

# INTEGRATION OF TRANSCAUCASIA: CONTINUED FAILURE AND HOPE

*The article discusses the failing history of Transcaucasia (South Caucasus) integration and the reasons for its continued failures. Lack of positive experience in integration, constant rivalry between the states of the region and among the great powers around the wider region and extra-regional powers, absence of common identity, and contrary security perceptions by the regional players have all played a part in these failures. Conflicts between countries in this region or with ethnic enclaves, as well as tensions with bigger neighbors have hindered regional integration processes. In this light, the attempts for normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations have the potential to be an essential factor for future successful regional integration. That failing, any integration hopes in Transcaucasia would be delayed for long.*

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## *The History of Transcaucasian Integration*

**T**he Caucasus region (between Black and Caspian Seas) was under Turkish and Persian control until the early 18th century since when the Tsars of Russia challenged that domination and by mid 19th century the whole of the Caucasus passed under Russian control. It was in this period (18th century) that the Russians introduced the term Transcaucasia (in Russian *Zakavkazye*) as a general term for the region. But there were administrative changes and changes in delineations of borders of the boroughs (regions) which would later on in the 20th century become a major source of ethnic conflicts.

As surprising as it may sound, the main initiator of the political integration of Transcaucasia in the 20th century was Turkey. Since 19th century the common border between Turkey and Russia had become a source of vulnerability for Turkey (which was better understood during World War I), the latter was determined to avoid having a common border with Russia and therefore supported the independence of the region from Russia in 1918. The Transcaucasia Seim (Parliament), created in February 1918, did not accept the peace accords of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty which superficially grouped the Transcaucasia states together. In April 1918 the Transcaucasia Seim declared the independence of Transcaucasia from Russia. The Transcaucasia democratic federal republic was founded. Though the Armenians were against independence from Russia, the decision passed the parliament because a majority was Georgian Menshevik and Azeri Muslim parliamentarians. The Transcaucasia Democratic Federal Republic existed only for a month, until the end of May 1918, when Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia declared their independence respectively.

The idea of the establishment of the “Caucasian Home” and Confederative Union of Caucasian Republics and North Caucasian Tribes resurfaced between October 1918 and June 1921. Georgia was always active in issues of integration of the Caucasus or at least Transcaucasia. In October 1918 the government of the Republic of Georgia made a proposal to summon a conference in Tbilisi for representatives of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Caucasian highlanders. The goal of that conference was the formulation of joint approaches for the peoples of Transcaucasia and the Northern Caucasus to act as a united front in the upcoming World Congress. But conflicting foreign political priorities and longings made this initiative fail. The three Transcaucasia states (as well as their neighbors Russia and Turkey) had differing views about each other’s borders, and their approaches were incompatible with one another. In this period, there were several clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis (particularly throughout 1918-1920), an Armenian-Georgian war (1918), Turkey’s Caucasus Campaign

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(1918), the Armenian-Turkish war of 1920, and the Russian capture of the Caucasus (end of 1920).

The next initiation of the integration of the Transcaucasia republics occurred after their Sovietization. The Musavat governed Azerbaijan, Dashnak led Armenia and Menshevik led Georgia were forced to become independent Soviet republics throughout 1920-21. However they formally retained their independence. The conference of the representatives from the three Transcaucasia republics signed a confederation treaty on 13 March 1922, which founded their Federation, officially called Federative Union of the Transcaucasia Soviet Socialist Republics (FUTSSR). In December of the same year the first congress of the Transcaucasia Soviets was held in Baku, taking the decision to transform the FUTSSR into Transcaucasia Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (TSFSR) and adopting a constitution. That is to say, the Union transformed into a Republic.

On both occasions Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia formally preserved their sovereignty. But the latter version anticipated a closer union of the Transcaucasia republics. The Transcaucasia Federation entered the Soviet Union in December 1922. As a federation it existed until 1936. Since 1936 Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have been separate entities within the Soviet Union.

After the collapse of the USSR, the integration idea gained a new impetus. The idea of forming a “Caucasian Home” was promoted by the then Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the first Chechen president Zohar Dudayev. It anticipated the unification of the peoples of the region (including independent states as Azerbaijan and Georgia and ethnic groups and nationalities of the Northern Caucasus under Russian rule). The main goal of that project was the alienation of Russia from the region. By this attempt Georgia was undertaking a leading role in the Transcaucasia, and the Chechens were aspiring for a leading role in the Northern Caucasus. But some of the Caucasian peoples, such as Armenians and Ossetians were disinterested in the project because of its anti-Russian essence. Simultaneously severe territorial and land disputes in the Northern Caucasus further complicated the implementation of this project.

In that respect special importance was given to the “Confederation of the Caucasian Peoples” (declared in 1992), which involved Georgia, Azerbaijan and a number of movements in the Northern Caucasus. Then the Georgian President Edward Shevardnadze and Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov reviewed the possibility of establishing an Organization for Security and Cooperation of the Caucasus resembling the OSCE, which even presupposed the foundation of a united Caucasian Parliament. Another proposal called “Common Caucasian Home” that emerged in mid-1990s presupposed the integration of the Caucasus into

the European structures but this idea was not materialized.<sup>1</sup> In 1996, Georgia and Azerbaijan signed the Tbilisi Accord in which the idea of the “Caucasian Home” was readapted within strictly the borders of the Transcaucasia.

All of those above-mentioned activities and integration attempts were declarative. Inter-state and inter-ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus were major obstacle to a successful realization of those ideas.

