

Summary: Over the past decade, relations between Turkey and Georgia have flourished on the political, economic, and geostrategic fronts. Nevertheless, underlying frictions have surfaced in the past year when Georgian parliamentary election campaigns highlighted Turko-skepticism among segments of the Georgian society. While there is a window of opportunity, to seize it requires an intellectual engagement on the part of Turks, Georgians, and EU counterparts alike. The deepening of economic and strategic relations between Turkey and Georgia needs to be complemented with intellectual and grassroots dimensions, including stronger links between civil societies, more substantial analysis of each others' internal dynamics, and more awareness of respective historical sensitivities, interests, and public debates.

**The Black Sea Trust for
Regional Cooperation**

B-dul Primaverii nr. 50
Corp 6 "Casa Mica"
Sector 1
Bucharest, Romania
T +40 21 314 16 28
F +40 21 319 32 74
E BlackSeaTrust@gmfus.org

Turkey and Georgia: Zero-Problems?

by *Diba Nigar Göksel*

The Strategic Setting

Over the past decade, relations between Turkey and Georgia have flourished on the political, economic, and geostrategic fronts. As the only NATO member bordering Georgia and standing between Georgia and the EU, Turkey is important in Tbilisi's quest to deepen its integration with the Euro-Atlantic. For Ankara, Georgia is a critical strategic link between Turkey and Azerbaijan, among other things. The concept of an East-West corridor from the Caspian to Europe rests upon firm relations between this tripartite. Not only is this strategic corridor a cornerstone of Turkey's regional influence but it is an important component of Euro-Atlantic interests in this neighborhood. For Azerbaijan and Georgia infrastructural connections through Turkey to Europe diversify options away from Russia's regional grip.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline (BTC) is a step toward this goal, as is the Baku Tbilisi Erzurum natural gas pipeline. TANAP (the Trans-Anatolian pipeline), stretching from the Caspian to Europe, is in the works and the construction of a Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is underway. The foreign ministers of the three countries have met twice in the past year to devise trilateral cooperation schemes in various sectors.

In the past decade, a priority for both Georgia and Turkey has been fostering

bilateral trade and economic cooperation. This has been supported by the overlap in the economic agendas of both capitals: promotion of Turkish business interests in its relations with neighbors for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, and efforts to liberalize trade and create an environment conducive to foreign direct investment on the part of Tbilisi. The closure of the Russian market to Georgian products in 2006, and Tbilisi's geostrategic rationale of offering favorable investment opportunities for Turkish businesses fuelled the intensification of economic ties between Turkey and Georgia. Turkish companies are invested in large construction and hydropower projects in Georgia, and hold the management rights for the Tbilisi and Batumi airports. In terms of foreign investment, Turkey is second only to Azerbaijan in Georgia.

Economic integration has been aided by a visa-free travel regime since 2005, a free trade agreement signed in 2007, and a passport-free travel regime in force since 2012. Turkey is currently Georgia's number one trading partner. Among illegal labor migrants in Turkey, citizens of Georgia are currently in the lead.¹ In terms of air links as well, Turkey leads in Geor-

¹ <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2013/04/28/hepsinin-umudu-turkiye>



gia.² Turkey is a rising tourist destination for Georgians and 39 percent of the foreign visitors to Georgia in 2012 were Turkish citizens — with Azerbaijanis ranked second at 24 percent.³

Turkey and Georgia appear to present a model of integration in Europe's east. And nothing to the contrary could be gathered from the positive images projected during the visits to Turkey by Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili in February 2013 and by President Mikheil Saakashvili in April 2013. However, even as Georgia-Turkey relations flourished in the past decade, numerous strains were lying beneath the surface, and informed public discussion about these challenges has been missing.

Turkey and Georgia appear to present a model of integration in Europe's east.

The strategic playing field, in which Tbilisi and Ankara have, on occasion, placed themselves on different axes, is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, Turkey's alignment with Moscow at certain critical junctures between 2008 and 2011,⁴ the divergences between Baku and Ankara that surfaced during the Turkish-Armenian diplomatic normalization efforts in the same time period,⁵ the souring in Turkey-EU relations, and the stall of Turkey's EU accession process, as well as mistrust between Ankara and Washington particularly during the Bush era all shook the basic parameters on which Tbilisi-Ankara strategic relations is built. The perception among Turkish diplomats and politicians that the color revolutions in the region were

an instrument of U.S. regional penetration also "colored" Turkish approaches to Tbilisi with a degree of cynicism.

