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## Evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy towards Georgia(\*)

### Change and Continuity in Turkish Foreign Policy

During Soviet times and since the creation of the Turkish Republic (1923), bilateral relations between Turkey and the Republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia were almost inexistant, since any form of contact had to go through the central authorities in Moscow.<sup>1</sup> Under these

circumstances, Turkey's early attitude towards the changes resulting from the Soviet Union's collapse in the South Caucasus and Central Asia was "somewhat cautious".<sup>2</sup> Soon, though, largely thanks to western backing in general and the United States in particular, Turkey began to change its foreign policy approach and to acquire the status of a regional power.

Throughout the Cold War, Turkish foreign policy was typically insular and non-interventionist, now Turkey has become more assertive, with an expanded concept of its security space. Turkey, which for almost half a century had been a staunch ally of the United States and a NATO member since 1952, was now fearful of losing its strategic importance as the bulwark southern flank for the

\* Briefly, Kemalism is not an organized political movement, rather it is an influential and important ideological guidance in the evolution of political ideas in the country. It was conceived under the leadership of the Republican People's Party Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, its principles were formalised at the 1931 Congress of the Republican People's Party, as well as written into the constitution in 1937. The tenets were symbolised by the emblem of the Republican Peoples Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi): "six arrows" (the Altı Ok). Each of them actually represents one of the key words of Kemalist ideology: Nationalism, Secularism, Republicanism, Populism, Statism, and Reformism. Basically, Turkey developed a policy of "Peace at Home and Peace Abroad", pursued a policy of "positive neutrality" between all the main European powers, and chose Europeanization as a means of nation building and modernization. A major break in the Kemalist vision of international relations occurred after WWII, with the intensified incorporation of

Turkey into the western world, in economic, foreign, and defence matters. See E.J. ZURCHER, *Turkey: A Modern History*, London, New York, Tauris, 2004, p. 190.

<sup>1</sup> D. JUNG – W. PICCOLI, *Turkey at the Crossroads*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> G.E. FULLER, *Turkey's new geopolitics: from the Balkans to western China*, Westview Press/RAND, Boulder Co, 1993, p. 63.

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### Abstract

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was a watershed for the twentieth century's history in general and for the role of Turkey in the newly born Eurasian region in particular. Largely thanks to western backing in general and the United States in particular, Turkey began to change its foreign policy and to put some of the Kemalist *dogmas*\* into question.

An orientation which is still visible today in a changing scenario sparked with the August war between Georgia and Russia in an area, the Caucasus, where Turkey has always had to deal with many regional and international actors to affirm its role, at first as a bridge between East and West, and then as a more autonomous and assertive mediator between all the participants

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western powers in the battle against the Soviet Bloc.

Initially, in this new and quickly changing international environment, President Ozal, prompted mainly by Washington, talked about the “coming of a Turkic century” within a territory “stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China”<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Turkey was among the first countries to recognise the sovereignty of the newly born republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

At a first stage, Turkic and Muslim countries had priority. But in a very a short time, it was understood that some of the early assumptions about Ankara's role in the newly independent Turkic republics of Central Asia proved somewhat inflated, due to a lack of capabilities, both financially and politically, i.e. costs of engagement were greater than gains<sup>4</sup>. Within this context, by mid-1992, the Caucasus emerged deserving Turkey's more immediate attention as a region that certainly is more promising for assuring Turkey that its engagements will pay off<sup>5</sup>.

### Concentration on the Caucasus and the Georgia choice

Therefore, after a period of euphoria, disappointment followed suit. Though not a coun-

try of the southern Caucasus, Turkey for many centuries has had close historic and cultural ties with the region, specifically with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Azerbaijan naturally gained a privileged position for Turkey.

As a country lacking vital energy reserves itself, Turkey hoped to capitalize on energy imports from Azerbaijan, reducing its overdependence on the Middle East, and seeking to become a convenient transit route to Western markets<sup>6</sup>. Georgia, because of its location to secure the transportation of Azerbaijani oil and gas to the international markets, took on a vital role in western and Turkish foreign policy making.

Thus, bringing stability and peace to the region became the main agenda for international policy makers. Indeed, one of the main concern for the Turkish government has been to turn Turkey into «one of the principal mediator of regional conflicts, the guarantor of peace and an overall power broker»<sup>7</sup>. The so-called “frozen conflicts”, namely Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been the principal hurdles to peace and stability in the region.