During the OSCE 1999 Istanbul Summit, the Armenian President Robert Kocharyan underlined the necessity of forming a Transcaucasian regional security system which would be included in the European Security System and which would include all stakeholders. Two months later, during his Georgia trip in January 2000, the then Turkish president Süleyman Demirel went further by stating that there is a need that “a stability pact for the Caucasus region has to be worked out, as it was for the Balkans.”<sup>2</sup> But Demirel did not clarify what countries could be involved in this Caucasus Stability Pact in addition to the three South Caucasian Republics. That gap was soon filled in by the Brussels based Center for European Policy Studies which established a working group to propose a “Concept for the Caucasus Stability Pact”<sup>3</sup>. The concept was discussed in conferences, but was never realized as neither the Turkish, nor the Caucasus countries’ leaderships received it with particular enthusiasm, because the conflicts in the Transcaucasia region were not resolved in the way the Brussels concept proposed ideas to resolve conflicts. These were not welcomed by any of the conflicting sides. Also it pointed out that the Caucasus Stability Pact would include the neighboring countries of the Caucasus region (so this was a Wider Caucasus Regional Integration Project) as well as interested international organizations. Even though the idea of the Stability Pact had been proposed by Demirel, the proposal drawn up in Brussels for a pact gave a minimum role to Turkey. Hence this attempt also failed, though the idea did not die.<sup>4</sup>

New proposals for Caucasian or rather Transcaucasian integration were made in 2004 (based on the experience of the Balkan political club, the Bulgarian president Zhelyu Zhelev suggested to the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili the establishment of a Caucasian Political Club). Russia attempted to implement

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<sup>1</sup> Rouben Shugaryan, “*The idea of regional cooperation in the context of foreign politics*” (in Russian), [http://www.spectrum.am/eng/book\\_2.htm](http://www.spectrum.am/eng/book_2.htm)

<sup>2</sup> “*Regional Envoys to Discuss Stability Pact*”, February 29, 2000, UN Wire, [http://www.unwire.org/unwire/20000229/7454\\_story.asp](http://www.unwire.org/unwire/20000229/7454_story.asp)

<sup>3</sup> Sergiu Celac, Michael Emerson, Nathalie Tocci, *A Stability Pact for the Caucasus, A Consultative Document of the CEPS Task Force On the Caucasus*, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels, 2000, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0C54E3B3-1E9C-BE1E-2C24-A6A8C7060233&lng=en&id=29279> and *A Stability Pact for the Caucasus in Theory and Practice - a Supplementary Note*, CEPS, [http://ceps01.link.be/Article.php?article\\_id=145](http://ceps01.link.be/Article.php?article_id=145)

<sup>4</sup> Tigran Mkrtychyan, “Caucasian security within the context of ‘Caucasian Platforms’”, *Capital Daily* (Armenian daily), 15 October, 2008, [http://www.cdaily.am/home/paper/2008\\_10\\_15/news/10493/](http://www.cdaily.am/home/paper/2008_10_15/news/10493/)

such an idea in 2007. But all of those ideas were left unimplemented.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the Russian-Georgian war, which began on 11 August 2008, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan proposed the idea of a “Caucasian alliance.” Possibly because the word “alliance” is too ambitious, one day later the Turkish president Abdullah Gül used the phrase of “Caucasus Stability Forum.” Subsequently, in Moscow Prime Minister Erdoğan reformulated the idea into the words “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform.” The fact that in three days this idea bore three differing appellations shows that the idea was still in the making and there was no pre-planned strategy.

Though initial consent for a platform was granted to Turkey by countries of the region, there are several questions remaining. One is, how would the de facto republics (Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh) be tackled? Proposals that exclude them could be rejected by Russia and Armenia. Proposals that include them could face dissent from Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Another question is, whether Armenian-Turkish normalization is to precede or follow the establishment of a Platform? And, how would the Platform relate to key stakeholders such as Iran, the EU and the U.S.? Ambiguity rather than clarity is dominating the “platform” idea.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Why is Transcaucasia Integration Failing?***

One of the many reasons of the Transcaucasia integration failures is the lack of any positive experience from integration in this region from the past. In fact neither during the pre-Soviet, nor in Soviet period did the region experience any actual integration. The psychological closeness never matured into a Caucasian identity. Most academicians do not view Armenians as Caucasian people at all, as Armenians originated in and spent much of their history living in the Armenian highlands (geographically the current Eastern Anatolia, often in ancient and medieval history books called “Armenia Major” or Greater Armenia.<sup>7</sup> The Armenian language is a branch of the Indo-European family. While the Caucasian

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<sup>5</sup> Teymur Atayev, *The Caucasus stability and cooperation platform: Is Erdoğan's idea realizable?* (in Russian) <http://www.islam.ru/pressclub/tema/osdierta>

<sup>6</sup> Tigran Mkrtchyan, “Caucasian security within the context of ‘Caucasian Platforms’”, *Capital Daily* (Armenian daily), 15 October, 2008, [http://www.cdaily.am/home/paper/2008\\_10\\_15/news/10493/](http://www.cdaily.am/home/paper/2008_10_15/news/10493/)

<sup>7</sup> Armenian Highlands mentioned as “Greater Armenia” (in Greek and Latin, Armenia Megali and Armenia Magna) were geographically described (within 300.000 sq/km, mainly the territory of current eastern Anatolia) by the ancient geographers and historians such as Strabo (63 BC-24 AD), Elder Pliny (23-79), Arrian (86-146), Curtius Rufus (1st century AD), Claudius Ptolemaeus (90-168), Marcus Justinus (3rd century), Ammianus Marcellinus (325-391), etc, to name but a few. It was a geographical entity on which territory Armenian royal dynasties ruled from 4th century BC until 14th century AD. The Republic of Armenia of 1918-1920 before it was attacked by Russian and Turkish armies in 1920 had a territory of 70.000 km/sq. Currently the Armenian Republic has a territory of 29.800 km/sq. The mentioning of “Greater Armenia” in Armenian textbooks is part of the history of Armenians of a given time in a given region and has nothing to do with irredentism or nationalism.

