
Railroad Crossing : Georgia Conflict Draws Attention to Armenia Transport Communication

By Aris Ghazinyan

Mindful of its vulnerable geopolitical location, Armenia has spent nearly 20 years looking for a way around the communication impasse that it had been driven to by Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The victory gained by ethnic-Armenian defense forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh war ideally should have ensured access to a major transport junction in the region, Yevlakh-Mingechaur. Control over that section would have fundamentally changed the whole geopolitical situation in the region, would have sharply reduced the post-war ardor of Baku conditioned by "oil diplomacy" and would have had a crucial impact on the course of the peace talks. But that didn't happen and the Azerbaijani blockade of Armenian communications imposed in 1989 is still being maintained at the state level.

The latest developments in Georgia even more aggravated Armenia's situation, since the prospect of resumed operation along the Abkhazian section of the Trans-Caucasian Railway has been removed from the agenda for a long and very indefinite time.

Meanwhile, official Yerevan had serious expectations from the restoration of this rail link so vital for Armenia. An inspection of the section was made in 2005, for the first time in many years. Still 13-15 years ago, this rail link provided Armenia with a guaranteed gateway to Russia and European countries.

The section of the railway was blocked by official Tbilisi as a consequence of the conflict in the territory of Abkhazia. Yerevan had repeatedly stated its readiness to assist in the reopening of the railway section. Ex-president Robert Kocharyan several times drew the attention of the Georgian leadership to the fact that the absence of railway communication via the Abkhazian section first of all blocks Armenia.

"Abkhazia is not an enclave as it is linked with Russia by land and sea," the Armenian leader repeatedly stated to Georgian counterparts, Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikhail Saakashvili. "The point of the blockade of Abkhazia is not clear in such a situation. The only country that suffers real losses from this is Armenia."

In October 2005, then Defense Minister Serzh Sargsyan made a sensational statement: "The Georgian side has given its consent to reopening the Abkhazian section of the Trans-Caucasian Railway." Moreover, he said that in the very near future Armenia, Georgia and Russia would set up a consortium for resolving that problem.

Russian Transport Minister Igor Levitin, who came to Yerevan shortly, also made a very optimistic statement then: "The inspection of the Abkhazian section of the Trans-Caucasian Railway will be complete in several days. We know which sections of the railway require construction and which require reconstruction."

In December 2005, self-declared Abkhazia's President Sergey Bagapsh said that the inspection of the section was over, 194 kilometers of a railway from Psou (Russian-Abkhazian border) to Ingiri Station (Zugdidi region of Georgia) had been checked. A protocol between Georgia, the Russian Federation and Abkhazia that the railway had been inspected was also signed then.

"On the next stage we should determine who specifically will finance this project. There are different proposals, including about setting up a consortium that will include Russia, Abkhazia and Georgia. Negotiations about this are currently in progress, with involvement of Armenia, which also needs a railway," Bagapsh said then. It was then that trilateral negotiations between Georgia, Russia and Armenia were held.

Moreover, beginning from February this year, the Armenian Railroad CJSC was given into concessionary management to the South-Caucasian Railroad CJSC, which is a 100 percent subsidiary of the Russian Railroads OJSC. It was planned that many organizational and especially financial problems would be solved in this very plane. It was expected that the construction of a railroad linking Armenia and Iran will begin along with the re-operation of the Abkhazian section of the Trans-Caucasus main line, and thus Russia will reach the Indian Ocean. Corresponding negotiations between the Armenian and Iranian sides were held early this year.

Nevertheless, the events around Georgia brought all efforts to naught. It is because of this that the issue of the possible reopening of the Turkish-Armenian border and restored communication along the Gyumri-Kars railway became urgent again. President Serzh Sargsyan stated the importance of this in September. Simultaneously, in Moscow, President of the Russian Railroads OJSC Vladimir Yakunin reported to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev about the condition of the railroad in Armenia. The meeting was held in early September, but no official report about the contents of that meeting followed. Possibly, the matter concerned prospects of laying railroad communication linking Armenia and Iran.

In any case, immediately after the talk with Dmitry Medvedev the head of the Russian company arrived in Yerevan. In the Armenian capital he stated that nothing new could be said about the resumption of the railway link between Armenia and Turkey.

Speaking about the construction of a railway between Armenia and Iran, Yakunin emphasized that there is no term yet set for the realization of this project. "The matter concerns the area of interstate relations and interstate negotiations. It requires serious re-developed, since the project is very expensive, but we agree that the preliminary project should be re-developed. We already have some projects that enable us to conduct negotiation, including in the international arena, about certain transport corridors advantageous for Russian Railroads and advantageous for the countries through which these corridors lie, advantageous, naturally for the Republic of Armenia."

The events in the region unfold so fast that perhaps by the end of the year it will be possible to speak more concretely about "Armenian priorities" of the Big Communication Game.