

Some Aspects of Turkey's South Caucasus Policy at the Modern Stage

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The present work deals with Turkey's Caucasian policy at the modern stage, from about 2000 to 2020. During this period, the Republic of Turkey has revealed a number of interesting initiatives in the South Caucasus, and we think their study is interesting both in terms of understanding Turkish foreign policy and in analyzing the ongoing processes in the South Caucasus. Since its establishment the Republic of Turkey has been interested in having intensive relations with the countries of the South Caucasus. Consequently, Turkey's South Caucasus policy is constantly being elaborated by Turkish diplomats, scholars, and analysts. You will find many significant details in the studies or evaluations that are public and available to scientists. These works reveal a great effort of Turkey to successfully develop the South Caucasus policy. We note here that this policy works successfully in many components. We have reviewed the works of all the leading authors who write very interestingly about Turkey's Caucasus policy.

Keywords: Turkey, South Caucasus, South Caucasus Policy

Introduction

Actually, all experts working on Turkey's South Caucasus policy agree that this direction is critically strategic in Turkish foreign policy, especially since Turkey's aspirations for Europe have not been successful. However, it should also be noted that since the founding of the Republic of Turkey (the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923), all its political leaders have openly stated that the South Caucasus has always played an important role in Turkish foreign policy. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk 1881-1938; Founder of the Republic of Turkey (1923) and its first president) was the first to speak about this even on February 8, 1920 with the representatives of the delegation that arrived from Georgia:

We are connected with Georgia not only with sympathy, but also with a unity of goals. We have a strong enemy in the west and we need a strong east. We especially need a strong Caucasus and the most important nation in the Caucasus - we need a strong and independent Georgia. Georgia and Turkey must make sure that other Caucasus states become free as well. (Svanidze, 2000, p. 10)

Researchers on the Processes of that Period

Many leading scholars write about the South Caucasus policy of Turkey during this period, e.g. Kamer Kasim, Mitat Celikpala, Ahmed Hani, Oktay Tanrisever, Mustafa Aydin, Haidar Chakmak, Dimitri Triantafilou, Vugar Imanbeyli, Sergei Markarov, Eugene Kogan, Elnur Soltanov, Faik Elekberov, Musfik Emirov, Richard

Giragosian, Sergey Minasyan, Alexander Makarov, Alexander Iskanderian, David Shahnazarian, Armen Manvelian, Revaz Gachechiladze, and others.

We will talk about a few of them. In one of his works, Kerim Has, a Turkish expert, says that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the regions discovered by Turkey were the Caucasus, along with Central Asia, with its historical, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious ties (Xac, 2016) and these regions in the area of Turkey's strategic interests after this period.

Guyane Novikova, an Armenian expert on international relations, describes Turkey's Caucasus policy, especially since "the Justice and Development Party" (AKP) came to power, focusing on the following goals:

- To find a balance between state security and personal freedom;
- To work with neighboring states to resolve problems;
- To conduct a proactive diplomatic course for the purpose of avoiding crises;
- The policies pursued with each state should be consistent;
- To increase its activities in international organizations;
- To work and develop a new image of the Turkish state as a world actor (Novikova, 2010, p. 134);

This researcher refers to Turkey as a dynamically growing power on the Eurasian continent and says that especially since 2002, Turkey has been pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy course towards Russia and the countries of the South Caucasus. But, he still characterizes it as a second quality region in Turkey's foreign policy and says that this region will become a priority for Turkey once Turkey's problems with the US and the EU are eliminated (Novikova, 2010, p. 134); According to Guyane Novikova, Turkey is not the dominant power in the South Caucasus: "Its strategic interests and claims are somewhat at odds with the role of regional power. The variability of Russian and Turkish interests in the South Caucasus creates additional potential for conflict between the countries of the region." (Novikova, 2010, p. 134). The author believes that Turkey does not have the appropriate material resources to intervene more deeply in the South Caucasus, despite the intensive cooperation with the two states in the region: with Georgia and Azerbaijan, especially in the economic and military spheres. The Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia strategic triangle ensures the South Caucasus regional partnership with NATO with the help of Turkey.