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language group ethnographically includes the peoples of the Northern Caucasus and Georgia (this excludes the predominantly Turkic peoples living in today's Azerbaijan as well)). Thus from amongst the dominant three Transcaucasia peoples only one is a Caucasian ethnic group.

The fact that the states of Transcaucasia were part of the enormous USSR economic system never translated into actual integration, because independent choice of the peoples was an absent factor. In the Tsarist period, there were several conflicts in the region (noteworthy is the Armenian-Tartar clashes in the beginning of the 20th century) and the regional borders were constantly undergoing administrative alterations, laying the grounds for future conflicts.<sup>8</sup> The administrative border alterations occurred throughout the period of 1918-36, giving birth to more conflicts after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

For any regional integration, in addition to minimal conditions (such as common goals and value system, mutual trust, a certain degree of amicable relations and cooperation), the existence of the following factors is necessary: the internal integration of separate entities, the understanding that only joint efforts can overcome problems equally threatening the region as a whole, well balanced and simultaneous involvement of wider regional players. The internal integration of the Transcaucasia states is rather weak. Vital challenges (equally posing a threat to all three of them) which could have united the three states are lacking. Each of the states has its own threat perceptions. Armenia and Azerbaijan view each other as threats, some in Armenia view Turkey as a threat, Georgia views Russia as threat, Azerbaijan has some fears of Iran. Meanwhile Turkey is an ally of Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran are allies of Armenia, the EU and the U.S. are strongly aligned to Georgia. Naturally "states facing an external threat will align with others to oppose the states posing the threat."<sup>9</sup> In the Caucasian context those threat perceptions or misperceptions tend to deepen the security dilemma because rival powers and alliances are constantly invited into the region.<sup>10</sup>

Historical experience shows that throughout the 20th century, and to date, the contradictions in the positions of Turkey, Russia, other third countries, and positions of the Transcaucasia republics almost always led to failures in Transcaucasian integration attempts. With some reservations, the three states have a similar past, but their perceptions about their futures are divergent, as are their value systems. The external forces (states and organizations) implementing

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<sup>8</sup> Lyudmila Harutyunyan, *Conflicts and integration in the Transcaucasia: Myths and realities, in Transcaucasia today: Regional integration prospects*, (in Russian), Yerevan, 1997 p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1994, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> "Given the irreducible uncertainty about the intentions of others, security measures taken by one actor are perceived by others as threatening; the others take steps to protect themselves; these steps are then interpreted by the first actor as confirming its initial hypothesis that the others are dangerous, and so on in a spiral of illusory fears and "unnecessary" defenses." Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997, p. 17.

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engagement from without are exerting differing level of influence and activity, acting not in cooperation, not jointly, nor in a balanced and simultaneous way, thus bringing forth a dire imbalance of power.

Currently Transcaucasia is an area of apparent rivalry, with isolation policies and zero-sum game logic serving as guiding principles for the regional actors. In this historical phase the Transcaucasia states are using their potential of international cooperation not inside the region, but outside. The process of establishing extra-regional partners is not yet complete. The priorities given to international organizations (CIS vs. GUAM), alliances (NATO vs. CSTO) and partner countries (Russia, the U.S., EU, Iran, Turkey) are not always compatible. Moreover, external forces and centers such as Russia, Turkey, Europe and Iran are pulling the regional countries in their directions undermining core regional integration processes. Due to the influence of those power centers, the limits of the integration visions by the Transcaucasia countries often lead to divergent conclusions.<sup>11</sup>

Even though in rhetoric they are in favor of Transcaucasian integration, the states of the region, their neighboring countries, and supra-regional actors have reservations which de facto prevent integration. For example, Azerbaijan has a negative disposition towards integration that directly or indirectly presupposes Armenia's participation or presence. In its own version of the South Caucasus stability pact, Armenia mainly suggests the "3+3+2" format involving the three Transcaucasia republics, their three neighbors, Russia, Turkey and Iran, and the supra-regional actors, the EU and the USA. Russia has always been intent on being the sole mediator of the problems in the Caucasus. Therefore the only Caucasian stability formula acceptable to Russia is the format "3+1."<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Georgia prioritizes the exclusion of Russia, while the U.S. and Turkey exclude the participation of Iran.