Georgia and Turkey both stand to benefit from Azerbaijani oil and gas, both as customers and as transit states. Although Turkey lacks any

ethnic, linguistic, or religious ties with the majority of the Georgian people<sup>8</sup>, their shared interests (and Georgia's desire to identify and build strategic partnerships with NATO member states) have been more than sufficient to form the basis for a strategic partnership<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> However, with a minority of them, Turkey shares those values. To name a few, there are the Muslim Ajars, who had their own autonomous republic on the Georgian-Turkish border, and also looked to Turkey in their demands for greater autonomy. With the new Saakashvili's government, their demands have been quelled and now Ajara has come back under the central government's control. Besides the Ajars, there are the so-called Meskhetian Turks, which are of mixed origins: some are descended from Turks, others from Turkicized and Islamicized Georgians. Moreover, there are the Laz of the Eastern Black Sea coast, an ancient Georgian-related subgroup. There are, also, some Islamicized Georgians in the interior of north-east Turkey, many of whom still speak a dialect close to standard Georgian. They are called Chvnebururi. However, they have shown no interest in being reunited with Georgia, which has not controlled the region since the Middle Ages. In addition, they are divided from the Orthodox-Christian population of Georgia by religion, having gradually converted to Islam from the sixteenth century onward. Please refer to E. KARAGIANNIS, *The Turkish-Georgian partnership and the pipeline factor*, in «Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies», Vol. 6, Issue 1, April 2004.

<sup>9</sup> S.T. HUNTER, *The Transcaucasus in transition: Nation-building and Conflict*, New York, 1994, p. 164-166.

<sup>3</sup> E.J ZURCHER, *Turkey: A Modern History*, London, New York, Tauris, 2005, p. 336.

<sup>4</sup> P. ROBINS, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, London, 2003, p. 294.

<sup>5</sup> E. KARAGIANNIS, *The Turkish-Georgian Relationship and the Transportation of Azerbaijani Oil*, «Caspian Crossroads», no. 3, March 1999.

<sup>6</sup> T. ISKIT, *Turkey: a new Actor in the Field of Energy Politics*, in «Perceptions», Vol. 1, March-May, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> MFA Republic of Turkey, Turkey's relations with Southern Caucasus, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sub.en.mfa?6bda4d8b-81a3-44d7-b8a0-5a287804f77b>.

## Energy policy as the driver in Turkish-Georgian Relations

Turkey formally recognized Georgia's independence in November 1991. Mainly since 1994, when Turkey finally understood the relevance of Georgia as the indispensable bridge connecting Turkey with Azerbaijan and Central Asia energy reserves to Europe<sup>10</sup>, Turkish-Georgian relations have steadily increased and reached the level of strategic partnership in a great number of fields, from defence, security, trade, and energy. Indeed, energy-related projects have been considered as the driver that lays behind the strengthening of their bilateral relations in all the other spheres of collaboration.

Mostly seen as a proxy for US involvement in the area, but always fully concordant with Turkey's interests and objectives, Ankara emerged as an ally for Tbilisi, as well as a model of development thanks to its long established connections with Europe and the US and its economic infrastructure, working state apparatus and strong state tradition<sup>11</sup>.

Of particular relevance for the development of the bilateral economic and commercial relations, and as evidence of the strong commitment of Turkey for the strengthening of regional cooperation, some projects are here worth mentioning. First of all, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline (BTE) projects, both operating since 2006, as well as the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railroad, which is a component of the East-West Transport Corridor or the so-called "New Silk Road" project - it is expected to be completed by the end of 2012<sup>12</sup>.

Cooperation on pipeline projects between Turkey and Georgia, has thus greatly contributed to the creation of new areas of collaboration between the two neighbors, not to mention the derivative effect on the local economy.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, trade volume between the two countries increased dramatically from 1992 to the present day. In the first half of

2010, Turkey ranks as Georgia's largest trading partner with USD 496 million<sup>14</sup>. Besides improving economic relations between the two neighbours, a major outcome of the energy policy of Turkey entailed also an intense and active cooperation in the sphere of defense. By establishing solid relations regarding security and military restructuring, the two countries have managed to protect the large scale pipeline projects and ensured the long-term viability of economic relations.

