



Informality between states that do not officially speak: Turkish trucks entering Armenia

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Abstract

In many Middle-eastern and former Soviet spaces, informal trade is a common way to avoid blockade-related restrictions. However, the institutionalization and diversification of trade can create a space where formally conflicting actors can carry out informal trade. Responding to the emergence of a new market economy and to the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, informal economic relations became a marker of social change in post-Soviet Armenia. Turkey has since then prevented the passage of aid destined to Armenia to cross over its borders. Armenia's eastern and western borders are closed. Thus, the country is left with two trading routes, via Georgia and Iran. However, informal Armenian Turkish trade relations persisted as of the early 1990s. Yet, the blockade does not allow Armenian exports to Turkey via legal routes. Meanwhile, Turkey's exports to Armenia, albeit facing the Turkish government's legal obstructions, are possible in practice. Indeed, many vehicles bearing Turkish number plates carry goods to Armenia over Georgia every year. With such a scenario as its backdrop, this empirical paper aims to explore the following question: How do informal practices become a tool of relations between the two states, able even to resist conflictual events?

Key-words: Armenia, informality, embargo, Turkey, conflict and security.

L'informalità tra Stati che ufficialmente non si parlano. I camion turchi che entrano in Armenia

In molte aree medio-orientali e post-sovietiche, l'economia informale è pratica diffusa per aggirare restrizioni legate agli embarghi. Tuttavia, istituzionalizzazione e diversificazione dei commerci possono creare spazi dove financo attori formalmente in conflitto mettono in pratica scambi informali. Nell'Armenia post-sovietica, per rispondere all'emergere di una nuova economia di mercato e alla prima guerra del Nagorno Karabakh, le relazioni economiche

informali divennero indicatori dei mutamenti sociali. La Turchia ha dalla prima guerra nel Nagorno Karabakh impedito il passaggio, attraverso i suoi confini, degli aiuti destinati all'Armenia. Mentre i confini orientali e occidentali dell'Armenia restano chiusi. Pertanto, al paese rimangono solo due vie commerciali, attraverso Georgia e Iran. Vero però che relazioni commerciali informali tra armeni e turchi persistevano sin dai primi anni '90. Ma se l'embargo non consente esportazioni dall'Armenia verso la Turchia via itinerari legali, le esportazioni dalla Turchia verso l'Armenia, sia pur soggette a controlli da parte delle autorità turche, sono invece possibili nella pratica. Infatti, veicoli con targhe turche sono soliti trasportare merci in Armenia via Georgia. Tenuto conto di un tale scenario, questo contributo vuole rispondere alla seguente domanda: in che modo le pratiche informali diventano strumento nelle relazioni tra i due stati, e sono addirittura capaci di sopravvivere ad eventi bellici?

Parole chiave: Armenia, informalità, embargo, Turchia, conflitto e sicurezza.

Introduction¹

In South Caucasia, there are different forms of blockades, e.g., Russian-Georgian embargo, EU-Russia sanctions. Geography is usually a major variable in economic-related sanctions; concurrently, informal trade helps avoiding blockade-related restrictions. However, the institutionalization and diversification of trade, state bodies and regional cooperation can create a space where formally conflicting actors can carry out informal trade on a state level. It is thus important to understand how informality functions between states, and the process of its institutionalization.

Since the 1990s, informal economic relations became a marker of social change in post-Soviet Armenia. Responding to the emergence of a new market economy and to the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1991-1994), shadow economy in conflictual *loci* (Fleming, Roman & Farrell 2000; Warde 2007) became a means to overcome socio-economic crisis (Dudwick 2003; Dabaghyan & Gabrielyan 2008; Fehlings 2017; Melkumyan 2018). The Republic of Armenia had to face the crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union (1987-1991), an energy crisis (1991-1995) and economic blockades (from Azerbaijan since 1989; from Turkey since 1993) (De Wall 2003).

Following Armenia's Independence (1991), Turkish-Armenian relations have been marked by a twofold tension: the unresolved issue of

¹ Despite the difficulty of dividing the paper into precise areas of responsibility, Hakobyan concentrated mainly on Sections 4, 5 and 6; Mollica on Sections 1, 2 and 3.

the acknowledgement of the Armenian Genocide (Giragosian 2009: 2-3; Grigoryan, Khachatryan & Ter-Matevosyan 2019: 3); and Turkish support to Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh War (Zakaryan 2021: 193-194). Armenia's eastern (with Azerbaijan) and western (with Turkey) borders are closed. The country is thus left with only two trading routes: via Georgia and Iran.

Nevertheless, indirect Armenian-Turkish trade relations persisted since the early 1990s. According to Armenian official data, Armenia imported Turkish goods in the range of \$3.4 billion during the period 1993-2021 (Armstat 1993-2021). This represented almost 99% of the trade between the two countries as Armenian exports to Turkey are nearly non-existent. Indeed, Armenia's list of imported goods placed Turkish trade to the country in sixth place in 2019 (Zakaryan 2021).

However, the blockade did not allow Armenian exports to Turkey. Vehicles bearing Armenian number plates are not permitted to enter Turkey since there is no bilateral road-transport agreement between the two countries. Meanwhile, custom declarations for goods of Armenian origin that enter Turkey directly from Armenia are not formally issued. However, Turkey's exports to Armenia are possible in practice. Trucks bearing Turkish number plates are not allowed to go to Armenia from Turkey and export declarations to Armenia are not issued. Nevertheless, Turkish trucks exiting Turkey may initially declare Georgia as their destination and then declare Armenia as their destination when arriving at the Georgian border. Similarly, Turkish products may initially be exported to Georgia and then re-sold in the Armenian market via Georgian companies. Many vehicles bearing Turkish number plates carry goods to Armenia over Georgia every year. This worked even after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020), when on December 31, 2020, the Armenian government placed an embargo on imports of Turkish goods.