Until the collapse of the USSR, the Transcaucasia region was merely a periphery of an empire. Currently it lies on a juncture where the influences and interests of Russia, Turkey, the U.S., Iran, as well as European and Asian states cross. (The Caucasus is the heart of what Zbigniew Brzezinski described as the "Eurasian Balkans.")<sup>13</sup> Russia continually reminds all that Transcaucasia never stopped its periphery. Moreover, after the Russian-Georgian war it seems that some of Transcaucasia or the South Caucasus (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) are still a part of the Northern Caucasus in Russia's map. To the degree that the regions integration is attractive for the U.S., Turkey and the EU as a factor of

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<sup>11</sup> Lyudmila Harutyunyan, *Conflicts and integration in the Transcaucasia: Myths and realities, in Transcaucasia today: Regional integration prospects*, (in Russian), Yerevan 1997. pp. 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> Rouben Shugaryan, *The idea of regional cooperation in the context of foreign politics* (in Russian) [http://www.spectrum.am/eng/book\\_2.htm](http://www.spectrum.am/eng/book_2.htm)

<sup>13</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, pp. 123-124.

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reducing Russia's influence, Russia and Iran are less supportive of such integration attempts. Nevertheless each of the supra-regional and regional actors has attempted to unify the region under their own supervision, which, at least currently, is impossible.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus had the potential to be an area of "post-hegemonic cooperation." Some realists termed it a zone of "power vacuum". Yet, the attempts to fill in this "vacuum" induced major powers' use of coercion mechanisms. Liberal sounding "democratization" was a tool for the U.S. and the EU, realist sounding "spheres of influence" has been a Russian approach and two states and one nation" is a nationalist slogan used by Turkey.<sup>14</sup> But all of those stances aimed at preponderance in the region. Theory of "hegemonic stability" has been more actively applied for the region, which "defines hegemony as preponderance of material resources."<sup>15</sup>

One of the largely ignored impediments to the integration of Transcaucasia is the fact that there is neither common appellation nor accepted borders. In 1918-22 and during the USSR period the term "Transcaucasia" was most used. Now the phrase "South Caucasus" is in circulation. There are political implications for the different terminology. If the Caucasus is one entity, why is then only the Southern part of it discussed in integration schemes, and not the northern part? In addition, for Abkhazia and South Ossetia there is a new center, i.e. Russia, while any perspective for unification of Northern Ossetia (located in the Northern Caucasus) with Southern Ossetia (located in Transcaucasia) could essentially change the borders of the region, as well as the balance of power in the Caucasus.

Until the "Southern Caucasus" has matured as a region, regional integration can not occur. The concept of "South Caucasus" is not only artificial, but also was imported into academic and political parlance from abroad. After conquering the Caucasus, Russia invented the concept of "Transcaucasia" possibly to divide the Caucasus into two: Caucasus (Northern Caucasus) and Transcaucasia. The latter denoted the area stretching beyond the Caucasian mountain range. The division between the two areas reflected Russia's interest in forming a new region. Transcaucasia being a bordering region was providing stability to the Northern Caucasus. The Northern Caucasus was notorious for its secessionist movements since the very beginning of its integration into the Russian Empire. Meanwhile the territories to the south at least since early 19th century were seeking for

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<sup>14</sup> After Demirel's proposal of Caucasus Stability Pact, Abdulhaluk Çay, Turkish Minister for Relations with the Turkic Republics, said that: "Russia is too weak to oppose us" in a plan to create a commonwealth of Turkic states. Çay said such a union would be a union between Turkey, "the successor to the Ottoman empire", and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. The Turkish minister also expressed the wish that the "Turkish commonwealth" might include Ukraine and Iran. "We ruled these territories for centuries," he explained, adding that Turkey should be "big brother" to these countries. ("Turkish President calls for Caucasus "Stability Pact", *European Foundation Intelligence Digest*, Issue No. 86, 14th-27th January 2000, <http://www.europeanfoundation.org/docs/86id.htm>)

<sup>15</sup> Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1984, p. 32.

Russian protection against the expanding Ottoman and Persian dominance. By separating the south from the north the Russians were safeguarding the stability and loyalty of Transcaucasia making it a frontline region. At the same time, the Russians were isolating the Northern Caucasus from the Ottomans and Persians, who were their potential protectors.

After the collapse of the USSR the phrase “Southern Caucasus” was adopted, due to political calculations, by the West. The republics in Transcaucasia gained their independence while in the Northern Caucasus secessionist movements against Russia were maturing. If there is a “Northern Caucasus”, then there should logically be a “Southern Caucasus.” The unification of those two would mean Caucasian unity, which could reduce Russia’s presence and curb Russia’s ambitions in the region. Hence, if the republics of the Southern Caucasus republics gained independence, why would the north of the Caucasus not as well?

From the perspectives of identity and perceptions Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh are separate and there is not one Transcaucasian identity. The Soviet propaganda exerted effort to promote one Transcaucasian identity. For that purpose particularly arts and culture were utilized. In 1930s Kurban Said’s *Ali and Nino* novel was published which is about a tragic love story between an Azerbaijani and Georgian; in 1977 the Soviet audience watched the film *Mimino* by a popular film director Giorgi Danielia, which is on a development of a Georgian-Armenian friendship in Moscow. The several Soviet anecdotes about the Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani based on the common features of Caucasian mentality with their peculiarities inevitably served one and the same purpose. The songs on brotherhood and Caucasian friendship between the cities of Yerevan, Baku and Tbilisi since 1950s, the mutual visits and joint projects for artists of the region were strongly encouraged by Soviet leadership. Also there was widely accepted Soviet custom that when an Armenian, Azerbaijani or Georgian officially talked of one another such catchwords as “brotherly Georgian/Azerbaijani/Armenian” were to be used necessarily. This policy and ideology formed a degree of artificial homogeneity and a superficial Caucasian identity. This was a weak identity, as was the identity of being “Soviet” which did not oust out the ethnic differences.<sup>16</sup>

