



# Implications of Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations for Regional Security and Development

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## **Abstract**

Turkey's actions in the South Caucasus face serious limitations as long as it has no direct influence over the dynamics of conflict settlement. Turkey has the potential to support transformation and reform within the societies of the South Caucasus through soft power. The current state of Turkey's relations with Armenia will keep on seriously curtailing Turkey's outreach in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan is a stakeholder in Turkish-Armenian relations and Turkey, because of its inability to proceed further with its bilateral agenda with Armenia, has become a stakeholder in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan's leverage on Turkey appears to be more and more influential. The importance of the notion of Turkishness in national politics is an important factor in assessing the strength of pro-Azeri feeling. The Kurdish problem is today a major political challenge. It is the most powerful dynamic underpinning the questioning and progressive redefinition of national identity.

**Keywords:** *Turkey / Foreign policy / South Caucasus / Azerbaijan / Armenia / Kurdish question*

## Implications of Turkish-Azerbaijani Relations for Regional Security and Development

by Burcu Gültekin Punsmann\*

### 1. Turkey and the security situation in the South Caucasus

At the end of the Cold War, the instability which arose from the power vacuum in the Caucasus region became a source of concern for Turkey. Turkey, which has traditionally avoided being involved in regional politics, was drawn into the volatile new politics of the Caucasus. Celebrations of the fall of the Soviet Union had been short-lived. The newly-rediscovered Caucasian borderlands transformed the Turkish-Soviet border into an area of instability, and brought the risk of a direct confrontation with Russia, recalling the recurrent Turkish-Russian wars of the past century.<sup>1</sup> The conflicts have spilled over into Turkey. Turkey has discovered her own Caucasian identity, and become an insider to regional dynamics. The Chechen, Georgian-Abkhazian and Nagorno-Karabakh wars have become part of the domestic Turkish agenda, with large parts of the population sympathizing with one or other of the conflicting parties. According to unofficial data - censuses in Turkey do not collect data on the ethnic origins of the population - the total numbers of Chechens and Abkhazians in Turkey might outweigh the populations of Chechnya and Abkhazia.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, Turkey's policy towards the South Caucasian republics aims at strengthening political institutions, fostering economic viability and ensuring military reform. In this respect, Turkey's approach to the region predates the Euro-Atlantic effort. The independence, sovereignty and stability of the region are considered important for Turkey's own security and regional ambitions.<sup>3</sup> In the second half of the 2000s, economic growth and internal political stability allowed Turkey to increase considerably its external action capacities in its neighborhood. In the case of Turkey, the need to project stability beyond its borders is more than mere rhetoric. It constitutes a real strategic objective. Turkey's neighborhood policy, as formulated by the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, aims at helping to secure and nurture a peaceful, prosperous, stable and cooperative environment conducive to human

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<sup>1</sup> For more historical background see Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, *Prospects for Regional Cooperation on NATO's South Eastern Border Developing a Turkish-Russian Cooperation in South Caucasus*, Final Report Manfred Wörner Fellowship 2004/2005, June 2005, <http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/04-05/f04-05.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, Argun Başkan and Kemal Tarba, "Abkhazia for the Integration of the Black Sea", in *ORSAM Reports*, No. 8 - *The Black Sea International Reports*, No. 1 (December 2009), p. 51, <http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showReport.aspx?ID=1410>.

<sup>3</sup> Mustafa Aydın, "Turkey's Caucasus Policy", in *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No. 23 (May 2010), p. 177-191, <http://pendientedemigracion.ucm.es/info/unisci/revistas/UNISCI%20DP%2023%20-%20AYDIN.pdf>.

development at home and the neighborhood.<sup>4</sup> This has proven to be a difficult challenge in the complex and conflicting environment where Turkey is located.

