

Turkey's South Caucasus Agenda: The Role of State and Non-State Actors

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On March 2, 2012, Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) and Turkish Economic Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) organized an international conference titled “Turkey’s South Caucasus Agenda: Roles of State and Non-State Actors” in Tbilisi, Georgia. The event brought together analysts, diplomats and decision makers from Turkey, Europe and the South Caucasus to discuss Turkey’s role in stabilizing the region both on the level of government engagement and civil society. What follows is the reflection of the commentary that was made by participants during the conference.

The Caucasus is a wide geopolitical region on the border of Europe and Asia. The southern belt of the Caucasus, with its rich energy resources, occupies a strategic place for the transport of Caspian oil and gas. However, the region is riddled with challenges, including three unresolved conflicts as well as socio-political and economic problems brought about by the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the South Caucasus is characterized by armed conflicts that hinder the development of peace and stability. Even though these disputes are referred to as ‘frozen’, the ‘five-day’ war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 over the break-away province of South Ossetia has demonstrated that the region’s conflicts can easily escalate. Further, the constituent states of the South Caucasus do not have fully functioning relations, notably Azerbaijan and Armenia. Clearly, the peoples of the region suffer as a

result. Encouraging peace and stability in the region is therefore of paramount importance.

Sitting on the border of the South Caucasus, Turkey has a potential role in creating an environment of peace and stability in the region. Over the course of the last decade, Turkey has begun to endorse a more constructive, solution-orientated foreign policy. One of the primary objectives of this new foreign policy orientation has been to be a part of conflict resolution processes in its immediate neighborhood. Even though worsening relations with Israel and Syria challenge this mission, Turkey’s policy of supporting conflict resolution in its neighborhood is critical in terms of assuring regional peace and stability. The South Caucasus should be no different. In line with its new foreign policy, Turkey can look to play an objective and constructive role in the South Caucasus that can help the region develop.

A NEGLECTED NEIGHBORHOOD?

The South Caucasus is little discussed or understood in Turkey. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Armenia and Georgia were not among Turkey’s foreign policy priorities. Instead, Turkey saw an opportunity in the Turkic world and used its financial and political resources to create a sphere of influence for itself. Relations with Azerbaijan became the backbone of Turkey’s foreign policy towards the region and the post-Soviet space. This relationship was largely driven by identity and kinship type factors,

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which some argue limited Turkey's success in the South Caucasus. Indeed, Turkey's good relations with Azerbaijan and the solidarity between the two countries complicated Turkey's relationship with Armenia. Both already had serious disagreements, such as border demarcation disputes and the genocide issue, and Turkey's unconditional support for Azerbaijan became another source of conflict between Turkey and Armenia.

Turkey's policy during the early 1990s was focused on establishing a foothold in the post-Soviet space. However, because of the gap between the expectations of the newly established states and Turkey's capabilities, Turkey's foreign policy towards the region achieved little in the way of success. Only in the late 1990s and early 2000s did Turkey start to adopt a constructive and comprehensive foreign policy strategy towards the South Caucasus. In essence, Turkey can be seen as a latecomer to the region. The energy card was highly important, with Turkey placing itself as an energy hub. The transportation of Caspian gas to the West became one of the government's priorities. Like Azerbaijan, Georgia also became an important country, especially after the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.

When the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey in 2002, the new government had little foreign policy experience. Ahmet Davutoğlu rose as a key figure and his concept of "strategic depth" became one of the guiding forces of Turkey's foreign policy making. Accordingly, Turkey adopted an active foreign policy especially towards its neighbors. However, while there has been a lively discussion about Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East, there has been less emphasis on the equally important relationship that Turkey has with the South Caucasus.

To date, relations with Azerbaijan serve as the backbone of Turkey's policy towards the region. Even though the 'one nation-two states' motto does not really reflect the political reality, it is still echoed in the political rhetoric and the sense of solidarity between Turkish and Azerbaijani state elites remains strong. Georgia is also one of Turkey's good neighbors with increasing economic/commercial relations and an advanced visa liberalization scheme. Armenia, however, is the missing piece in this puzzle. The diplomatic efforts started in 2008, the so-called football diplomacy, raised expectations of normalization, but the situation is again deadlocked and the near future does not paint a bright picture.