The Armenian economy and employment market have dramatically transformed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially the political instability and deindustrialization created dramatic social and economic crisis and as the industrial production stopped, employees lost their jobs. In such a context, marked by the absence of a social welfare system and an economic collapse, informal economies flourished. Rano Turaeva suggests that «Post-Soviet social and economic crises coupled with growing uncertainties about the future have led people to rethink their [...] social navigation through societal and political systems» (Turaeva 2018: 74).

Similar practices across the world are associated with unstable labor markets and occupy a semi-informal sphere of business activity, e.g., petty trans-border trade (Cieślowska 2018: 94). Thus, informal trade prospered once the former Soviet Union's borders were opened. It was however the transitional period with its "porous borders" and almost non-existent controls that helped informal transactions. These were helped by huge price disparities with the former Soviet sphere countries (*Ivi*: 95).

In the Armenian case the above must also be contrasted with the First Nagorno-Karabakh War and the economic blockade. From 1990 to 2000, Armenia's most popular shuttle trades were with China, Poland, Syria and, indirectly, with Turkey (mostly in the Georgian markets of Sadakho and Lilo). However, over time some trades transformed into profitable businesses. Traders still travelled, but the scale of their trade increased. Several former traders became retail suppliers to wholesale outlets. Others continued to travel abroad to buy goods for their own stalls in the markets; but most of them sent their purchased goods through intermediaries. Thus, they were only required to supervise their delivery. Some of the latter started organizing cargo transportation and logistics systems from Turkey to Armenia. This was documented by Cieślowska (*Ivi*: 97) in other post-Soviet countries, whilst in Armenia the shuttle trade suffered from poor economic conditions and widespread corruption.

Building on works of informality in Eurasian spaces (Polese 2021) and informality as everyday practices in post-Soviet (Polese *et al.* 2018) and Middle Eastern (Helou 2021; 2022; Helou & Mollica 2022) zones, this paper takes on an empirical approach to explore the following question: How do informal practices become a tool of relations between Armenia and Turkey, able even to resist conflictual events? We will suggest that the practices can even resist tense political situations. To do so, we have looked at a variety of media sources which related to different aspects of the question.

We have analyzed international and local (mainly Armenian and Turkish) social media. The scrutiny was conducted from a factological perspective relying upon a document analysis methodology. Social media were largely used to gather data during and after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War because they documented ongoing processes not yet academically analyzed or not enough analyzed. The media proved often to be the single source offering relevant information about some events. In addition, participant observation was carried out from 2020 to 2023 in Yerevan, mainly in Malatia market that is one of the main post-Soviet Armenia spaces

where shuttle trades between Armenia and Turkey arose and developed to later becoming a place of wholesalers. It is made of different selling areas, e.g., cloths, shoes, agricultural products and so on. One of the authors lives very close to the Malatia market, which facilitated data collection. This gave the co-author opportunities to continuously observe market processes, life and shifting dynamics. At the time of writing, the market was functioning perfectly. Fieldwork was mostly conducted in the morning. On Mondays the cloths market did not work as selling was limited to fruits and vegetables. Observation was however intensified since September 2020 when the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War started, as well as in December 2021 and December 2022 when costumers visited the market because of the incoming festivities (New Year Eve and the Armenian Apostolic Christmas - January 6).

However, we have also used material gathered during previous fieldworks (2006 and 2010) conducted by one of the co-authors on both Armenian-Georgian and Turkish-Georgian borders in the framework of two international research-field schools in the Georgian settings of Sadakho and Vale. The project was on ethnicity, everyday practices and economy in Transcaucasian borderlands (Brednikova, Voronkov & Zurabishvili 2011).

South Caucasian forms of informal and indirect trade, as well as illegal border transactions and the way they interact with ethno-political conflicts, have been articulated in three recent area-study contributions. First, Susanne Fehlings' (2022) work on trade and traders between Caucasia and China, with an emphasis on the Georgian case, explores the origin and development of informal and small-scale transactions, and the way «globalization from below» impacted economy, markets and social relations. Second, the work of Blakkisrud *et al.* (2021) upon the Abkhazian case showed the correlation between trade and trust in contested statehood and conflict transformation, and proved how the relation is much more complex than often assumed as trade does not necessarily promote trust but emotional implications that relate to memory and self-understanding components. Third, Mattheis, Russo and Raineri's (2019) contribution on the way forms of connectivity extending across borders survived both the materialization of inter-state frontiers and the freezing of conflict borderlines. Thus, cross-border networks thrive on the economic practices shaping the region via open-air trading markets, e.g., bazaars scattered along the Georgian borders with South Ossetia (Ergneti), Azerbaijan (Red Bridge) and Armenia (Sadakhlo). At the same time, what we hypothesize

concerns the ways in which the practices of legitimacy are declined by varying the political situations, especially those of conflict.

The context chosen, i.e., the case of informal transactions between Turkey and Armenia, is marked by the omnipresent influences dictated by the (synchronic) conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and by the (diachronic) long-standing tensions, ripe fruit of the unresolved issue of the Armenian Genocide. This is why we have decided to devote to the historical section particular attention (see later); it is indeed this historical background that connects to, and helps explaining, the question posed by the article and contextualized the subsequent discussion. In what follows, we endorse the definition given by Abel Polese (2021) upon informality, «As an activity, performed by an individual or a group of individuals [...], that eventually bypasses the state or the overarching entity regulating the life of that group or society» (Polese 2021: 3). However, it is our main aim to bend it towards an understanding of the political dimension of the phenomenon.

