was signed and sent a protest through Behbud Shakhtakhtinsky (BaberoVski, 2003).

Soviet Russia made many attempts to bring the communist to power in Armenia. However, the Dashnak regime, which held actual power in Armenia, did not agree to this. Perhaps this was a tactical move, because a series of negotiations were held with the Dashnaks in order to establish the communis in Armenia. As a result of these negotiations, it was decided to transfer the ancient lands of Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan and Zangezur, to Armenia. It is no coincidence that a number of issues related to Armenia were discussed at the meeting of the Political and Organizational Bureau of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party, held a day after the establishment of the communism in Armenia. The following decisions were adopted at this meeting: "There is no border between Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Armenia; Zangezur and Nakhchivan pass to Armenia; the mountainous part of Karabagh is given the right to self-determination; Soviet Azerbaijan establishes an indissoluble military and economic alliance with Soviet Armenia. Narimanov should be instructed to draft this resolution."

Naturally, N. Narimanov bore direct responsibility for this vital issue. However, it should not be forgotten that N. Narimanov worked hard to ensure that these territories remained within Azerbaijan. Carrying out this task, N. Narimanov, in his speech at the solemn meeting of the Baku Soviet held at the State Theater on December 1, 1920, announced that Zangezur and Nakhchivan would be ceded to Armenia, and full autonomy would be established for the Armenians in Karabagh. The statement read:

Soviet Azerbaijan, assisting the struggle of the working Armenian people against the rule of the Dashnaks, who have shed and are shedding the innocent blood of our best comrades - the communists - in Armenia and Zangezur, declares that from now on no territorial issue can be a reason for the shedding of blood between two peoples who have been neighbors for centuries: Armenians and Muslims; all military operations within the borders of Zangezur are stopped; the troops of Soviet Azerbaijan are withdrawn from here. (Chakhmagly, 2024).

Thus, the piece of land connecting Azerbaijan with Turkey was taken from Azerbaijan. The separation of these territories from Azerbaijan and their transfer to Armenia also had very serious consequences for Turkey. The ideas of Turanism existing in Turkey were thwarted. This step was a

step taken towards severing Turkey's existing political and economic ties with Turkic-speaking countries.

### **The strategic importance of the Zangezur region**

According to archival Soviet-era decisions, the Zangezur District became part of the Armenian SSR by resolution of the Council of People's Commissars of July 20, 1921. This administrative change disconnected the main territory of Azerbaijan from its Nakhchivan exclave, which has had significant repercussions for the region. Geographically and economically, Zangezur occupies a strategic position, and the context changed after the September 2020 conflict, culminating in the agreement signed on November 10, 2020, by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The second part of this article will analyze the opening and demilitarization of the Zangezur Corridor as an urgent and high-impact challenge for the South Caucasus.

The realization of the Zangezur corridor entails a transformation of geopolitical competition in the Caucasus. An analysis of this region in terms of cooperation, economy, transport, logistics and geography also reveals its importance in a globalizing world (Aliyeva, 2023). This corridor is of economic, geopolitical and strategic importance, connecting Central Asia, the Caspian Basin, Azerbaijan and Armenia with Turkey. The opening of this corridor will increase transport and logistics opportunities between Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia and Armenia. The expansion of the railway network of the corridor between Azerbaijan, Turkey, Russia, Armenia and Iran, in addition to creating opportunities, has the potential to connect Turkey from the Asia-Pacific region to Central Asia, the Caspian Basin, Azerbaijan and Armenia (Jabbarova, 2023). It will further strengthen the "East-West" corridor, the "North-South" International Transport Corridor and the Caspian Transport Network (Aliyev, 2024). This corridor will also facilitate the operation of the Oil and Gas Pipeline System. The implementation of the corridor can also play a very important role for the energy supply lines of Europe, the USA, Russia and China.

The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, has voiced the strategic importance of the Zangezur corridor on many platforms. The President noted this in his speeches at the 77th Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific of the United Nations (UN). The President of the Republic of Azerbaijan stated in his interviews and speeches that the corridor will create new opportunities for Turkey, Azerbaijan, the region as a whole, including Armenia.

