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türkiye ekonomi politikaları araştırma vakfı

Unlocking Nakhichevan, the Gate of Orient – *Şark Kapısı*

Lifting the Blockade on Nakhichevan in the Context of the Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement

A Proposal

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TEPAV Policy Note
November 2009

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The signature of the protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations and the development of relations by the Turkish and the Armenian Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Zurich on 10 October 2009 brought winds of change in South Caucasus where the status quo characterized by conflicts divides, blockades and trade restrictions is far from being satisfactory.

With a change of vista, this new climate can improve the fate of Nakhichevan, the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan completely separated geographically from the mother country and surrounded by Armenia. The protocols signed between in Turkey and Armenia reiterate the validity of the Treaty of Kars which defines in its Article V the status of Nakhichevan, and provide therefore an enhanced security guarantee to Nakhichevan. The process that has started can first help to unlock Nakhichevan before tackling the issue of the reintegration of Upper Karabakh into the South Caucasus region.

As a gesture of goodwill, Armenia can lift the blockade on the Nakhichevan and allow the restoration of all north-south and east-west connections of the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan. This would be a considerable confidence building measure for the settlement of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The new railroad projects between the three South Caucasian Republics and their immediate neighbors, Turkey, Iran and Russia are following conflict divides and therefore acknowledge the facts on the ground set by the ceasefire agreements. They are not only costly but also condemn Nakhichevan, the former Gate of Orient, to isolation by either bypassing or making it the end point of the new transport corridor.

Furthermore unlocking Nakhichevan will transform the Turkish-Azerbaijani border gate of Dilucu into a trade center. Dilucu can be a meeting place for people from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran and Turkey.

Nakhichevan, the Gate of Orient

Nakhichevan is said to be the oldest city in the world. Noé would have chosen to settle in Nakhichevan when he came down from Mount Ararat where his Ark landed. In the 17th century, the traveler Evliya Çelebi described the city as one of the wonders of the world. After the opening in the 19th century of the border gate at Culfa, 40km to the south, Nakhichevan became an important communication hub and the Russian empire's chief access to Persia. Called the Gate of Orient, the enclave is at the crossroad of east-west and north-south railway connections. It was once a major junction on the Moscow-Tehran railway line as well as the Baku-Yerevan railway. In Soviet times, 30 locomotives, each pulling 150 wagons, passed through Julfa every day.

Nakhichevan is bordered on its South on 200 km by Iran, Armenia surrounds with a slightly longer border, the Azerbaijani Autonomous Republic on its North, West and East. The Araxes River marks the

border with Turkey and the Eastern border with Armenia. The Sadarax region is bordering all the three countries, Iran, Turkey and Armenia. One has to drive towards the direction of the Mount Ararat, along the Armenian border, to reach Dilucu, the border crossing with Turkey.

Unlocking Nakhichevan in the context of the opening of the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement: a significant confidence building measure

Nakhichevan is since 1993 surrounded by a ceasefire line. Only 22,5 meters are separating Armenian and Azerbaijani military lines. In the context of the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, as a gesture of goodwill, Armenia can lift the blockade on the Nakhichevan and allow the restoration of the connections of the Autonomous Republic. The Upper-Karabakh conflict cut Nakhichevan's communications with the rest of Azerbaijan. The Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan is blockaded by Armenia on its west, north and east. All land communications with Azerbaijan are also blocked. Flights connecting Nakhichevan and Baku are the only remaining direct link. The railway is disused for most of its length. A small portion is still used for an internal rail connection with Ordubad, a few kilometres from Armenian-controlled Meghri. The southern connection towards Iran is also operational. The impact of the Armenian blockade is all the more pronounced because the Soviet built infrastructure for energy delivery passed through Armenia, which has since interrupted gas and electricity supplies to the Nakhichevan.

In the context of the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, as a gesture of goodwill, Armenia can lift the blockade on the Nakhichevan and allow the restoration of all north-south and east-west connections of the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan. This would be a considerable confidence building measure for the settlement of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. The reopening of the North-South communications will reactivate the Nakhichevani-Iranian border gate of Julfa and the reopening of the East-West communications will boost the activities of the Turkish-Azerbaijani border gate of Dilucu.

- *North-South communications*

Efforts aiming at the opening-up of the routes of Nakhichevan through Armenia would be an important step forward towards the demilitarization of the region. Turkey can provide the necessary security guarantee for the territorial integrity of Nakhichevan in case of the opening of Nakhichevan-Armenian border. A very small interposition force in charge of the security of the transportation routes would be enough.

The Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan could preserve its territorial integrity. Sadarax was the scene of fierce fighting. The Turkish guarantee proved to be efficient even during the escalation of the Karabakh war. In August 1993, Armenian forces stopped at Sadarax on the Nakhichevani border.

The Article V of the Treaty of Kars defines the status of Nakhichevan as an autonomous territory under the protection of Azerbaijan as agreed by the governments of Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The protocols signed between in Turkey and Armenia by reiterating the validity of the Treaty of Kars offer a security guarantee to Nakhichevan against Armenia.

- *East-West transportation corridor and the Dilucu border gate*

Iğdır is located at 85 km from the border post with Nakhichevan and at 35 km from the border with Armenia. The Dilucu border gate, commonly known as Hasret Kapisi, opened in May 1992. A bridge built over the River Araxes links Turkey to Nakhichevan.

