

ZERO PROBLEMS WITH NEIGHBORS: THE CASE OF GEORGIA

Georgia and Turkey enjoy close ties and have smooth political relations. Turkey's main concerns vis-à-vis Georgia are economy and trade links. Consequently, Turkey managed to replace Russia as Georgia's biggest trade partner, citizens of Georgia can travel to Turkey without a need of visa, and Turkey attracts a large number of labor migrants coming mainly from Georgia's impoverished countryside. However, so far Turkey has failed to formulate a policy that would fully meet Georgian and Russian expectations at the same time. On the one hand Turkey showed reluctance to NATO's enlargement in the region and on the other, Turkish investments in Abkhazia as well as the lobby of the Abkhazian diaspora living in Turkey have posed challenges to Turkey-Georgia relations.

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Turkey was one of the first states to recognize Georgia's independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Turkey became the first foreign state that most Georgian citizens visited in their lives. At the beginning of the 21st century Turkey and Georgia became linked to each other with energy infrastructure. Turkey could be seen as a bridge connecting Georgia with the European Union. Turkey managed to replace Russia as Georgia's biggest trade partner and due to the liberal visa policy it became an attractive destination for labor migrants and vacationers.

At the political level both states enjoy close relations, however there are some issues that also limit the depth of this relationship. Namely, due its close partnership to Russia, consisting of economic links and energy dependence, Ankara maintains a low profile when it comes to Georgia-Russia relations as well as issues concerning the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This paper sheds light on the significant achievements in Georgia-Turkish bilateral relations, as well as the shortcomings. Particular attention is paid to political relations, economic links and educational programs.

Although there remain some challenging issues, Georgia could be considered a clear success of Turkish foreign policy, which aims to promote zero problems with neighbors. The current Foreign Minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu, stated that the most striking example of the success of Turkish foreign policy, besides Syria, was its relations with Georgia.¹ Sharing 252 kilometers of land border, Georgia and Turkey have been drawing closer in recent years.

During Shevardnadze's presidency of Georgia, the two countries became closely linked with each other as a result of large-scale energy projects. Shevardnadze's foreign policy was praised by Turkish political analysts who, in retrospect, stressed that he managed to "establish his policy on a very very careful line: with gradual steps that would not cause discomfort for his country, moving his country towards the West."²

Bilateral ties have strengthened further since the change of ruling elites in Turkey and Georgia. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) –led by current Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan– came to power in November 2002, one year before the National Movement of Georgia –led by current President Mikheil Saakashvi– came to power as a result of the Rose Revolution.

Turkish foreign policy towards Georgia is based on strengthening political links and intensifying trade relations – as well as the related establishment of visa free travel. This article will provide an evaluation of these goals, and explore challenges ahead.

Strengthening Political Ties

The security doctrines of both Georgia and Turkey highlight the importance of bilateral cooperation. Georgia's 2011 National Security Concept portrays Turkey as a leading regional partner. The document underlines that "Turkey, as a member of the NATO and one of the

¹ "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 10 No. 1, p.80

² Ismet Berkan, "The man who lost his country in gamble" *Radikal*, , 12 August 2008

regional leaders, is also an important military partner.”³ Meanwhile, the Turkish National Security Council removed Georgia from the list of countries that pose a threat to Turkey.⁴

Turkey’s foreign policy towards Georgia emphasizes stability over democracy, in other words, Turkey does not impose any conditionality relating to Georgia’s democratization. Unlike many Western countries, Turkey maintained a distant approach towards Georgia’s Rose Revolution and has never openly criticized Georgia for its democratic shortcomings. As the Turkish Foreign Minister put it: “if you want to contribute to regional and global peace, you have to speak from within. You should not impose. You should not dictate.”⁵

Both leaders have given positive messages about each other’s nation at various occasions. In his first visit to Georgia as the Prime Minister of Turkey on 12 August 2004, Erdoğan mentioned that he was Georgian because his family had migrated from Batumi to Rize, a Turkish town on the Black Sea. Mikheil Saakashvili, the President of Georgia, praised Turkey as “a great state, Georgia’s close friend and a model state”⁶ and noted that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s revolutions directed towards Turkey’s unification and strengthening constituted a perfect example for him: “Georgia should become a modern, united, developed and successful state and in many issues we follow the example of our neighboring friend – Turkey.”⁷

After Russia, Georgia is the top destination for Turkish Prime Minister among the Black Sea littoral states. During his tenure, Prime Minister Erdoğan made more ministerial trips to Georgia (six times from 2003 until May 2011) than to Bulgaria, Romania or Ukraine.