Ankara's so-called "strategic drift" was perhaps most obvious to Tbilisi in Turkey's response to the August 2008 War. Coming a few years after Turkey objected to the extension of NATO's Operation Endeavor to the Black Sea, Turkey's caution in speaking out against Moscow's moves was a blow to enthusiasts of Turkey's role in counterbalancing Russia in the Caucasus. During the war, Ankara referred to the Montreaux Convention in denying access to U.S. naval hospital ships headed to Georgia through the Bosphorous. The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) that Turkey proposed was received negatively by Georgian counterparts due to its inherent suggestion that Euro-Atlantic players had no role to play in bringing stability to the region.

From 2011 onwards, Ankara gradually returned to a position of seeking strategic reassurance from its belonging in the Euro-Atlantic bloc, if only conjecturally.⁶ While Ankara has incurred a reality check about what deepening relations with Russia and Iran can deliver, Tbilisi has also experienced a reality check about the extent to which Brussels and Washington can provide strategic reassurance to Georgia. Realignment and integration between Tbilisi-Baku and Ankara has been enforced by related dynamics.

Nevertheless, underlying frictions have surfaced in the past year when Georgian parliamentary election campaigns highlighted Turko-skepticism among segments of the Georgian society.

While there is a window of opportunity, to seize it requires an intellectual engagement on the part of Turks, Georgians, and EU counterparts alike. The deepening of economic and strategic relations between Turkey and Georgia needs to be complemented with intellectual and grassroots dimensions, including stronger links between civil societies, more substantial analysis of each others' internal dynamics, and more awareness of respective historical sensitivities, interests, and public debates.

² There are three flights a day between Istanbul and Tbilisi and one a day between Istanbul and Batumi. See: Ivane Chkhikvadze, "Zero Problems with Neighbors: The Case of Georgia," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Summer 2011, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/617/zero-problems-with-neighbors-the-case-of-georgia-summer-2011/>

³ Information Centre, Information and Analytical Department, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia

⁴ D. Nigar Goksel, "The dynamics of the Ankara-Moscow partnership in relation to the South Caucasus," published by the Strategic Research Center under the president of Azerbaijan (SAM) in Russian in December 2012, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/dosyalar/files/DNG-%20Turkey-Russia-Caucasus%20August%202012%20.pdf>

⁵ Nigar Goksel, "Turkish Policy Towards Caucasus: A Balance Sheet of the Balancing Act," EDAM Black Sea Discussion Paper Series 2011/1, November 2011, http://edam.org.tr/eng/document/Black_Sea_Paper_Series1.pdf

⁶ <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/turkeys-third-wave-and-the-coming-quest-for-strategic-reassurance/>



Bilateral Issues of Contention

During the run-up to the October 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia, resentment among the Georgian population about Turkish “penetration” into Georgia came to the surface. Complaints included the neglect of old Georgian churches in northwest Turkey, the perceived Turkish economic dominance in Georgia (predominately in Ajara, supposedly without providing a clear benefit to the Georgians), Azerbaijani or Turkish “monopolization” of Georgian strategic assets, and the spread of Turkish schools and mosques in Georgia. These provided fertile ground for the Georgian Orthodox Church and some Georgian Dream candidates to fuel Turko-skepticism for their domestic political ends.

Sites of Worship

One dimension of the negative campaigns stemmed from negotiations that had taken place in the past few years between Ankara and Tbilisi over respective sites of worship. Possibly motivated by Turkey’s positive steps toward Armenian churches in Anatolia, the Georgian Orthodox Church requested permission for the renovation of a few medieval Georgian churches in northwest Turkey. In January 2012, Turkish press circulated news that Tbilisi and Ankara had agreed that an old mosque in the Adjara region (Aziziye mosque), and a few other mosques in Georgia would be reconstructed in return for the renovation of a few historic Georgian churches in Turkey.⁷ The association of the Aziziye mosque with Ottoman conquest aroused resistance against these reconstruction plans.

