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ETHNIC CONFLICTS OR ECONOMIC BENEFITS? A MEDIA CONTENT ANALYSIS ABOUT THE BAKU-TBILISI-KARS RAILWAY AS A PART OF THE TRANS-CASPIAN TRANSPORT CORRIDOR

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Abstract. *Introduction.* The study analyses the reflection of the infrastructure projects on the Trans-Caspian transport corridor in the media. By combining the roles of transport corridor as a means of regional cooperation and overcoming ethnic issues between the countries, it is aimed at addressing two main questions. The first question would be on the reflection of infrastructure projects on the Trans-Caspian transport corridor in the media in the context of promoting regional cooperation, the second on whether news about infrastructure projects contains any ethnic based messages of discrimination or hostility to exclude any country from such projects. The BTK railway project is used as a case in this paper in this respect. *Methods and materials.* A conceptual content analysis methodology is applied in this study, which is limited to online media news of three major news agencies of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey within a specific time period beginning from the official inauguration of the BTK until the date of conducting this research – 30 October 2017 – 15 May 2020. *Analysis and results.* The findings reveal that the news investigated within the context of this research involves positive messages supporting regional cooperation, mutual benefits and common interests that may have an incentive impact on public perceptions. It was also discovered that the news about the BTK railway project does not contain any content otherizing or excludes any country, which may help societies to focus on regional cooperation rather than vulnerable ethnic issues. Considering the difficulty of control of social media, it has been recommended that official news may avoid publishing messages with provocative content. *Authors' contribution.* A.N. Uste developed the content of the article and carried out its general scientific editing. U. Sanili Aydin proposed a scheme for research analysis. The authors jointly analyzed the results.

Key words: ethnic conflicts, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, transport corridor, regional trade, cooperation.

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ЭТНИЧЕСКИЕ КОНФЛИКТЫ ИЛИ ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИЕ ПРЕИМУЩЕСТВА? КОНТЕНТ-АНАЛИЗ СООБЩЕНИЙ СМИ О ЖЕЛЕЗНОДОРОЖНОМ ПУТИ БАКУ – ТБИЛИСИ – КАРС КАК ЧАСТИ ТРАНСКАСПИЙСКОГО ТРАНСПОРТНОГО КОРИДОРА

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Аннотация. *Введение.* В исследовании анализируется репрезентация инфраструктурных проектов Транскаспийского транспортного коридора в СМИ. Авторы рассматривают роль транспортного коридора как средства регионального сотрудничества и преодоления этнических проблем между странами. Первый исследовательский вопрос касается репрезентации инфраструктурных проектов Транскаспийского транспортного коридора в СМИ в контексте продвижения регионального сотрудничества, а второй вопрос направлен на выявление информационных сообщений о дискриминации или враждебности по этническому признаку с целью исключения какой-либо страны из таких проектов. Железнодорожный проект «Баку – Тбилиси – Карс» (БТК) выступает в данной статье в качестве примера. *Методы и материалы.* В этом исследовании применяется методология концептуального контент-анализа, которая ограничивается онлайн-новостями трех крупных информационных агентств Азербайджана, Грузии и Турции за период, начиная с официального открытия БТК до даты проведения этого исследования – 30 октября 2017 г. – 15 мая 2020 года. *Анализ и результаты.* Сделан вывод, что новости, изученные в контексте данного исследования, содержат позитивные сообщения, поддерживающие региональное сотрудничество, взаимную выгоду и общие интересы, которые могут оказывать стимулирующее воздействие на общественное мнение. В новостях о железнодорожном проекте «БТК» не обнаружено содержания, изолирующего или исключаящего какую-либо из трех стран, что позволяет обществу сосредоточиться на региональном сотрудничестве, а не на острых этнических проблемах. Учитывая сложность контроля над социальными сетями, официальным новостям рекомендуется избегать публикации сообщений провокационного содержания. *Вклад авторов.* А.Н. Усте разработал содержание статьи и осуществил ее общую научную редакцию. У. Санлы Айдын предложила схему исследовательского анализа. Результаты исследования совместно проанализированы авторами.