## Defence Cooperation

Turkey started its military collaboration with Georgia in 1992-93. It became closer and more intensive in 1995-96, when the first authorities in Georgia spoke about joining NATO. The beginning date of this cooperation was March 1997, when Georgia and Turkey signed a military cooperation agreement.

In this regard, it must be underlined, though, that cooperation between the Turkish and Georgian militaries have not implied the establishment of Turkish military bases on Georgian soil as stressed by Shevardnadze in 1999, in that «this might risk a collision with the Russian military in the long-run»<sup>15</sup>. Neither has Turkey initiated independently peacekeeping initiatives, nor it has joined regional organiza-

<sup>10</sup> The Armenian route was soon dropped, due to the strain relations between Turkey and Armenia. Armenia was practically isolated and excluded by Ankara because of a number of issues, such as the Azeri-Armenian war on Karabagh, Armenian territorial demands on North-eastern Turkey, and the allegations of "Armenian massacre".

<sup>11</sup> M. ÇELIKPALA, *From A Failed State to a Weak One? Georgia and Turkish-Georgian Relations*, in «The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations», no. 36, 2005, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Though, the realization of the mentioned projects was not an easy task to accomplish. The projects have been the products of a long and difficult struggle among many regional and international players (mainly Russia, Turkey, the United States, the European Union) for getting access to untapped oil and natural gas reserves which has become commonly known as the "New Great Game".

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. *Energy projects catalyst for regional cooperation and political stability in the Caucasus*, March 22, 2002, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/h.php?news=energy-projects-catalyst-for-regional-cooperation-and-political-stability-in-the-caucasus-2002-03-22>.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Georgia's H1 Foreign Trade Up by 18%, July 23, 2010, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22544&search=Turkey>.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. *Georgian President rules out NATO Membership, Turkish Bases*, March 8, 1999, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1141858.html>.

tions perceived as anti-Russian such as GUAM.

Rather, the Turkish military as well as the Turkish MFA have always stressed the fact that the military cooperation between Turkey and Georgia is part of a larger project to incorporate Georgia into the western and Atlantic security network through NATO and the US<sup>16</sup>. True that Turkey's interest was to manage to balance the Russian influence over Georgia by providing training for Georgian officers and, thereby, to strengthen the hand of Shevardnadze in domestic politics. But at the same time, Turkey had to be very cautious in not upsetting or threatening its relations with the big northern neighbor, i.e. Russia<sup>17</sup>.

Basically, Turkish-US assistance to the Georgian Army has included: the provision of military equipment such as medical equipment, transport vehicles and other supplies, the improvement of technical and logistical capabilities that complies with the NATO standards, the training of Georgian troops and officers with the Georgian Train and Equip Program (GTEP), which ended in 2004.

In 2001 and 2002 Georgia joined in nine NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) exercises and eight exercises held in

the spirit of PfP. Specifically, the Turkish Partnership for Peace Training Centre (TUPTC) has been providing on-spot-training with its mobile training teams in the states of Caucasus, Central Asia and the Balkans, in line with the project of "Increasing the Efficacy of TU PTC in NATO." The most striking result of this western orientation was confirmed at NATO's 50th Anniversary Summit in Washington in 1999, when Georgia declared its intention to quit the CIS Collective Security Treaty along with Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan<sup>18</sup>.

Moreover, both countries are participating in the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR) – along with Bulgaria, Russia, Romania and Ukraine – and cooperating within the Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM) on the Black Sea (so-called "Ukraine Initiative"), initiatives aimed at enhancing peace and stability in the Black Sea area and increasing regional maritime cooperation<sup>19</sup>.

The former Turkish President, has frequently reiterated Ankara's support for Georgia's territorial integrity. «We want South Ossetian and Abkhazian problems to be solved in frames of Georgia's territorial integrity through peaceful and constrictive means...», Ahmet Necdet Sezer stated. He also pledged that Turkey, «within its capabilities», will further continue its support for Georgia's «po-

litical and economic stability and development»<sup>20</sup>.

As stated by former Georgian Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili in January 2005, «Georgia, in its hardest times, has always seen friend and neighbor Turkey standing by it»<sup>21</sup>.