As for the policy towards Armenia after the August 2008 war, the author says that despite the "Caucasus Stability Platform" and the failed "Football Diplomacy", Turkey will have to soften its relations with Armenia and "the Turkish government has been forced to take certain steps to normalize its relations with Armenia." (Novikova, 2010, p. 134).

According to Sergei Markedonov, the South Caucasus is still the object of geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the United States. Washington's interests in the region are driven by "energy pluralism" or by finding alternative ways to supply oil and gas to Europe. According to Markedonov, Turkey has been particularly active in the region since 2008, when it launched the Stability Platform. But, according to the author, this initiative was formed as a result of controversy between the players of the region. According to him, the countries of the South Caucasus are united in two blocs: Turkey and Russia. The positions of Ankara, Tbilisi, and Baku coincide on many issues. Russia pursues a policy of balancing with Yerevan in parallel with the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Markedonov, 2016, p. 9).

Researcher Ali Alipour is well acquainted with Turkey's interests in the South Caucasus region. In his works, he deeply analyzes the role of Turkey in the geopolitics of the region, its ties, and trade and economic relations with Azerbaijan, and after a thorough analysis, concludes that the Turkish economy does not have the

ability to play a significant role in the current processes in the South Caucasus (Alipour, 2015, p. 192). Although the author discusses in detail the multifaceted relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey in his work, he still considers Georgia, together with Azerbaijan, as Turkey's main partner ("a key partner for Turkey in the South Caucasus"), due to Georgia's strategic location. Ali Alipour still believes that Turkey is unlikely to achieve its goals due to the Russian factor in the South Caucasus, as Turkish policy faces great challenges, but will still remain an active policy-making force (Alipour, 2015, p. 192).

Authors Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay question Turkey's reference to being a regional power. They have question marks as to whether this country is already internally established? Is it Western civilization or Eastern? They ask the question: If Turkey is a regional power with global ambitions, what is Turkey's global vision? These authors describe Turkey's relations with the Black Sea countries, the Caucasus, and Central Asia as "competitive cooperation" with Russia, with which it has strong trade and other types of relations (Bryant & Hatay, 2013, p. 8).

Speaking about Turkey's South Caucasus, the Turkish author Kemal Kirişçi states that he supports the Turkish-backed idea of "soft regionalism" as an informal and pragmatic policy that would facilitate more trade with neighboring countries. He believes that Turkey can be a leading force in this policy region, as Turkey has proper ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan. It is true that the border with Armenia has not been opened and the protocols have not been signed, both sides are carrying out certain activities and there are contacts between the peoples. The author says that despite the recent economic downturn, Turkey remains the largest economy in the region and a transit hub on the future trade route from China (Kirişçi & Moffatt, 2015, p. 71).

Turkish researcher Mustafa Aydin writes in his works that after the end of the Cold War, Turkey took time to adapt to the new reality, and only after that began to form a South Caucasus policy and the involvement in the so-called "Big Game" with Russia, Iran, and the United States. It is true that Turkey initially took over the Muslim community in the Caucasus, but soon the rest of the Caucasus population appeared in the area of its interests. Realizing that its pan-Turkish ideas had no potential for development, Turkey began to pursue a policy of normalizing relations and developing relations with Azerbaijan. This was not difficult with this country. Also, with Georgia and Armenia, with whom, despite the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey was eager to deepen bilateral ties. From then on, Turkey is constantly trying to develop political ties between Ankara and the capitals of the countries in the region (Aydin, 2001).

Why the South Caucasus Is Important for Turkey

The South Caucasus region is important for Turkey due to several aspects.

Factor of Azerbaijan

One of the states in this region—Azerbaijan—is a nation/state related to Turkey. The Turkish press often mentions that in addition to kinship in this union, the issue of natural resources owned by Azerbaijan is no less important for Turkey. Although Azerbaijan has reconsidered the issue of selling natural resources to Turkey at reduced prices due to the dialogue with Armenia that began after 2008, the transfer of these resources to Turkey is still an important and inviolable issue for Turkey.