Ключевые слова: этнические конфликты, железнодорожный проект «Баку – Тбилиси – Карс», региональная торговля, транспортный коридор, сотрудничество.

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Introduction

The transportation is a significant component of international trade due to its ability to ensure a movement of the manufactured goods from any point to another one. According to the Central Product Classification (CPC Version 1.1) of 2002 issued by the United Nations (UN) in order to set a standard in which product details are determined,

the transportation sector has been defined as a service sector [7]. The Caspian basin is an important component on the West-East transportation axis with its geostrategic bridge position, linking another two significant regions – the Black Sea and the Central Asia.

While recent mutually interdependent feature of the global market economy and world trade increases the importance of the Trans-

Caspian transport corridors, the ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasian region are the serious barriers for them as well as regional stability.

This study aims to examine the reflection of media news about the infrastructure projects on the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor. It aims to answer the following questions: How are the infrastructure projects on the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor reflected in the media in the context of promoting regional cooperation? Does the media news on infrastructure projects contain any ethnic based messages of discrimination or hostility to exclude any country from such projects? The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project has been selected as a case study.

The paper is structured as follows:

- Introduction (section 1);
- Review of the prominent concepts of this study, exactly regional cooperation, the Trans-Caspian transportation corridors and ethnic conflicts as a barrier to regional cooperation (section 2);
- Description of the nature of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral regional cooperation and the significance of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project (section 3);
- Information about the methodology used for conducting this research and provides results and discussions about the case study (section 4).

Prominent concepts of the study

Regional cooperation. Regional cooperation can be considered as an interaction between neighboring countries emerging as a result of evolution of the nature of international political economy. The regional cooperation was accepted as an essential element of political stability and economic welfare among the states of particular region as well as a tool to deal with common challenges in issues of infrastructure, investment, transportation, crime, energy, climate change, environment, etc.

Sometimes states are reluctant for collaboration due to their national vanity, political influences, a lack of confidence each other [17]. If there is a lack of trust between bordering states due to the past problems, they cannot be successful in achieving constructive solutions and cooperating [17].

Transportation corridor. Transport is a key to sustainable development and regional integration. Transportation corridor is vital for effective international movement of goods in the world, primarily providing economic profits, but also having social and cultural effects. The increase in international trade and the movement of goods between markets play an important role in determining international economic relations between states and regions as well. Transportation expenditures compose a significant part of public expenditures of the governments on one hand. On the other hand, transportation activities are the important income items contributing to the national economies. Various transportation corridors in the world facilitate and increase an international trade between regions and countries. Transportation corridors positively affect economic growth of the states in the long run.

The Trans-Caspian transportation corridor. An access to open seas is vital the landlocked countries of the South Caucasus and the Central Asia. Both regions are a crucial transit part of the West-East trade route. These two factors determine the necessity of the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor as it can be the most suitable line between the developed European and emerging Asian economies.

In spite of advantages of the corridor, a need for a huge amount of investment to improve the infrastructure as well as to harmonize the technical standards and procedures to easy access is a serious issue on the discussion table that must be solved. Such type of projects requires the close contacts of politicians with continuous political will, promising mutual benefits all sides in case of cooperation among the neighboring countries.

Overcoming ethnic conflicts as a barrier to regional cooperation. Ethnic groups' memories about what had happened in the past make it difficult to be aware of advantages of regional collaborations. It is the communities themselves that primarily suffer from such conflicts in terms of economic, political and social issues.

The will and decisiveness of political elites and leaders is another important motivation for resolution of ethnic conflicts. According to Hadley Bull, cooperation is also possible among the states that do not feel they belong to a common civilization. A triggering pragmatic need

which enforces different societies to interact and cooperate with each other is required. This necessity will be sufficient for the production of what Bull refers as “diplomatic culture” (see: [14, p. 176; 180]).