### The Abkhazian issue

An important aspect, which is often neglected when analysing Turkish-Georgian relationships, is represented by the Abkhazian issue, and mainly what Georgia considers illegal trade between Ankara and Sukhumi.

The maritime link between Turkey and Abkhazia is officially closed. The embargo is present since early 1990s after the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia. Russia removed the embargo in March 2008, five months before the beginning of the August conflict, sending a clear sign of its future moves.

Turkey, while always supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia, justifies these illegal trade relations with Abkhazia by saying that they are conducted by the members of the diaspora.

The Abkhaz, or Mohajirs, together with the other North Caucasian communities had settled in Turkey since the late 18th as a consequence of

<sup>16</sup> G. WINROW, *Turkey and the Caucasus: Domestic Interests and Security Concerns*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 2000, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> M. ÇELIKPALA, *From A Failed State to a Weak One? Georgia and Turkish-Georgian Relations*, in «The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations», no. 36, 2005, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> M. ÇELIKPALA, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> *National Security Concept of Georgia*, [http://embassy.mfa.gov.ge/idx.php?sec\\_id=16&lang\\_id=ENG](http://embassy.mfa.gov.ge/idx.php?sec_id=16&lang_id=ENG).

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. *Turkey, Georgia Pledge Mutual Support*, March 14, 2006, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12068>.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. *Georgia-Turkey relations set an example*, January 20, 2005, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/2418/georgia-turkey-relations-set-an-example.html>.

the Russian advance towards and subsequent conquest of the Caucasus region. Commonly, they are referred to as Cherkess or Circassians. With the national awaking in the 1980s and the outbreak of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, a more active and political influential Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey has emerged. Among them, it is worth mentioning the *Kafkas-Abhazya Dayanışma Komitesi - KADK* (the Caucasus-Abkhazia Solidarity Committee), the main North Caucasian body at a national level, which was founded in Istanbul on 23 August 1992, with the participation of representatives from 42 Caucasian Cultural Associations<sup>22</sup>.

Therefore, being the diaspora community quite numerous and influential in public opinion, Turkey finds it hard to prevent them from trading with Abkhazians. Rather, Turkey envisages economic cooperation as the only way to achieve regional stability.

It is clear that besides imposing fines and detaining some ships coming from Turkey, Georgia can do very little to hinder these trades. According to official figures, Georgia

seized more than 40 Turkish ships between 1999 and 2003 and 22 ships between 2004 and 2006 on charges of "illegal crossing of Georgian waters."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, trades between the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey and Abkhazia continues apace.

Moreover, Turkey's dilemma towards the Abkhazian issue has been coming to the fore once again after the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, with the ensuing recognition of independence by Russia<sup>24</sup> of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Abkhazia's publicly stated desire of being recognised also by Turkey, being Turkey ranked as the second trade partner of the Republic, Russia ranks first, with 60% of the imports from Turkey and 54% of export destined to Turkey<sup>25</sup>.

### The August 2008 war and its aftermaths

The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia certainly was a brief affair but its many implications are likely to play out for a long time. The five-day battle (August 08-12, 2008) has caused

"tectonic shifts" in regional geopolitics<sup>26</sup>.

One of the most striking outcomes of the war has been Turkish stance in such a changing scenario, which «...placed Turkey in a difficult diplomatic position, (...) between the United States and Russia»<sup>27</sup>.

During the war days, Turkey tried to stay out of the conflict and avoided taking sides. As Erdogan stated «we will not allow Turkey to be pushed to one side or the other. We will act in accordance with Turkey's national interests. Turkey will observe a balance in tandem with its interests»<sup>28</sup>.

On the one side, there is Ankara's main trade partner, Russia, which has come out of the war with definitely a new assertive attitude towards the situation in Georgia. Moscow, tired of western rhetoric, has made clear that it is willing to regain control over its "near abroad" and it emerges as the indisputable dominant power in the Caucasus. As a further evidence, besides the swift recognition of independence of the now *de jure* Republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has also recently signed agreements on establishing permanent Russian military bases on

<sup>22</sup> For a definitive and comprehensive account of migration of Diaspora to Turkey following the World War I and their activities see L. BEZANIS, *Soviet Muslim Emigrés in the Republic of Turkey*, in «Central Asian Survey», vol. 13, no. 1, 1994; M. ÇELIKPALA, *The North Caucasian Emigrés Between the Two World Wars*, in «International Journal of Turkish Studies», vol. 9, no.1/2, 2003; M. ÇELIKPALA, *From Immigrants to Diaspora: Influence of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey*, in «Middle Eastern Studies», vol. 42, no. 3, May 2006.