If the Zangezur corridor is opened, it can direct the development of the South Caucasus countries and change the political and strategic landscape of the region.

Most importantly, the Turkic world will unite through the Zangezur corridor. The opening of the Zangezur corridor can make a great contribution to the economic development of Turkic-speaking states. Currently, Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan are connected only by automobile connections passing through the territory of Iran. This corridor will have a positive impact on all spheres of life in Nakhchivan and will create conditions for access to the East-West corridor. The main goal of Azerbaijan is to obtain a land route to Nakhchivan and Turkey. The fact that Nakhchivan is separated from the main territories of Azerbaijan limits the geopolitical opportunities of the region. Furthermore, the opening of the Zangezur corridor can also be useful in terms of normalizing relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The opening of this corridor can also be useful for the implementation of a number of global projects. Through this corridor, Azerbaijan's position between Turkey and China will be further strengthened. Azerbaijan will become one of the main actors in terms of transit cargo transportation through this corridor. It is thought that this corridor will play a very important role in connecting the two old continents. Since time is a very important factor in cargo transportation, minimizing the cargo transportation time through this corridor will make transnational companies prefer to transport cargo through this route. At the same time, the implementation of huge projects in the region will make a great contribution to the well-being of the population of the region.

By implementing the Zangezur corridor, Azerbaijan aims to turn itself into the center of road and energy transit between Asia and Europe, increase its importance in the Eurasian geography, become one of the guarantors of Europe's energy security, and play a role as a bridge between the Turkic world and the main power in the discussions around the Caspian Sea and its surroundings (Aliyev, 2023). If the project is implemented, an alternative route will be created for the cargo that Turkey sends to Central Asia via Iran. This alternative will serve to reduce Turkey's dependence on Iran. The increase in Turkish investments in Nakhchivan will lead to the strengthening of the economic potential of the regions of this state located in the South Caucasus border areas. At the same time, the establishment of new cooperation in the fields of energy, transport and logistics in Turkish-Russian relations indicates the positive results of the project. Moreover, the opening of the corridor can be considered an important contribution to the improvement of relations between Turkey and Armenia.

The corridor in question is of great importance for the trade turnover between Turkey and Central Asian countries,

as well as for the trade volume between Turkey and China, which exceeded 21 billion euros in 2019. Moreover, it can be said that it will also have a positive impact on the new Central Asian corridor that Turkey has opened through the Zangezur corridor. Forecasts suggest that the Zangezur corridor will also connect Turkic-speaking countries, whose gross domestic product is 1.1 trillion dollars.

But after Armenia's heavy defeat in the Second Karabakh War, its attitude towards the implementation of new transport corridors and, at the same time, the implementation of integration policies is not serious. Radical groups in Armenia consider the implementation of this corridor a "gift of misfortune" for Armenia. However, those who support integration and the opening of the corridor want to turn the country into a socio-economic, geopolitical and geostrategic power. Through such projects, even Armenia can gain geopolitical advantages in the new process. Armenia's position towards neighboring states, its long occupation of Azerbaijani lands, and its territorial claims to Turkey and Georgia serve no purpose other than to isolate it in the region and to hinder the state's political and economic maneuvering possibilities. The coming to power of N. Pashinyan, who pursued a more liberal policy than previous Armenian leaders, and the results of the Second Karabakh War opened up new opportunities for Armenia in domestic and foreign policy.

The Zangezur corridor is a way out of the economic blockade and geopolitical siege that Armenia is in. The corridor would improve Armenia's relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. It also creates opportunities to benefit from the geopolitical process emerging in the Caucasus. The Zangezur corridor could also create conditions for Armenia to independently conduct its relations with Iran without dependence. If Armenia sets itself the goal of developing economic cooperation with Azerbaijan, it will gain access to the East-West corridor, an important communication channel of the "Belt and Road" project. If the planned Caspian gas pipeline between Central Asia and Turkey is realized in the future, Armenia could also benefit from energy transportation as a transit country for the benefit of the country's economy. In addition, the current Armenian government could also benefit from Azerbaijani investments in the rehabilitation of regional railways.

