

СЕКЦІЯ 2. ГОТЕЛЬНО-РЕСТОРАННА СПРАВА ТА ТУРИЗМ

Anvar Ismayilli

Junior Researcher,

Institute of Economics of the Ministry of Education and

Science of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Baku, Azerbaijan Republic

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF MOUNTAIN TOURISM IN THE POST-CONFLICT REGIONS OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AS A FACTOR IN ACCELERATING REGIONAL INTEGRATION

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the frozen ethno-territorial conflicts in the South Caucasus region turned into military-political conflicts between: a) Armenia and Azerbaijan (Karabakh); b) Russia and Georgia (Abkhazia, Adjara and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia). The territories of the conflict are mainly mountainous and occupy approximately 20–25% of the territory of Azerbaijan and Georgia, respectively. For 30 years, these conflicts significantly hampered the development of a) conflict territories and states as a whole; b) integration processes both in the region and in the global economy. Thus, the main factor in the development of the socio-economic region of the South Caucasus is the settlement of these conflicts.

In the post-Soviet period, the Russian Federation intensified the separatist movement in Georgia (Abkhazia, Adjara, Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia). In 2004, Adjara peacefully joined Georgia. In 2008, Russia annexed Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During this period, the rate of development of Adjara, especially in the field of tourism, was the highest, significantly ahead of other regions of the country. Adjara gave a new impetus to the development of the Georgian economy. Armenia is a predominantly mountainous country (about 50%), and mountain tourism has developed because, unlike Azerbaijan and Georgia, Armenia had no post-conflict territories.

Since independence, Armenia has occupied 20% of Azerbaijan's territory, and it was only in 2020, after the 44-day Karabakh War (also known as the Azerbaijani Patriotic War), that Azerbaijan released the occupied lands. Then the government of Azerbaijan began to rapidly restore the industrial and social infrastructure of the region to world standards, which is a necessary condition and an important factor for the development of mountain tourism in Karabakh.

Last year, a number of researchers in Azerbaijan proposed their view towards the current issue, mainly formation of several tourism clusters accordingly with geographical characteristics of the region:

One suggested direction is Fizuli-Khojavend-Shusha-Lachin, second one is Fizuli-Jebrail-Zangilan.

One more tourism cluster can be Zangilan-Gubadli.

Fourth one is Kelbajar-Lachin.

Finally, fifth one can be Barda-Agdam.

Currently, major construction works are underway in the Karabakh Economic District (Shusha) and the East Zangezur Economic District (Lachin and Kelbajar). Karabakh has significant resources of cultural, natural, health and ski tourism. Preparations are made for hiking in nature, paragliding, mountain biking, boating on mountain rivers. Experts say that the development of several types of tourism, including mountain tourism such as Shusha, Lachin and Kelbajar, has relatively greater potential. At the same time, Azerbaijan will have to make a lot of efforts to optimize the service and reduce prices, because in terms of these parameters, Azerbaijan is often inferior to the winter resorts of neighboring countries – Turkey and Georgia.

According to the data for the beginning of 2024, almost 2 million of people from different countries visited Azerbaijan. 30 % of visitors came from the Russian Federation, 18,1% from Türkiye, 7,9 % from Iran, and 4,9 % from Georgia.

Reintegration of post-conflict territories of the Azerbaijan into its existing socio-economic system expected to contribute to the overall growth and development of state's economy. In its turn, the experience of Azerbaijan in the field of evolution of mountain tourism exactly in post-conflict zones can be an essential ground for further experience exchange with Georgia, which can obtain this experience and apply in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in future. It can facilitate regional integration processes in the region, which will also help to take existing relations between states to the new level.

In this regard, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive program for the development of the tourism sphere of Karabakh with the involvement, of the business structures of the Caucasian countries, as well as global brands. The restoration of Karabakh can give a new impetus to the revival of not only the economy of Azerbaijan, but also the entire Caucasus as a whole.