<sup>23</sup> H. KANBOLAT, *Georgia barrier to Turkish ships in Black Sea*, September 1, 2009, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/columnists-185736-georgia-barrier-to-turkish-ships-in-black-sea.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Only Nicaragua, Venezuela and the tiny Pacific island state of Nauru have followed suit.

<sup>25</sup> B.G. PUNSMANN - A. BAŞKAN - K. TARBA, *Abkhazia for the Integration of the Black Sea*, in TEPAV - ORSAM Report no. 8, December 2009, <http://www.abkhazworld.com/articles/reports/387-orsam-abkhazia-report-december-2009.html>.

<sup>26</sup> I. TORBAKOV, *The Georgia Crisis and Russia-Turkey Relations*, The Jamestown Foundation, 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=34181](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34181).

<sup>27</sup> I. TORBAKOV, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> I. KALIN, *Turkey and NATO: Is non-alliance an option?*, September 4, 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/columnists-152027-turkey-and-nato-is-non-alliance-an-option.html>.

their soil for the next half-century.<sup>29</sup>

On the other side, there is Turkey's closest ally, namely the United States, along with the Georgian military forces, which for decades had been trained by Turkish-US-NATO programmes, and that had been miserably defeated in five days.

Besides representing a bad blow for the credibility of the West in general and for the US and NATO military forces in particular, the Russian-Georgian confrontation underscored the unwillingness of the western community to take any concrete action and help Georgia against Russia. It was clear that neither the European Union, nor the United States were ready to sacrifice the already difficult relationship with Russia for Georgia's sake.

At the same time, both Brussels and Washington have intensified bilateral relations with the small Georgian state with the intention to keep Georgia into their sphere of influence. Precisely, the Eastern Partnership (EaP), launched by the European

Union in May 2009<sup>30</sup>, and a new US-Georgia Security Pact, signed in January 2009, covering areas such as democracy, defence and security, economic, trade and energy, and cultural exchanges<sup>31</sup>. Lately, Saakashvili made it also clear that EU-membership is a long-term perspective, and that he hopes to see visa facilitation measures implemented and a comprehensive free trade area established.

Therefore, caught in between Moscow and Washington, Ankara embarked on an intense *shuttle diplomacy* to promote itself as a peaceful mediator between Russia and Georgia, hoping that this might eventually lead to a normalization of Georgian-Russian relations and to a resolution of the conflicts on Georgian soil.

A clear example of Turkey's understanding of the regional developments and of the situation in Georgia, was thus the proposal for the creation of a "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP)"<sup>32</sup> put forward by

Ankara and Moscow soon after the end of the August 2008 hostilities, and based on the "Strategic depths" policy elaborated by the foreign policy advisor at the time and now Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu<sup>33</sup>.

Though, it must be pointed out that no tangible achievements of the CSCP have been visible so far because of the fact that many actors are involved, and each of them, Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, has its own interest to pursue and thus, finding a common denominator to achieve stability in Georgia and in the Caucasus is not an easy task to accomplish.

### Geopolitical Pragmatism

Another outgrowth of the Russian-Georgian crisis has been the widespread perceptions of a Turkey's shift towards East away from West. These worries, mainly brought about by an alleged vacuum left by Washington in the Caucasus, and by an increasing Turkish disappointment with the EU, arose right away at the time of the outbreak of hostilities in August 2008 when the United States decided to send ships to the Black Sea to intimidate Russia, and Turkey essentially prohibited the United States from doing so by invoking the

<sup>29</sup> The military bases are expected to be accommodated in Gudauta, Abkhazia, and in South Ossetia's capital Tskhinvali. Each base is likely to host up to 1,700 servicemen, T-62 tanks, light armored vehicles, S-300 air defense systems and various aircraft. Russia's military buildup in the region has also been condemned by the West for defying international law and contravening the internationally brokered ceasefire agreement signed by Russia and Georgia in the wake of their August 2008 conflict. April 7, 2010, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100407/158465631.html>.