The Zangezur corridor will eliminate a number of economic problems for Armenia by providing access to the markets of Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. The lack of a direct border with Armenia's main trading partner hinders its economic and political relations and security. It will also allow Armenia to establish a railway connection with another important trading partner, the Islamic Republic of Iran (Rashid, 2021). The November 10th ceasefire

declaration between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia shows that Russia is an interested party in the opening of this corridor. Thus, the text of the Trilateral Declaration stated that Russia would ensure the security of the Lachin corridor between Armenia and Khankendi, which is planned to be rebuilt, and the corridor that will create a land connection between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan through the territory of Armenia.

### **International support for the realization of the corridor**

The territory of Azerbaijan has become the center of the region's transport hubs for international projects. In this regard, the Zangezur corridor can become a strategic transport corridor connecting Azerbaijan with the region, Asia and Europe in several directions. A number of major states and transnational companies are aware of the prospects of the Zangezur corridor and express their support for the opening of this corridor. It is also a fact that at the meeting of the heads of state of the United States of America and the Russian Federation, they stressed the importance of opening communication lines in the South Caucasus. The President of the Republic of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, discussed the issue of opening communications with the Presidents of the Russian Federation and the United States of America, and a joint agreement was reached.

This corridor can be of great benefit to the countries of the region as well as to the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Of course, the opening of this corridor is promising in terms of the interests of the People's Republic of China. It is also a reality that in a globalized world, having only production capacity is not enough for the economic development of countries. China, one of the world's most important exporters, exports goods worth 2 trillion 400 billion dollars to the world market annually, and more than half of these goods are sent to the European market. In this regard, China attaches great importance to economic relations with Europe and is interested in using new alternative transit routes. Exporting manufactured goods to foreign markets in a cheap and short way is as necessary as air and water for developing countries like China, which have huge economic potential in the world. Industrial products exported from the People's Republic of China to the world can be easily delivered to Europe, the Gulf countries, and Africa via Turkey through this corridor. This route is both cheap and shorter than others (Gasimova & Yurcu, 2023).

Various analyses suggest that the opening of the Zangezur Corridor could generate geopolitical and geoeconomic transformations, both regional and intercontinental,

consolidating Azerbaijan's position as a transit hub in Eurasia and reinforcing its role as a sovereign state in the international arena. In his statements to national and international media, President Ilham Aliyev has highlighted the economic, strategic, and historical significance of the project. According to the tripartite agreement, the corridor's security will be the responsibility of Russian forces, reflecting Russia's history of involvement in the Caucasus and its responsibility for overseeing transit corridors.

Russia's control of the corridor eliminates the possibility of any military operation against Zangezur. The creation of a direct land connection between Russia and Armenia through the corridor is important for Moscow. On the other hand, the corridor could become Russia's main route on transport lines in the South Caucasus. Russian trains could travel through the corridor to the Middle East and other South Asian countries. Although Russia and European countries are interested in using the Zangezur corridor to reach Central Asia, there are differences of opinion on the management of the corridor, although both sides see this corridor as one of the important gates in the Eurasian transport network. Moscow aims to locate its border and customs services here, gain full control over the corridor, and generate revenue. However, Europe supports the fact that this corridor should be under the control of Armenia, not Russia. It is also worth remembering that Azerbaijan wants the Zangezur corridor to be opened in accordance with the November 10th agreement and Azerbaijan to have unhindered access to Nakhchivan.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

During the first years after the Russian Revolution, the USSR's policy toward the South Caucasus pursued several objectives: decoupling Turkey and Azerbaijan, rewarding Armenian nationalists (Dashnaks) who had collaborated in the establishment of local Bolshevik structures, and simultaneously ensuring Armenia's accession to the new Soviet order. The result was the cession of large areas of the western part of what would become Azerbaijan today—including the Zangezur region—into Armenian hands. This decision fundamentally altered transnational connections in the region, as it not only fractured the historical link between Turkey and Azerbaijan but also created an Azerbaijani enclave (Nakhchivan) isolated by Armenian territory. With the Soviet collapse, the borders inherited from the 1920s came to be interpreted as state-to-state lines, reigniting latent tensions. For decades afterward, the Zangezur Corridor remained blocked: the dividing line not only served as a physical barrier but also represented a symbol of an ethnic-territorial rivalry that intensified with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, the outcome of

that conflict disrupted the balance of power in the region, forcing a re-evaluation of the possibility of reopening a land link directly connecting Turkey with the Nakhchivan enclave and the rest of Azerbaijan.

