
BTK railway line to connect Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey

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Today's Zaman reported that regional cooperation between the South Caucasus and Turkey has moved into a new phase as the deal over Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway finally concludes. Nicknamed the iron silk road, the railroad will connect Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey while bypassing Russia and Armenia.

This project has formulated and clarified power relations among these countries. Although it took longer than expected for Georgia to join due to pressure from the Armenian lobby on American foreign policy to halt the project, the railway is scheduled to be completed by 2010 at an estimated price of USD 500 million.

The occupation of northern and southern routes by so called problematic countries Iran and Russia drew American and European attention to the South Caucasus, particularly Azerbaijan, as a potential bridge between East Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey stepped forward to serve as a protected corridor for Europe and to strengthen transportation between Asia and Europe via the BTK railway.

Construction of the final section of the BTK railway, connecting Kars with the Georgian border, began in July with a ceremony in which the leaders of all three countries participated. 105 kilometers remain left to build, 76 kilometers within Turkey and the remaining 29 between the Turkish border and the city of Ahelkeleki in Georgia. Georgia also plans to rehabilitate rail between Ahelkeleki and Tbilisi.

The railway is expected to transport 1.5 million passengers and 3 million tons of freight per year. Forecasts predict that by 2034 it will transport 3 million people and more than 16 million tons of goods. The total cost of the project is estimated at \$500 million, with \$200 million to be covered by Georgia and the remaining cost to be covered by Turkey. Georgia will also receive support from Azerbaijan and the US.

Transit railways linking Europe to Asia crossed through Armenia to Turkey in three routes until Azerbaijan and Armenia went to war over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. One route passed through Kars-Gümri-Ayrum-Marneuli-Tbilisi, finishing in Georgia. The other two traveled via Icevan-Kazakh-Baku and Kars-Yerevan-Nakhchivan-Baku. Armenia has also closed all routes to Central Asia, Russia and China. Thus the only trade connection that Armenia has left open is through Iran.

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