This article is divided into five sections. Section one, entitled *The Armenian-Turkish Thorny Border: an historical background*, examines the history of the post-Soviet border between Armenia and Turkey. Section two, entitled *Informality Penetrates the Thorny Border: the bus route that did not exist*, discusses how informal practices penetrated the border. Section three, entitled *Circumventing the Embargo*, provides details on how informal practices circumvent the economic blockade. Section four, entitled *Turkish Trucks Encountering Genocidal Past Memories*, looks at the frictions between the Turkish-Armenian trade and the sempiternal shadow of their entangled past. Section five, entitled *Concluding Remarks*, summarizes the content of the paper.

The Armenian-Turkish Thorny Border: an historical background

Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Armenia's independence on December 16, 1991, after the collapse of the USSR. Armenian proclaimed its independence on September 23, 1991. However, even before the official recognition of the new Republic (27.11.1991), when Armenia was still formally in the USSR, the Ambassador of Turkey to Moscow, Volkan Vural, said that Turkey was preparing to open a consulate in Yerevan (ESI 2009: 9). On April 12, 1991, Ambassador Vural had a three-days official visit. It was the first visit in Armenia by a high-ranking Turkish official in 70 years (*Ivi*: 6). The Ambassador, along with then acting Ar-

menian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ashot Yeghiazaryan, visited the closed Armenian-Turkish border of Margara (Hakobyan 2012: 267). Yeghiazaryan even recalls that they said: «Here will be our checkpoint» (Yeghiazaryan quoted in Hakobyan 2012: 267).

However, while Vural was visiting Armenia, the Soviet Central Authority and the Soviet Azerbaijani leadership were planning the special Operation Ring in Nagorno-Karabakh. The decision to launch the operation was made on April 10, 1991. On April 30, Soviet Army, Internal Troops and Azerbaijani Special Police units attacked the Armenian rural border villages of Getashen [Chaykend] and Martunashen [Qarabulaq] (De Wall 2003: 116-117), then on the Azerbaijani – Nagorno Karabakh border, today in Goygol District in Azerbaijan. Operation Ring was Soviet Union's first and only civil war. It marked the beginning of an open, armed phase in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The operation was accompanied by systematic and gross human rights abuses (De Wall 2003: 120-121).

Nevertheless, despite Ambassador Vural's visit, the Turkish government refused to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia. Turkey also refused to open the two border posts of Margara–Alijan [Alican] and Dogu Kapi [Doğu Kapi] – Akhurik. The Turkish government put forward two preconditions to their opening: 1. Armenia must recognize the Turkish-Armenian border as established under the Treaty of Kars (1921); 2. Armenia must put an end to the process of international recognition of the Armenian Genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh issue (Hakobyan 2012: 276-278, 300-306). The preconditions mean waiving Armenian alleged territorial claims and denying the existence of the Genocide.

From the beginning of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, Turkey had provided Azerbaijan with political, diplomatic and military assistance. On March 2, 1992, Turkey began to implement a policy of randomly obliging planes carrying cargo bound for Armenia to land in Turkey. This policy complemented Azerbaijan's economic blockade of Armenia, which begun in 1989. However, Turkey did not cut all ties with Armenia. In November 1992, Turkey had, for instance, agreed to allow 100.000 tons of wheat (part of a larger EU humanitarian assistance) from the EU to pass through its territory to Armenia (De Wall 2003: 213). At that time, Azerbaijani forces were preparing to launch a final offensive to conquer Stepanakert (*Ivi*: 196, 210). Armenia was under an economic blockade from the Azerbaijani side while facing the coincidental breakdown of transit routes across Georgia because of the Abkhazian conflict (1992-93).

According to an agreement signed between the new Republic of Armenia and the new Russian Federation on September 30, 1992, Russia had ensured the security of Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran. However, on April 3, 1993, Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians took control of the Azerbaijani town of Kalbajar. This allowed the opening of a second corridor between Armenia and Karabakh, beside Lachin corridor (captured on May 17, 1992). Turkey retaliated to the loss of Kalbajar by stopping the supply of European wheat by re-sealing the Turkish-Armenian border post of Dogu Kapi.

Turkey also halted the transfer of humanitarian aid through its territory and eventually severed all rail and air connections between Turkey and Armenia (Zakaryan 2021: 193). Since then, Turkey has linked the re-opening of the borders to the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue (Hakobyan 2012: 300-306; Gültekin 2005, 42).

However, on May 2, 1995, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey announced that the international air route between Armenia and Turkey, closed since 1993, was re-opened (Gültekin-Punsmann *et al.* 2012: 14-15).

The Former Head of the National Security Service of Armenia, David Shahnazaryan, recalled that, after the battle of Kalbajar, Turkish policy towards Armenia changed sharply. He said:

[In the winter of 1994] a Turkish delegation [...] visited Armenia [...] I told the ambassador that it was incomprehensible to us that Turkey had closed its air border with Armenia. I said that [...] Turkey had a tougher position than Azerbaijan. The air borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan had never been closed and we had been using each other's airspace [...] Soon after that the airspace was opened (Shahnazaryan quoted in Hakobyan 03.04.2006).

The former Chief of the Armenian Aviation Authority, Shahen Petrosyan, added: «The process was very difficult because of the absence of diplomatic relations. [However, on] April 20, 1995, the agreement on opening of the air border was signed between Armenia and Turkey» (Petrosyan quoted in Sargsyan 27.12.2021).