As a result, this agreement was criticized by the Georgian Orthodox Church, no less because of compromises they claimed were being made in terms of property ownership and management of the restored churches in Turkey.⁸ Government critics in Georgia held that Tbilisi caved to Turkish conditions rather than turning to international law or UNESCO to apply international law on cultural heritage sites. The Georgian Orthodox Church was apparently displeased that they were not included in these decisions.⁹

⁷ <http://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/turkiye-kilise-gurcistan-cami-koruyacak-95589/haber-95589>

⁸ <http://www.chveneburi.net/tr/default.asp?bpgpid=2061&pg=1>

⁹ <http://www.hristiyangazete.com/2012/02/cami-restorasyonu-anlasmasi-gurcistan-ortodoks-kilisesini-rahatsiz-etti/>

A sense of injustice resonated:

“During the years of Georgia’s independence (both in Adjara and other regions) around 300 Shiite and Sunni mosques were built, together with Islamic offices. In the region of Batumi, there are 10 schools teaching Islam, and they are all financed by Islamists from Turkey. There are two mosques in the capital of Georgia. For 20 years, Georgia has never demanded Turkey build any new Orthodox churches or even reconstruct old Georgian ones in Turkey in exchange for reconstruction of the mosques.”¹⁰

Ironically, values and religion have also been a negative issue in the Turkish debate about Georgia. Turkish government representatives complained that the ease of travel to Batumi led men from the Black Sea region of Turkey to travel there for gambling, prostitution, and cheap alcohol. Accordingly, the price of crossing the border gates (“exit fee”) has been raised from 1 Turkish Lira (TL) to 15 TL.

Editorial columns in conservative religious newspapers have argued that Georgia is a country where Christian identity is imposed and the Muslim minority is disregarded.¹¹ These sentiments also surfaced in coverage of the August War, when conservative writers reminded their readers that President Saakashvili ignored the Muslims of Georgia when he framed his country’s identity as Christian and placed “a

Editorial columns in conservative religious newspapers have argued that Georgia is a country where Christian identity is imposed and the Muslim minority is disregarded.

¹⁰ <http://eastbook.eu/en/2012/03/material-en/news-en/georgia-religious-affairs-pervaded-with-fear-of-turkeys-influence/>

¹¹ Hakan Albayrak, “Saakaşvili ve şovenist siyasetin iflasi,” *Yeni Şafak* daily, August 11, 2008

symbol of the Crusades” (the cross) on the flag of the region of Adjara, where many Muslim Georgians live.¹²

Economic Dominance

Another controversy over Turkey that has recently surfaced in Georgia revolves around the rising economic and strategic dominance of Turks in Georgia. After the October 2012 elections, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili announced that his government would review a number of investment projects brokered by the previous government, notably business contracts that give control of natural resources to Turkish investors — such as power stations,¹³ as well as the extension of the contract of a Turkish company, Tepe-Akfen-Vie (TAV), to manage the Tbilisi airport from 2027 to 2037 in return for TAV reconstructing a runway. The operation rights of TAV were particularly controversial because a conflict of interest was perceived with TAV also managing the Istanbul airport and supposedly setting prices in a way as to maintain Istanbul as a hub. Though the new Georgian government stated that losses (for the construction that started in 2011) would be compensated for, the revisiting of contracts threatened to send the wrong message about political risk to potential investors.

The reality that the Free Trade Agreement had augmented Turkish exports to Georgia significantly more than it had Georgian exports to Turkey has also fed the perception of “extractive” Turks.¹⁴ While there are reasons for this stemming from weak production and entrepreneurship dynamics in Georgia, certain features of the agreement itself arguably also limited its effect on Georgian economic growth.¹⁵ Unofficially, both business representatives and government officials are disgruntled, particularly about frequent Turkish bureaucratic obstacles that Georgian exporters face in practice, and the agreement of Georgia to not export agricultural goods.

¹² Nazif Gurdogan, “Savaş ülkeleri Kafkaslar,” *Yeni Şafak* daily, August 10, 2008

¹³ <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-302182-new-georgian-govt-reviews-baku-tbilisi-kars-project.html>

¹⁴ Ivane Chkhikvadze, “Zero Problems with Neighbors: The Case of Georgia,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Summer 2011, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/617/zero-problems-with-neighbors-the-case-of-georgia-summer-2011/>

¹⁵ For a detailed account of the impact of the FTA between Georgia and Turkey see “Georgian-Turkish Free Trade Agreement 2008: Implications Two Years After,” prepared by the European Initiative of Liberal Academy Tbilisi (EI-LAT) with the support of the German Marshall Fund Black Sea Trust in March 2011, <http://www.ei-lat.ge/projects/research-and-analysis/244-georgian-turkish-free-trade-agreement-2008-implications-two-years-after.html>