For the purpose of being an integral part of the European security system (and this is in Turkey's interests), Turkey must play an important role on the path of natural resources from Asia to Europe. Therefore, the Turkish government has not strongly objected to the decision of the government of Azerbaijan to increase

prices for oil products. This change was received with calm in Turkey. The main thing here was that no changes were planned in the routes of energy projects, and this fact only indicated a crisis in the relations between the two countries.

Connecting Bridge

The South Caucasus is a bridge for Turkey to connect with the peoples of Central Asia. These ties are of strategic importance to Turkey, both commercially and culturally and politically.

The successful development of the South Caucasus is correlated with the smooth running of the political channels leading to Central Asia in Turkish foreign policy. Central Asia is a region that is also of vital importance to Turkey as Turkey has invested huge amounts of money in the economy and education of this region and, consequently, is making huge profits. In other words, the interest is so great that in the new foreign policy strategy of Turkey, as we have seen above, these areas are a priority.

Sales Market

The South Caucasus (Georgia and Azerbaijan) is a good sales market for the Republic of Turkey, as tens of thousands of tons of various products enter the South Caucasus market (excluding Armenia) every year.

A study of Turkish Caucasus policy during this period shows a tendency to work individually with each country in the South Caucasus, including Armenia, although these efforts have not been very successful; not a single Armenian and Turkish expert states that the negotiations have been carried out with Armenia and still continue intensively with the help of non-governmental organizations.

Johnny Melikian, an Armenian researcher and Kartvelologist stated that Armenia could not refuse a strategic partnership with Russia because "in the past, this attitude was so great that it is not easy to spontaneously stand up and abandon this relationship one day" (We interviewed him in Yerevan, Armenia, in July, 2016).

It seems that Turkey is no less interested in normalizing relations with Armenia than in strengthening strategic ties with Azerbaijan. But the Russian factor plays a crucial role here as well.

Turkish expert Kamer Kasim raises an interesting question: "What are the interests of the South Caucasus states?" One is to have a free foreign policy choice and not be under Russian pressure. We offered cooperation for this choice. But, it so happened that fear or the work of certain forces prevented them from cooperating. Turkey is a developed, NATO member state. It has its interests with the states of the South Caucasus. Not only here, but I will speak about this direction now. However, as is often misunderstood, these interests do not conflict with respect for the independence and territorial integrity of these states. Since Turkey is a member of NATO, it realizes the essence of cooperation differently. Turkey wants to establish well-developed trade, economic, military, and cultural relations with these countries, as is typical for a civilized state. The modern world is unimaginable without it. We are trying to act as a Western power... How is the other side fighting at this time? By methods focused on violence, pressure, blockade, division, and degradation. It is up to these countries to make a choice between these forces. (We interviewed him in Bolu, Turkey, in June, 2015).

Russian Factor

It is interesting why the Russian factor works so successfully not only in the South Caucasus. Why is it that they still take into account its factor? And why does it have such a huge impact on the countries of the South Caucasus? We think there are several reasons for this: First of all, as mentioned above, coexistence over

the years under the influence of the Russian or Soviet Empire has formed a certain type of mentality in the inhabitants of this region; it takes time to get rid of this influence. More precisely, change of the generation. This is not a short and fast-paced stage for the country to overcome. Moreover, this process is painful and takes place against the background of fluctuations. That is, the main problem is in the people themselves, who live in the countries of the South Caucasus. Mental release does not occur yet in order to make a choice and defend one's choice. This does not automatically mean that after these people would prefer friendship with Turkey than with Russia, raising the issue in this way would have devalued the problem. It is about protecting one's freedom of choice, even at the cost of sacrifice. It is true that this choice was made to some extent by the states of the South Caucasus when the national liberation movement began in the 1990s and culminated in independence, but this struggle seems to be continuing or needs to be continued. That is, the main problem is the internal resistance, when the Soviet man is still alive in us and still acts on the instincts acquired during the past coexistence. This moment helps Russia to have influence in the region.