The closure of the air corridor between Armenia and Turkey impacted Azerbaijani flight connections to Turkey and to the Western countries (TEPAV *et al.* 2012: 5). Meanwhile, «Armenia was getting 1 million dollars yearly for aeronavigation thanks to this» (Petrosyan quoted in Sargsyan 27.12.2021).

After the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, a decision was made by Turkey to allow Armenian citizens to obtain Turkish visas at Turkish border points. Armenian citizens were later given the opportunity to get an entry

visa at the airport when traveling to Turkey. However, in 2001, in retaliation for the French Parliament recognition of the Armenian Genocide, Turkey stopped issuing visas to Armenian citizens at border posts. Thus, Armenians had to apply for a visa to the Turkish consulate in Tbilisi or Moscow. But in 2002, Turkey reversed its decision (Gültekin-Punsmann *et al.* 2012: 14, 28-29). The air corridor was open for transit to/from Armenia; however, the Turkish national carrier, Turkish Airlines, did not operate flights to Yerevan (TEPAV *et al.* 2012: 5-6).

Informality Penetrates the Thorny Border: the bus route that did not exist

Armenian-Turkish cross-border issues precede USSR collapse. In the late Soviet period, a first, small-scale, informal trade link was established between Turkey and Soviet Transcaucasia when Caucasian regions started opening their external borders. In 1988, land border-crossing points were established between USSR and China, and between USSR and Turkey, Finland, and Norway. This was the first step towards the development of the so-called «cross-border tour». Meanwhile, the increasing collapse of USSR internal economic ties and the emergence of ethnic conflicts in Caucasia disrupted ground communications facilitating the emergence of informal networks (Dabaghyan & Gabrielyan 2008: 51).

But the Armenian-Turkish border had unique features. According to the political scientist Burcu Gültekin:

Turkey, along with Norway, was one of the two flanking states of NATO that shared a land border with the USSR. The Moscow Treaty of 1921, which established the Soviet-Turkish border, gave birth to 70 years of relative stability. A preliminary definition of the Turkish Armenian frontier provided the setting for that treaty, as well as defining the boundaries between Turkey and the three Transcaucasian republics [Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan]. The opening of Dog'u Kapi/Akhourian [Dogu Kapi/Akhourik], the first and only border gate between Turkey and the USSR, dates back to 1927. The gate is located a few kilometers from the Turkish city of Kars and the Armenian city of Gyumri (Gültekin 2004: 28).

In a later contribution, Gültekin addressed the tense relations at the border:

The Soviet officials thought apparently that the Armenian population of Gyumri was unlikely to collaborate with the Turkish enemy just at the other side of the border. The Adjarian and Azeri populations in Batumi and Nakhitchevan were far more suspicious (Gültekin 2005: 131).

During the Cold War, the Kars–Gyumri railway was the only operational land transportation link for commodities and passengers between Turkey and the Soviet Union (*Ibidem*). The opening of Dogu Kapi–Akhu-rik border gate was meaningful for rational motivations as it was the only railway connection and ready border infrastructure to directly connect Kars and Gyumri. Indeed, to connect Transcaucasia with Turkey via Georgia or *Nakhitchevan* required new infrastructures.

In 1988, the Sarpi border-crossing was opened between Turkey and the USSR in Georgia. Later this border post was to impact regional politics because the Georgian village of Sarpi and the Turkish town of Hopa became the main space of «tourist shuttle» and cross-border trade (Hann & Beller-Hann 1998). However, at the beginning of the 1990s, Armenian citizens were less involved in shuttle trade because of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Turkish positions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the memory of the Genocidal past had structured perceptions about Turkey among Armenians (Dabaghyan & Gabrielyan 2008: 60; Mollica & Hakobyan 2021, chap. 5).

At the end of the war in 1995, Armenian citizens could get a Visa to enter Turkey at land checkpoints, and since 2002 the opportunity was extended to airport checkpoints. However, informal trade was already active. According to Gültekin (2005) some 11.000 Armenian citizens had visited Turkey in 2003; and in 2004 the total number of Armenian citizens having visited Turkey exceed 11.000 as many Armenian tourists and small businessmen entered Turkey via Georgia (Gültekin 2005: 181).

A bus route Istanbul-Yerevan-Istanbul was opened in 1996 serving Armenian traders. In Istanbul, the bus stopped at Emniyet Garaji bus station in the Aksaray district, that is, the Station for International Bus Lines to the Balkan and Caucasia. In Yerevan, the bus stopped close to the Central Bus Station, at the Sport-concert Complex, and close to Tourist Offices in the City Center. On the route, it stopped, on request, in the Armenian towns of Spitak and Vanadzor. The price was between \$60-70.

However, in practice, the Yerevan-Istanbul-Yerevan bus route did not exist. It could not be registered as an official bus route because the Republic of Armenia did not have official relations with the Republic of Turkey. The position of the Armenian Government about the «official» international bus route was that it was necessary to have official relations with the countries with whom the passenger bus route was established. Thus, bus routes formally functioned with Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran, Rus-

sia and Greece. Concurrently, the Yerevan-Istanbul-Yerevan bus route was considered a tourist route. This meant that, there was no need to register the route and consequently to give official licenses to provide the service. To describe the bus-trip, we use the word «caravan» based on Vahe Sarukhanyan (19.03.2013; 30.04.2013) description since cargo trucks ran alongside the buses.

