



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**ZANGEZUR DISCOURSE:
IMPLICATIONS FOR WAR AND PEACE BETWEEN ARMENIA AND
AZERBAIJAN**

RAHIM RAHIMOV

167

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Following the 44-day second Karabakh war from September 27 to November 10, 2020 with Armenia, the Azerbaijani leadership actively shapes what I call the Zangezur discourse in this paper. And the related media and public are also actively engaged in promoting it. The Zangezur discourse has implications for the future of war and peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It also offers an angle to look into the wider security environment that is being reshaped in the South Caucasus region following the second Karabakh war.¹

What is Zangezur?

Zangezur is a historical name for an area whose parts are now territories of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan. In 1868, the Russian Imperial authorities established an administrative-territorial unit there known as the Zangezur province (Zangezurskiy uyezd). Following various clashes, disputes and decisions, the Bolshevik authorities eventually split Zangezur into western and eastern regions in 1921 to be parts of Soviet Armenia and Soviet Azerbaijan, respectively.

The Armenian part of the region that Azerbaijan calls [western] Zangezur is formally named Syunik in the Republic of Armenia with its own version of the region's history.² It is located on the Armenian-Iranian border between the Republic of Azerbaijan and its exclave – the Autonomous Republic of Nakhchivan that is patched between Iran, Turkey and Armenia. According to the Azerbaijani narrative, the Russian-Bolshevik transfer of [western] Zangezur to Armenia created a border between Armenia and Iran and, more importantly, separated Azerbaijan from Nakhchivan and, most importantly, cut off Turkey from the rest of the Turkic world; particularly, mainland Azerbaijan.³ “The transfer of Zangezur to Armenia led to a geographical split of the Turkic world,” Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev told the summit of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States.⁴ Therefore, the Zangezur issue is not simply a historic dispute of an ethnic or territorial character but rather an item on the evolving regional geopolitical agenda.⁵ The Zangezur discourse has two major inter-related and also complimentary components: Zangezur as a transport corridor and Zangezur as an ancestral land.

Terminology

This paper aims to speak with a neutral voice neither to endorse nor reject any terminology. Since Azerbaijan's discourse is the focus of the paper, the terminology refers to the language that is used by Azerbaijan. Therefore, and for better clarity, consistency and easy tracing, we will use the following terminology: "Zangezur discourse," "Zangezur corridor" and "Zangezur region/area."

Zangezur as a Transport Corridor

On November 9/10, 2020, Russian president Vladimir Putin brokered a truce accord known as the Trilateral Declaration with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to end the 44-day war.⁶ The nine-point document contains two important clauses (6 and 9). First, under Clause 6, the Lachin corridor with a 5-km width was established under the control of Russian peacekeepers through Azerbaijan's Lachin district (therefore, it is called the Lachin corridor) to connect the Republic of Armenia to the Russian peacekeeper-controlled and Armenian-populated parts of Karabakh. This clause was fulfilled immediately. Second, Clause 9 states that all "transportation connections" are to be unblocked. Specifically, "transport communication" between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan is to be established under the control of Russian border troops (not the peacekeeping forces). It is to pass through the Zangezur/Syunik region and, therefore, Azerbaijan calls it the Zangezur corridor which is also known as the Nakhchivan or the Meghri corridor or otherwise. But unlike Clause 6, Clause 9 has not been fulfilled and is still pending execution. The document distinguishes the "Lachin corridor" for Armenia from "transport connection/communication" for Azerbaijan.

Apparently, Baku was not able to incorporate the term "corridor" into Clause 9. This said, it also does not put up with the omission of it, either. Therefore, Baku now seeks to shape a discursive reality in which the notional Zangezur corridor is equalized with the de-facto Lachin corridor. Subsequently, it will seek to materialize the discursive reality by establishing the transport communication or the quasi-corridor to Nakhchivan. For that purpose, Baku pro-actively promotes the Zangezur corridor domestically and internationally. Azerbaijan and Turkey signed the Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations on June 15. The declaration mentioned the Zangezur

Corridor, although within brackets.⁷ Still, it was hailed by the Azerbaijani government and the related media as successful international recognition. The Zangezur corridor has also become part and parcel of Baku's strategic communication. President Aliyev said that the term Zangezur corridor "has already been included in the international lexicon. I know that the European Union is also very positive about this issue. During a recent visit of the President of the European Council, Mr. Charles Michel, to Baku, we had a broad exchange of views on this issue and they, of course, strongly support this project."⁸