With the collapse of the USSR things began to fall back into place. The religious element again started to play a decisive role in the definition of identity. Azerbaijan is a Muslim country, Georgia is Christian-Orthodox and Armenian is Christian-Apostolic. The foreign policy priorities were differing too, while the ethnic conflicts played a pivotal role in deepening the dividing lines. After the collapse of the USSR, the West attempted to cultivate a South Caucasian

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<sup>16</sup> Salome Asatiani, CIS: *Is South Caucasus 'Region' an Artificial Construct*, - RFE/RL's Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Georgian services- <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/05/>

identity. Different international structures, such as the NATO and EU, appointed a single special representative for all three republics. The same model projects of development and reforms were passed to all three Transcaucasia republics, even though they were in differing starting conditions and on different levels of social development. Hence the Western attempts at cultivating a South Caucasian identity were doomed.

The terms “South Caucasia” and “Transcaucasia” have not had mutual acceptance by the regional players partially due to their artificial application and foreign origins. Those terms do not reflect any regional identity. Therefore, there is a need for a new term, to be born in the region (and not artificially invented and enforced from abroad). The Transcaucasian states are already seeking alternative regional identities. In order to underscore the European origins of the Georgian people, the Georgian leadership has been active in promoting Georgia’s Black Sea identity. This way Georgia can distance itself from the more problematic South Caucasia. When the South Caucasus is taken up as a region by international organizations, the internal problems of Georgia’s neighbors holds Georgian progress up, too. On the other hand, Azerbaijan, by underlining its belonging to the Caspian region emphasizes its significance as a “geopolitical pivot” and its being the “cork in the bottle containing the riches (“the vast energy resources”) of the Caspian Sea basin.”<sup>17</sup>

The most commonly discussed model of Transcaucasian (South Caucasian) integration is the unification of the three countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia). But de facto there are other entities in Transcaucasia (namely South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh). Therefore there is a need to clarify an approach towards these entities. Including the three republics (and not the other entities) aims to conserve the situation that existed during the USSR period, ignoring the conflicts in existence in the last 21 years (1988-2009) as well as the reality of functioning new borders in the region.

Ignoring the de facto states is unrealistic and sets the ground for failure for integration attempts. In a recent Black Sea security related conference in Yerevan on 27 October 2008 Turkey’s official understanding of the Caucasus Stability Platform was presented by Deniz Çakar, the Head of NATO and Euro-Atlantic Infrastructure and Logistics Department of the Turkish Foreign Affairs Ministry. According to this view, the Platform would include exclusively the states of the region, Turkey and Russia, while the region’s conflicts would be resolved in line with the principle of states’ territorial integrity. Such an approach could well mean the beginning of the end of the Platform’s practical existence as Russia and Armenia would want the direct or indirect presence of Nagorno-Karabakh,

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<sup>17</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 46.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the Platform.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, their inclusion would be rejected by Azerbaijan and Georgia. Hence a middle formula, acceptable to all sides is sought in order to smooth this most contentious issue. Such a formula could propose a forum for the Caucasian peoples and not states.

Armenia does not perceive itself as a Caucasian state, and thinks of itself as a state that lost its historical fatherland and established a state on its edges by creating a new identity based on the Armenian genocide. Transcaucasian integration would risk making Armenians a minority and the Karabakh achievements would have an ambiguous future, if integration were to exclude non-recognized entities. So Armenia weighs the potential costs of such an integration. Therefore, Armenia is relatively restrained in promoting regional integration proposals. Hence there is a misleading impression that Armenia is least interested in this region's integration. Meanwhile Armenia, which is isolated in the region, blockaded, consecutively kept away from all major regional projects, has the most to gain from regional integration projects.<sup>19</sup> Getting access to various regional projects, gaining political, economic and security balances, diversifying its dependence on Russia are all vital factors for Armenia. And regional integration could open the way for such perspectives.

But the starting conditions are not equal as Armenia has already been excluded from all regional projects implemented so far and from those which are in the process of planning. Theoretically speaking of integration, but at the same time keeping Armenia out of all regional projects is not in the best interests of Armenia. But this does not mean that Armenia is not genuinely interested in regional integration.

Integration does not necessarily mean exceptionally close economic cooperation. It is not possible to regulate all political and security related issues through economic levers and vice versa. A balance needs to be struck between the economic, political, security and ideological driving forces of regional integration.

“The idea of regional cooperation, as well as any other idea should not become an ideology, or a self-serving reality, as it often happens. It should be viewed as one of the tools and routes for achieving stability, security and prosperity in the region. This idea should not be made as a medicine providing solution to all regional problems. But if it is correctly used, it could become a means for getting rid of unacceptable relics from the 20th century. But we must be ready for negative results,

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<sup>18</sup> Tigran Mkrtchyan, “Armenia’ European Future”, in Tigran Mkrtchyan, Tabib Huseynov and Kakha Gogolashvili, *The European Union and the South Caucasus: Three Perspectives on the Future of the European Project from the Caucasus*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Berlin, 2009, p. 39,

[http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/bst/de/media/xcms\\_bst\\_dms\\_28297\\_28302\\_2.pdf](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/bst/de/media/xcms_bst_dms_28297_28302_2.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Lyudmila Harutyunyan, *Conflicts and integration in the Transcaucasia: Myths and realities, in Transcaucasia today: Regional integration prospects*, (in Russian), p. 70, Yerevan 1997.