Thus, Turkish trucks could for the first time enter Armenia. But the «caravan» had to face restrictions. Nevertheless, ways to overcome them were always found. First, Turkey had prohibited Armenian license plated vehicles with more than 16 seats from entering its territory. Thus, buses and trucks used for this route had either Turkish or Georgian license plates. Second, the route was operated by Turkish and Armenian companies. However, some of the owners of the Georgian buses were Armenians who had registered their vehicles in Georgia. Third, considerable controls were often taking place at checkpoints, mostly in Sarpi. Sometimes, after taking the lists of the passengers entering Turkey, border guards demanded drivers to return with the same list of persons (Sarukhanyan 19.03.2013).

According to Gültekin (2005), bus companies shuttling between Yerevan and Istanbul were an important source of information. Two Turkish companies, Aybaki and Mahmudoglu, dominated the land connection between the two countries, but two other companies, AST and Buse, also run services (*Ivi*: 183). However, according to 2013 data, 19 Armenian and 4 Turkish companies were involved in the business (Sarukhanyan 30.04.2013). In fact, despite the complicated schemes to operate the route, Armenian tourist agencies had monopolized the business. The companies provided services such as changing commercial invoices and transport documents on the Turkish-Georgian border, and ensuring customs clearance in Armenia as final destination (ICHD 2011: 35).

The bus route allowed informal trade to develop. From Armenia, buses smuggled cigarettes and alcohol (mostly vodka which was presented as 'Russian' in Turkey); from Turkey, olive and maize oil and washing powder (Sarukhanyan 30.04.2013). Most trade was channeled through cargo transported via trucks bearing Turkish or Georgian plate numbers. In 2013, at least five Armenian-based companies acted as informal representatives of Turkish cargo transportation companies based in Armenia. Armenian companies ordered the transport to be carried out by specialized Turkish companies. The order was then mostly carried out by the Turkish company Gozde, a leading company in international trade based in Hopa

(Turkey) with a branch in Yerevan (Sarukhanyan 30.04.2013). Gozde offered international transport and storage services anywhere in Turkey and Europe (www.gozdenakliyat.com.tr/en/). Murat Kayan, Turkish owner of the Armenian registered Gozde company, interviewed by Vahan Dilanyan on the trade, replied: «I worked in Armenia over 17 years, and never had any problems» (Kayan quoted in Dilanyan 28.08.2012).

According to the Turkish newspaper Hurriyat Daily News, in 2011 «more than 50 trucks carry 17 tons of cargo to Armenia from Istanbul via Georgia each week» (Hurriyat Daily News cited by Tert.am. 02.02.2011). It is however difficult to assess the exact number of trucks involved in the trade. The number of companies involved fluctuated; new companies appeared every year; others disappeared; others were connected to one another. At times, Armenian companies represented Turkish companies in Armenia albeit they operated under different names (Sarukhanyan 30.04.2013).

However, indirect trade between Armenia and Turkey were institutionalized. In 2019, Armenia imported (mostly via Georgia) \$267 million worth of Turkish-manufactured products. More recent figures, the last refers to the first nine months of 2021, released by the Ministry of Economy of Armenia, suggest that Turkish imports fell to \$20 million (Harutyunyan 30.12.2021). But the last figures must take into consideration both Covid-19 pandemic and the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. Nevertheless, Armenia was not listed in Turkish trade statistics until 2008-2009. According to the Armenian Amberd research center analysis, the statistic was distorted. In addition, recent Turkish statistics suggest that Armenian exports to Turkey exceeded its imports, thus, subverting a dominant belief. Indeed, even statistics provided by international organizations show that Armenian figures are closer to reality (Yenokyan 02.02.2022).

Transport of goods from Turkey to Armenia via Georgia using Turkish-owned trucks is well documented: «It's a corridor that exists despite Turkey's official trade embargo against Armenia and the lack of diplomatic relations between the two states» (Mghdesyan 10.02.2022).

However, on the one hand, Turkish shipment vehicles need an official passage card issued by the Turkish Ministry of Transportation, Maritime Affairs and Communications to pass through another country and Armenia is on the approved list, thus trucks bearing Turkish number plates face no problems entering Armenia (TEPAV *et al.* 2012: 6). On the other hand, Turkish customs do not issue declarations for goods from Turkey

that are sold to Armenia. In practice, goods that are being exported from Turkey to Armenia are declared for Georgia; then these goods are forwarded from Georgia to Armenia. In Georgia there are specialized agencies that deal solely with these operations. Georgian middlemen receive a commission of 1-2% and do not encounter any problems (TEPAV *et al.* 2012: 8).

Entrepreneurs trading between Turkey and Armenia who import the above goods from Turkey to Georgia provide two invoices: the first for the Georgian intermediary consignee company; the second for the real Armenian consignee. While leaving Turkish customs border posts both invoices are stamped by customs authorities. However, only the first will be given to the Georgian consignee (to be later included in Turkey-Georgia trade statistics). Entering Georgia, the transport agent provides the second invoice, to be later given to the Armenian consignee, to the Georgian customs authority. These goods pass Georgia as transit goods and then exit from Georgia to enter Armenia. The transport runs smoothly, as no embargo of Turkish goods exists in Armenia. Thus, a vehicle which was bound for Armenia through the Sarpi border-crossing got from the Turkish custom authorities a permit to unload in Georgia. As the vehicle leaves the Turkish customs and enters Georgia, the driver declares it a «transit vehicle» with a shipment bound for Armenia. Thus, the vehicle can freely proceed to Armenia. Since the Georgian documents are «multi-purpose» and do not differentiate between transit and single destination permits, shippers will not experience any problems. In practice, Georgian rules on transport allow a hauler to enter Georgian customs without any permission (TEPAV *et al.* 2012: 2).