In order to overcome the ethnic obstacles and create a cooperation environment, a pragmatic need / obligation must arise, as Bull has said. Global threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic require regional cooperation, and despite all ethnic problems, it should be considered as an opportunity to initiate diplomatic and economic interaction.

Stylized facts

Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral regional cooperation. It is observed that the cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey is developing despite the differences and conflict issues. Common grounds and communication channels are open for multidimensional cooperation.

None of these countries focused on land and border issues with the collapse of the Soviet Union; on the contrary, a new comprehensive cooperation-centered era has started between them. Following a more logic path, these countries have preferred to leave back the historical conflicts and to benefit the opportunities emerging with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Turkey is the first country recognizing the independence of its neighbors – Azerbaijan and Georgia. In spite of the fact that there are clear differences between economic structures and foreign policy priorities of these three countries, they were able to establish cooperation based on national interests in triple format in the post-Soviet era. Besides the South Caucasus, mentioned trilateral collaboration covers the strategic area that unites the Caspian-Black Sea-Mediterranean basins. At first glance it seems that the basis of the formation of this triangle rests on the historical and cultural relations and geographic neighborhood between sides. However, examining deeply, it has been determined that favorable conditions for common economic cooperation, strong political will, and mutual benefits predominate in Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral regional cooperation more than other factors. Initially, Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral regional cooperation

has been introduced as the Western-directed policy among these countries. However, serious efforts exerted by all three sides to protect the synergy of the trilateral cooperation even in the problematical periods of relations of each of them with the West have significantly changed these perceptions [2]. Considering the fact that efforts for the collaboration in the post-Soviet area on the regional level often end in frustration, Azerbaijan- Georgia-Turkey trio seems to have found a winning formula based on multidimensional pragmatism [10] in accordance with each one’s priorities. In this regard, Georgia plays a vital role for both Azerbaijan and Turkey. Primarily, this country provides a land connection between these two. It is also an exit to the open seas and to the world for Azerbaijan as well as an alternative access to the Caspian basin and Central Asia for Turkey. Besides geopolitical interests, the geographical accesses enabled by Georgia serve the economic benefits of both Turkey and Azerbaijan. Only in 2019 Turkey’s trade volume with the Central Asian countries has been 8.5 billion dollars, where over 4 thousand Turkish companies are operating in the region [16]. A significant amount of mentioned trade has been made using Georgia-Azerbaijan-Caspian Sea route. Similarly, with its transit location, Georgia benefits from mentioned trilateral cooperation to improve its economy.

Within the context of this study, Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral regional cooperation can be evaluated in three headings completing each other: economic relations, energy partnership and transportation corridors.

Azerbaijan’s GDP was 48,048 billion dollars in 2019. Georgia’s GDP has been accounted 17,477 billion dollars in 2019 [9]. Turkey is one of the G20 countries. Georgia is a transit country between the wider Black Sea-Caspian Sea basins with attractive business environment, signing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area preferential trade regime with the EU. These facts shape the nature of the economic dimension of Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trilateral relations.

Azerbaijan is one of the main investors in Georgia [18]. In 1995–2018, Azerbaijan invested 3 billion dollars in the neighboring country; on the other hand, total Georgian investment in Azerbaijan has been accounted 93.8 million dollars for the same period. The number of Georgian

companies registered in Azerbaijan is more than 300. About 650 Azerbaijani companies operate in Georgia. In 2018 the total trade volume between sides has been accounted 1.1 billion dollars [12].

The trade turnover between Turkey and Azerbaijan in 2019 has been accounted 2 billion dollars. Azerbaijan is the largest foreign investor of Turkey with 11.2 billion dollars between 2002 and 2018. Similarly, Turkey has invested 11 billion dollars in Azerbaijan in the same period [3].