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because any alterations in the region, even positive ones, are accompanied with painful passages and presuppose certain level of danger.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***“Sine qua non” of the Transcaucasia Integration: Anatomy of “Football Diplomacy”***

The most significant hurdles in front of regional integration are the region’s conflicts (in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh) and problems with neighbors within the wider region (Russian-Georgian and Armenian-Turkish). Amongst all those problems the issue that seems to be closest to solution is the Armenian-Turkish normalization. Hence there is unprecedented international attention to this process.

Turkey and Armenia have had a difficult and painful past. Especially since the late 19th century the predicament of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire became intolerable culminating in several massacres (Hamidian purges of 1894-96, 1909 Adana massacres, and 1915-17 Armenian genocide, with clashes, massacres and expulsions continuing in various regions of Turkey to Armenia in 1918-23). Since the 1960s Armenians started campaigning for the recognition and condemnation of the Armenian genocide. That process gained new momentum after Armenia became an independent state in 1991.

Turkey was among the first states to recognize the independence of Armenia. There were even regional projects under discussion (such as the Alaton-Hovnanian project of connecting Armenia to the Trabzon port) which would heighten Armenia’s transit significance in the region. But Turkey did not hurry with the establishment of diplomatic relations due to the Karabakh conflict that had started in 1988. And after Armenians’ capture of Kelbajar in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Turkey stopped official negotiations with Armenia for establishment of diplomatic relations and closed its land borders with Armenia in 1993 (which had never fully functioned in a free and unrestricted regime during the Soviet period and afterwards). After the end of the Cold War, the Turkish-Armenian border remained the only border gate of the Iron Curtain that is still sealed. Also it is the only NATO border closed to a NATO partner country.

Since 1993 the Turkish official position has proposed various preconditions for the establishment of diplomatic relations and opening the border with Armenia. Amongst them few have been repeated most often: withdrawal of Armenian forces from territories under the control of Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh

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<sup>20</sup> Rouben Shugaryan, *The Idea of Regional Cooperation in the Context of Foreign Politics* (in Russian) [http://www.spectrum.am/eng/book\\_2.htm](http://www.spectrum.am/eng/book_2.htm)

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and the surrounding territories<sup>21</sup>; official recognition of Turkey's and Azerbaijan's territorial integrities and their borders; reconfirmation of the Kars Treaty from 1921 confirming the existing Turkish-Armenian border; ceasing of the international campaign of Armenian genocide recognition (especially after 1998 this policy became an Armenian official foreign political core issue); acceptance of historians' commission which would study historically contentious issues concerning the relations between Armenians and Turks and issue its judgments on those problems (after Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan proposed this idea in April 2005). Almost all of those conditions have been proposed this way or the other since 1993. There were a number of other preconditions, but they were dropped by time.<sup>22</sup>

The Turkish condition of keeping the border gates closed and not establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia aimed at forcing it to compromise in the negotiations with Azerbaijan. This policy has given no results whatsoever. After 1991 there was an opportunity that Turkey could appease the Armenian public fears that it is no threat to Armenia and start an open dialogue about the painful past and people-to-people reconciliation process. Yet in 1993 there were even threats from the Turkish leaders that Turkey might strike at Armenia for the Armenians' efforts in Karabakh. Turkish President Özal made such a warning by saying:

“What would happen if during military exercises three of our bombs fall in the Armenian territory? What would happen if we sent 1-2 military brigades to Nakhijevan? We are bound to Nakhijevan with an agreement. What would happen, who would do us anything, who would come to intervene? Who could intervene in Bosnia? In world politics without resorting to risk we can reach nothing.”<sup>23</sup>

But Russia had warned Turkey of dire consequences in case if Turkey intervened militarily in the conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In 1992 Marshall Yevgeni Shaposhnikov, Military Commander of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) warned that “if another side enters there, then we may find ourselves on the threshold of World War III.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> There are differing perceptions by Armenia and Azerbaijan on the nature of Karabakh conflict. If for the Azeris the issue is purely territorial where territorial integrity is constantly cited as a counterargument, for the Armenians the issue is a self-determination issue, as the Karabakhi Armenians invoked their constitutional right to self-determination anticipated by Soviet law.

<sup>22</sup> For details see Tigran Mkrtchyan, ‘Post-election prospects for Armenian-Turkish Relations’, *TESEV*, Foreign Policy Bulletin, Istanbul, July 2007, No. 5, p. 16, [http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD\\_OBJS/PDF/DPT/BULTEN/tesevedbul\\_july2007.pdf](http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD_OBJS/PDF/DPT/BULTEN/tesevedbul_july2007.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> *Hürriyet*, 08 4 April 1993.

<sup>24</sup> *Turkish Daily News*, 21 May 1992; ‘Up Against the Border’, *Time*, 1 June 01 1992; *The Financial Times*, 22 May 1992; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (in Russian), 22 May 1992. Another Russian official, Gennady Burbullis, Russian State Secretary, when asked about possible Turkish intervention, abruptly answered “That is excluded!” (*AZG Daily*, 23 May 1992).

Since 1998 the tension in relations did not appease as the Armenian President Robert Kocharyan (1998-2008) further pushed for the Armenian genocide recognition on the international arena as a foreign political agenda issue. Independent of Armenian government wishes or efforts, the genocide recognition process had started much earlier, even before Armenia became independent and was mainly directed by the Armenian diaspora groups (especially in Latin America, Northern America and Europe). After the Armenian government made it a foreign policy objective the number of foreign countries and organizations that recognized and condemned the Armenian genocide sharply increased.