It is also worth noting that the development of cargo systems and digital, online technology had a direct impact on the practices of trade. Indeed, in the last years, most traders stopped going to Istanbul and started ordering online their goods, e.g., cloths. According to an informant, they select their items using photos or video that are send to them by shopkeepers, vendors and traders from Istanbul (Woman interviewed in Malatia Market, Yerevan, on 14.02.2023).

Circumventing the Embargo

Informal trade and economic relations are often linked to borders. Artak Dabaghyan and Mkhitar Gabrielyan (2008) run fieldwork in the market of the Georgian village of Sadakhlo on the Armenian-Georgian-Azerbaijani

border. During the conflict, this was the only space for informal economic relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Thus, it played a major role in constructing stereotypes and political attitudes. In the South-Caucasian informal context, a similar role was played by the market of the Georgian village of Ergeneti on the Georgian-South Ossetian border, which involved trans-border trades between two (then) belligerent parties (Chkhartishvili, Gotsiridze & Kitsmarishvili 2004). However, in 2004-2005 both Sadakhlo and Ergeneti border markets were closed since the Georgian government was unable to provide effective control over them (Dabaghyan & Gabrielyan 2008). Ways to overcome economic embargos are thus related to border practices, as seen during the Syrian War in the border town of Kessab (Mollica & Hakobyan 2021, chap. 7) or during the former Yugoslavia war (1991-2001). Despite Yugoslavia being under international sanctions, the market of Szeged on the Hungarian-Serbian border kept functioning (Czako & Sik 1999: 725).

However, the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Turkish Army direct involvement in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War created a new situation in Turkish-Armenian trade and informal connections. On October 20, 2020, the Armenian Government put a temporary embargo on imports of goods having Turkish origins. However, in accordance with the Government decision, the embargo was to come into effect on December 31, 2020. The decision prompted security concerns associated with product safety because of the support Turkey gave to Azerbaijani interventions. The decision was officially meant to address threats related to Turkish goods, while also putting an end to the financial proceeds and fiscal revenues of a country «with manifest hostile attitude» (Government of the Republic of Armenia 21.10.2020).

The embargo lasted originally until July 1, 2021. It was then extended for additional 6 months (Hovhannisyan 30.12.2021). According to the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union of May 29, 2014, after the expiration of the term, the decision could be extended for another six months (Hergnyan 22.10.2020). It was however allowed to import raw materials and processed products from Turkey. In 2021, mainly construction materials, knitted, cotton fabric and natural leather were imported from Turkey (Sargsyan 20.12.2021). According to the economist MP Artak Manukyan, 4,000 businessmen were involved in the import sector from Turkey to Armenia (Hergnyan 22.10.2020).

Vahan Kerobyan, Armenian Minister of Economy, explained that the decision to impose a ban on the import of Turkish goods was based on political

considerations and made during the war. In his opinion, lifting the embargo will be a political decision (Hovhannisyan 30.12.2021). However, Kerobyan drew also attention to the course of events both in Armenia and in Turkey over the past years. He recalled the significant devaluation of the Turkish Lira, which led to a reduction in the price of Turkish goods. This increased the level of threat for Armenian producers (Hovhannisyan 30.12.2021).

However, public campaigns began against Turkish goods before the Government decided on them. Armenian supermarkets launched the «No Turkish products» campaign aimed at stopping the sale of Turkish products in their stores (Novosti Armenia 30.09.2020). Between them, the Eco Fruit Co. that used to import tomatoes and citrus fruits from Turkey began to refuse to import them at the beginning of the war (Lazaryan 06.05.2021). A large sign, with the words «No Turkish products», stood in front of the fruit store in Malatia Market, the largest fruit market in Yerevan. Other initiatives got a transnational dimension, e.g., the public petition «Don't finance terrorism - put EMBARGO on Turkish products» (Change.org 2000). Greece and Saudi Arabia decided to boycott Turkish goods too. In France, a petition was called to boycott all Turkish products to protest Turkish foreign policy, while also condemning President Erdogan for strengthening ties with radical Islamist groups (Jofree 03.11.2020).

During the embargo, some Turkish clothing shops looked for ways to operate under the import ban. However, several shops had to close, among them the DeFacto. Others, e.g., the Koton store, which was importing Turkish goods before the ban, decided to remain open. The Waikiki Armenia chain of stores refused to take a public position, but the saleswomen confirmed that they had no intention of closing the store, although they no longer imported Turkish products (Lazaryan 06.05.2021).

However, according to Armenian media, it was a completely different picture at the «fairs», fly markets where clothes labeled Made in Turkey could be found. Part of them were in the storages before the embargo; but a consistent part was imported informally. Indeed, Turkish goods had continued to enter the Armenian market through illegal routes. This was confirmed in February 2021 by Artem Karapetyan, head of the Customs Control Department of State Revenue Committee of Armenia. According to him, there were importers who kept importing Turkish goods under the name of another country. Sellers of the «fairs» operating in Yerevan, interviewed by Arshaluyus Barseghyan (22.12.2021) stated that there were many Turkish-made items in the «fair». They were also aware that a way to

avoid the embargo was to pass the finished product under the term «raw material». According to the seller, the product reached Armenia through a specific chain, whose first link was made by Armenians who had recently settled in Turkey (Barseghyan 22.12.2021).

