‘Silk Wind’ train
next stop, the future

It’s a high-speed container block train, which will allow cargo transportation from China to Southern Europe via the shortest possible route. It’s the ‘Silk Wind’ train, and once all the infrastructural projects that surround it are completed, it will be possible to go from western China to Istanbul in only 12 days. As those involved with the project explain, its creation is expected to bring about significant benefits in terms of trade, development and the environment. The EU Neighbourhood Info Centre correspondent from Azerbaijan sends us this story.

Text by Shahin Abbasov
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BAKU – For centuries, the route from east to west influenced the development of civilizations, playing a major role in the cultural, religious, and artistic exchanges that took place between the major centers of Europe and Asia during antiquity. These times of modern communication and international air transport are certainly very different, but the development of the ‘Silk Wind’ transport project, a high-speed container block train, which will allow cargo transportation from China to Southern Europe along the shortest possible route, still has the ability to inspire nations and provide such a vast region with important benefits.

The train will travel via a new route: China-Kazakhstan-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey-Europe. The EU-funded program TRACECA, standing for ‘Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia’, supports the realization of this large scale international project by way of technical assistance. In parallel, TRACECA also refers to the intergovernmental organization aimed at stimulating the political dialogue in view of realizing the smooth functioning of this transport corridor.

According to Akif Mustafayev, Azerbaijan’s national secretary at the TRACECA organisation, the development of the ‘Silk Wind’ transport...
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route will seriously increase the economic efficiency of multimodal cargo shipments. “The project is aimed at filling the transport corridor with new, real content. It will attract part of the huge volume of cargo which now goes from China to Europe by sea” he says.

**Benefiting from an industrial boom**

Indeed, the industrial boom in the western part of China makes this project even more interesting. Currently China annually ships about 240 million tonnes of containers to Western Europe and the United States. The TRACECA corridor has all the chances to attract part of the container cargoes.

“Even three per cent of these cargoes – of which the global amount is about 360,000 tons a year – would bring big revenues to the countries of the ‘Silk Wind’ train project,” says Mustafayev.

As an example, he mentions that the most active period of container shipments transported via the TRACECA corridor in 2010, saw 17,500 containers taken from Azerbaijan to Afghanistan for the needs of the international peacekeeping operation.

**The development of Kazakh infrastructures**

The countries participating in the planning and implementation of the ‘Silk Wind’ transport project are Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, and they have underlined their intention to implement the project through concrete measures aimed at establishing modern infrastructure for uninterrupted, safe, high-speed and financially efficient cargo transport. For Marat Saduov, Kazakhstan’s national secretary at TRACECA, the ‘Silk Wind’ project is an important step in developing Kazakhstan as a business, transport and logistical hub. “Kazakhstan and the whole central Asian region have a huge transit potential,” he says.

His country is taking on several big infrastructural projects. “The launch of the Altynykol railway point for trains crossing the border with China has considerably increased the trade turnover between the two countries and it has helped to develop transit shipments which are expected to reach 6 million tons by 2015,” Saudov adds.

Moreover, the launch of the 293km Zhetygen-Korgas railroad in late 2012 has shortened the distance from China to the southern regions of Kazakhstan and central Asian countries. The transit capacity of Kazakhstan’s railways has also been widened thanks to the construction of the Uzen-Turkmen border (146km) and Eraliev-Kuryk (14km) railroads. The construction of the 1000km long Zhezkazgan-Beyneu railroad is very important for the ‘Silk Wind’ project’s implementation.

“It will create new destination from China to the Aktau port at the Caspian Sea via the central part of Kazakhstan. This line will allow to shorten the transportation distance, and its launch is expected in 2015,” says Saduov.

“This will allow the reduction in the time for cargo transportation from Western China to Istanbul to about 12 days. It is about four days less than using current route...”
Azerbaijan is also getting ready

Azerbaijan, says Akif Mustafayev, is also developing its infrastructure. The launch of the new modern International Sea Trade port and logistical centre in the suburb of Alat, 70km from Baku, is also anticipated to take place by the end of 2015. By that time, the new Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad joining Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey will become operational.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan state Caspian Shipping Company (Caspar) is purchasing new ferries, Ro-Ro type ships and tankers, thus increasing the capacity of its transport fleet. “Currently Caspar has more than 80 ships including 17 ferries which work only in the Caspian Sea at the TRACECA corridor,” Mustafayev says.

The capacity of each ferry is 54 rail cars and they meet the requirements of international conventions.

Along with the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, Azerbaijan has been implementing the government programme on the development of its railway system, using its own resources in combination with a loan from the World Bank.

Within this programme, the reconstruction of 503km of railway from Baku to the Beyuk Kesik station at the border with Georgia is – according to Mustafayev – expected to ensure the safety of transportation and increase the maximum speed of trains to 100-120km/h and the average to 60-70km/h, twice as much today’s speeds. By the end of this year, Turkey plans to finish the construction of the railroad tunnel under the Bosporus that will ensure access of container and passenger trains to Europe.

From China to Istanbul in 12 days

Implementation of all these infrastructure projects in these four TRACECA countries will see a reduction of around 1,000 km in the length of the rail route of cargo and passenger transportation, currently at about 5,000km.

The countries are not only developing their infrastructure, but paying much attention to the simplification of customs and border-crossing procedures, the reduction of environmental damage, the unification of transit tariff policy and the introduction of modern information technologies to shorten trains’ waiting time at the borders. The EU-funded TRACECA program supports this process by bringing in technical assistance.

“All this will allow the reduction in the time for cargo transportation from Western China to Istanbul to about 12 days. It is about four days less than using current route from Kazakhstan to Istanbul via the Black Sea,” Mustafayev says.
These issues are reflected in a new draft agreement between Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, expected to be signed this year, following the signing at the end of last year of a Memorandum of Understanding between the transport ministers of the involved countries.

Saduov believes that launch of ‘Silk Wind’ train could be possible within a year of signing the agreement.

“However, full enforcement of train’s advantages will become possible after the launch of the Zhezkazgan-Beyneu railroad and the reconstruction of Aktau port. Other countries should also finish their infrastructure projects and agreements should be reached on a single tariff and simplified administrative procedures,” he says.

The ‘Silk Wind’ train will then have really left the station.

TRACECA Silk Wind project

The project aims at creating the favorable conditions for a container block train route, with advanced electronic exchange of information, simplification of customs and border-crossing procedures, reduction of transit time and travel time.

Participating countries: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkey

TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia) is an international transport cooperation programme between the EU and its Partner countries in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia. It has a permanent Secretariat in Baku, Azerbaijan. The cooperation framework covers the areas of maritime transport, aviation, road and rail, transport security and transport infrastructure.

Find out more
Traceca project website:
www.traceca-org.org/en/traceca/

EU Neighbourhood Info Centre thematic page: TRANSPORT
www.enpi-info.eu/themeeast.php?subject=8

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