Following the trilateral agreement of November 2020, endorsed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia, the need for a “non-impermeable corridor” that would allow transit between Nakhchivan and the easternmost part of Azerbaijan was formally established. However, the implementation of this infrastructure clashes with divergent objectives:

- Turkey and the Turkic world, which see the corridor as a potential land route that would boost trade with Central Asia, strengthen ethnic and cultural unity, and reinforce its role as an energy supplier and hub.
- Russia, which officially assumes responsibility for “ensuring the security of the corridor,” seeks to maintain its role as a regional mediator, ensure the functioning of its military bases in Armenia, and preserve a balance of influence between Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to analysts, Moscow seeks to manage its relations with both countries so as not to undermine its strategic prerogatives in the region.
- Iran, which has historically served as an alternative route for trade between the Caucasus and South Asia, perceives the new direct passage as a threat to its relevance on land routes. Thus, it promotes diversifying and improving its own free transport infrastructure to Azerbaijan, so that it does not depend exclusively on a crossing controlled by other powers.
- The European Union and China, both interested in diversifying alternative logistics corridors to those that cross Russia. For the EU, the corridor would offer more secure—and cheaper—access to Azerbaijani hydrocarbons and other raw materials, gradually reducing dependence on Russian gas. For China, within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, it represents an additional link that would strengthen the southern branch of the Silk Road, connecting the Mediterranean with Central Asia without passing through Russian territory.

Thus, despite a declared majority within the international community in favor of reactivating the corridor, a fundamental disagreement persists over who should ensure its opening and operation. The trilateral decree of November 2020 explicitly entrusts Russian federal forces with the mission of ensuring transit security, but neither the European Union nor a large part of the Armenian government agree to relinquish this responsibility to Moscow. In the short term, this tension could translate into administrative delays, political objections, and demands for the participation of external observers (for example, representatives of the EU or multilateral organizations). In the medium

term, if the control issue is not resolved, the corridor risks remaining inoperative or semi-blocked, reproducing the territorial fragmentation that marked the 20th century in the South Caucasus. In light of these considerations, it is concluded that the reopening of the Zangezur Corridor is almost inevitable from an economic and geostrategic perspective, as it responds to urgent needs for regional interconnectivity following the 2020 war. However, its viability will depend on a complex balance:

- On the one hand, on the political will of Armenia and Azerbaijan to cede real sovereignty over a strip of territory that, until recently, symbolized their most heated dispute.
- On the other, on Russia's ability to play a credible guarantor role in the eyes of Brussels and, at the same time, Yerevan, without Ankara feeling disadvantaged.
- Finally, on Iran's perseverance in redirecting its infrastructure projects to avoid being marginalized, as well as on the determination of the EU and China to consolidate alternative routes to the Russian orbit.

Only if these four interest parts—Turkish, Russian, Iranian, and Eurasian—manage to establish a shared security and oversight mechanism will the Zangezur Corridor be able to operate uninterruptedly, transforming itself into an axis of economic development, energy integration, and political cooperation that will potentially redefine the geopolitical order of the South Caucasus. Conversely, if mistrust and a reluctance to cede control to a third party persist, the project will be relegated to a mere treaty statement, and the borders inherited from the USSR will once again function as barriers rather than bridges. History teaches us that the routes enforced by the ruling powers can be reversed when local and global circumstances change drastically. However, the success of this reversal—that is, the effective reopening of the corridor—now depends on a collective effort that transcends territorial claims and focuses on mutual benefits: only then will the Zangezur Corridor transform from a hypothetical passageway into a true catalyst for regional stability and prosperity.

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