Turkey's role in the South Caucasus cannot be analyzed separately from its broader relationship with Russia. Throughout the last decade, Turkey has grown more deferential towards Russia's regional strategic interests. Turkey adopted a collaborative approach towards Russia rather than a confrontational one.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, this deferential attitude does not represent a limitation: it enlarges Turkey's room for maneuver, and underlines Russia's implicit acceptance of Turkey in the post-Soviet geography. Turkey's actions in the South Caucasus are curtailed by the fact that it cannot have a direct influence on dynamics of conflict settlement.<sup>6</sup> The proximity to the region can indeed be both an aide and a hindrance to diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> Turkey is too close to the theater. Its capacity to use hard power is seriously restricted not so much because of its lack of freedom of action and independence, but because of the risks it involves. The decision to send troops across borders can have far-reaching consequences.

Turkey has the potential to support transformation and reform within the societies of the South Caucasus through soft power. Turkey is the only country that can compete with the soft power of Russia in the region. Its force of attraction is based on economic growth and its liberal visa regime. Turkey has become a major destination for tourism, trade and work for people from the region. 3.5 million Russians, 1.4 million Georgians, 590,000 Azerbaijanis and 70,000 Armenians visited Turkey in 2012.<sup>8</sup> The nascent middle classes traveling to Turkey for work, trade or tourism become aware enough to acknowledge the need for social and political change at home.<sup>9</sup>

Turkey's new strength, its experience in building a strong, modern economy and its ambition to trade and integrate with its neighbors offer a chance to bring greater stability and to reduce conflicts. Turkey's approach can help shape a vision of a region in which security and economic interests are pursued pragmatically by all states and citizens within a framework of cooperation which aims at a normalization of relations. A pragmatic approach can help build trust and cooperation in a context of mistrust and mutually-perceived threats. This said, the pattern of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, which are based on a sense of kinship, is seriously curtailing Turkey's transformative effect in the South Caucasus region.

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, "Zero Problems in a new Era", in *Foreign Policy* website, 21 March 2013, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/21/zero\\_problems\\_in\\_a\\_new\\_era\\_turkey](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/21/zero_problems_in_a_new_era_turkey).

<sup>5</sup> Kevork Oskanian, "Turkey and the Caucasus", in "Turkey's Global Strategy", *IDEAS Special Reports*, No. SR007 (May 2011), p. 23-27, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR007/caucasus.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, "Turkey's Interest and Strategies in the South Caucasus", in *South Caucasus - 20 Years of Independence*, Tiflis, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2011, p. 293-294, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/08706.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Jackson, "The Limits of Good Intentions: The Caucasus as a Test Case for Turkish Foreign Policy", in *Turkish Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter 2010), p. 91, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/558/the-limits-of-good-intentions-the-caucasus-as-a-test-case-for-democracy>.

<sup>8</sup> Tourism statistics available on the Turkish Statistical Institute website: [http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt\\_id=1072](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=1072).

<sup>9</sup> Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, "Increased security vs vulnerability in the Middle East", in *Hurriyet Daily News*, 7 February 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=a-case-of-increased-security-versus-vulnerability-in-the-middle-east-2011-02-07>.

## 2. Turkish-Azerbaijani security relations

Turkey is a factor that has to be dealt with in security equations. Turkey and Azerbaijan have signed a defense pact, which includes a mutual assistance clause.<sup>10</sup> Its signature was made possible by Russia's implicit understanding of its symbolic nature, which explained Russia's restrained reaction to it. Turkey has acted as a security provider for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and, by extension, for Georgia, although this relationship has been overshadowed by NATO and US involvement. The BTC oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline became facts on the ground in June 2006 and March 2007 respectively. The region therefore matters for Turkey's energy security.