The difference between a transport connection/communication and a corridor is not very clear. But from the text of the declaration, the corridor appears to be of a higher status. However, there is still ambiguity. The Lachin corridor is secured by Russian peacekeepers who are normally deployed in conflict zones. But the communication line to Nakhchivan is to be secured by Russian border guards who also protect Armenia's borders with Iran and Turkey. This creates an impression that as if the territory of the transport line becomes a kind of Azerbaijani or external to Armenia: it lies along the Armenian-Iranian border which is also guarded by Russian border troops. The context is further enhanced by explicit Iranian concerns. Tehran stated that it rejects to "have a new neighbor [Azerbaijan]" through changing the border condition between Armenia and Iran.⁹ And President Aliyev's response did not refute that way of interpretation but, rather, reaffirmed it: "This will not be something new for Iran."¹⁰

Zangezur as an Ancestral Land

The Iranian interpretation sharpens the effects of Baku's portrayal of the implementation of the Zangezur corridor as a foreshadowing of a return to their "ancestral land" for Azerbaijanis.¹¹ Thus, Zangezur's significance for Azerbaijan goes far beyond its role as a transport connection to Nakhchivan and/or Turkey. Azerbaijan regards Zangezur as its historical land which was forcefully separated and granted by the Soviet-Bolshevik forces to Armenia. President Aliyev has repeatedly said that "Zangezur is our ancestral land" which the "Soviet authorities handed to Armenia." He vows that "we [Azerbaijanis] will return to Zangezur, no one can stop us."¹² Accordingly, Baku keeps up these vows with these kinds of statements: "We are implementing the Zangezur corridor whether Armenia wants it or not. If they do, it will be easier for us and if they do not, we will decide it by force."¹³

In line with that rhetoric, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev issued a decree on July 7, 2021, to reorganize the country's economic districts.¹⁴ One eye-catching and most-promoted point in the decree was the formation of a new economic district called "Eastern Zangezur." It covers those areas which are parts of the historic Eastern Zangezur that remained with Azerbaijan when Bolshevik authorities split the region. Then, President Aliyev said that "if there is an Eastern Zangezur, then there is a Western Zangezur" in a statement that was interpreted as Azerbaijan's forwarding of a territorial claim to Armenia's Syunik region.¹⁵

The Azerbaijani leadership's Zangezur discourse resonates with various segments of the population. This, in particular, is true for those who either themselves or their ancestors originate from Zangezur and/or were forced out of their homes in various periods of Soviet and Russian Imperial rules over Azerbaijan, especially with the latest and final wave taking place in the mid to late 1980s. In that final wave, Azerbaijan received around 200,000 refugees from Armenia.¹⁶ including from the Zangezur area. They form a major support base for the ruling government and played an active role in determining the outcomes of the power struggles in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s.¹⁷

President Aliyev said that he had talked about Zangezur ten years ago. This statement, in a way, represents a response to his opponents who attribute the active promotion of the Zangezur discourse to the government's alleged aim to pull public attention away from those areas of Karabakh which are under effective Armenian-Russian control such as Khankendi/Stepanakert, Khojavend/Martuni, Khojali, Askeran, etc.

Furthermore, President Aliyev has regularly raised the issue of the glorification of the controversial Armenian commander, Garegin Nzhdeh, who was convicted by the Soviet authorities for collaborating with the Nazi forces during World War II. A particular motive in raising the issue is related to Zangezur: Nzhdeh led Armenian forces in revolting against the Azerbaijani authority in Zangezur in 1919 and rejected the Azerbaijani rule eventually leading up to the Bolshevik decision of splitting Zangezur into western and eastern parts.¹⁸ Aliyev had used the Nzhdeh topic on various international occasions, including at a summit of CIS heads of state. As a result, the Russian authorities had to dismantle a plaque which had been erected in Russia in order to honor Nzhdeh.

Implications

Domestically, the Zangezur discourse may be, in a way, seen as diverting attention from the fact that the Armenian-Russian-controlled part of Karabakh still remains beyond Azerbaijan's de-facto authority. But viewing or interpreting it just through domestic lenses is an over-simplification of the matter. Internationally, the Zangezur discourse relocates the subject of the conflict from being solely the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan to that of Armenia as well. Indeed, this strategy seems to be effective. In response, Yerevan has made statements that focus on what it depicts as an "encroachment on the sovereign territory of Armenia in the Syunik region." Yet, French President Emmanuel Macron demanded that Azerbaijan "cease intervention."

An apparent rationale behind that dimension of the Zangezur discourse is to counterbalance Armenia's disputing of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in Karabakh: If Armenia forwards a claim on Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, then Azerbaijan reciprocates. Basically, territorial integrity must be recognized on a mutual basis. Over the three decades of the conflict, Baku had clearly emphasized that it did not forward any territorial claim against Armenia, hence paradoxically diverting all of the attention on Azerbaijan's territories, including Karabakh and the surrounding regions, and making Azerbaijan's territorial integrity the sole subject of the conflict.