Turkey has also been a valuable military partner for Georgia. Turkish assistance in training of Georgian troops, improving technical and logistical capabilities, and in modernizing military infrastructure has significantly contributed to the strengthening of Georgian Armed Forces. Turkey founded the military academy in Tbilisi and also modernized the military airbase in Marneuli (close to Tbilisi) as well as the military base in Vaziani, Georgia, starting from the withdrawal of Russian military force from those bases in early 2001. Turkish military personnel also offered pre-deployment training for Georgian armed forces before they were dispatched to Kosovo, as well as training to Georgia’s Kojori special forces brigade.

Both Turkey and Georgia pay special attention to maintaining close political ties and avoiding diplomatic tensions, however from time to time controversial topics surface. One source of tension in the relationship is Abkhazia – Georgia’s breakaway region of 300.000 people - which has been recognized as a state only by the Russian Federation, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru. Currently there are more Abkhaz living in Turkey than in Abkhazia. The community of those

³ “Draft of Georgia’s New National Security Concept”, *Civil Georgia*, 19 February 2011, http://www.civil.ge/eng/_print.php?id=23164

⁴ “‘Turkey’ declares Israel ‘Central Threat’”, *The Baltimore Jewish Times*, 1 November 2010, http://www.jewishtimes.com/index.php/jewishtimes/news/jt/international_news/turkey_declares_israel_central_threat/21481

⁵ “Mr. Zero Problems”, *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 89 No. 6, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/29/mr_zero_problems?page=0.1

⁶ “Saakashvili speaks of importance of close ties with Turkey”, *Civil Georgia*, 14 March 2006, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12061>

⁷ Ibid.

with Abkhaz ethnic origin in Turkey numbers around 500.000, and they actively lobby for the establishment of close political and economic ties between Turkey and Abkhazia. As current Turkish Ambassador to Georgia Murat Buhran put it, Turkey hopes to “establish direct trade relations with Abkhazia”⁸ with the possibility that Turkish ferries could make a stopover in Batumi for customs clearance before continuing on to Abkhazia.

Georgia has been asking the international community to isolate Abkhazia’s ruling elite, not giving them the opportunity of meeting with the Abkhaz ethnic origin communities living in Turkey. Ankara refused to issue an entry visa to the Abkhaz leader, late Sergey Bagapsh, in 2007. However Bagapsh managed to visit Turkey with the invitation of the Federation of Abkhaz Associations and the Federation of Caucasus Associations on 7-10 April 2011. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to issue a press release clarifying that the visit had no official character.⁹

Moreover, Turkey and Georgia have different approaches towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) eastern enlargement. While Georgia advocated getting a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the NATO Bucharest summit in spring 2008; Turkey together with France, Germany and Italy was reluctant about Georgia and Ukraine receiving MAP.¹⁰ Turkish officials frequently stress that “they cannot understand why NATO and the U.S. want to penetrate the region.”¹¹

The Georgian government was not happy with Ankara’s stance following the Russia-Georgia war. Russia, fearing they could transfer military equipment, pressured Ankara to prevent the passage of U.S. ships delivering humanitarian aid to Georgia. Turkey, referring to the Montreux Convention,¹² denied access to U.S. ships headed to Georgia though the Bosphorus. As one key Georgian government official put it, “this was not a nice page in Turkey-Georgian bilateral relations.”¹³

However, Georgia maintains an effort to avoid the deterioration of its relations with Turkey. In this regard, following the visit of Ahmet Davutoğlu in September 2009, Georgia released the captain of the Turkish-operated cargo vessel who was detained for violating Georgian law on