However, the current state of Turkey's relations with Armenia will keep on seriously curtailing Turkey's outreach in the South Caucasus. In April 1993, Turkey sealed its border with Armenia by closing the Doğu Kapı/Akhourian crossing and halting direct land communications between the two countries<sup>11</sup> in view of the escalating conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and more precisely after the Armenian offensive against Kelbajar, which triggered a massive flow of refugees.<sup>12</sup> The border has been closed since that date.<sup>13</sup> According to Turkish logic, since closing the border was a retaliation for Armenia's occupation of Azerbaijani territory, ending the decade-long blockade is inextricably linked to the political settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the liberation of Azerbaijani lands. The failure of the last attempt at normalizing relations between Turkey and Armenia in 2009-10 led to a reassertion of the Nagorno-Karabakh conditionality.

After the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, the efforts of the Turkish and Armenian governments to normalize their bilateral relations gained visibility. However, up until March 2009, attempts at normalizing Turkish-Armenian relations have not impacted negatively on Turkish-Azerbaijani bilateral ties. Turkish-Armenian talks were being conducted under strict confidentiality. Confidentiality, though initially justified, could have been accompanied by a communication strategy. Apparently, Baku was not kept in the loop about the substance of the Turkish-Armenian moves on normalization.<sup>14</sup> In April 2009, as Turkish-Armenian issues topped foreign policy

<sup>10</sup> Shahin Abbasov, "Azerbaijan-Turkey Military Pact Signals Impatience in Minsk Group Talks", in *Eurasianet*, 18 January 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62732>.

<sup>11</sup> Burcu Gültekin, "Les enjeux de l'ouverture de la frontière turco-arméniennes. Les contacts transfrontaliers entre la Turquie et l'Arménie", in *Les dossiers de l'IFEA. Série La Turquie aujourd'hui*, No. 11 (Octobre 2002), [http://www.ifea-istanbul.net/dossiers\\_ifea/Bulten\\_11.pdf](http://www.ifea-istanbul.net/dossiers_ifea/Bulten_11.pdf). See also Nathalie Tocci (ed.), *The Closed Armenia-Turkey Border: economic and social effects, including those on the people; and implications for the overall situation in the region*, Brussels, European Parliament, August 2007, [www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/studiesdownload.html?languageDocument=EN&file=18288](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/studiesdownload.html?languageDocument=EN&file=18288).

<sup>12</sup> David Atkinson, "Report on the humanitarian situation of the refugees and displaced persons in Armenia and Azerbaijan", in *Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Reports*, Doc 7250, 14 February 1995, <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=6823>.

<sup>13</sup> Burcu Gültekin Punsman, "Building Bridge of Trust and Confidence between Turks and Armenians in Support of the Normalization and Reconciliation Process", in *Today's Zaman*, 8 April 2010, [http://www.todayzaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=206806](http://www.todayzaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?load=detay&link=206806).

<sup>14</sup> Arif Ragimzade, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Regional Issues and member of the political board of the Yeni Azerbaijan Party, stated: "The Turkish government should provide clear and broad information about talks with Armenia. It is a surprise that information of Turkey and Armenia about talks does not coincide. In this situation Azerbaijani public has fair resentment". See: "Fraternal relations

agendas and media attention, the process went out of control. The profusion of comments and interviews increased expectations: the impression that the Turkish-Armenian border could be opened overnight triggered panic in Azerbaijani society and its leadership, and opened a period of turbulence in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.

The news of the impending opening of the Turkish-Armenian border led to public outrage in Azerbaijan. Public positions on issues considered patriotic could be interpreted as a first step for wider participation in political life. These public reactions revealed close similarities with the Turkish boycott campaigns. Turkish and Azerbaijani societies have indeed been growing closer for the last fifteen years.