The Zangezur discourse has produced a sensible effect on the Armenian domestic political debates and led to grappling between the ruling group led by PM Pashinyan and his opponents and critics. A veteran Armenian expert, Alexander Iskandaryan, notes that Ilham Aliyev has become a "quite serious actor on the Armenian domestic political and domestic discussion scene." Iskandaryan concludes that Aliyev "in fact has already changed the discourse in Armenia."¹⁹ Indeed, segments of the Armenian public view the establishment of communication lines to Nakhchivan as a foreshadowing of Azerbaijan's return to Zangezur. Residents of Armenia's Syunik region blocked PM Pashinyan's escort in protest of a possible opening of the Zangezur corridor.²⁰

The Zangezur discourse, combined with the shocking defeat in the second Karabakh war, has caused a "cognitive dissonance" effect on Armenian society: on the one hand, the unblocking of transport lines are in the best interests of Armenia if for no other reason than it would end the

three decades of regional isolation of the country. On the other hand, uncertainty dominates the Armenian perspective on whether or not to unblock the transport lines with the “enemy” (Azerbaijan and/or Turkey). And Azerbaijan’s Zangezur discourse and related rhetoric exacerbate such uncertainties by adding fuel to the fears in the post-war Armenian society, which perceives it as a territorial claim against the country.²¹ The following statement from the Azerbaijani president is just a case in point: “While in Yerevan, Charles Michel described the border territories as disputed. To be honest, I also disagree with this expression because we believe that these territories are ours. I believe that this is the territory of Zangezur and Zangezur is the land of our ancestors and so we are in our own territory.”²²

Russia’s perspective on Azerbaijan’s Zangezur discourse is ambiguous. At first glance, Azerbaijan’s Zangezur discourse appears to be contradicting Russian interests, not least because it entails territorial claims on Moscow’s strategic ally, Armenia, and bolsters Turkish-Azerbaijani bilateral ties and Ankara’s influence in the region at the expense of that of Moscow. But in essence, it must appease and make the Kremlin happy for a range of considerations such as: Russian Railways as the operator/owner of Armenian Railways will commercially benefit from it. The Russian border guards will protect the corridor, hence enhancing Moscow’s geopolitical standing in the region. It will provide Russia with a much-needed railway (and possibly motorway) connection to Armenia via Azerbaijan. The establishment of the corridor would significantly diminish Iran’s influence and that of Georgia, considerably. Moscow may extract additional concessions from Baku in exchange for facilitating the practical implementation of the corridor.

But the major problem, at least from Moscow’s perspective, is that the full unblocking of the transport lines would lead to the restoration of Turkish-Armenian transport communications and a related thaw and eventual normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. A clue why Moscow would still concede to the opening of the Zangezur corridor comes from the Shusha declaration. It defines “the construction of the Kars-Nakhchivan railway” (directly between Turkey and Nakhchivan bypassing the Soviet-era route via Armenia) as the “continuation of the [Zangezur] Corridor.” Basically, this means that the Zangezur corridor would not extend to Turkey via Armenia, hence keeping the Armenian-Turkish border shut and transport lines blocked for an indefinite time.

As concerns Azerbaijan's purported territorial claim on Zangezur, Moscow could be very pleased with this if no other reason than that such rhetoric once again highlights Russia's crucial role for the security of Armenia. Therefore, there is an ironic and paradoxical scene in which: on the one hand, the Zangezur discourse purportedly serves Azerbaijan's strategy to ensure the respect for its territorial integrity by inter-linking it to the respect for Armenia's territorial integrity. Namely, either the territorial integrity must be respected on a mutual basis or the territorial integrity of neither side will be respected. But on the other hand, the Zangezur discourse seemingly pushes Armenia harder into the arms of third parties such as, in particular, Russia, hence further distancing the perspective of a grand peace treaty.

While Armenia and Azerbaijan fight over the Zangezur discourse, Russia shapes its protectorate in the Armenian-populated rump of Karabakh based on lessons and experience from other similar post-Soviet conflicts in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.²³ As well, the Kremlin is gaining yet another opportunity as the dominant arbiter, not only in Karabakh but also along the state border between the two nations.²⁴ Armenia and Azerbaijan have no one but themselves to blame for this because they do not even think about direct engagement and dialogue and are rather in a permanent search for an ideal arbiter that would support their causes, respectively. As a result, the peace and reconciliation potential of the transport lines in question are not only overshadowed and fettered by different colliding agendas but, in fact, may turn toxic.

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