Perhaps strategically most significant was that in December 2012, Ivanishvili questioned the economic viability of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, underway since 2008 and scheduled to be finalized in 2014.¹⁶ Concerns spread about whether the prime minister shared the same vision of strategic integration with his predecessors. After his visit to Azerbaijan on December 26-27, the prime minister retracted this statement, admitting it was rushed.¹⁷ Nevertheless, questions continue to resonate in Georgian public debates about the railway — both about its economic and strategic impact, and on the basis of claims of the embezzlement of project funds.

Questions continue to resonate in Georgian public debates about the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway.

Ethnic Minorities

A third area of controversy in Turkish-Georgian relations has been Turkish sensitivities regarding people whom segments of Turkish citizens consider as “kin” in Georgia — namely the Abkhaz and Mesketian Turks.

Turkish interaction with the breakaway region of Abkhazia is one issue that has been on the agenda of Tbilisi-Ankara relations consistently. Turkish citizens of Abkhaz origin¹⁸ are relatively well organized in Turkey and lobby for Abkhazia-friendly policies from Ankara. The Abkhazian diaspora is also active in the quest to reopen the ferry link between Trabzon and Sukhumi, which Turkey had cancelled in 1996 as part of the CIS embargo. A circle of Turkish businesses that work in Russia also have a standing demand for direct economic relations with Abkhazia. Whereas Ankara recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia, in practice there

¹⁶ A trilateral agreement for the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad was signed between the three presidents in February 2007.

¹⁷ http://www.georgiatoday.ge/article_details.php?id=10730

¹⁸ The estimates of their numbers have a very wide range because the Turkish census does not identify ethnicity and often calculations are made in ways that group together people of North Caucasian origin. Moreover, there is assimilation and intermarriage between these groups. The numbers of Abkhaz can range from 100,000 to 500,000 depending on the source, while figures of North Caucasians in Turkey can range from 1 to 6 million.



is direct trade between Turkey and Abkhazia. Turkish ships carry cargo to Abkhazia, and there is a widespread view that Turkish officials have turned a blind eye to such activity.

While precise figures of trade turnover vary, it is consistently stated that Turkey is the second trade partner of Abkhazia. Abkhazia is also a route through which Turkish businesses access the markets of South Russia.¹⁹ The lifting of visas in 2011 for Turkish citizens entering Russia has also enabled easier entry into Abkhazia.²⁰ Turkish ships heading to Abkhaz ports have been seized by Georgian naval forces for violating the country's Law on Occupied Territories.²¹

There have been talks between authorities in Tbilisi and Ankara to find a formula that could accommodate both Georgia's territorial integrity and Turkish interests. Georgian officials initially requested that Turkish ships first dock in Georgian ports on route to Abkhazia. However, the suggestion to have a Georgian customs official in Trabzon check goods and sign paperwork was more recently on the table. Both sides seem assured that such a solution will be workable.²² The continuation of economic relations between Abkhazia and Turkey is seen by some Georgians as a potential way to reduce Abkhazian dependency on Russian subsidies, trade, transfers, and infrastructure programs. Others are concerned about its potential to legitimize the separation of Abkhazia from Tbilisi.

Another issue on the agenda of Turkish diplomats with Tbilisi is the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia. Ankara has been involved in facilitating the return of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia. These ethnically Turkish Muslims were exiled from Georgia to Central Asia by the Soviet authorities in 1944.²³ While Tbilisi formally agrees to their return, the implementation has proven challenging. One reason is that the population of the region the

¹⁹ Burcu Gultekin Punsmann, "Questioning the Embargo on Abkhazia: Turkey's Role in Integrating Into the Black Sea Region," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Winter 2009, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/453/questioning-the-embargo-on-abkhazia-turkeys-role-in-integrating-into-the-black-sea-region-winter-2009/>

²⁰ "Russia-Turkey Visa Free," *Voice of Russia*, April 16, 2011, <http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/04/16/49018132.html>

²¹ [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/caucasus/georgia/224-abkhazia-the-long-road-to-reconciliation.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/europe/caucasus/georgia/224-abkhazia-the-long-road-to-reconciliation.pdf)

²² Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Spring 2013, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/886/interview-with-mikheil-saakashvili-georgias-westward-march-spring-2013/>

²³ For more information, see <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/01/03/georgia-return-of-the-meskhetian-turks/>

The continuation of economic relations between Abkhazia and Turkey is seen by some Georgians as a potential way to reduce Abkhazian dependency on Russian subsidies, trade, transfers, and infrastructure programs.