Azerbaijani opposition and ruling parties issued a joint statement condemning the Turkish move, media organizations signed a declaration,<sup>15</sup> Allakh-Shukur Pashazade, Azerbaijan's most senior Muslim cleric, addressed an open letter to Ali Bardakoğlu, the head of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate, internet campaigns were launched, and the Executive Director of the Baku radio station Media FM, Tural Aliyev, announced that if the Turkish-Armenian border was opened, his station would cease broadcasting songs by Turkish singers.<sup>16</sup> The common feature in all these statements was the feeling of betrayal of the entire Azerbaijani nation by Turkey.<sup>17</sup>

Today, the processes of the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations and that of the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict still remain distinct, but are, nevertheless, increasingly intermingled. At official level there is a clear understanding in Turkey that Azerbaijan is part of the Turkish-Armenian equation.<sup>18</sup> Azerbaijan is a stakeholder in Turkish-Armenian relations and Turkey, because of its inability to proceed further with its bilateral agenda with Armenia, has become a stakeholder in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. The development of Azerbaijani leverage on Turkey

Contrary to the normal pattern of an asymmetrical inter-state relationship, where the bigger and more powerful state has leverage on the weaker one, Azerbaijani leverage on Turkey appears to be more influential. Azerbaijan's leverage on Turkey is increasing: SOCAR, the Azerbaijani national gas company, is becoming an important player in the Turkish economy. By late 2017, SOCAR's investments in the Turkish

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between Azerbaijan and Turkey should not be sacrificed for some interests: Milli Medjlis deputy", in *Today.Az*, 10 April 2009, <http://www.today.az/news/politics/51476.html>.

<sup>15</sup> See "Union for Democracy to send protest letter to Turkish leadership", in *Today.Az*, 13 April 2009, <http://www.today.az/news/politics/51506.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Liz Fuller and Emil Danielyan, "Azerbaijan continues to vent anger with Turkey", in *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, 10 April 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijan\\_Continues\\_To\\_Vent\\_Anger\\_With\\_Turkey/1606118.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Azerbaijan_Continues_To_Vent_Anger_With_Turkey/1606118.html).

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem. See also Burcu Gültekin Punsman, "Azerbaijan in the Changing Status Quo: Adaptation Strategies", in Annie Jafalian (ed.), *Reassessing Security in the South Caucasus. Regional Conflicts and Transformation*, Farnham and Burlington, Routledge, 2011, p. 75-90.

<sup>18</sup> Mustafa Aydın, "Turkey's Caucasus Policy", cit.

<sup>19</sup> Esra Çuhadar and Burcu Gültekin Punsman, "Reflecting on the Two Decades of Bridging the Divide: Taking Stock of Turkish-Armenian Civil Society Activities", in *TEPAV Publications*, No. 62 (2012), p. 71, <http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/yayin/s/481>.

economy are expected to reach 17 billion dollars,<sup>20</sup> including the PETKİM acquisition and TANAP, the Azerbaijani-Turkish pipeline project.

The Azerbaijani-Turkish inter-governmental agreement on the implementation of the TANAP pipeline was signed on 26 June 2012. Both countries hailed TANAP as a step ahead “towards a new age of partnership.”<sup>21</sup> The Nabucco consortium had never resolved the issue of accepting Azerbaijan’s state oil company as a partner in that pipeline project. A pipeline under its own control will give Azerbaijan the control over the Shah Deniz II gas exports.

TANAP as a transnational gas export project realized at the initiative of Azerbaijan and in cooperation with Turkey, is expected to become a game changer. TANAP will fundamentally change the situation as regards bringing Caspian gas to Europe: TANAP is backed by gas and funding from Azerbaijan. The cost is estimated at 5 billion dollars. The partners will finance the construction of the pipeline proportionately to their respective shareholdings, i.e. SOCAR 80%, BOTAŞ 10%, and TPAO 10%. Third-party gas-producing companies, apparently meaning Shah Deniz consortium partners, may be allowed to join the consortium later as minority shareholders. The capacity of the transit line is projected at 16 billion cubic meters (bcm) annually in the first stage, to be increased to 24 bcm in the second stage.<sup>22</sup>

