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# THE IMPACT OF THE ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR ON GEORGIA'S TRANSIT FUNCTION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS REGION

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## ABSTRACT.

Ongoing geopolitical and infrastructural transformations in the South Caucasus significantly shape the economic, political, and security landscape of the region. At the center of current debates lies the Zangezur Corridor, envisioned to establish a transport connection between Azerbaijan and Turkey, which has the potential to fundamentally alter existing transit dynamics. For Georgia, which for decades has served as the primary transit hub of the region, the operationalization of this corridor represents both a challenge and an opportunity.

The article aims to analyze the impact of the Zangezur Corridor on Georgia's transit role, contrasting existing routes with the newly emerging transport network, and assessing the extent to which Georgia's economic and geopolitical position may be diminished or reinforced. The study draws on theoretical frameworks of regional security, economic integration, and energy diplomacy, while also relying on empirical data regarding ongoing transport projects across the region.

Findings suggest that although the Zangezur Corridor may reduce Georgia's monopolistic position in terms of transit functions, the country's strategic importance will not be fully undermined. On the contrary, Georgia retains the potential to strengthen its role as a diversified transport and logistics hub, particularly if it manages to attract infrastructure investments, deepen cooperation with Western partners, and stabilize its internal political and economic environment.

Thus, the article underlines that the Zangezur Corridor may become not only a source of competition for Georgia but also an opportunity that encourages the country to pursue new strategic initiatives.

**Keywords:** Zangezur Corridor, Geopolitics, Middle Corridor, South Caucasus, China's factor, Russia's influence, Turkey's interests.

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## Introduction

The South Caucasus has historically been a critical geopolitical junction, intersecting multiple East–West trade and political routes. Traditionally, it served as a core route of the Silk Road, linking the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia, and later extending to the Middle East and Europe. Due to its strategic location, the region has consistently attracted the attention of various empires, including the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian Empires.<sup>1</sup>

In the post-Soviet era, the South Caucasus regained strategic importance as Western and Eastern interests intersected in matters such as energy corridors, transport networks, and security architecture. For Georgia, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened the opportunity to become a central transit hub, linking Azerbaijani energy resources to Black Sea ports and, subsequently, Europe. Projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi–Supsa pipeline, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway exemplify this strategic positioning.<sup>2</sup> Recently, new transport initiatives, most notably the Zangezur Corridor, have become subjects of controversy. Establishing direct communication between Azerbaijan and Turkey via Syunik (Zangezur) implies not only an alternative transit route but also a transformation of existing transit architectures.<sup>3</sup> For Georgia, which has historically maintained a near-monopolistic position in regional transit functions, this project presents both challenges and opportunities.

The geopolitical significance of the Zangezur Corridor is multi-faceted. Firstly, it aligns with the strategic interests of Azerbaijan and Turkey: Azerbaijan gains direct land access to Turkey, while Turkey strengthens its connections with Caspian and Central Asian states.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, the corridor is significant for Russia, providing both challenges and opportunities to maintain influence over regional transport infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, China’s Belt and Road Initiative necessitates consideration of all possible transit routes, including the Zangezur Corridor.<sup>6</sup>

Iran is also a key factor. Traditionally aiming to maintain its own transit role linking the Persian Gulf to the Caspian and South Caucasus, Iran faces both challenges and opportunities: reduced cargo flow through its territory versus the potential to enhance its position via alternative routes, such as the North–South Corridor.<sup>7</sup> Iran’s approach to the corridor thus contains both competitive and cooperative elements.<sup>8</sup>

Within this context, the main research question is: to what extent will the Zangezur Corridor transform Georgia’s transit function? While many analysts predict a weakening of Georgia’s role, certain factors indicate that Georgia retains geographic and strategic advantages, especially if it diversifies infrastructure projects and strengthens partnerships with external actors.

## Research Objectives

- To analyze the Zangezur Corridor’s significance from historical and geopolitical perspectives;
- To assess Georgia’s transit function under the corridor’s operationalization;
- To examine the interests of external actors (Russia, Turkey, Iran, and China) regarding Georgia’s transport policy;
- To identify strategic alternatives that could maintain and strengthen Georgia’s transit role.