Robert Kocharyan though understood very well “that the development of regional stability and cooperation in the Southern Caucasus is impossible without shifting Armenian-Turkish relations into a new position.”<sup>25</sup>

Throughout this period Armenian and Turkish diplomats often had secret meetings in European capitals (usually before Foreign Affairs Ministers’ meetings). It continued in 2008 after Serzh Sargsyan became President of Armenia. This was followed by a number of cordial congratulations and correspondence between the Presidents, Prime Ministers and Foreign Affairs Ministers of both countries, as talks of starting a “new period” between the two countries intensified.

The groundbreaking event took place in Moscow in 23 June 2008 at a meeting between the Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan and the Russian-Armenian diaspora representatives where he said:

“The Turkish side suggests forming a commission that would study the historic facts. We do not mind establishing that commission, but only when the border between our countries is opened. Otherwise, it can become a means of protracting the solution of the issue for many years. In the future I intend to undertake new steps to further the normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations. Most probably, I will invite Turkey’s President Abdullah Gül to Yerevan to watch the match between the national football teams of Armenia and Turkey.”

The principal agreement to form historians’ commission and invitation of Turkish president to Armenia were most unexpected for many. In a 2005 correspondence between Erdoğan and Kocharyan the latter had also noted that such a commission could be formed as part of an intergovernmental commission only after border opening, but he would have never invited Gül to Armenia (as he confessed after Sargsyan invitation of Gül).

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<sup>25</sup> Armenian President Addresses OSCE Summit, *SNARK News Agency*, 19 November 1999.

President Abdullah Gül paid an unprecedented historic visit to Armenia on September 6 to watch the football match between the Turkish and Armenian national teams. Before the visit and after August war between Georgia and Russia, Turkey thought that there was a good opportunity for taking a leading role in proposing and developing regional integration projects. In that context the idea of a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform was born (discussed above). A process of talks, meetings and negotiations between the Turkish and Armenian leadership started which the media termed as “football diplomacy”. This is indeed a political catchword or a “big idea”<sup>26</sup> emulating “ping-pong diplomacy” of 1970s, though there are far more difference in those two efforts than similarities. Most importantly, the players in this “football diplomacy” as the unfolding of events showed, were not two sides and there were not two football pitches. There were and are many more players, such as Europe (through Swiss mediation), the U.S. (Obama policies and Turkish pressures on the U.S. administration before April 24 –Armenians’ Remembrance Day– and U.S.’ active participation in the signature and release of a joint Armenian-Turkish-Swiss statement about a “road map” of normalization of relation), Russia (as Armenian leader made the statement in Russia, Russian leaders being briefed by Turkish and Armenian leadership about the progress of talks) and Azerbaijan (which has been the only country by expressing explicit displeasure at the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement negotiations and threatening Turkey and the west with its energy resources and clearly flirting with Russia in that respect). Hence it is not the most correct term to be applied in this case. Football was a pretext for the Turkish President’s visit to Armenia. But the Armenian President noted that he cannot go to Turkey for the return match “as a simple tourist or as a football fan.”<sup>27</sup>

The sides have reached agreements on the intergovernmental commission (consisting of sub-commissions), establishment of diplomatic relations and endorsement of the borders between Armenia and Turkey.<sup>28</sup> The much discussed and possibly signed road map documents have not been yet disclosed as the negotiations and hopes for their successful conclusion are ongoing. But never in negotiations was Nagorno-Karabakh issue discussed. This was confirmed at the

<sup>26</sup> “Sports diplomacy” is a big idea as it has a bottom-line connotation that through sports activities political issues can be resolved (about the nature of ‘big ideas’ in politics see the remarkable analysis by Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *The Silence of the Rational Center. Why American Foreign Policy is Failing*, Basic Books, New York, 2007, pp. 21-89). As catchy as that idea may sound analysis of past sports efforts and politicization of sports events shows that they usually are not the safest means of conducting diplomacy (in most of the football matches between England and Germany, for example, World Wars were remembered, fans often used racist and nationalist remarks and generally the atmosphere on TV screen as well as in stadiums were very tense. Thus “football diplomacy” in this context was not diplomatically helpful). For details about those approaches also about ‘football dimension’ in international affairs see Peter Beck, “The Relevance of the ‘irrelevant’: football as a missing dimension in the study of British relations with Germany”, *International Affairs*, 79:2, 2003, and on various sports events and their “diplomatic” potentials see Lincoln Allison and Terry Monnington, “Sport, Prestige and International Relations”, *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 37 No. 1, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Interview of Wall Street Journal with Serzh Sargsyan, President of Armenia, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 April 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124041090806043783.html>

<sup>28</sup> David Phillips, Testimony to the US House of Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, 14 May 2009.

second official meeting between Presidents Gül and Sargsyan in Prague, 7 May 2009. The official reports of this meeting noted that the Presidents of Armenia and Turkey reached agreement “to honor all previous agreements and move forward toward the normalization of the Armenian-Turkish relations without preconditions and in a reasonable timeframe.”<sup>29</sup> As a deadline for those talks are often mentioned the October 2009 match in Turkey between the national teams of Armenia and Turkey.