Turkey remains Georgia's largest trade partner since Free Trade Agreement was signed in 2007. In 2019 the trade volume between two countries has been 1.8 billion dollars [11].

Energy cooperation between three countries constitutes the backbone of the trade volumes and investment amounts mentioned above. Azerbaijan has an opportunity to deliver its energy resources to the international markets via Georgia and Turkey that makes enable the European countries to diversify their oil and natural gas supply also. As transit countries, both Georgia and Turkey benefit from this cooperation as well as they access cheaper energy resources. Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan petroleum pipeline (BTC), Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline (BTE) – soon the South Caucasus natural gas pipeline (SCP), Trans Anatolian natural gas pipeline and its connection to Europe – Trans Adriatic pipeline (TAP) form the basis of trilateral energy partnership [19, p. 10]. In fact, a considerable amount of Azerbaijan's investments in Georgia has been made in the pipeline infrastructures. Similarly, a great part of Azerbaijan's investments in Turkey's energy sector has been made by State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR). Besides of above mentioned energy transportation projects, three countries create together an important ring of the West-East, North-South transportation chain via TRACECA, BRI, North-South Projects. With their transit role in the modern Silk Road three countries not only serve international trade, but also strengthen own service sectors, integrating with best practices of developed economies. The BTK railway project is a result of common attempts of sides to improve the infrastructure in this regard.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has precluded the regional integration and cooperation in the South Caucasus in the post-Soviet period. Armenia has been excluded from the BTC,

TANAP and BTK projects in the East-West, North-South axis. It sure is that a war is not the preferred method of constructing a peace. However, the Second Karabakh War enabled Azerbaijan to regain its territorial integrity; in other words, it removed one of the biggest obstacles to cooperation in the region. Azerbaijan's conditioning to establish a direct connection with Nakhchivan against Armenia should actually be addressed within this framework. The opening of such a corridor should be considered as one of the most important factors of permanent peace and cooperation in the region rather than a connection between Azerbaijan and its exclave region Nakhchivan. Because Zangezur corridor has the potential to gain an effective momentum for trade and logistics activities between three regional actors – Russia, Iran and Turkey – and three regional countries – Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project.

The idea of the railway was on the agenda in parallel with the discussions on the revival of the Silk Road. Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey looked for the alternatives to strengthen its ties with the South Caucasian and Central Asian countries [13, p. 43].

However, geopolitical conditions in the region were not suitable for realizing this idea in that year. On the other hand, the same geopolitical conditions in the region enforced Azerbaijan and Turkey to find a new route connecting them with each other as well as to the other countries. Therefore, the BTK railway project, known also as “the Iron Silk Road”, emerged in the early 2000s with the developments in world trade and Georgia's desire to take advantage of its transit location. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey pragmatically evaluated the historical opportunity for their mutual interests and completed the project with trial, regional, international and global significance.

In the first stage, it is planned to transport 1 million passengers and 6.5 million tons of cargo by the BTK railway. The capacity is aimed to be increased to 3 million passengers and 17 million tons of freight by 2034. It is proposed annually 50 tons of international transportation potential with the BTK railway connection between Turkey, Asia, the Caucasus and the European countries.

Currently the BTK railway is used for cargo transportation to Turkey, Russia, China, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. For instance, the transportation between Turkey and Kazakhstan with 4,700-kilometer distance via the BTK railway can be completed in 180 hours depending on the situation of the Caspian Sea. Three trains in a week operate mutually between Turkey, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. A container agency agreement has been signed between Turkey's state railway organization – TCDD Tasimacilik AS and Kazakhstan's KTZ Express JSC in order to increase the export transportations to this country by the BTK railway. The completion time of customs procedures of the goods transported by the BTK railway is reduced to 10–15 minutes from 24 hours with the “Weighted Simplified Method”.