The second point is the economic deficiency of the region. As we are aware, the Soviet Union had an interdependent oriented system of economics; if raw materials were obtained in one country, the infrastructure useful for its processing had to be set up in a Soviet country where this raw material had not been received. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, each Soviet country had either infrastructure or raw materials. Of course, these resources would have been used properly under the control of a wise government, as the Baltic states did, for example, but actually, the South Caucasus states found themselves facing an economic collapse. Azerbaijan has relatively coped with the problems thanks to its rich energy resources, but not to economic development. And Georgia and Armenia have become dependent on foreign aid. That is, economic backwardness is one of the reasons why the countries of the South Caucasus have not been able to reach a proper level of development and achieve economic independence, which would allow them to act independently and boldly in the foreign policy arena. The third factor is the practice of brute force by Russia: Russia is ready for everything. At the same time, its nuclear and military arsenals are much larger than those taken together by the countries of the South Caucasus, although they often talk about the antiquity of Russian equipment.

The fourth factor can be the following: Russia has vast natural gas fields and other natural resources, which it successfully uses to exert political pressure on neighboring countries and regions. Because of all this, Russia is often an accountable power not only to the countries of the South Caucasus, but also to the West. That's why it's hard to negotiate with it. Alexandre Kukhianidze, a Georgian professor, said interestingly in this context: "The West is urging us to engage in more dialogue with Russia, but it has not been able to engage in dialogue with Russia itself" (we recorded the interview on May 3, 2016). Therefore, a dialogue with Russia is difficult for Turkey as well, and especially for reconciliation. For Russia, an agreement and any format of dialogue is a way to save time and get more information around the issue. In the South Caucasus policy of Turkey, Russia represents the factor, which cannot be balanced and therefore is forced to achieve certain results by using soft force methods.

Indeed, if we look at Turkey's actions and the steps it has taken, not only in the South Caucasus, we will see that the Turkish government often turns its back on Russia and avoids open confrontation. Let us recall the incident of the downing of a military jet, when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself actually publicly apologized for this fact (Erdoğan has apologized for downing of Russian jet, Kremlin says, 2010).

We are aware that American researcher Eugene Kogan perfectly describes Turkish-Russian relations when he writes: "Some Turkish analysts and political reviewers think that the process of transforming these countries

into strategic partners into Russian-Turkish relations is underway. In our opinion, the relations between the two countries can be called 'Turkey's attitude without strategy'." (Kogan, 2014, p. 3). The author continues: The 2008 crisis seems to have successfully delivered an important message to the addressee: Russia takes its national interests in the Caucasus very seriously, and Ankara will be able to increase its influence in the region only through coordinated moves with Moscow and not through coordinated actions with NATO allies.

In fact, this means that Turkey will not be allowed to enter and rely on NATO allies in the region ... As a result, Turkey is trying its best not to irritate Moscow, however, Russia still considers the Black Sea region and the Caucasus as its own backyard and not someone else's backyard. (Kogan, 2014, p. 3)

In the process of research, we got acquainted with the authors who do not see the role of Turkey in this way in relation to Russia and talk about the growing trends in relations between the two countries. For example, the Turkish scholar Fatih Ozbay considers the relations between the two countries to be geopolitical cooperation focused on long-term calculations, and considers the personal friendship of the country's leaders as one of the basis for the positive indicators of the dynamics of these relations:

The beginning of the development of relations between Russia and Turkey was accelerated by the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in Russia and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey... Turkey and Russia have become economic and strategic partners and it is impossible to deny this. (Ozbay, 2011, pp. 69-92)

Girey Bozkurt considers the issue of the Black Sea to be actual in Russian-Turkish relations. He emphasizes that the importance of the Black Sea will increase even more, as raw materials are supplied to the European market via Central Asia through the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, and that the nature of Russian-Turkish relations determines cooperation and security in the Black Sea region (Bozkurt, 2011, Sayı 30, p. 11).