Armenian migrants had mainly established themselves in Kaumkapi and Kurtuluş districts in Istanbul. The presence of Armenian migrants is usually overlooked by Turkish authorities. However, occasionally the issue enters the political arena. The Armenian migrant community is then used as a sort of «hostage» in the relations between Turkey and Armenia (Akgönül 2013). On different occasions, Turkish authorities have threatened to deport Armenian migrants. The issue came, for instance, to the fore when then Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan reacted on the resolutions passed by the USA and Sweden in 2010, which recognized the massacres of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as genocide (Grigoryan 2018: 9).

These «informal» groups acquired a main role during the embargo. They sent photos of products from Istanbul stores and Yerevan sellers chose the model, the color, and the size of the item. The order was then transferred to people who delivered the product to Armenia, getting their percentage as wholesale products. According to sellers' information collected by Barseghyan (22.12.2021), Turkish goods arrived in Armenia via Russia. Before the embargo, there were many merchants going to Turkey, and the delivery of goods was fast, which allowed to have a competitive low price, but during embargo: «“The field is left to specific people. If in the past a person could go to Turkey and bring two hand suitcases and sell them at a minimal price, now they have to become resellers and buy from wholesalers”, said the seller» (Barseghyan 22.12.2021).

Beside informal routes, another means was to change/remove Turkish labels from the items. Thus, labels with the inscription Made in Turkey were changed before reaching Armenia, cut out in Turkish stores in Turkey or brought to Armenia and cut out there (Barseghyan 22.12.2021). On August 9, 2021, the State Revenue Committee of Armenia confirmed the attempts to circumvent the temporary ban on the import of products of Turkish origin by disguising their origin by removing labels. The Committee called again to follow the embargo and do not import illegal products of Turkish origin (SRC 09.08.2021).

However, on March 18, 2021, the Armenian newspaper Zhoghovurd wrote that, despite the ban, the local market continued to be flooded with shoes and clothes of Turkish origin, but with Chinese labels. Traders

brought Turkish clothes and shoes under the name of foreign companies. They also started to import clothes of Turkish origin through Russia, where the labels were replaced with Chinese ones, or simply imported without labels (News.am 18.03.2021). But Turkish goods kept also arriving in Armenia through re-labeling done in Georgia. According to the economist Tatul Manaseryan, they were even replaced by certificates and brands of the country of origin (Danielyan 24.11.2021).

Turkish Trucks Encountering Genocidal Past Memories

The last major attempt at rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia was facilitated by Switzerland (2007-2009). It culminated in the signed, but not ratified, Zurich Protocols in which it was envisaged that the border between the two countries could be re-opened. But, again, the Azerbaijani factor brought the process to collapse (Phillips 2012: 49-51). Then Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan publicly re-emphasized the need to condition the ratification of the Zurich Protocols to the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue (Zakaryan 2021: 194).

It was finally after the Armenian defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in November 2020 that the debate on the re-opening of the Turkish-Armenian border re-emerged. In December 2021, Armenia and Turkey appointed special envoys to discuss the potential normalization of their relations. On July 1, 2022, Turkey and Armenia announced an agreement to open their common border for third-country nationals and to begin direct cargo flights respectively (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia 01.07.2022). According to the eastern Turkish newspaper *Gazete Kars*, «Turkey has allegedly started to demine the area bordering Armenia [...] in the countryside of the village of Ibiş in Kars» (*Gazete Kars* 07.12.2022).

However, as Yerevan-based analyst Richard Giragosian suggests: «[Turkey] will not take any step that Azerbaijan could perceive as against their interests [...] as the same day on July 1, suddenly the Azerbaijani state border service announced that it was closing its border with Turkey» (Giragosian 07.07.2022). Indeed, Azerbaijani authorities cited Covid-19 pandemic as a justification for the closure of the border. They stated that, on June 20 the Azerbaijani Government had decided to extend the quarantine regime until September 1, 2022. However, the initial announcement regarding the extension of the quarantine did not mention the Azerbaijani-

ni border with Turkey (Avedian 13.07.22). For Giragosian this proves an «unavoidable synergy or indirect relationship» between Armenia's parallel negotiations with Turkey and Azerbaijan (Giragosian 07.07.2022).

However, although Azerbaijan's Turkish-backed victory makes obsolete Ankara's preconditions for normalization, a return to the preconditions of the early 1990s could not be limited to what Tigran Zakaryan (2021) summarized as:

To renounce the support for international recognition of the Genocide. [As] another requirement for the opening may be the establishment of a corridor between Azerbaijan and *Nakhitchevan* through Armenia's Syunik province [...] «a centuries-old dream for the Turkish foreign policy» (Berker 2000) [...] which opens a direct connection between Ankara, Baku and the Turkic world beyond the Caspian Sea (Zakaryan 2021: 199-200).

But the prohibition of movements across borders that renders the transit routes to/from Turkish ports inaccessible for Armenian goods can be simply regarded as a land blockade (Zakaryan 2021: 194). After all, it was only on December 30, 2021 that the Armenian Government lifted the ban on the import of Turkish goods. The decision came into effect on January 01, 2022. According to the Ministry of Economy of Armenia, the ban had both positive and negative economic consequences (Armenpress 30.12.2021). Indeed, Turkey and Armenia had recently appointed special envoys on mending relations (Kucera 04.01.2022).

Armenian Minister of Economy, Vahan Kerobyan, said that: «The justification for continuing the ban is weakening» (Kerobyan quoted in Kucera 04.01.2022). According to Babken Tunyan, Deputy Chair of the Economic Affairs Committee of the Armenian Parliament: «Economically, unfortunately this ban led to a situation where Turkish products were entering Armenia through [...] more complicated ways» (Tunyan quoted in Kucera 04.01.2022). However, some business organizations suggested to continue the ban for 5 more years. To make the ban more effective, they even proposed to add a ban on sales (Hetq.am 01.12.2021). They were echoes of a more widespread and profound malaise.