On the other hand, one block container train operates per week between China and Turkey. The most important fact in this context is that in 2019 the first China-Europe train consisting of 42 wagon-containers used the BTK railway. This was the first train from China to Europe to pass through the Middle Corridor via the “Iron Silk Road”, as well as the first international freight train to pass through the Marmaray Tunnel [4].

In May 2019 the authorities of railway administrations of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Russia agreed on a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation on BTK Railway Route. According to mentioned document, it is aimed to transport 1 million tons of coal, grain and metal in the short term, and 3–5 million tons in the medium term between Russia and Turkey [4].

Until May 2020, 240 thousand tons of Turkish export cargo were transported with 5,250 containers by the BTK railway, which started to operate in October 2017 already. Additionally, 280 thousand tons of cargo imported by Turkey and the European countries were transported with 5,300 containers via the BTK railway [5].

In order to provide the uninterrupted flow of freights from Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan via the BTK railway to the Europe, operations have completed to eliminate the differences in rail distances in the Kars Logistics Center by the Turkish government. As it is known, the post-Soviet countries like Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Georgia use the railway systems with

a track gauge of 1,520 mm. However, Turkey and the European countries use the standard-gauge railways with a track gauge of 1,435 mm. Turkey aimed to solve the problem and to accelerate the cargo transportation by laying double railway gauge between Kars Logistics Center and Georgia's Akhalkalaki region and integrating the railway systems. This is a transfer point of cargo carrying by both railway systems [6].

Due to the increased demand for the BTK railway within the framework of the COVID-19 measures as the railway is a transport mode with high level security, the Turkish government raised the load capacity of 3,500 tons per day additionally to the existing capacity [5].

During the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Iran Quadrilateral Meeting of Foreign Ministers which was held in Baku in March 2018, the sides discussed the connection of the Rasht-Astara railway to the BTK railway [1].

In fact, the BTK railway is a project that most states can benefit from because it is not a project that emerged to make any counter attack against any similar initiative. These kinds of projects generally serve the countries of the region and establish cooperation in the region instead of competition.

Methodology, findings and discussion

Methodology. This article aims to investigate the reflection of infrastructure projects on the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor in the media news. How are the infrastructure projects on the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor reflected in the media in the context of promoting regional cooperation? Does the media news on infrastructure projects contain any ethnic based messages of discrimination or hostility to exclude any country from such projects? May such news change perceptions towards cooperation and common interest rather than ethnic issues? This article focuses on the perspective of the BTK railway project as a regional cooperation tool for mutual economic interests and increasing welfare countries, leaving ethnic issues behind.

A conceptual content analysis is used in this research, demonstrating the focus of group or institutional attention as well as revealing trends in a communication content through counting

words or/and phrases and grouping them under categories. Counting provides an opportunity for the researchers to compare the contents more definitely, particularly if the objective of the research is to understand how much are some issues stressed more or less than others.

The research was limited with online media news of three major news agencies of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey within a specific time period beginning from official inauguration of the BTK until the date of conducting of this research due to the reliability, availability and easy accessibility of them. The BTK railway project is the universe of the research. Only official state news agencies from each country have been selected. It was aimed to introduce different perspectives at the similar equivalence on the research topic as much as possible. The names of news agencies are: Anadolu Ajansi (AA) (Turkey), Azertac (Azerbaijan), Gruzinfo (Georgia). Anadolu Ajansi is a state news agency of the Republic of Turkey. Similarly, Azertac is a state news agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Gruzinfo is a state news agency of the Republic of Georgia. All three news agencies are popular in their countries and leading information service providers in their countries. Both Anadolu Ajansi and Azertac have a website in English besides of native and some other commonly used languages. In the initial stage of research it was determined that all news published by these agencies is translated into English simultaneously. Gruzinfo publishes online news only in Georgian and Russian. For these reasons, news about the BTK railway has been scanned in English on websites of the Anadolu Ajansi and Azertac, however, in Russian on the website of the Gruzinfo.