Aktürk Şener considers the idea of mentioning Russian-Turkish rapprochement as an alliance in a skeptical view, especially after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. In his opinion, the relations between the two countries before and after the war are different: This war has damaged Turkey's strategic positions in the Caucasus, however, relations between the two countries are still going on intensively (Aktürk, 2013, p. 2).

The fact that three countries in the Black Sea region (Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania) are members of NATO sounds very uncomfortable for Russia. Therefore, after the occupation of Crimea, Russia began to worry about more or less equalizing its forces with Turkey. But, it still has limited capabilities compared to NATO. If, for example, Turkey assumes that certain threats have arisen from Russia and closes the Straits, it will be difficult for Russia to supply Russian bases in Tartus and Latakia as well as provide fast supplies to its bases in Novorossiysk, Tuapse, and Sochi. In this case a land route must be used. The occupation of Crimea by Russia served precisely the purpose of ensuring the possession of an unfrozen port during winter and summer and balancing Turkey's advantages in this regard in the Black Sea. Thus, the policies of Russia and Turkey in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea, as well as NATO, are so intertwined that it will be difficult to conceive if we do not discuss them in a complex way.

In recent years, NATO's interest in the Black Sea region has grown even more, and this is reflected in the projects aimed at the security of the Black Sea region and the number and scale of trainings conducted (Brussels NATO Summit, 2018). This is only beneficial for Turkey, as it will further strengthen and consolidate its positions. Ahead of 2018 NATO Brussels Summit, the circumstances were highlighted that

NATO Summit is an opportunity for the Alliance to focus on a strategically important region, and that region is the Black Sea. Since Russia illegally annexed Crimea in 2014, the Black Sea has become a predominantly Russian lake. This poses a direct threat to US and NATO security interests. The United States should use this summit and the Alliance to take important steps to cooperate with the Black Sea countries, to start developing a security strategy for this region. (Brussels NATO Summit, 2018)

The Issue of Gas

The issue of gas is the most vulnerable issue in Russian-Turkish relations. Turkey is a poor country in terms of energy resources and is 98% dependent on imports. Gas imports mainly occur from Russia. About 60% of the country's gas supply for this stage comes from Russia. Russia believes that it has the leverage to influence Turkey. According to the Oxford Institute for Energy Research, Turkey is historically the most dependent on gas imports. Since 1990, these figures have been gradually increasing. Consequently, billions of dollars are spent on the purchase of energy resources from the Turkish budget. For example, in the same 2016 and 2017, 53% of gas imported to Turkey was purchased from Russia (The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2018, p. 2). These two states are also interconnected in terms of trade-economics and tourism. Russia and Turkey are the greatest trading partners for each other. Russia has recently threatened to impose economic sanctions on Turkey during the events in Syria and carry out sequestration on products imported from Turkey. So these countries have the leverage to negatively impact each other.

Russia, obviously, is trying its best to force Turkey to take appropriate steps in its interests and to neutralize its strengths. Under the slogan of partnership, it repeatedly called on Turkey to think about the implementation of a joint energy project, which would allow Turkey to receive gas from Russia without passing through a third country.

Turkey and Georgia

If we look at the Georgian-Turkish relations from the 90s of the last century to the present day, and especially in 2008-2018, we will see that its character has not actually changed. Only the intensity changed. These relationships can be characterized as partnership.

During all this time the relationship has deepened greatly and counts numerous joint projects in the fields of science, culture, military, security, art, and more. Georgia and Turkey are also strategic partners in the framework of major regional energy projects. Turkey is an indispensable partner of Georgia in its relations with NATO.