In October 2021, a video circulated in Armenian social media showing that, at the request of an Armenian who participated in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Turkish flag was removed from the front of a truck (the plate number is not visible in the video). The event took place in Syunik province, Southern Armenia (Novosti-Armenia 2021).

The demand was not accidental. A similar incident had taken place in the same region about a month before. Armed and masked Azeri policemen stopped a bus, transporting players of the Mountainous Artsakh youth football club, through the Azeri-controlled Goris-Kapan Road, and engaged in threatening propaganda. There were 18 young people aged 15-16 on the bus, along with the coaches and the doctor. In the video spread on social networks, an Azerbaijani policeman scrapes the logo of the football club «We Are Our Mountains» and the Artsakh flag from the car with a knife. The bus was stopped for half an hour. Then Russian peacekeepers came, and the bus could continue its trip (Khulyan 18.09.2021).

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War also had a transnational impact. At the beginning of the war, on September 28, 2020, four trucks with foodstuffs and tires were ready to leave the Georgian town of Akhalkalak for the Armenian-Georgian border checkpoint of Ninotsminda-Bavra and then enter Armenia. However, the trucks were stopped by Georgian officers who said that the border was closed due to Covid-19 pandemic and permission from the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was needed to transport aid across the border (Aghalaryan 28.09.2020; Ayvazyan 01.10.2020). This caused indignation and protest among local Armenians. In retaliation, a group of 1.000 young Armenians from the southern Georgian Javakheti [Javakhk in Armenian] blocked the road leading to Turkey in the Armenian-populated village of Kartsakh in Akhalkalak region. They banned Turkish trucks from entering Georgia. They protested the Georgian official position that did not allow the entry of humanitarian assistance to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh nor the entry of Armenian volunteers. They said they would not allow Turkish trucks to enter Georgia until the Georgian-Armenian border re-opens and their humanitarian assistance reaches Nagorno-Karabakh (Hayern Aysor 15.10.2020). But Javakheti Armenians protested also because, according to them, Turkey supplied weapons to Azerbaijan through that same road (Aghalaryan 30.09.2020). The road was eventually opened thanks to the negotiations between some Georgian MPs of Armenian origin, the police forces and the protestors (Civilnet.am 30.09.2020).

Concluding Remarks

Based on fieldwork and participant observation in geographic sites in Armenia where formal and informal trade occur, this paper has explored and discussed the development of informal and indirect trade between

Armenia and Turkey, emphasizing its impact on inter-state relations. Conceptually, it relies on different strands of literature, such as informality in conflicts and regional contexts, in addition to the classification of patterns of trade diversion and extralegal circulations of people and goods.

Emerging in the late Soviet period, small-scale cross-border trading became a marker of the new South Caucasian economy. However, this phenomenon took on a different form in Armenia due to two specific conflict-related variables: the Nagorno-Karabakh wars and Azerbaijani and Turkish blockades. Nevertheless, despite the problematic and unfavorable political conditions, shuttle trade with the Asia Minor peninsula never stopped. The closure was overcome by complex informal transnational schemes that defied institutional limitations. The ethnography suggests that this kind of trade via bus caravans penetrated different informal trajectories: from bus routes to informal trade practices (customs) and the delivery of invoices. However, these practices were neither considered illegitimate nor part of official economic relations. This was the frame that allowed the first Turkish truck to enter Armenia. Based on these practices, an indirect trade scheme between Armenia and Turkey developed, using trans-regional informal practices. In turn, this provided relevant trade practices and the development of economic relations via Georgia, while also involving trading companies and travel agencies that restructured their offers to meet the new market demands by providing licenses and other documents.

First, the legitimacy of these informal practices depended on the regional political situation, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the diplomatic tensions between Armenia and Turkey and the skirmishes at the Armenian–Azerbaijani border. This testifies the fluid South Casasia scenario, but also the incredible capability of informality to adapt and resuscitate after every political setback. Indeed, despite difficult political conditions, indirect transactions between Armenia and Turkey found ways to persist. Traders and truck drivers managed to circumvent restrictions dictated by the old-standing international political tension related to Armenia on the one side and Turkey and Azerbaijan on the other. This fits in with an extensive literature on informal trade, conflict and borders (Blakkisrud *et al.* 2021), peripheries (Mattheis, Russo & Raineri 2019) and shadow economy practices (Dabaghyan & Gabrielyan 2008; Fehlings 2022).

Second, the real economy cannot be understood by simply resorting to statistical or economic data provided by national or international institu-

tions that simply measure formal exchanges. Our employment of participant observation helped capture economic dimensions that escaped official statistics. Armenians are willing to buy Turkish goods despite enmity with Turkey. This is a common occurrence in many conflictual settings (including Caucasia), i.e. when people have little choice they will purchase and consume goods from «enemies». As our case study shows, despite the embargo, in 2019 Turkey ranked sixth on the list of Armenia's trading partners in terms of imports. However, we submit that our case study is not just representative in the regional context and goes beyond the framework of South Caucasian literature on informality. In a comparative framework, this is in line with other works on informality in Eurasian spaces (Polese 2021) and informality as everyday practices in post-Soviet (Polese et al. 2018) and Middle Eastern (Helou & Mollica 2022) zones, where economic drivers are independent from political and historical factors.

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