⁸ Nick Clayton, “Turkish Investment and Trade Booms in Abkhazia”, *Weekly Journal Tabula*, 1 April 2011, <http://www.tabula.ge/article-3573.html>

⁹ Press Release Regarding the Visit of Mr. Sergey Bagapsh to Turkey, No. 96, Issued by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Turkey, 7 April, 2011

¹⁰ Gaidz Minassian, “Turkey-Russia: A New Strategic Partnership?”, *Foundation of Strategic Research* Note No. 08/10

¹¹ Suat Kınıklıoğlu, “The Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations”, *The Brookings Institution*, 2007

¹² Montreux Convention sets the number and tonnage of ships willing to enter to the Black Sea. No more than nine warships of non-Black Sea states, with a total tonnage of 45, 000 tons, could be present at one time in the Black Sea and they are supposed to leave the sea in 21 days.

¹³ Author’s interview with a key Georgian government official, April 2011

Occupied Territories. Prior to his release, the captain was attempting to deliver fuel to breakaway Abkhazia and was accordingly sentenced to 24 years imprisonment.

Moreover, upon Turkey's request, Georgia released ten Turkish citizens in spring 2011 and 17 in summer, six of whom were serving life sentences. The Turkish Foreign Ministry welcomed the decision and stressed that Georgia's move would "increase the friendship and neighborly ties between the two peoples, and this is an important part of humanitarian dimension of bilateral relations."¹⁴

Economic Cooperation and Trade

The development of close economic ties between Georgia and Turkey goes back to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, then Prime Minister of Turkey –late Turgut Özal– elaborated a policy of forming an alliance with the close neighbors of Turkey, viewing them as potential export markets. This policy was carried on by President Süleyman Demirel (holding office between 1993 and 2000) and the late Foreign Minister, İsmail Cem (1997-2002). The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has pursued this trend even more actively. As a result, Turkey has signed Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with many of its neighbors, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Macedonia, Montenegro, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Tunisia, Serbia, Syria and Lebanon. Moreover, Turkey also has a Customs Union with the European Union since 1995.

The AKP program outlines that "moving from the fact that exports can be achieved most easily with neighboring countries, [Turkey] will take all types of measures aimed at implementation for the increase of exports to neighboring countries."¹⁵ The document also sets a target for the Turkish missions abroad, which is to intensify AKP's activities towards increasing exports. As a Turkish government official noted, "today the success of an ambassador is often judged on the basis of the increase of Turkish exports to the country during his term of tenure."¹⁶

Turkish foreign policy is broadly shaped by economic considerations – such as export markets, investment opportunities, tourism, energy supplies and the like. In line with this general approach, Turkish Ambassador to Georgia, Murat Burhan named economic and trade relations as Turkey's most important priorities in Georgia-Turkish relations.¹⁷

Indeed, Turkey's economic relations with Georgia have been deepening steadily. particularly since the mid 2000s. Turkey is Georgia's biggest trade partner and the fifth biggest investor in Georgia. While Turkey's policies played an important role in this progression, so did the Russia-Georgia crisis and the reforms within Georgia itself.

Following the Rose Revolution, President Saakashvili and his team pursued a liberal economic policy aimed at cutting red tape and fighting corruption. It also marked the liberalization of

¹⁴ "Turkey welcomes Georgian decision to release Turkish prisoners", *Today's Zaman*, 9 June 2011

¹⁵ Justice and Development Party Program, <http://eng.akparti.org.tr/english/partyprogramme.html>

¹⁶ Kemal Kirisşçi, "The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40 (2009), pp. 29-57

¹⁷ Interview with L. Murat Burhan, Turkish Ambassador to Georgia, *The Messenger*, 29 October 2010

Georgian tax and labor codes and an aggressive privatization process. Georgia has been trying to open its economy to the entire world and attract Foreign Direct Investments. Such policies reaped results particularly before the war. In 2007 Georgia managed to attract more than two billion dollars.