As it is noted above, the BTK railway was officially inaugurated on 30 October 2017. Therefore, the news has been reviewed within a specific time period of 30 October 2017 – 15 May 2020. Identifying the key concept in study topic, “Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway” has been used for

search of news. Analyzing results in order to assess and modify this study’s search terms, relevant news was captured and saved to the files.

At the second stage of the research a conceptual content approach has been used to analyze the news found. Conceptual content analysis is a research method that aims to determine the number of times a word or a phrase exists in reviewed documents. This is a type of content analysis – “a tool that is used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts” [8, p. 176]. In the context of this study, the codes were developed that closely relate to the aims and goals of the BTK railway such as “regional cooperation”, “mutual benefit”, “strategic cooperation”, “global trade”, “welfare”, “ethnic conflict”, “occupied lands”, “enemy nation”, “separatist powers”. It was tried to determine how the BTK railway is structured in scanned news and to measure the focus of news using both positive and negative phrases. A number of news fit more than one code. The relevance of the news was established and 100 percent of reviewed news was relevant to our study ($n = 368$). Kappa statistic has been used for calculation of intercoder reliability on all study dimensions. Considering that Kappa values are usually preferred to be at least 0.6 and often higher than 0.7 [15, pp. 107–109], the achievement of an intercoder reliability of 0.8 has been accepted as satisfying for this study.

Analysis. While all 368 news found on websites of news agencies involve information about the BTK railway project, these news include the declarations of state authorities, namely, presidents, prime ministers, ministers of several ministries, ambassadors, spokesmen, as well as press releases about the bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral, multilateral meetings.

As it is shown in Table 1, totally 368 news were found on the websites of three news agencies for the time period of 30 October 2017 – 15 May 2020.

Table 1. Media review for the BTK railway project

News Agencies	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	Percent
Anadolu Ajansi	11	16	4	2	33	8,97%
Azertac	83	130	66	15	294	79,89%
Gruzinfo	7	9	20	5	41	11,14%
Total	101	155	90	22	368	100%

Note. Compiled by the authors.

Interestingly, Azerbaijan's state news agency Azertac made more news than other two agencies – 294 news. This amount is 79.89 percent of total news. 83 of these news have been made in 2017 (30 October – 31 December), 130 news have been made in 2018, 66 news have been made in 2019 and 15 news have been made in 2020 (1 January – 15 May).

While the majority of news has been published by Azerbaijan's agency, Turkey's news agency – Anadolu Ajansi – published 33 news, which compose 8.97 percent of the total. 11 news made after the opening the BTK railway in 2017. 16 news have been made in 2018, 4 news made in 2019 and 2 news have been made from 1 January 2020 until 15 May 2020.

Similarly, Gruzinfo provided 41 news about the BTK railway during the mentioned period. It composes 11.14 percent of the total. 7 news have been made from 30 October 2017-31 December 2017. 9 news have been made in 2018, 20 news have been made in 2019 and 5 news have been made from 1 January 2020 until 15 May 2020 by Gruzinfo.

What do these data mean? The difference between the numbers of news indicate that the BTK railway has a more place in Azerbaijani

press, publishing the relevant news in the most common language, such as English.

27.44 percent of all news have been published in 2017. While this rate is 42.12 percent for 2018, 24.45 percent of them have been published in 2019 and 5.99 percent in 2020 (Table 2). The data show that the BTK railway covered a wide place in the press in the early days of its opening.

It was determined that there are several topics on the websites of news agencies like politics, official news, economy, world, actual, sport, astrology and etc. The published news is existed on the web page of agencies under the relevant topic in accordance with their content.