As for the assessment of these processes from the focus of Georgia: Georgia, due to its advantageous geographical location, has the opportunity to pursue a political course based on pragmatism. But, strategic location does not automatically mean that a country has the luxury of pursuing such a policy. Small countries like Georgia make a foreign policy choice between bad and worse. The change in their political vector depends on the political weather in the region. The ongoing processes in the region are based on the world order and are tailored to the interests of leading political actors. If we consider in the context of the concept of neorealism, Georgia has a theoretical opportunity to take advantage of all the benefits that its strategic location brings to the country, but in real politics it is not so easy. If we evaluate the processes in this light, there will be less ground for optimism, but it should not be understood as an insurmountable fact. It should also be noted that Georgia still managed to get involved in several globally and strategically important projects after the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as energy projects. But, that is not enough. Georgia's political leadership is backed not only

by a geographically small country, but also by an economically weak and still institutionally flawed state, and this reality will not allow it to make many profitable maneuvers, but still has a choice of diplomatic maneuvering and maximum activity in this direction is recommended. The reality created in the world and, consequently, in the South Caucasus, constantly puts Georgia in the situation when it is necessary to take into account certain conjunctures. It is also vital for the country to constantly strive to enhance cooperation with its regional neighbors. In this regard, we think the country's approaches should be reconsidered and not only from the side of Georgia. All the neighboring states of the region should analyze the need for more cooperation, because it is the conditions of more cooperation that will make it possible to gradually change the political balance in the region, the political balance that forces the South Caucasus states to take coercive steps. If there is a strong political will in the approaches of the states of the region, the processes will come out of the closed circle and the countries of the South Caucasus will take their rightful place in the regional balance.

What is Georgia doing to make full use of the opportunities offered by its geographical location? There are a lot of questions in this regard. Some of them are difficult to answer.

Georgia is a weak state, which in many cases cannot act due to its interests and has to take into account the political situation in the region. The potential at its disposal could not be fully exploited and used. We think it is necessary to develop new approaches and better define foreign policy goals, which will help it to move firmly through its Euro-Atlantic choice.

With regard to long-term goals, we think that the Georgian government should continue the dialogue with all parties, including Russia.

Turkey and Azerbaijan

Relations and strategic partnerships between the two countries in the South Caucasus region go beyond just partnership relationships. Relations between fraternal nations became particularly strained after the collapse of the Soviet Union, for obvious reasons.

Despite some grievances, for Azerbaijan, Turkey still remains an elder brother who will always protect and support it. It is because of Azerbaijan that Turkey has ceased diplomatic relations with Armenia, which it has not been able to resolve so far. This behavior was on the one hand an expression of great trust and support and on the other hand a demonstration that sometimes emotions overwhelm real politics and prudent diplomacy, even with irreparable consequences.

Azerbaijan and Turkey are connected by the largest energy projects in the South Caucasus and are related to the countries of Central Asia, thus, Turkey has blood relatives and supporters in its neighborhood.

Turkey and Armenia

Despite great efforts, Turkey is unable to involve this country in its pragmatic policy in the South Caucasus. Its removal from Russia is not only in Turkey's plans. The European Union is also working in this direction. What does Turkey need Armenia for? Turkey, which looks to Europe, is often reminded by EU protocols that it has no diplomatic relations with one of its neighbors. This fact is often the basis for its criticism by the Members of European Parliament, and in addition to this, reprimands and persistent calls are made to Turkey to recognize the fact of genocide, to apologize to this nation, as Germany did in its time, and to pay compensation.

Conclusions

Assessment of Turkey's South Caucasus policy must be considered in the context of discussing several components. These components include assessments of political as well as cultural and economic issues.

It can be said that in the South Caucasus politics, Turkey is largely successful in implementing its projects related to the cultural and economic component. However, in some respects, its policies have been unsuccessful and Turkey does not find an outcome. For example, the issue of Armenia has already become a very big challenge for it. Turkey has been in close contact with national interests, and when the issue escalates to such a level, each step of resolving it requires a very gentle approach, so as not to provoke such types of reactions among the population, that the Turkish state may face other kinds of challenges than it has today. Unfortunately, as time goes on this problem gets deeper and more complex.

We think that resolving multilateral problems in the South Caucasus will not be an easy process. In this process, Turkey acts from the perspective of its interests, which is natural, but at the same time it has a great responsibility as one of the strongest states in the region and a member of NATO.

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