Another reason Turkey successfully replaced Russia as Georgia's leading economic partner was the fact that Turkey offered Georgia what Russia refused to give: free trade and travel. Russia introduced an embargo on Georgian agricultural products and mineral water in 2006, whereas Turkey opened its market to Georgian goods with a Free Trade Agreement (entering into force in 2008). Bilateral trade increased almost eightfold from 2002 to 2010. Export of Georgian products to Turkey augmented fourfold – from 53 million dollars in 2002 to 216 million dollars in 2010. Turkish import to Georgia amplified almost tenfold – from 89 million dollars in 2002 to 888 million dollars in 2010. Although a small market of approximately four million consumers, Turkish FDI to Georgia has been growing since 2005, reaching a record 164 million dollars in 2008.

The main areas of the Georgian economy that are attracting Turkish investments are textile, agriculture and energy. There are several relatively small size textile companies operating in Adjara (Adjara Textile, Batumi Textile, BTM Textile, Georgian Bay Peri Textile, Georgian TeXtile Geofibre etc.), a region on the Black Sea Coast that is close to the Georgia-Turkish border. There are also some agro-processing companies (for example, ICON Group produces tomatoes in the same region). Currently, there are 83 construction projects that are being carried out by Turkish contractors in Georgia, with a total value of more than one billion dollars.¹⁸

Based on a mutual agreement signed in 2006, Batumi airport became part of Turkey's network of internal flights and its management rights were transferred to the Turkish company Tepe-Akfen-Vie (TAV) for 20 years, for a symbolic amount of one dollar. TAV has also acquired the management rights of Tbilisi airport for 15 years.¹⁹ Turkcell, a Turkish telecommunications giant, holds large shares in the Georgian telecommunication system.

Turkish companies such as Kolin Construction, Tourism Industry and Trading Co. Inc. were put in charge of a 150 million dollar hydropower project. In early 2011 Georgia also signed a memorandum with a daughter company of Turkish Adaoğlu Group on the construction of three hydropower plants in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Visa Free Travel

Contrary to Russia's handling of the visa regime towards the citizens of Georgia, Turkey lifted its visa requirements in 2005. As an outcome, Turkey became the one of the main destinations for citizens of Georgia. According to *Today's Zaman* the number of Georgians entering Turkey increased from 161,687 in 2002 up to 830,184 in 2008. Turkey also became a favorite place for

¹⁸ Tina Shavadze, "Foreign Investors and the government", *24 hours*, 10 April 2011

¹⁹ Ivane Chkhikvadze, "Black Sea regional cooperation from Georgia perspective", May 2010, <http://www.bsyr.org/download/2010/Chkhikvadze-01.pdf>

those planning vacations, reaching a record number of 101,146 Georgian tourists in 2010.²⁰ Many Georgian labor migrants, mainly coming from the impoverished countryside, are also benefiting from the abolishment of the visa requirement; the remittances sent from Turkey to Georgia by Georgian labor migrants increases annually. Compared to the remittances of two million dollars in 2002, the figure is 33 million dollars for 2010.²¹ They are generally employed by small or medium sized enterprises in the Marmara region and the eastern Black Sea. The sectors where these workers are employed are: agriculture, walnut collecting, construction, carpentry, textile, house cleaning and dish washing.²² There are a significant number of irregular Georgian migrants pursuing seasonal or permanent labor activities in Turkey. This could be a significant leverage in Turkey's hand. One only needs to recall the statement that Prime Minister Erdoğan made about Armenian irregular migrants employed in Turkey to see that these migrants provide Turkey with leverage. Erdoğan had said in March 2010: "Look, there are 170 000 Armenians in my country – 70 000 of them are my citizens, but we are tolerating 100 000 of them illegally in our country. So what will we do tomorrow? If it is necessary, I will tell them Come on; go back to your country."²³

In addition to visa free travel, Georgian and Turkish citizens benefit from the fact that both countries have good transport connections. In addition to direct land connections, there are three flights per day between Tbilisi and Istanbul and one between Istanbul and Batumi. This makes Turkey the country with most intense air-links with Georgia. On top of this, both states have reached an agreement on passport-free travel, meaning by 2012 the citizens of Turkey and Georgia may be able to cross the border by only showing their national identity cards.