According to Table 3, which shows the distribution of the subject categories of the news, 42.12 percent ($n = 155$) of the 368 news have been published under the category of "politics" on the websites of agencies in the sample group. 28.81 percent ($n = 106$) have been published under the category of "official news", 17.66 percent ($n = 65$) have been published under the category of "economy", 5.71 percent ($n = 21$) have been published under the category of "world", 3.53 percent ($n = 13$) have been published under the category of "actual", 0.82 percent ($n = 3$) have been published under the category of "publication",

Table 2. Frequency of news by years

Years	Number of news	Percent
2017	101	27,44%
2018	155	42,12%
2019	90	24,45%
2020	22	5,99%
Total	368	100%

Note. Compiled by the authors.

Table 3. Distribution of news by categories

Categories	Number of news (n)	Percent
Politics	155	42,12%
Official News	106	28,81%
Economy	65	17,66%
World	21	5,71%
Actual	13	3,53%
Publication	3	0,82%
Society	2	0,54%
Foreign Policy	1	0,27%
Health	1	0,27%
Law	1	0,27%
Total	368	100%

Note. Compiled by the authors.

0.54 percent ($n = 2$) have been published under the category of “society”, 0.27 percent ($n = 1$) has been published under the category of “foreign policy”, 0.27 percent ($n = 1$) has been published under the category of “health” and 0.27 percent ($n=1$) has been published under the category of “law”.

Interestingly, the news about the BTK railway project have been published under the category of “politics” more than the “economy”, although it is more relevant to the economic activities. On the other hand, one news item has been found under the category of “health” that was published in May 2020.

It is not a coincidence that the project was reported in this category at a time when the effect of COVID-19 pandemic increased. Closed borders and limited number of road transit licenses during the pandemic period have increased the demand for railway transportation. It may be thought that the BTK project will gain a new identity in this sense in the near future.

It was found that “regional cooperation” is the most used statement in this news. “Regional cooperation” has been used 133 times totally in 368 news. The second most used statement is “mutual benefit” in all news, which was used 71 times in total. While “strategic cooperation” is used 26 times, the phrase “global trade” is mentioned 10 times in scanned news. The word of “welfare” is emphasized 5 times. The level of mentioning such statements and words by the politicians mainly directs the perceptions about the BTK railway project’s in positively (Table 4).

Moreover, when the contents of all news have been analyzed, it was determined that none of declarations, speeches, statements, announcements, press releases, public information, explanations and expressions include any word or mention about the hate on ethnic or identity base, otherization or provocative discourse

against any state, government, nation, group, society, organization and project.

Words and expressions such as “ethnic conflict”, “occupied lands”, “enemy nation”, “separatist powers” have been scanned in the news contents. Such negative words have not been found in any news content.

On the contrary, in most news the openness of the BTK railway project for all sides ready to cooperation has been underlined. It was found that almost all news about the BTK railway focus on regional cooperation, economic benefits, development of the project and widening its borders as well as to attract more and more partners.

As it is pointed, almost all of this news include the explanations and declarations of the state heads and senior officials of three countries. These explanations are important because first of all, state heads and senior officials are the main agenda setters in their countries. Secondly, as it was practiced in the history, a will and support of political elites and leaders plays a great role in establishment of regional cooperation and economic integrations. While strong political will is needed for the realization of such projects, continuous political support is vital for the sustainable and beneficial operations of them. News about the speeches, statements and explained attitudes of politicians to public about the BTK railway is remarkable in this regard. Moreover, the publication of this news by official agencies is also important in terms of reliability and impartiality. On the other side, the influence of public authorities on media, especially in Azerbaijan and Turkey, is often criticized by the EU officials. In this sense, the impartiality of the news published is open for discussion. However, in general, it is important that the news that is the subject of our study do not serve a purpose that goes beyond the fundamental values of the EU, such as promoting peace, stability and cooperation between countries and regions.

Table 4. Relative frequencies of coded words

Codes	Frequency, %	<i>n</i>
Regional cooperation	36,14	133
Mutual benefit	19,29	71
Strategic cooperation	7,06	26
Global trade	2,72	10
Welfare	1,36	5

Note. Compiled by the authors.