<sup>30</sup> J. SÖDERSTRÖM, *Georgia and the Eastern Partnership Democratization without Conflict Resolution?*, The Institute for Security & Development Policy, Policy Brief, No. 22, April 22, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> N. MIKHELIDZE, *After the 2008 Russia-Georgia war: implications for the wider Caucasus and prospects for western involvement in conflict resolution*, Background paper of the conference on "The Caucasus and Black Sea region: European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and beyond", Rome, February 6-7, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> In early 2000, the then President of Turkey, Süleyman Demirel, came up with a similar idea, the Caucasian Stability Pact.

<sup>33</sup> C. FRAPPI, *La Turchia e la Piattaforma per la Stabilità e Cooperazione nel Caucaso*, ISPI Policy Brief no. 106, November 2008, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazioni.php?id=1>.

Montreux Convention of 1936<sup>34</sup>.

Ahmet Davutoğlu explained this move by saying that Turkey is not in a position to counter Russia for any reason and that western countries should try to understand «...the geographical conditions of Turkey... We don't want to pay the bill of strategic mistakes or miscalculation by Russia, or by Georgia»<sup>35</sup>.

Since the late 1990s, Ankara has been pursuing a policy of both competition and cooperation with both Russia on the one hand, and the EU and the US on the other. Hence, this Ankara's juggling behaviour, together with a more recent approachment towards the Eastern axis, (namely Iran, with which Turkey is developing energy cooperation deals, and also Syria) has recently raised concern in both EU countries and in the United States about a possible decline in the Western-Turkish alliance.

Erdoğan, however, reiterated that Turkey's main aim is to diversify energy supplies and Turkey does not permit anyone to encroach upon its strategic national interests. It would be «out of the question to stop imports from either country [Russia or Iran]», Erdoğan said following the Georgian war, especially as Turkey's energy needs grow

by almost 6 percent per year<sup>36</sup>.

A mere alliance with the West will not be enough for strengthening Ankara's national and regional goals. Basically, Turkey's choices are imposed by its strategic geopolitical position, as well as driven by economic and energy-related concerns. In order to grow politically and economically stronger, Turkey needs access to as many markets as it can secure, and it needs stability and peace in these places. This applies to its inclination towards Europe, but also its mutually beneficial relationships with the Russian Federation, the Caucasus countries and Middle Eastern states.

As S. Markonov highlighted «...international politics are no longer dictated solely by clear-cut alliances and blocs vying for power and influence. There are intermediate categories that range from full alliance and cooperation to non-interference and restraint. We have seen these modalities in Turkey's policies in Iraq, the EU, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Kosovo, Cyprus and the Black Sea»<sup>37</sup>. And the Caucasus crisis was another evidence of Turkish more assertive, autonomous and pragmatic foreign policy, with an approach focused on the principle of "problem solv-

ing»<sup>38</sup> with all its regional partners.

To note also that the August 2008 Russian-Georgian confrontation blatantly exposed to the West the vulnerability of the energy transit routes that traverse the Georgian territory, thus complicating Turkish strategy. An explosion on the Turkish portion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline three days before the Russia-Georgia conflict highlighted Turkish vulnerability, even if it were caused by technical error.<sup>39</sup>

Right in light of these events and considerations, the western powers should look at Turkey's and more recently Georgia's approachment towards Iran. Indeed, Georgia's approachment with Turkey and Iran «is directed neither against the West nor against Russia. (...) If translated into a platform for positive regional cooperation of all actors involved, it would only facilitate normalization of Georgia's relations with Russia. It's a win-win game», said Alexander Rondeli, an analyst from the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies<sup>40</sup>.

If Turkey aims at becoming the European Union energy hub as an alternative to Russian routes must secure the

<sup>34</sup> S. MARKOV, *New Russia and New Turkey in a New World*, May 13, 2010, <http://orientalreview.org/2010/05/13/new-russia-and-new-turkey-in-a-new-world/>.

<sup>35</sup> *Turkey's Top Foreign Policy Aide Worries about False Optimism in Iraq*, Council on Foreign Relations, September 19, 2008, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/17291/html>.