Turkey's priorities towards the South Caucasus include the maintenance of regional security and stability. Turkey also supports the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the South Caucasus countries and encourages their integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures as well as other international organizations. Ankara is also aware that the closed border with Armenia limits Turkey's presence and influence in the South Caucasus. However, it is highly unlikely that Turkey would normalize its relations with Armenia at the expense of relations with Azerbaijan. In addition to Azerbaijan's strategic natural resources and the kinship links between the two states, Turkey's economic ties with Azerbaijan are the most important among all the three countries of the South Caucasus. Turkey is actually the second largest trading partner for Azerbaijan with a trade volume of \$2.416 bn. in 2010.¹

¹ Ministry of Economy Web Page: Azerbaijan Country Profile
<http://www.ekonomi.gov.tr/upload/7A079AFo-D8D3-8566-45209F73D74AFCCo/azerbaycan.pdf>

Football diplomacy and the normalization process in general presented a rare historical opportunity to establish peace and stability in the South Caucasus through the protocols that were signed in Zurich at the end of October 2009.

Ultimately, the normalization process between Armenia and Turkey stalled, and perceptions on both sides towards each other further diminished. According to data from EPF's Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) from 2010 (i.e. a survey conducted after the normalization process had already stalled), while the majority of Armenians still thought that opening the border with Turkey would benefit Armenia economically, 44% of respondents in Armenia thought that opening the border with Turkey would be harmful for internal political processes and 58% thought that the opening would be harmful to Armenia's national security.²

According to TESEV's "Foreign Policy Perceptions in Turkey" survey, which was conducted in December 2010, 39% of respondents in Turkey support establishing diplomatic relations with Armenia and opening the border, whereas 44% do not. At the same time, 50% of respondents support political rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey, whereas 37% oppose it.³ CRRC's data also show that 69% of respondents in Armenia think that the Turkish population's general attitude towards their country is rather or completely negative.⁴ These data demonstrate that mutual perceptions of the two countries' citizens are still problematic.

Initial expectations were that the attempts at normalizing Armenia-Turkey relations would trigger Armenia-Azerbaijan rapprochement. It was assumed, at least in Turkey, that a positive move on one track would facilitate progress in the other. However, Armenia-Turkey rapprochement was shelved so quickly that it should not be considered a positive move but rather an incomplete one. While, it perhaps contributed to an improvement of attitudes in Turkey towards Armenia, the stalled process has not really contributed to Armenia-Azerbaijan dialogue. In fact, given that relations with Azerbaijan were the main reason for the Turkish side putting the brakes on the protocols, the failed process could ultimately have a negative impact on the prospects for dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey clearly thinks that the Armenia-Turkey normalization process and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are interrelated. In other words, the stalemate in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict negatively affects regional dynamics as well as the Armenia-Turkey normalization process. Ultimately, even though the Armenia-Turkey and the Armenia-Azerbaijan tracks are to be negotiated separately, there is a connection between the two.

CREATING A PLATFORM?

Turkey's role in the South Caucasus is dependent on its relations with each country. There has probably been only one instance of Turkey addressing the region as a whole and this was Turkey's proposal for a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform immediately following the August 2008 armed conflict between Russia and Georgia. With this suggestion, Turkey offered an alternative platform to facilitate communication between the countries of the region and a framework to

2 Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) 2010, "Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved from <http://www.crcc.ge/oda/?dataset=5&row=122>.

3 Akgün M., Gündoğar Senyücel S., Görgülü A., Aydın E.E. "Foreign Policy Perceptions in Turkey", TESEV Publications, 2011. pp. 28-30

4 CRRC 2010, "Caucasus Barometer".

develop stability, confidence and cooperation.⁵ Even though the initiative was a positive one, the timing and its format were criticized. One of the major faults of the initiative was the exclusion of the EU and the US from the platform. This was of particular concern to Georgia, which has close relations with both parties. In addition, Turkey was not seen as an objective player in the region. Turkey was, and still is, considered to be closer to Azerbaijan than Armenia. In the end, the platform was rejected by both Azerbaijan and Georgia, while Armenia did not directly oppose the platform initiative, perhaps because Ankara approached Yerevan on this issue without preconditions.