In accordance with the long-term bilateral agreement signed previously with Azerbaijan, Turkey will be entitled to buy 6 bcm/y from Shah Deniz in Phase Two of production in order to supply her domestic market. The highest priority for Turkey is to meet her supply security needs. According to BOTAŞ, Turkey’s natural gas demand is expected to increase to around 66 bcm/y by 2020. Without additional import contracts, Turkey will only be supplied with approximately 41 bcm/y by that date.<sup>23</sup> The existence of the earlier bilateral long-term gas purchase agreement with Azerbaijan was forgotten during the negotiations for the Nabucco pipeline project. Turkish requests to secure 15 percent of the gas piped through Nabucco and 4-8 bcm/y of Azeri gas to supply her domestic market were considered unacceptable. Ankara found it exceedingly difficult to agree to allow the passage of substantial gas volumes across Turkish territory without being able to access a portion of these volumes for the Turkish market.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, for the first time Turkey will become a main partner in a pipeline project which will transform the country into the fourth natural gas artery to Europe. Whether the project also involves gas storage in Turkey remains unclear.

<sup>20</sup> Vusal Gasimli, “Azerbaijan Eyes to Become Top Investor in Turkey”, in *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 14 November 2002, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/op-ed/3044>.

<sup>21</sup> “Agreement signed between Azerbaijan and Turkey on TANAP pipeline”, in *News.az*, 27 June 2013, <http://www.news.az/articles/economy/63113>. On this issue see also Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, “A Step Ahead Towards the Stage of Maturation in Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations: The Trans Anatolian Pipeline”, in Sabit Bagirov (ed.), *Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline: Challenges and prospects for the Black Sea Countries and the Balkans*, Baku, Qanun, 2012, p. 85-91, <http://www.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=16334>.

<sup>22</sup> See TANAP’s official website: *TANAP Project, the Silk Road of Energy, Has Been Signed*, <http://www.tanap.com/en/the-energy-of-the-future-is-ready.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> Gareth M. Winrow, “Problems and Prospects for the Fourth Corridor: the Positions and Role of Turkey in Gas Transit to Europe”, in *Oxford Institute for Energy Studies Working Papers*, No. NG 68 (June 2009), p. 14, <http://www.oxfordenergy.org/2009/07/problems-and-prospects-for-the-%E2%80%9Cfourth-corridor%E2%80%9D-the-position-and-role-of-turkey-in-gas-transit-to-europe>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

However, TANAP is likely to remove bilateral relations from the realm of emotions, and clearly mark out the interests of both sides, thus transferring cooperation between the two states onto healthier ground based on win-win pragmatic dealings. In the near future, bilateral efforts will focus on working out the details and mechanisms of the agreements. In the context of lengthy negotiations, the brotherhood rhetoric that has prevailed so far between the two countries carries the risk of blurring the picture of each side's own interests and prerogatives, which will become irritating for both sides.

Importing low-cost gas ranks high in the list of BOTAŞ's priorities for Turkey's energy security. Noting Turkey's geographical location, BOTAŞ has been opposed to paying the same price as Central Europeans for gas produced in the Caspian and Gulf regions and in the Middle East. Turkish officials have insisted on purchasing the gas at Turkey's eastern border at a lower price. On the contrary, Azerbaijan has an interest in selling its gas at the highest price. Azerbaijan's gas production will likely reach 30 bcm/y by 2015 and 50 bcm/y by 2025.<sup>25</sup> The conditions of the onwards transit of Azeri gas to the high-value European markets have to be clearly settled. Turkey should be moving towards formalizing a gas transit regime. In the longer term, Turkey's aspiration to become an energy trading hub, as opposed to a merely physical hub, would imply the reselling of gas.

#### **4. The Azeri lobby in Turkish society: solidarity with Azerbaijan as a breeding ground for nationalism**

Pan-Turkism enjoyed a brief spell of popularity among Turkish politicians in the first half of the 1990s, but subsequently withdrew to its traditional social niche of the Turkish nationalist milieu.<sup>26</sup> The pro-Azeri lobby has traditionally found its support amongst extreme-right pan-Turkic circles. The opening of the post-Soviet space with the fall of the Soviet Union galvanized pan-Turkish sentiment. However, the definition of post-Soviet geography as a Turkish space could not stand the test of reality: disillusionment at the end of the 1990s, together with the steady development of Turkish-Russian relations, marginalized pan-Turkic ideology.

