



## Armenia: The new tourism hub of the region



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Baku would present it as a manifestation of the Armenian side's destructiveness. One of the most recent manifestations of "powerful diplomacy" was the aggression against Artsakh at the start of the US negotiations between the foreign ministers of the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan in June, as a result of which four Defense Army soldiers were killed. Moreover, it should be noted that even prior to the last Brussels negotiations, simultaneously, Azerbaijan continued to escalate the situation both in Artsakh and on the border with Armenia. One of the most outstanding examples of the latter is the use of the Armenian prime minister's willingness to recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan as a justification for blocking the Lachin Corridor by Azerbaijan. Generally, as already mentioned, the reason for such positioning of Baku is that Azerbaijan currently sees opportunities to get the most from Armenia.

Moreover, these calculations of Baku are in the range of all key issues with Armenia. In case of Artsakh, Azerbaijan sees an opportunity to completely occupy the historically Armenian-populated region and to ethnically cleanse it, therefore, at least he considers it problematic to directly negotiate with Stepanakert under any "international mechanism" by the international community, thereby gaining a new dependence on various international actors. This is the reason why the Artsakh's Road of Life, the Lachin Corridor, has remained blocked for more than seven months, resulting in the humanitarian situation in the region reaching disaster level.

Another humanitarian issue, that is, the issue of Armenian POWs forcibly kept in Baku, has not recorded any significant change since the war. More than three dozen Armenian servicemen remain in captivity: moreover, Azerbaijan continues

to criminally kidnap new servicemen, regularly terrorizing the civilian population in Artsakh and in various regions of Armenia. In the process of delimitation and demarcation, Baku tries to avoid the option of moving the process forward based on the 1970s maps of the USSR, while talking about some fictitious maps. It is within the framework of this logic that although the Armenian side has repeatedly mentioned its willingness to recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan even numerically in the Almaty Declaration, while the Azerbaijani side has not yet made a similar statement. The aim of such positioning of Azerbaijan is to get opportunities to solve the Artsakh problem with its own agenda through manipulative diplomatic practices, using the recognition of Armenia, as well as unilaterally, without exchange, to get the so-called "enclave" territories from Armenia, and not leave the sovereign territories of Armenia occupied in May 2021.

Baku adopted the same position in the process of the unblocking of regional communications, not giving up the notorious Turkish-Azerbaijani "Zangezur Corridor" project. And, although the universally accepted principle in the issue of unblocking in almost all negotiation platforms is to bring the process under the sovereignty and jurisdiction of the states, nevertheless, the Azerbaijani side refuses the final agreement in every possible way, since for now it sees an opportunity to get the Azerbaijan-Nakhichevan connection through the "corridor" logic.

The above-mentioned realities are the reason why it has not been possible to establish peace in the South Caucasus over two and a half years following the bloody war of 2020. Moreover, enjoying the comprehensive support of Turkey, Baku continues to act from an extremist position, constantly creating instability in the region

and even expanding its geography. During this period, the Azerbaijani authorities purposely escalated the situation with Iran as well, wanting to neutralize the latter's principled policy in regional developments.

In the face of new realities, a purposeful attempt is being made to weaken as much as possible the levers of Iran's influence in the region and in Azerbaijan, especially the Yerevan-Tehran resistance in the issue of implementation of the "Zangezur Corridor" project.

Under the aforementioned circumstances, Armenia's position is aimed at encouraging the negotiation process on all possible platforms to exclude a new military escalation, despite its near-zero effectiveness. By ensuring the continuity of the negotiation process, it is possible to keep the attention of the international community constantly focused on our region, thereby keeping Azerbaijan's aggressive behavior as manageable as possible. At the same time, in the complicated geopolitical situation, amid the security system shaken by the 44-day war, the main problem for Armenia is coping with the non-stop challenges through various and new mechanisms.

Among such mechanisms are the preservation of the previous systems with Russia, despite the significant decrease in their effectiveness, cooperation with Iran, especially in the part of Syunik, the deepening of relations with India in the military and political fields, the diversification and deepening of cooperation with the US and the EU, especially with France and other western countries, the process of normalization of relations with Turkey, meetings with Azerbaijan in various negotiation formats, etc. That is to say, in such a crucial period of history, the actual processes are often important even in the face of zero efficiency.

Nagorno-Karabakh were not defeated. It should be noted that NKAO is not an entity created by the will of the Armenians living there, but is a coercion. Therefore, on the one hand, the above-mentioned mobilization is supposed to be pro-Azerbaijani, since an attempt is being made to establish the Azerbaijani nation; on the other hand, it is condemned to be anti-Armenian and anti-Artsakh, since by creating institutions, Azerbaijanis try to enter into competition with already existing institutions. Secondly, there is a hierarchical difference: It was "embarrassing" for the Azerbaijanis to compete and lose to a lower hierarchical-

ly subordinate entity, Nagorno-Karabakh, during the USSR years. What Azerbaijan has done and is doing is a series of actions aimed at making a political nation. The creation, or rather the appropriation of culture and history, has been a continuous chain of actions by Azerbaijan since Soviet times, as it was an imperative requirement for Baku, alongside Iran, Georgia and Armenia, neighbors with a rich history and culture in the region. Cultural appropriation for Azerbaijan is done at the expense of the peoples of the region. This creates the basis which will allow Azerbaijan to position themselves side-by-side with