The Dilucu border post has been of vital importance to the isolated Azerbaijani enclave. However, the Turkish-Nakhichevani connection, originally envisaged as Turkey's gateway to South Caucasus and Central Asia, runs into a cul-de-sac.

During Soviet times, Azerbaijan had unfettered access to Nakhichevan by road and rail through the Meghri region, Armenian border region with Iran. Armenia should lift its blockade and open the east-west railway connection to transit traffic. The security of the transit corridor crossing the Azerbaijani occupied territories can be ensured jointly by Turkey, Iran and Russia with the support of the EU.

Alternative railroad projects bypass Nakhichevan

The new railroad projects between the three South Caucasian Republics and their immediate neighbors, Turkey, Iran and Russia are following conflict divides and acknowledge the facts on the ground set by the ceasefire agreements:

- *The Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railroad*

A new 105-kilometer-branch of railway is planned to be constructed within the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars project; 76 kilometers will stretch through Turkey and 29 kilometers through Georgia. Moreover, a 183-kilometer section of railways – Akhalkalaki-Marabda-Tbilisi – will be reconstructed in Georgia to increase capacity to up to 15 million tons of freight per year. A train transition station, changing trains from the existing tracks in Georgia to European tracks is planned to be constructed in Akhalkalaki. The Azerbaijani State Oil Fund has allocated \$337.8 million as a preferential loan to construct the Georgian section of the railway. Azerbaijan plans to allocate \$200 million from the Azerbaijani State Oil Fund to reconstruct the Georgian section of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars route. The railway is expected to become operational in 2011.

Azerbaijan is negotiating with Turkey on construction of a branch line from the basic Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway. The branch will run to the Turkish city of Iğdır and further to Nakhichevan. This railway

communication between Baku and Nakhichevan through Georgia will place Nakhichevan at the end point of a transport corridor. The other new railroad projects are entirely bypassing the enclave.

- *The Armenia-Iran railroad project*

The Armenian Railway CJSC was transferred to the concessional management of South Caucasus Railway, fully owned by the Russian Railways Company, under a concession contract of February 13, 2008. The term of the concessional agreement is 30 years, with the right of prolongation for 20 more years upon the expire of the agreement. As of the moment of conclusion of the agreement, investments would amount to \$ 572 mln, in case of re-launch of railway communication with Turkey - \$603 mln, with Azerbaijan - \$ 1,7 bln. And if the communication in Abkhaz section is resumed, investments will amount to \$ 2,1 bln.

The priority task of South Caucasus Railways is to turn Armenia into a transit country linking Europe and Asia. 90 million Russian rubles would be targeted for the creation of an international logistic center on Armenian-Turkish border. Similarly the connection of the Armenian railroad network to Iran is a priority.

The Armenia-Iran railroad project is expected to last five years and cost about \$ 1.2 billion. The railroad will stretch for approximately 470 km, with 410 km on Armenian territory. With the passage through Nakhichevan blocked, the new rail link will have to be built across high mountain ranges. The portion of the railroad to be built on Iranian territory must run to the city of Marand. The announcement came end July 2009 that an agreement will be signed with Asian Development Bank under which Armenia will receive funding to implement the feasibility study.

- *The Russian-Azerbaijani-Iranian railroad project, the North-South transport corridor*

The North-South transport corridor envisages unified railway transportation from Europe to India and Southeast Asia via Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran. According to preliminary estimates, the project will cost over \$400 million and much work should be done in Iran, which has no rail link to the border with Azerbaijan. Certain work worth about \$35-40 million should be conducted in Azerbaijan. The work to be conducted in Azerbaijan envisages constructing about 8.5 kilometers railway station to the Astara station (Azerbaijan), having a wheel pair change system, border and customs infrastructure. It is also necessary to build a border railway bridge. However, this project will be implemented on a parity basis with Iran.

These projects are not only expensive but also condemn Nakhichevan, the former Gate of Orient, to isolation by either bypassing or making it the end point of the transport corridor. On the contrary, the rehabilitation of the traditional South Caucasus network, included in the new TRACECA map approved at the Tbilisi meeting in 2001, would re-emphasize the centrality of Nakhichevan and support the peace building process in the region. The TRACECA Action Plan for 2002-2003 was allocating resources

for the for the technical feasibility study of the re-opening of the railway link Yerevan-Nakhichevan-Baku.

Dilucu: a Meeting Point for People from Four Different Countries

The modernization of the Dilucu border gate is underway. Iğdır will be the first city in East Anatolia to host a border trade center which will allow duty free imports from Nakhichevan. However in 2008 imports from Nakhichevan amounted only to \$ 4 million and exports to \$ 52 million. The tax free border trade in petrol trade which sustained the activity of Dilucu until 2002, will not be included in the new regulation.

Only the opening of the east-west transport corridor through Nakhichevan has the potential to boost trade at Dilucu. Furthermore, this will transform Dilucu into a meeting place for people from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Iran and Turkey. These borderlands between four countries can become, as the Turkish-Georgian borderland, fully open to human and trade interactions. As the history of Europe shows, the most stable borders are precisely those which have disappeared as a result of intense cross-border interactions.