Next significant finding is that the BTK railway and expectations from this project in terms of mutual benefits and common interests were not expressed only during bilateral meetings of Turkish-Azerbaijani, Turkish-Georgian or Azerbaijani-Georgian authorities or on the several platforms of Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia trilateral cooperation. According to the news, it was determined that the BTK railway project is intensively involved in the agenda of discussions in different formats, such as bilateral and multilateral negotiations of each party countries with the government officials of the EU, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Iran, Russia, China and Ukraine. Moreover, the prospects of the BTK railway project are among the active discussion issues of the intergovernmental, regional and international organizations and initiatives, such as the Turkish Council, Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Baku Global Forum, Davos Summit, TRACECA, BRI, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and NATO.

As it is known, the world experiences a new period due to unpredictable effects of COVID-19 in all countries. The news about the suggestion by the members of the Turkish Council on the establishment of “green corridor” via the BTK railway for the transportation of urgent materials such as food products, medicines and medical devices increases the popularity of the line. Because of the life-threatening effect of the pandemic, it is obvious that there is a need for non-contact or/and less contact methods in foreign trade preventing the spread of the virus. Considering Turkey’s close relations with the developed economies of the EU as a candidate state for a long time, the experiences of this country to facilitate border transit, digital foreign trade implementations, and harmonization of online technical infrastructures and customs procedures can be useful practices for the South Caucasian and Central Asian countries as well as Iran. In this regards, news about the role of the BTK railway may have incentive effect on perceptions of the public authorities and private sector of several countries to use it, thus, to contribute to regional cooperation.

Finally and most importantly, it was determined that promoting regional cooperation and partnerships, the news about the BTK railway project are far from the goals such as threatening any country, state or society.

Results. In the light of above mentioned facts, the conceptual content analysis is used for conducting this research in the sample of the BTK railway project. It was aimed to investigate the reflection of the BTK railway project on official news of three party sides. It was determined that the news contained the declarations, speeches, statements, announcements, press releases, public information, explanations and expressions. All information, involved in the news, has been scanned using both negative and positive words and expressions. It was determined that none the contents of all scanned news include any word or mention about the hate on ethnic or identity base, otherization or provocative discourse against any state, government, nation, group, society, organization and project, aiming to exclude particular nation or state from the BTK project. On the contrary, in most news it has been emphasized that the project is open to the participation of all parties. Almost all news about the BTK railway focus on regional cooperation, economic benefits, development of the project and widening its borders as well as to attract more and more partners. Most of news includes the explanations and declarations of the state heads and senior officials of three countries. Considering that state heads and senior officials are the main agenda setters and the political will and support of them plays a great role in establishment of regional cooperation and economic integrations, news about the attitudes of politicians to the public is remarkable in this regard. Finally and most importantly, the news about the BTK railway project is far from the goals such as threatening any country, state or society.

We argue that media news about the infrastructure projects on the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor may promote the regional cooperation and may have a positive effect on public perceptions about strengthening the regional cooperation between countries and may help to focus on mutual benefits rather than conflicts on ethnic base.

Considering the difficulty of control of social media, we recommend that official news may avoid to publishing messages with provocative contents about ethnic issues.

On the other side, the world is witnessing the extreme change. Information age influences everything: preferences, perceptions, habits, life

styles, behaviors that strongly affects the social, economic and political priorities of states. Moreover, the world faced with a new and non-traditional threat – COVID-19. The movement of goods, services, capitals and people in the world has almost stopped in the first months of 2020. Regardless of their development level and economic powers, all countries have been exposed by the pandemic. There is an initial perception that countries turned in on oneself due to COVID-19. However, considering that the survival of humans, populations, societies and finally, states depends on health, now countries need each other more than before. The cooperation, sharing of best practices is more essential to deal with the effects and results of the pandemic. Because COVID-19 showed that such types of threats pose a danger for all states regardless of ethnicity, identity, language, religion, race. Only collaborations and mutual measures can be effective to minimize the threats.

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