Today these pan-Turkic groups lost much of their influence. Neither the size of the Azeri-origin population, which is rather small, nor the strength of the business links between Turkey and Azerbaijan are enough to explain the effectiveness of the pro-Azeri lobby. In comparative terms, the Northern Caucasian diaspora is much more significant than the ethnic Azeri groups. Figures for the wider North Caucasian diaspora range between 2 and 7 million.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Mehmet Ögütçü, "Limited window of opportunity for Caspian gas and TANAP", in *Today's Zaman*, 19 June 2012, [http://www.todayszaman.com/news-284032-limited-window-of-opportunity-for-caspian-gas-and-tanap-by-mehmet-ogutcu\\*.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/news-284032-limited-window-of-opportunity-for-caspian-gas-and-tanap-by-mehmet-ogutcu*.html).

<sup>26</sup> On this issue see Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, "Turkey's Interest and Strategies in the South Caucasus", cit.; Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, "Azerbaijan in the Changing Status Quo...", cit., p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, Argun Başkan and Kemal Tarba, "Abkhazia for the Integration of the Black Sea", cit., p. 51.

Financial and organizational support provided by Azerbaijani channels seems to be instrumental in the mobilization of the pro-Azeri lobbies. As noted above, the news of the impending opening of the Turkish-Armenian border led to public outrage in Azerbaijan. Reactions have been good indicators of the potential for mobilization of actors of Azerbaijani society around politically acceptable issues. Public positions on issues considered as legitimate and patriotic could be interpreted as a first step for wider participation in political life. These public reactions originating from the Azerbaijani society revealed close similarities with the Turkish boycott campaigns.

Advocacy activities for Turkish-Azeri solidarity are fuelling nationalist sentiment and strengthening a monolithic vision of national identity. The motto of “two states, one nation”, which has underpinned official relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, carries the hallmarks of pan-Turkic logic in presenting Turkishness as the natural link. Turks and Azeris are depicted as one nation divided by history into two separate states. This led to the understanding that Azerbaijani and Turkish national interests are identical.

Azeri lobbying channels were very active in the campaign conducted in Turkey in 2012 for the commemoration of the Khojaly massacres. The rally that took place in Taksim square in Istanbul on the day of commemoration disturbed however a large part of the Turkish society. Racist anti-Armenian slogans chanted during this rally upset Turkish public opinion and the political class. The fact that the Interior Minister İdris Naim Şahin took part in the rally without reacting to these slogans aggravated the outrage. As a matter of fact, the Turkish-Azerbaijani people-to-people dialogue rarely involves liberal actors in either society. Furthermore, interaction between Turkish and Azerbaijani civil societies seems to have failed to support further democratization in either country. Contrary to civil society initiatives between Turkey and Armenia since the second half of the 2000s, initiatives between Turkish and Azerbaijani civil society actors are scarce. The real degree of interaction between Turkish and Azerbaijani society is rarely questioned, since the bilateral relationship is perceived as unproblematic.

## 5. Turkish-Armenian reconciliation at societal level

The murder of the *Agos* newspaper editor Hrant Dink in 2007 caused deep shock among Turkish intellectuals and the youth<sup>28</sup> and gave a boost to cross-border contacts between Turkey and Armenia. The shock mobilized a debate on the issue of the genocide. These trends will, in the long run, impact very positively on the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation. Turkish-Armenian reconciliation is seen as an important issue for the further democratization of Turkish society and the Turkish political system.