Iran, Armenia and Georgia. The Azerbaijanization of Iranian culture goes parallel to the process of declaring the monuments of Artsakh as Aghvanian. By Azerbaijanization of Nizami and Aghvanization of Armenian culture of Artsakh, Azerbaijan creates/invents the complex of spiritual and material culture. Accordingly, if looking at the conflict from an anthropological point of view, Azerbaijani policy gradually limits the cultural inclusion of Artsakh (in Soviet times, NKAO), and there will come a moment when Azerbaijan will try to say that the current population of Artsakh is also Armenianized Aghvans.



In the first half of 2023, Armenia was visited by nearly 1.9 million tourists, which exceeds the historically highest result of the comparable period of 2019 by about 30%. In Armenia, as well as all over the world, among the most affected fields by the coronavirus pandemic was tourism, which was not only fully restored, but also stands for record scores. Following the pandemic, the war and other regional developments, in 2023, all prerequisites were created to reach and even surpass the 2019 indicator. Actually, Armenia changes its current positioning in the global tourism market and aspires to become a tourism hub of the region, for which it tries to create prerequisites by providing diverse offers.

On the one hand, Armenia attracts tourists from the point of view of cultural, entertainment, adventure, medical, and nature tourism; while on the other hand, due to the fact that it is a transit zone.

In fact, one of the most important prerequisites for tourism development is the presence of developed infrastructure, the availability and quality of services, for the provision of which active works are currently being carried out, such as through modernization of the transport network, the introduction of new routes from airports, etc. Private tourism companies, in turn, offer diversified inbound packages, not only in the capital, but also throughout the country. The main destinations are Gyumri, as a colorful and cultural city, Jermuk as a resort destination, Garni-Geghard, with historical and cultural places, Syunik and Dilijan with beautiful nature, Yenokavan for extreme leisure lovers, Tsakhkadzor for winter sports, etc.; and all of these are united by an important component of gastrotourism, which will please any demanding tourist.

The culture of festivals, such as wine days, workshops (especially in rural areas) has also started to develop in Armenia.

Actually, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has changed long established air routes, creating new opportunities for other countries, including Armenia. Currently, more than four dozen airlines operate flights from Armenia to various destinations, both to Europe and Asia. Especially, following the Russia-Ukraine war, both the destinations and the number of flights have increased. Moreover, in the last few years, there has been a lot of activity in the market, both with the increase of national airlines and the entry of European budget airlines. This, in turn, contributed to the increase in the offer of budget tickets and diversity of destinations, used not only by Armenians, but also by citizens of Russia, Ukraine and other countries. Thus, due to geopolitical developments, the entry of national air carriers and budget airlines, Armenia has also begun to be considered as a transit destination. Emphasizing the presence of developed transport infrastructures with neighboring countries, direct flights in this direction are also increasing. For instance, two Armenian airlines have announced the launch of the Yerevan-Tehran-Yerevan route, which can give an impetus to the Armenia-Iran passenger flow.

10 countries provided tourism growth to Armenia in January-June 2023

Rank	Country	number of tourists, k	In total, %
1.	Russia	519	52
2.	Georgia	115	11
3.	Iran	58	6
4.	USA	17	2
5.	Ukraine	12	1
6.	India	12	1
7.	Germany	10	1
8.	France	9	1
9.	Belarus	8	1
10.	China	5	1

The geographical distribution of tourists arriving in Armenia is quite concentrated. This year, more than half of the 10 countries which provided the main tourist growth are the Russian Federation, with 519,163 tourists, Georgia, with about 11%, Iran is in the third place, with 6%, or with 58,494 tourists. Moreover, about 64% of tourists prefer to visit Armenia by air (Zvartnots and Shirak airports, which had a record number of 3,697,000 passengers in 2022), and the most popular among the five land routes is the Bagratashen border checkpoint on the Armenian-Georgian border, 21.6%, followed by Bavra, 9%, and the Meghri border checkpoint on the Armenian-Iranian border, around 4%.

Tourism in Armenia attracts visitors with its accessibility, safety and diversity. In general, according to calculations of the Central Bank of Armenia, the average spending in 2022 was \$1,100-1,200 per tourist.

Based on various international rating scales, Armenia is on the list of the safest countries in the world; it is a country of low risk, where the safety of tourists is at a fairly high level. Statistical data prove that the field has a great potential to make Armenia a regional tourism hub, including developing a component of being a transit country connecting Asia with Europe.

It is noteworthy, that regional tourism also has an important component in the development of tourism in Armenia. It is estimated that 42% of tourists come to Armenia within the framework of regional visits. The number one tourists to Armenia are Russians, followed by Georgians.

Iran ranks third in Armenia by a number of tourist visits, especially the number of tourists increase during the Nouruz holidays. However, the tourism potential between the countries in the region is not fully realized; it is possible to make the field more active by developing awareness campaigns and marketing interactions as well as offering joint tourist packages.