Although the initiative did not happen, one of the by-products of this project was the initiation of Turkey's approach towards Armenia in the form of a road map, enhanced by football diplomacy, before the very positive signing of two protocols to normalize relations. Even though the platform initiative was proposed in the aftermath of the August 2008 war, the primary objective of this suggestion was to help find a solution to the Armenia-Turkey and Armenia-Azerbaijan conflicts.

Another important issue in the region is Russia's continuing influence. The August 2008 conflict has once more demonstrated that Russian military intervention remains a credible threat. Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has attempted to establish a presence in the post-Soviet space, but comparatively speaking there has been less effort to do so in the South Caucasus. One reason for this could be that Turkey is cautious about stepping on Russia's

toes. The conflicts between Armenia and Turkey and Armenia and Azerbaijan also hampered Turkey's presence in the region.

The normalization of relations is also in the interest of the US and the EU. The theory is that the normalization of relations will build peace and stability in the South Caucasus, fostering further integration into European structures. The US and the EU's desire to engage Turkey as a player in the region may be seen by some as a counterbalance to Russia and might be construed as a part of the overall strategy of the integration into Europe of the South Caucasus. Among the 3 South Caucasus states, Georgia is the most active in its desire to integrate with Europe, since it is unhappy with the continued occupation of its territory and the military presence of Russia on its internationally recognized territory. Georgia's desire to join NATO and the EU remains unchanged for more than a decade now. CRRC data demonstrate that 65% of respondents in Georgia support their country's membership in NATO and 68% support membership in the European Union.⁶ In Armenia, however, the majority of Armenia's population do approve of Armenia's joining the EU, but not NATO.⁷

Some experts perhaps had expectations that the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations would have a positive effect on the resolution dynamics of other conflicts in the region. Unfortunately this did not happen because the Protocol diplomacy proved to be short lived. Moreover, experts might have had unrealistic expectations that Turkey might emerge as a counterbalance to

5 Babacan, Ali. "Turkish initiatives, Calming the Caucasus," *International Herald Tribune*, September 23, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/23/opinion/23iht-edbabacan.1.16407371.html>

6 CRRC 2011, "Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved from <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/>, accessed in March 2012. Note that this is preliminary data and that a final cleaning of the dataset in spring 2012 may change values, but only marginally.

7 Ibid

Russia in the South Caucasus. While this is a possible theory, the Armenia-Turkey normalization process could also have been seen as a threat to Baku's interests. Baku continues to fear that Armenia will harden its position on the Karabakh issue if the border is opened. An argument can also be made that a rift between Baku and Ankara provides more leverage to Russia in the neighborhood or that Russia's influence in Armenia and the South Caucasus does not directly depend on Turkey's opening the border with Armenia. While an open border with Armenia would have some benefit for Turkey, the benefit of normalization of relations with Armenia does not outweigh the potential damage to its other strategic partnerships. In short, the Azerbaijan factor trumps other considerations.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES?