As a reaction to Hrant Dink’s assassination, approximately 275 Turkish academics, journalists and other liberal intellectuals signed a petition, published on 5 December 2008, drafted by professors Baskin Oran and Ahmet Insel, liberal journalist and academic Cengiz Aktar, and Islamist-oriented *Yeni Şafak* columnist Ali Bayramoğlu,

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<sup>28</sup> On this issue see Esra Çuhadar and Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, “Reflecting on the Two Decades of Bridging the Divide...”, cit., p. 77-79.



apologizing personally for the “great catastrophe” suffered by the Armenians in 1915.<sup>29</sup> The organizers opened a secure website to collect signatures; the petition remains open. The number of signatories has reached some 30,000. The text calls on the Turkish people to confront a controversial episode in their history.

The reactions triggered by this apology initiative revealed the existence of a domestic debate on the disputed events of 1915. Turkey’s Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli issued a written statement stressing that Turks have no reason to apologize.<sup>30</sup> Sixty retired Turkish ambassadors and consuls-general declared on 8 December 2008 that the initiative was ungrounded and harmful to Turkish national interests. On the other side a number of intellectuals and historians criticized the text of the apology insofar as it avoided qualifying the events of 1915 as a genocide. Others voiced the criticism that the state, and not individuals, should apologize. Others minimized the importance of the apology campaign, stressing that the priority should be to ensure a suitable atmosphere for an open discussion. The initiative paved the way for the commemoration of 24 April in Taksim.

## 6. The peace process with the Kurds as a decisive factor

In the coming years, the strength of pro-Azeri sentiments will depend on the relative importance of the notion of Turkishness in national politics. The Kurdish problem is today a major political challenge. It is the most powerful dynamic underpinning the questioning of the founding myths of the Turkish nation and the progressive redefinition of Turkey’s national identity which is likely to lead to a revisiting of history.

The issue of Turkish-Armenian relations has become intertwined with the Kurdish problem.<sup>31</sup> Generally speaking, the Kurdish problem fuels nationalist feeling and creates polarization within society. On the other hand, the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) openly in favor of reconciliation with Armenia. During the hearing held on 21 October 2009 in the Turkish Parliament on the protocols signed between Turkey and Armenia, reactions of the opposition parties, namely MHP and the Republican People’s Party (CHP), appeared to be quite similar. The stress was put on the Azerbaijani suffering in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the importance of Turkey’s solidarity with the Azerbaijani cause. Only the Kurdish party (Democratic Society Party, DTP at that time, BDP today) expressed its support for the protocols, and urged Turkish-Armenian and Kurdish-Armenian reconciliation.

The municipalities of Kurdish-populated cities such as Van and Diyarbakır are actively looking for establishing good relationships with Armenians of Armenia and the diaspora and are channeling funds for the restoration of Armenian heritage sites located in their cities. Kurds, who consider themselves victims of Turkish nationalism, manifest greater

<sup>29</sup> See the website *özür diliyorum*: <http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com/foreign.aspx>.

<sup>30</sup> “Bahçeli den ‘Ermenilerden özür diliyorum’ a tepki” [Bahçeli reaction to ‘I apologize to Armenians’], in *Radikal*, 7 December 2008, [http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/bahceliden\\_ermenilerden\\_ozur\\_diliyoruma\\_tepki-911831](http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/bahceliden_ermenilerden_ozur_diliyoruma_tepki-911831).

<sup>31</sup> On this issue see Burcu Gültekin Punsman, “Paving the Way for Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation: A Personal Account”, in *Turkey Analyses*, June 2013, p. 9, [http://www.fes-tuerkei.org/media/pdf/einzelpublikationen/TurkeyAnalyses\\_TurkishArmenian\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.fes-tuerkei.org/media/pdf/einzelpublikationen/TurkeyAnalyses_TurkishArmenian_Eng.pdf).

readiness to enter into a historical reconciliation process with Armenians and are ready to acknowledge that Armenians suffered as well from Kurdish nationalism.

In more general terms, the negotiation process between the government and the PKK, described as the “peace process”, carries the risk of a nationalist backlash in case of failure and significant dividends if it proves conclusive. A more multicultural identity will strengthen Turkey’s outreach in the South Caucasus and boost democratization efforts in the whole region.

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