<sup>36</sup> T. BABALI, *Turkey at the Energy Crossroads: Turkey, Present and Past*, in «Middle East Quarterly», Spring 2009, pp. 25-33, <http://www.meforum.org/2108/turkey-at-the-energy-crossroads>.

<sup>37</sup> S. MARKOV, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> C. FRAPPI, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. B. PANNIER, *Georgia-Russia Conflict Changes The Energy Equation*, September 2, 2008,

[http://www.rferl.org/content/Georgia\\_a\\_Russia\\_Conflict\\_Changes\\_Energy\\_Equation/1194496.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Georgia_a_Russia_Conflict_Changes_Energy_Equation/1194496.html)

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. *Anxious Georgia embraces Iran, Turkey*, May 27, 2010, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=39235>

Georgian routes and undertake efforts towards the stability and peace of the Caucasus region. What is more, diversification of new energy supply routes, even Iranian ones, remains a crucial matter not only to Turkey's development but also for the West's energy security as a whole, in order to disentangle from an overdependence on Russia.

### Conclusion

Turkish-Georgian relations, apart from the friction from time to time caused by the Abkhazian issue, are mutually beneficial and both countries are willing to keep their partnership on the high level of their foreign policy agenda.

Georgia needs Turkey, the closer pro-western ally, to counterbalance the influence of Russia, which still consider the South Caucasus region and Georgia in particular as its "near abroad" thus showing its intention in keeping the territory under its political, economic, strategic sphere of influence, particularly true after the August 2008 war; Georgia needs Turkey also because it represents its only link with the West, a "window to Europe" as President Saakashvili stated, through which it can get closer to the Euro-Atlantic community.

On the other hand, Turkey views Georgia as the indispensable bridge connecting Turkey with Azerbaijan and Caspian Basin energy reserves. The importance of this preference has been underscored with the realization of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines, as well as with the fact that both countries have be-

come the joint legs of broader projects such as: the Turkey-Greece-Italy gas interconnector, and the U.S.-Turkish "east-west energy corridor" concept, which envisages extending these pipelines via the Trans-Caspian pipeline and west to Europe via the Nabucco pipeline between Turkey and Austria. This would, for the first time, allow the European Union to buy Caspian gas without a Russian intermediary. And given the continued standoff between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the High-Karabakh region, Georgia seems again the only feasible route.

At the same time, though, Turkey is playing an interesting game in the region. While Turkey's goal is to keep Georgia independent out of Russian control, due to Turkish-Russian important economic relations, Turkey pushes Georgia to improve its relations with the big northern neighbor, and it keeps developing projects and trade relations with the Russian Federation as well.

This rapprochement, together with the current energy cooperation with Iran, irritates both the European Union and the United States. Still, they can do very little to hinder these relations from developing.

Western policies towards Georgia and the South Caucasus have been strictly affected by relations with Russia. Having a limited leverage on Russia, and the August war was a clear sign of it, the EU and US have thus a limited scope of action.

Turkey, having strategic partnerships with most of the

players involved in the regional entanglements, emerges as a vital mediator between the EU, the US, and the Russian Federation, or better as "an asset that everybody wants to see on his side."<sup>41</sup>

Hence, Ankara mediation can also facilitate US-Russian relationships and help their cooperation on several issues, among them Iran's nuclear affairs, and thus further contributing to the stability of the Caucasus region and beyond. Recently, Brussels has also been welcoming the strengthening of the important role of Turkey in the region, and hopes to expanding bilateral cooperation in this context.<sup>42</sup>

In this complex scenario, for Georgia, having Turkey at its side could certainly be an advantage and a further means to strengthen its position in the wider Caucasus region. Most of the projects that envisage a Turkish engagement, are then followed by a Georgian involvement, both on the political, economic and energy spheres.

It follows a closely Western monitoring of the internal situation of Georgia, and of its foreign policy direction: Georgian Association Agreement with the European Union, Georgian-US Security Pact, along with the ongoing energy

<sup>41</sup> P. SALEM, *Rising Turkey in a Changing Middle East*, July 6, 2010, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=41113>.

<sup>42</sup> *The EU Will Help Georgia Pursue Democratic Development*, July 19 2010, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/print.asp?type=1&id=104728>.



projects to be implemented are only examples of the consequences of the strategic regional partnership with Turkey.

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