Meskhetians would return to is largely populated by ethnic Armenians and regarded by them as Armenian historic homeland. Given the sensitive balances in Georgia vis a vis the balance of Armenians versus Turkic people,²⁴ this issue is particularly complicated.

Turkey-Georgia relations have been both the best example of Turkey's neighborhood policies — fostering open borders and deeper economic relations — and also an example that clearly depicts the weaknesses of Turkey's foreign policy doctrine and ability to maximize its soft power potential. Turkey's win-win solution proposals aimed at ensuring "zero problems with neighbors" reflected "naivety" and ended up undermining the interests of its traditional allies. It has also become clear that kinship links can be either an asset or a burden in Ankara's conduct of relations with neighbors.

In Search of an Informed Debate

Strikingly, neither the strategic setting as it affects Georgia-Turkey relations nor the ups and downs in bilateral relations have received much attention in public debates. Overall, Turkish-Georgian economic and strategic integration has not been matched with developing ties between opinion shapers or analysts/strategists in civil society, think tank, or media communities.

²⁴ Zaur Shiriyev & Kornely Kakachia, *Azerbaijani-Georgian Relations: The Paradoxes and Challenges of Strategic Alliance*, SAM Review 6, June 2013 (publication forthcoming)



According to President Saakashvili, the neglect of people-to-people contact from the Georgian side has caused by the lack of awareness that a concerted effort was needed to foster such links. In his opinion, this lack of awareness stemmed from the fact that prejudice did not exist at the government level. There was also an assumption among the Georgian ruling team that any existing prejudice in the society at large would fade away in the course of the intensifying economic interactions with the Turks.²⁵ One might also add that after the Rose Revolution, the Georgian leadership focused all its energy on outreach to the EU and the United States.

It is perhaps more critical to examine the Turkish side in this framework. There has been a near total absence of Turkish counterparts in debates about internal developments in Georgia and very scant attention on Turkey-Georgia relations among Turkish think tanks, NGOs, academia, or media.

In general, limited knowledge of the social and political scene of its neighbors is a reality in Turkish civil society. However the Georgia case is particularly striking in three ways: relative to Turkish media and civil society engagement in the other two countries of the South Caucasus — Armenia and Azerbaijan; relative to the strong engagement of European and U.S. counterparts; and relative to the intensity of other dimensions of bilateral relations — ie economic and strategic.

Limited knowledge of the social and political scene of its neighbors is a reality in Turkish civil society.

One reason for Turkey's weak presence on the civil society front in Georgia has been the approach of Western donors. Since the 1990s, initiatives of European or U.S. foundations supporting the establishment of networks, dialogue, and cooperation in this region have traditionally excluded Turkish counterparts. Turkey, not being post-Soviet, fell

²⁵ Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Spring 2013, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/886/interview-with-mikheil-saakashvili-georgias-westward-march-spring-2013/>

between the cracks in almost all regional cross-border NGO collaboration programs.²⁶ A stronger presence of the professionalizing Turkish civil society in countries like Georgia could be an asset for public debates, civil society projects, and capacity building.²⁷

Partly as a result of the weak channels of engagement between Turkish and Georgian opinion-makers and analysts, and partly because of the intense Turkish domestic and foreign policy agenda, the turbulent Georgian pre-election period and post-election polarization was not discussed by the Turkish press or think tank community, even when it directly concerned Turkish interests in Georgia. This was not the first time, however, that important milestones for Georgia hardly registered in Turkish public debates, or did so in a distorted fashion.

Neither the Turkish think tank community nor the press has produced analytical coverage of the domestic dynamics that led to the Rose Revolution, or the reforms and political polarizations that the country faced thereafter. At times of breaking news, the Turkish press mostly ran updates from international news agencies and wire sources. On the rare occasions that Georgian domestic developments were covered, it was in the context of geopolitical showdowns between Russia and the United States, or in relation to the Abkhaz or Muslim Georgians. The presumption that the government in Tbilisi was an outpost of Washington was prevalent.