## Research Questions

<sup>1</sup> “Zangezur corridor” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zangezur\\_corridor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zangezur_corridor) Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Aguiar P. “The Zangezur Corridor: A Key Trade Link in the South Caucasus” <https://shorturl.at/IFbld> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Ketenci A. “3 QUESTIONS - Importance of Zangezur corridor for the region explained” <https://shorturl.at/Uo428> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Novruz A. “Tehran’s concerns over Zangazur Corridor: Closer look at economic and geopolitical implications” <https://www.azernews.az/analysis/231221.html> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Sharifi K. “US Management of the Zangezur Corridor In The Caucasus? Iran Won’t Like It” <https://shorturl.at/Cl2Lt> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> GolshiriGh. Russia, Iran and the fast track to a new world order <https://shorturl.at/S8WnO> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Mahamed A. “Zangezur Corridor: Russia and Iran in Conflict over Caucasus Link” <https://shorturl.at/SH3h5> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> Sargsyan S. “Iranian-Russian Tensions Over the Zangezur Corridor” <https://kntn.ly/c11c8eb9> Assessed August 18, 2025.

- How might the Zangezur Corridor transform Georgia's transit role in the South Caucasus?
- What strategic instruments does Georgia possess to maintain and strengthen its transit function under the new regional reality?

The study employs a qualitative social research method. Its advantage lies in the in-depth and multi-dimensional theoretical analysis of old and new transit routes and their interacting factors. Data collection included qualitative content analysis of scientific sources.

## Main Part

### 1.1. Historical-Geopolitical Analysis

The South Caucasus has historically been a center of geopolitical interest, blending diverse civilizations, empires, and cultures. This diversity confers unique strategic significance, particularly in terms of transit potential and energy resources.

The region's history is marked by conflicts and political transformations. In 1918, following the independence of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, a new political reality emerged. The Zangezur region (present-day Syunik province of Armenia) became a key territory linking Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave. In 1919, the Zangezur Agreement, signed in Tbilisi, aimed to ensure peaceful coexistence between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory.<sup>9</sup>

During the Soviet era, Zangezur served as an important transit corridor connecting Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, with railways constructed to facilitate transit.<sup>10</sup> The 1992 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict disrupted these transit routes. As post-Soviet states gained independence, new conflicts and territorial disputes emerged, yet Zangezur remained strategically crucial for regional power balance.

Currently, the Zangezur Corridor continues to be central in South Caucasus geopolitics. Initiatives to develop the corridor have been driven by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Armenia initially opposed the project until it adapted to newly established international realities. Iran and Russia continue to express concern over potential negative impacts on their interests.

For Georgia, as a key regional country, participation in the corridor's development is significant. Its strategic location allows it to serve as a transit bridge between East and West. Maintaining regional stability and peace aligns with Georgia's economic development and international relations goals.

### 1.2. Context of the Zangezur Corridor

The Zangezur Corridor is a critical transit route from Azerbaijan to Turkey through Armenia's Syunik region. While initial regional engagement began in the 1990s, the project gained traction after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war<sup>11</sup>. Its main objective is to establish a secure transport corridor enabling economic and political connectivity between Azerbaijan and Turkey and facilitating access to Western markets.

Azerbaijan views the corridor as a strategic alternative connecting Nakhchivan to Turkey, facilitating energy and cargo transit.<sup>12</sup> Turkey supports the project to expand its regional influence, as part of an anti-global strategy vis-à-vis Russia, Iran, and other regional actors.<sup>13</sup>

Russia expresses concerns as the corridor disrupts its preferred balance of transport and political influence in the South Caucasus.<sup>14</sup> Iran also opposes the corridor, fearing a reduction in its regional influence, especially as Georgia and Turkey develop alternative routes.<sup>15</sup> China, through the Belt and Road Initiative, views the corridor as an opportunity to diversify global trade networks and enhance transit alternatives.

<sup>9</sup> "Agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan respecting the District of Zanghezour" <https://kntn.ly/46e32654> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> "Zangezur corridor" <https://kntn.ly/dd8de4a0> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> "Zangezur corridor" <https://kntn.ly/dd8de4a0> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Aguiar P. "The Zangezur Corridor: A Key Trade Link in the South Caucasus" <https://shorturl.at/IFbld> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Sabah D. "What will Zangezur Corridor, new South Caucasus route, mean for Türkiye?" <https://kntn.ly/f45eb1a0> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Mahamed A. "Zangezur Corridor: Russia and Iran in Conflict over Caucasus Link" <https://shorturl.at/SH3h5> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> "Belt and Road Initiative" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belt\\_and\\_Road\\_Initiative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belt_and_Road_Initiative) Assessed August 18, 2025.