But after Barack Obama’s statement on April 24th (where he avoided using the G-word, using the Armenian version for Great Calamity, “Mets Yeghern”), the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan has continuously reminded of the erstwhile precondition of Nagorno-Karabakh solution for the border opening and establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia. Erdoğan made such statements in Turkey, Azerbaijan as well as Poland. In parallel the Turkish foreign minister Ali Babacan who had been heavily and positively involved in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement talks was replaced from his ministry and moved to the Finance Ministry.

There has been a common understanding that the Turkish-Armenian relations’ normalization were proceeding parallel to the negotiations over the Nagorno-Karabakh peaceful settlement. And it is clear that a full normalization of relations (which anticipates diplomatic relations establishment and open borders with unrestricted regime) assumes some progress in the negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories under Armenian control. In Poland, the Turkish Prime Minister mentioned about Turkey opening the border gate with Armenia “if the latter ended its invasion of Karabakh” (it is unclear if Erdoğan sees the differences between Karabakh and the surrounding territories. In negotiations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis the return of Karabakh is not being discussed at all). Erdoğan also mentioned about the possibility of deporting “40,000 illegal Armenian labor migrants”<sup>30</sup> and that Turkey “could send them back if necessary”, but does not do that “because of humaneness.”<sup>31</sup> The mentioning of “40,000 illegal migrants” as a threat in such a high level diplomatic process is a vulgar simplification of the process itself where the top Turkish, Armenian and international diplomats are involved.

Provided such statements continue and there are no implementations of agreements as endorsed in the “road map” of normalization of relations, then the unique opportunity for the normalization of relations will be lost for years to come.

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<sup>29</sup> Working Visit of President Serzh Sargsyan to the Czech Republic, 7 May 2009, Official Website of the President of the Republic of Armenia, <http://www.president.am/events/visits/eng/?id=59>

<sup>30</sup> There are no official statistics about the Armenian migrants numbers in Turkey. Even state officials are using different numbers.

<sup>31</sup> “Turkish PM: There are 40,000 Armenians living and working illegally in Turkey”, *ANS News*, 16 May 2009 <http://anspress.com/nid115004.html>

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The establishment of relations between Turkey and Armenia could be a first step aiming at peaceful regional integration processes. Its failure will kill the Caucasus Stability Platform outright. Turkey could be supportive of Nagorno-Karabakh talks if it showed signs of “just” solution to the conflict irrespective of the internationally mediated negotiations in this issue that have been going on since 1994. By unequivocally and palpably siding with one of the sides of the conflict, Turkey makes it harder for the Armenian side to perceive it as a helpful player in the region. That is important for the Armenian public perception in confidence building efforts and people-to-people reconciliation build-up following possible normalization of inter-state relations between Turkey and Armenia. Return to conditionality factors and threats in political vocabulary would merely deepen the Armenian perception about the “encirclement of Armenia by hostile Turkic peoples.”<sup>32</sup>

Indeed that would hit on Turkey’s international image, as any breach of agreements on this level do not serve well for any country nor any leader. This could make a dangerous precedent in international practice about breaching (by a Prime Minister) of gained agreements (by a President). It would also deepen the distrust among Armenians about any future dealings, including signing of compromises in the Nagorno-Karabakh case with Azerbaijanis. Legitimately Armenians may no more trust the promises of the leaders of its Turkic neighbors and such a feeling of double insecurity (distrust in words and intentions) would make future diplomatic negotiations much harder.

International concerns on the toughening of Turkish stance have been raised too. As David Philips, former chairman of the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC), biggest Track Two diplomacy project between the Armenians and Turks, said in a recent hearing in the U.S. House of Representatives, “as there should be no linkage between normalization and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, there must be no linkage between normalization and genocide recognition.”<sup>33</sup> The U.S. State Department, the OSCE Minsk Group American and French co-chairmen have also underscored the necessity of unconditionality factor in establishing relations between Armenia and Turkey.

Lastly, the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement failure would guarantee the regional integration failures in the upcoming future and further make the Caucasus rife for regional rivalries, great powers’ interferences, continuation of the unresolved conflicts status quos, unstable and unpredictable neighborhood and a battleground of zero-sum gains and losses. Through the Armenian-Turkish

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<sup>32</sup> Sabine Freizer, “Time for Turkey to be visionary in South Caucasus”, *Today’s Zaman*, 17 May 2009, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=175505>

<sup>33</sup> David Phillips, Testimony to the U.S. House of Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Europe, 14 May 2009.

rapprochement Turkey cannot and will not lose Azerbaijan,<sup>34</sup> but its failure would guarantee the longevity of the standoff in Karabakh (as it would merely petrify the Azerbaijani and Armenian positions respectively), the continuation of the Armenian-Turkish tense relations and would exclude Turkey from a unique chance of truly becoming a regional power with a leading role in integration processes. For any integration to have success in the Transcaucasia the normalization of the Turkish-Armenian relations first of all is an indispensable precondition.

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<sup>34</sup> It is often mentioned that Azerbaijan threatens Turkey with its oil cut. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan is an international project. Its shareholders are: BP (30.1 percent); AzBTC (25.00 percent); Chevron (8.90 percent); Statoil (8.71 percent); TPAO (6.53 percent); Eni (5.00 percent); Total (5.00 percent), Itochu (3.40 percent); INPEX (2.50 percent), ConocoPhillips (2.50 percent) and Amerada Hess (2.36 percent) (<http://www.bp.com/genericarticle.do?categoryId=9006615&contentId=7020655>) Azerbaijani company does not have even close to half of shares. Hence it is deeply unclear how Azerbaijan can cut oil flow without violating international agreements and commitments.

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