During the August War, among the relatively scarce analysis, some Turkish columns focused on U.S. involvement as an example of double standards,²⁸ others highlighted

²⁶ For more analysis on this issue by the author, see *Turkish Civil Society: From Black Sheep to Synergy in the Black Sea*, German Marshall Fund, On Turkey Series, September 26, 2011, http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/goskel_canturkey-inspire_sept11_pt21.pdf, and Nigar Goksel, "Neither neighbor nor member: Bringing Turkish civil society into the fold," November 27, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/neither-neighbor-nor-member-bringing-turkish-civil-society-into-the-fold.aspx?pageID=238&nID=8115&NewsCatID=396>.

²⁷ There are some platforms where this interaction is taking place. One is multi-dimensional engagement by the Turkish Gulen movement in Georgia. There are also many multilateral platforms where Turkish and Georgian counterparts collaborate. However, these do not serve the same purpose as civil society platforms, joint NGO projects, networks of analysts, academic expertise, or programs consistently and comprehensively focusing on the analysis and development of bilateral relations. The Black Sea Trust has filled a gap in this sense, bringing Turkish NGOs into the fold of networks along with their Black Sea counterparts.

²⁸ Özlem Albayrak, "Kani Dokulesi Haksizlar, Masumlar," *Yeni Şafak*, August 12, 2008, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/yazarlar/?t=12.08.2008&y=OzlemAlbayrak>



Saakashvili's misplaced calculations²⁹ and faulted him for bringing US-Russian confrontation to Turkey's doorstep.³⁰ One went so far as to say that "Mikheil Saakashvili, who is kept in power by George Soros's money and who is Zbigniew Brezinski's disciple," may have received nuclear weapons from the United States in the planes traveling from Iraq to Georgia.³¹ The few analytical pieces in the Turkish mainstream press focused on how the August War would affect Turkey in light of the Baku-Ceyhan-Tbilisi pipeline and how the re-emergence of a cold war between Russia and the United States might affect Turkey's geostrategic positioning.³² Consideration of the Georgian peoples' strong support of being a part of the Euro-Atlantic sphere and the legitimacy of these aspirations was nearly non-existent. Also missing was the presentation of *realistic* alternatives of how Tbilisi should have dealt with pressures from Moscow or *constructive* proposals about how Ankara could be more effectively involved.

Looking Ahead

While Georgia-Turkey relations continue to develop, there will continue to also be challenges. The nature of most of these challenges is such that a concerted effort on both sides could turn them into advantages and opportunities.

As a country with an interest in Georgia's economic development and stability, Turkey can help Georgia maximize its benefit from the Free Trade Agreement, identifying and addressing the reasons why Georgian products are having difficulty entering the Turkish market, and providing assistance to overcome these challenges. A little benevolence on the Turkish side may be in Turkey's interests in the long term, and go a long way in terms of winning good-will among skeptics in Georgia.

Official Turkish instruments, such as scholarships for students of regional countries or development aid, could also focus more on Georgia. Arguably due to the prioritiza-

tion of ethnic kinship in education programs³³ and the focus on Muslim countries in the dispersal of development aid³⁴ through Turkey's development agency, Georgia has received less support than the upswing in bilateral relations merits.

Georgia has received less support than the upswing in bilateral relations merits.

Given Georgia's slowing economy and the need to reassure foreign investors, spurred by the transition of power in the country, Tbilisi does not have the luxury to raise concerns among Turkish investors. The opening of the Russian market to Georgian products this spring does not change this fact. On the other hand, if Turkish counterparts approach Georgia as if it were an autocratic country without empowered business and civil society communities and using geopolitical leverage to bargain business deals, it could backfire.

Turkey has an opportunity to turn its strong economic presence in Georgia into a more effective soft power and public relations tool. More knowledge about the Georgian "field" could be useful to this end. More generally, Turkish civil society — including academia, media, think tanks, and NGOs — can help intensify interaction and mutual knowledge between the Turkish and Georgian societies, to ensure the intellectual sphere not be the Achilles heel of the central role in the region to which Turkey aspires.