The general belief is that the OSCE and the EU's attempts to encourage peace-building in the region have had little success. Without the political will on all sides, establishing or improving a conflict prevention or resolution mechanism will not necessarily lead to achieving effective progress. For example, the involvement of the EU after the August 2008 armed conflict was positive, but has not achieved its intended goal. Real success would probably come with the creation of a framework for the various sides to come to the table and establishment of an environment that promoted resolution. Here, there is a role for regional actors, but given that those actors are often part of the conflict, their role is at best ambiguous. As one example, Russia's potential role is compromised by its relations with Georgia. While the Tbilisi administration views the conflict as one between Georgia and Russia, Moscow views it as between Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Vis-à-vis Georgia, Turkey may play a double role. First, Turkey can promote new initiatives to complement the Geneva discussions with the goals of promoting measures to stabilize the situation on the ground, establishing a format for dialogue and giving direction to the process. Turkey could also contribute to some of the serious, results-oriented Track II initiatives. A second role for Turkey would be to engage with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but without recognizing their independence. This approach could have negative implications on the relationship between Ankara and Tbilisi, however, which would force Turkey to adopt more cautious policies towards these regions.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, on the other hand, paints a darker picture for the future. The OSCE Minsk group that was created in 1992 to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict has not yielded a successful result so far. The Group is headed by a co-chairmanship consisting of France, Russia and the United States. In the twenty years since the establishment of the Minsk Group process, the parties involved in the conflict have not demonstrated the political will to compromise or prepared their populations for peace. In addition to the Minsk Group co-chairs' intense diplomatic efforts, Russia during Medvedev's administration had taken a lead in proposing new initiatives. Some experts argue that in her efforts Russia was somewhat 'bypassing' the other two co-chairs, but the official line of the Minsk group is that Russia was fully coordinating with them all of its initiatives of peace talks of late. Indeed, Russian engagement can be seen as positive in this regard as it has leverage and influence on both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In 2007, the Minsk Group proposed the Madrid principles to the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Even though some experts argue

that these principles offer common ground that would satisfy both sides, no agreement has been achieved so far. The principles were revised in 2009 and include the following points:⁸

- Return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control.
- An interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self governance.
- A corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will.
- The right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence.
- International security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.

For this conflict, confidence building measures at the official level have been difficult to achieve agreement on and, when they have been accepted, they remained largely unimplemented. There are many non-governmental projects aiming to increase people-to-people contact, such as those between journalists, but the results of these initiatives (i.e. improvement of societal perceptions and increased trust) will more likely be visible in the medium term. There is also a need to increase the transparency of the efforts of the Minsk Group which must be balanced against the necessity of maintaining confidentiality during certain phases of the negotiations.

Even though Turkey was eager to mediate at the beginning of the conflict, Turkey's support for

Azerbaijan motivated both by strategic and domestic factors has limited its potential role as a mediator. Armenia does not see Turkey as a neutral state and, according to CRRC data, 70% of respondents in Armenia think that Turkey should not be involved at all in finding a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. On the other side, 85% of respondents from Azerbaijan think that Turkey should be more involved in the process.⁹ Despite this polarized view, Turkey still closely follows the conflict resolution process since this issue is vital to Turkey's interests in terms of both the normalization of Armenia-Turkey relations and the establishment of stability and peace in the South Caucasus. For example, the protocols that were signed between Armenia and Turkey in October 2009 were suspended mainly because of the deadlock in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process. Turkey is in favor of a peaceful change in the status-quo and supports diplomatic means towards resolution. The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh itself is quite volatile. Because many people live in poverty, a large number of people have left. Not only has there been no progress towards resolution, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has recently underlined the possibility of a resumption of the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁰ ICG also emphasized that the situation of 600,000 Azerbaijani internally displaced people (IDPs) has still not been addressed. The same can be said about many thousands of refugees from both sides. Turkey can play a positive role in

⁹ CRRC 2011, "Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved from <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/>, accessed in March 2012. Note that this is preliminary data and that a final cleaning of the dataset in spring 2012 may change values, but only marginally.

¹⁰ Please visit <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2011/europe/armenia-and-azerbaijan-preventing-war.aspx> for more information.

⁸ Mark Dietzen, 2010-11 Fox Fellow to Freie University in Berlin, *A New Look at Old Principles: Making the Madrid Document Work. Caucasus Edition: April 1, 2011, Volume 4, Issue 1.*

reducing the risk of war. Turkey could start by encouraging Azerbaijan to collaborate with Armenia in implementing an incident investigation mechanism and getting both sides to agree to pull back snipers from the line of contact.