The corridor creates a complex reality for the South Caucasus. For Georgia, it represents a challenge, as the new route may compete with its transit functions. Strategic investments, such as the Anaklia deep-water port, remain essential for Georgia to maintain its regional transit relevance.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.3. International and Regional Partnerships

The emergence of new realities in the South Caucasus challenges Georgia's transit function. Despite its geographic advantage as a mediator between East and West, the Zangezur Corridor introduces strategic and economic risks that could weaken Georgia's transit position.<sup>17</sup>

As an Azerbaijan–Turkey strategic project, the corridor may compete with Georgian transit routes, offering shorter and more efficient transport alternatives.<sup>18</sup> This trend limits Georgia's influence over transit flows, affecting economic revenues and geopolitical status.<sup>19</sup> Euro-Atlantic partnerships still provide partial strategic stability, but the corridor introduces a parallel set of economic and political challenges. Strategic projects like Anaklia port have yet to restore full competitive capacity in transit flows, increasing vulnerability to external influence.

### 1.4. External Actors' Influence on Georgia's Transit Position

Russia remains a key actor in regional power dynamics, directly impacting Georgia's transit functions. The Zangezur Corridor challenges Moscow's strategic influence, potentially provoking attempts to counterbalance or sabotage the corridor's strategic concept.

Turkey perceives the corridor as a tool to expand regional influence. For Ankara, it represents a geopolitical maneuver beyond economic interests, aiming to develop regional trade and energy flows through Azerbaijan and Armenia.<sup>20</sup>

China's interest relates to the Belt and Road Initiative, supporting diversified transit options. Despite Chinese investment in Anaklia port, Georgia must strategically balance internal priorities with external influences.<sup>21</sup>

Iran consistently opposes the corridor, concerned about reduced influence in the South Caucasus. Georgia's active participation in the corridor could accelerate certain international decisions from Tehran's perspective.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the corridor represents a shift in regional power dynamics. Georgia must pursue flexible policies, strengthen international partnerships, and develop alternative infrastructure, such as the Anaklia deep-water port, to preserve strategic independence and transit competitiveness. The main challenge is maintaining balance between regional competition and international cooperation to protect transit revenue and status.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

The study aimed to examine Georgia's transit function in the context of the Zangezur Corridor, considering regional and external actors' influence. The analysis shows that the corridor poses strategic challenges, placing Georgia in direct competition over transit significance. Use of the corridor between Azerbaijan and Armenia under Turkish influence partially neutralizes Georgia's trade and transport advantages. Consequently, Georgia's geopolitical and economic position depends not only on its investments and infrastructure but also on external political decisions.

<sup>16</sup>Menabde G. "Georgia's Anaklia Deep-Water Port Becomes Chinese Geopolitical Project" <https://kntn.ly/236e2c42> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Aguiar P. "The Zangezur Corridor: A Key Trade Link in the South Caucasus" <https://shorturl.at/IFbld> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Sabah D. "What will Zangezur Corridor, new South Caucasus route, mean for Türkiye?" <https://kntn.ly/f45eb1a0> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>19</sup>Menabde G. "Georgia's Anaklia Deep-Water Port Becomes Chinese Geopolitical Project" <https://kntn.ly/236e2c42> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Sabah D. "What will Zangezur Corridor, new South Caucasus route, mean for Türkiye?" <https://kntn.ly/f45eb1a0> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> "Belt and Road Initiative" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belt\\_and\\_Road\\_Initiative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belt_and_Road_Initiative) (8.5. 18.08.2025).

<sup>22</sup>Mahamed A. "Zangezur Corridor: Russia and Iran in Conflict over Caucasus Link" <https://shorturl.at/SH3h5> Assessed August 18, 2025.

<sup>23</sup>Menabde G. "Georgia's Anaklia Deep-Water Port Becomes Chinese Geopolitical Project" <https://kntn.ly/236e2c42> Assessed August 18, 2025.

Georgia's previously uncontested transit function now faces intense competition. Euro-Atlantic cooperation provides partial stability, but does not guarantee retention of the existing position under the corridor's influence. Maintaining regional significance and associated economic benefits remains a challenge.

Analysis of external actors demonstrates that Georgia may face a strategic dilemma, where its positions are constantly shaped by other states' geopolitical goals. Actions by Russia, Turkey, China, and Iran create an environment where Georgia's transit function becomes a political instrument requiring sophisticated diplomatic and strategic management.

Answering the research questions: the corridor significantly reduces Georgia's transit function and increases external influence in the South Caucasus. Strategic instruments for maintaining and strengthening Georgia's transit role include balancing internal infrastructure development with constructive foreign policy. Projects like the Anaklia port and a new railway to Turkey provide alternative transit routes. Active diplomacy with international partners ensures regional security, economic cooperation, and geopolitical balance. Strengthening Georgia's strategic position depends on aligning domestic policies with external factors while preserving internal political stability and development-oriented economic environment.

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