Turks and Georgians who strive for a European future need to join forces more to this end, including in managing the public opinion of their respective countries. An informed debate within the Turkish policy community and intellectual elite on the issue of Georgian churches in Turkey would go a long way toward instilling trust among skeptical Georgians. The recognition and protection of Georgian cultural heritage in Turkey would be an asset to Turkey's cultural

²⁹ Ismet Berkan's columns in *Radikal* daily are a case in point. He wrote the largest number of columns on the issue, each harshly critical of the Saakashvili government (particularly relevant are his articles on August 9, 2008, August 10, 2008, August 12, 2008, and August 15, 2008).

³⁰ Aslan Yavuz Şir, "Savas Sonrasi Donemde Gurcistan" (Georgia in Post War Period), ORSAM, January 2009, <http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/Uploads/Yazilar/Dosyalar/yavuzSir.pdf>

³¹ Ibrahim Karagul, "Gurcistan'a nukleer silah mi gonderildi?" (Were nuclear weapons sent to Georgia), *Yeni Safak*, August 15, 2008.

³² Analysis by Cengiz Çandar in *Radikal* daily and Sami Kohen in *Milliyet* daily

³³ Ivane Chkhikvadze, "Zero Problems with Neighbors: The Case of Georgia," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Summer 2011, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/617/zero-problems-with-neighbors-the-case-of-georgia-summer-2011/>

³⁴ Georgia ranks high in comparison to other non-Muslim neighbors, particularly in 2008 (that year Georgia was 10th among 13 countries, all of the others of which were majority Muslim)



richness, with no cost and much to gain in Georgian hearts and minds. Pilgrimage to these sites from Georgia would also have a value in economic terms, in a region that is in need of local development.

Abkhazia is another front that could highlight Turkey's added value in the neighborhood. There is potential for Turkey to contribute to breaking the isolation of Abkhazia and contribute to integration trends in the Black Sea region. However, Turkey needs to tread carefully, and not work against Tbilisi's interests or undermine resolution prospects between Tbilisi and Abkhazia. Tbilisi seems ready to accommodate formulas to this end.

There is a window of opportunity for new momentum to be injected in the East-West corridor. In the past year, the tripartite integration of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey has gained impetus. The railway line is an important component, and one that has been on the bilateral agenda recently. At certain times, Western officials have argued that instead of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars link, Turkey should open its land border with Armenia to reactivate the segment of the railway running from Kars to Gyumri and onwards to Tbilisi. However, this would not serve the intended strategic end of integrating the larger region or extending to Central Asia and beyond. While the marginalization of Armenia is a legitimate concern, given the circumstances of the Karabakh war, and given the need for regional integration to proceed, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars project is a necessary addition to the strategic East-West corridor. Whether this railway can co-exist with the opening of another railway (connecting Sochi, Abkhazia, western Georgia, Armenia, and someday Turkey) or whether they are technically, economically and strategically mutually exclusive remains a question on the agenda.

For different domestic and regional reasons, it is ever more important for both Tbilisi and Ankara to align with their Euro-Atlantic counterparts. The perception of a decline in U.S. interest in the region and increased EU incoherence raises the importance of Turkey's engagement in the Black Sea region. And if indeed the current Georgian government takes steps that aid Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions without exacerbating tensions with Russia, this will be more convenient for Turkish foreign policymakers, who have been strained trying to harmonize Turkey's relations with both Moscow and Tbilisi.

Deeper alignment between Turkey and Georgia also depends on both countries' course of democratization — which can not be taken for granted — on stability in the Caucasus, which rests on strong Turkey-Azerbaijan relations, and on progress in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict, which would enable Armenia to be drawn in.

Ultimately though, besides the policies of Ankara and Tbilisi, the alignment of the two countries will also depend on the EU. An exclusionary EU will weaken the Western-oriented segments of both countries, deepening divergences between Turkey and Georgia, and compromising Western interests in this region. A Turkey that is aligned with the Euro-Atlantic agenda is welcomed in Georgia as a regional leader, and in turn, Turkey's positive role in Georgia could become be a testament of Turkey's strategic synergy with the EU.

About the Author

Diba Nigar Göksel is editor-in-chief of *Turkish Policy Quarterly*.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, Warsaw, and Tunis. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

About the On Wider Europe Series

This series is designed to focus in on key intellectual and policy debates regarding Western policy toward Wider Europe that otherwise might receive insufficient attention. The views presented in these papers are the personal views of the authors and not those of the institutions they represent or The German Marshall Fund of the United States.