As for EU-Turkey cooperation, Turkey stands out as an indispensable partner in the South Caucasus for the EU. The interests of Turkey in the region coincide with those of the EU perhaps in more ways than those of many particular European countries. There is energy security, Euro-Atlantic integration, open borders, open economies, the reduction of security risks, trafficking, terrorism and resolution of conflicts. In fact, Turkey's agenda is virtually a carbon copy of the EU's interests. As members of the 'Western camp', it is not surprising that both Turkey and the EU desire a South Caucasus closer to Euro-Atlantic institutions. But despite that, there remains the need for closer dialogue between the EU and Turkey on the South Caucasus and consultations on policy regarding the conflict regions of Georgia. There is also the need to examine what can be done in order to ensure that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict does not spiral out of control. The EU should additionally be more active in terms of encouraging normalization between Armenia and Turkey that would radically reduce the security risks in the region and create positive momentum towards resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

THE ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS

Finally the role of non-state actors in the region deserves closer scrutiny. As CRRC data in 2011 show, public understanding of what civil society does is very low across the whole of the South Caucasus. Accordingly, trust in NGOs is quite low in Armenia (only 5% fully trust), Azerbaijan (7% fully trust) and Georgia (4%

fully trust).¹¹ NGOs, both domestic and international, face various challenges and the situation has become even more difficult in recent years because of a variety of reasons and factors. In Georgia, the space for dialogue since the August 2008 war has been reduced and some dialogue mechanisms that do exist are actually more reminiscent of those utilized over a decade ago. At the same time, some pre-war initiatives have remained and there have been new initiatives that include non-state actors, so there is still hope for the future.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is even more difficult as frustrations and grievances not only remain, but have actually increased. Baku looks at Track II diplomacy and the involvement of NGOs with skepticism regarding what either can bring or deliver. The key issue for Azerbaijan is that confidence building measures should not be seen to reward Armenia in the absence of any actual resolution. This condition presents a challenge for NGOs focused on conflict resolution. That said, with elections in 2012-2013 preventing progress in the conflict resolution process, Track II should be further emphasized. Twenty years on, the conflicts are still in limbo and unfortunately show no sign of improvement in the next decade. At this stage, the confidence-building process must acquire a long term perspective. Both state and non-state actors should place a particular focus on youth since they have little to no contact with their counterparts across conflict-lines.

The security situation in the region also has an impact on the scope of activities of NGOs. In Georgia, the post-2008 status quo provides a degree of stability for the wrong reasons, i.e. territorial boundaries were established by force and the Russian military and border guards now

¹¹ CRRC 2011, "Caucasus Barometer".

hold the line. Frustration and pent-up grievances are never far from the surface and trust levels are therefore close to zero. But it is still possible to implement Track II initiatives. Success in these efforts requires continuity and a consistent and reliable pattern of behavior. When there is such a trust deficit in the region, confidence building measures should be about incremental change on multiple levels in each society. When the peace process is at the level of Track I and reaches only senior elites, there is definitely the need to develop Track II. Confidence building measures by their very nature are part of a long-term process which never really ends. At the same time, it is possible to set mid-term objectives. Turkey provides a good location for regional initiatives because of limited travel restrictions for the many parties and because it provides an accessible and at the same time relatively neutral ground for all the conflict sides.

CONCLUSIONS

Turkey's presence in the South Caucasus has been limited and efforts to expand its influence

are directly impacted by the protracted conflicts in the region. At the same time, Turkey has the potential to become an influential regional actor as demonstrated by its good relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. However, the closed border with Armenia and the lack of diplomatic relations with it jeopardize this potential and isolate Turkey from a significant part of the region. The recent football diplomacy and the rapprochement process with Armenia did not move forward the positive momentum in the South Caucasus. Since it was not implemented, it did not facilitate rapprochement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For the time being, the regional deadlock prevails. Under these circumstances, Turkey will probably become more involved with Azerbaijan and Georgia in terms of developing cooperation in trade and energy and begin to adopt cautious policies towards conflict zones in order not to challenge the regional balance of power. Consultations with EU, however, can open up new opportunities for building cautiously more active policies vis-à-vis the entire region.



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The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) is an independent non-governmental think-tank, analyzing Turkey's most pressing social, cultural, political and economic issues. The Foreign Policy Programme exists to contribute to the democratization of foreign policy in Turkey and abroad by creating an environment for dialogue on key issues.

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