Other Fields of Cooperation

Education is another field of Georgian-Turkish cooperation. There are Turkish middle schools as well as a Turkish university in Georgia, and Turkey offers scholarships to Georgian students who would like to continue their higher education in Turkey and learn the Turkish language.

However, according to the figures Georgia is low in the list of states whose citizens receive educational scholarships from the Turkish Ministry of Education. In the list, Georgia comes behind states like Mongolia, Afghanistan, China, Macedonia, Moldova and Russia.²⁴ The number of Georgian students pursuing their studies at various Turkish universities is also very low compared to the students coming from other states. All in all there are 262 Georgian students in Turkey, whereas 899 students from Mongolia and 307 from Macedonia.

²⁰ "Turkey sees nearly 15 percent rise in tourist numbers in first five months", *Today's Zaman*, 28 June 2011

²¹ National Bank of Georgia, www.nbg.ge

²² "Denied work permit, 500 000 foreigners working illegal in Turkey", *Today's Zaman*, 22 October 2010

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ According to the data obtained from Turkish Ministry of Education, for the year 2011, Turkey granted 660 scholarships (for language school, pre-elementary, elementary, MA and PhD level) for the citizens of Azerbaijan, 659 for Turkmenistan, 649 for Krygyzstan, 530 for Kazakhstan 525 for Kosovo, 339 -for Iraq, 303 for Mongolia; 246 for Afghanistan, 132 for China, 137 for Iran, 167 for Macedonia, 154 for Moldova, 147 for Russia. However, only 58 scholarships were allocated for the students coming from Georgia.

The Turkish Ministry of Education could overview the priorities of allocating the scholarships with the aim of increasing the rate of Georgian students in Turkey. Education programs and more scholarships are the biggest assets in Turkish hands and could become the most precious Turkish investment in Georgia.

Surprisingly, Georgia seems not to be an attractive place for Turkish Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). There are British, American, German, and Czech NGOs operating in Georgia, but there are no Turkish NGOs carrying out projects. Like many other European states Turkey should create a cultural center in Georgia.²⁵

In 2009 Georgia received up to 79 million dollars from Turkish International Development and Cooperation Agency (TIKA), preceded by such states as Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.²⁶ In order to become a more important player, Ankara should prioritize Georgia in areas beyond trade and investment, including spheres such as education, cultural programs and civil society development.

Conclusion

Turkey-Georgia relations are broadly moving in the right direction though there are some shortcomings.

The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) that Turkey proposed to the South Caucasus states after the Russia-Georgia war was inaugurated on 13 August 2008 in Moscow by Prime Minister Erdoğan. At that time the Turkish Foreign Minister explained that the platform was the “framework to develop stability, confidence and cooperation and become a forum for dialogue”²⁷.

The CSCP can be assessed as a failure. After almost three years of its launching, it still misses common principles, structure and decision making mechanisms. Georgia keeps a distant approach towards the platform. President Saakashvili was not happy with the format since it lacked the participation of EU and other key regional actors.²⁸

One of the reasons of the failure is that the platform excluded significant actors of the region such as NATO, the European Union, the US, and even Iran. The US state officials were surprised by “Turkey’s call for the formation of a CSCP, as they had not been informed in advance.”²⁹

²⁵ There are French, German, British, Italian cultural centers operating in Georgia under the auspices of these countries embassies.

²⁶ Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) report of 2009.

²⁷ Ali Babacan, “Turkish initiatives: calming the Caucasus”, *International Herald Tribune*, 26 September 2008.

²⁸ “Caucasus Platform not Feasible yet”, *Hürriyet Daily News*,; 24 March, 2009

Turkey needs to seek a win-win policy together with Russia, the US, NATO and the EU in the region.

Turkey should formulate a more comprehensive policy towards Georgia (in harmonization with the policies of other players in the region) as well as towards the entire region. Trade relations and visa free travel is undoubtedly a great success of Georgia-Turkish relations but it needs to go beyond focusing only on those two and pay much more attention to the students exchange programs, cultural links and civil society development.

²⁹ Gareth Winrow, "Turkey, Russia and the Caucasus: Common and Diverging Interests", *Chatham House Briefing Paper*, November 2009.