



TURKISH SOCIETAL ACTORS IN THE CAUCASUS

Special Editors: Andrea Weiss and Yana Zabanova

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Introduction by the Special Editors

Turkey is an important actor in the South Caucasus in several respects: as a leading trade and investment partner, an energy hub, and a security actor. While the economic and security dimensions of Turkey's role in the region have been amply addressed, its cross-border ties with societies in the Caucasus remain under-researched. This issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest illustrates inter-societal relations between Turkey and the three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as with the de-facto state of Abkhazia, through the prism of NGO and diaspora contacts. Although this approach is by necessity selective, each of the four articles describes an important segment of transboundary societal relations between Turkey and the Caucasus.

In the case of Armenia, as Ter-Matevosyan demonstrates, the absence of diplomatic relations with Turkey has brought civil society groups to the fore in developing ties between the two societies, most prominently during the period of the attempted rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia in 2008–2009. While Turkish civil society's involvement has been essential for maintaining contacts to Armenia, it has faced criticism for failing to engage broader sections of Turkish society into the Armenian–Turkish dialogue.

Apart from civil society groups, diasporas are actor configurations that routinely transcend state boundaries. Demirdirek and Gafarli draw attention to three different subsets of the Azerbaijani diaspora in Turkey, concentrating on the politicization of the more recent (post-1990) arrivals and emphasizing the Azerbaijani government's attempts to use this group to exercise influence within Turkey. By contrast, the historical Azerbaijani diaspora, despite (or perhaps because of) linguistic proximity between Azeris and Turks, does not play a prominent role in Turkey's relationship with the "homeland" and, due to its Shia faith, has been leaning closer towards Iran since 1979. This lack of engagement is very different from the position of Turkey's large and institutionalized Abkhaz diaspora, whose role as the nexus between the Turkish and Abkhaz societies is explored in Zabanova's contribution. Viewed as a valuable ally and resource by the Abkhaz authorities, the diaspora functions as the key driver behind economic and societal contacts to Abkhazia and advocates Abkhaz interests in Turkey. Some of its members have settled in Abkhazia permanently while others travel back and forth between the two locations. Finally, Weiss's article shows that in comparison to the Turkish-Abkhaz, members of the Georgian diaspora in Turkey, although active in Georgia, have been less visible in their respective homeland. Apart from institutionalized inter-state relations and a larger range of actors in Georgian–Turkish transboundary ties, the lower visibility can be attributed to the degree of the diaspora's assimilation into Turkish society and particularly to the fact that Georgia's majority population is Christian, whereas the diaspora is predominantly Muslim.

All in all, despite the significant role played by NGOs in the Armenian case, societal ties between Turkey and the South Caucasus cannot be fully captured through the prism of civil society only. The diaspora focus prevalent in this issue underscores the role of individual networks, informal ties, and political alliances at the inter-societal and even the geopolitical level.

Andrea Weiss and Yana Zabanova

Track Two Diplomacy between Armenia and Turkey: Achievements and Limitations

By Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, Yerevan

Abstract

The aim of this brief survey is to examine key aspects of Turkish–Armenian track two diplomacy and its major achievements and failures over the past 25 years. It argues that current problems in official Turkish–Armenian relations should not discourage donors and participants from further assisting civil society contacts between the two nations.

Introduction

The lack of Turkish–Armenian diplomatic relations remains a perplexing challenge not only for the security and stability of the South Caucasus but also for Europe. The fruitless process of “football diplomacy” did not change *the status quo*, as Turkey keeps its border with Armenia hermetically sealed. Moreover, the situation, with its non-existent official relations, became more strained and complex as the parties became increasingly distrustful of one another’s intentions and policy preferences. Diplomatic communications between Turkey and Armenia have effectively broken down, with no hopeful perspectives in sight. As a result, the relations between two countries have only deteriorated. The lack of understanding on many key questions has effectively diminished any trace of the minimal trust developed during the “football diplomacy”.

In the given circumstances, unofficial contacts between people remain the only option to sustain a minimum of communication between two societies. Citizens of Armenia and Turkey began to travel to one another’s countries once the border checkpoints were opened in 1992. Although the Margara/Alican (northwest of Armenia) and Akhurik/Akyaka (west of Armenia) border crossings were open only occasionally, they allowed many Armenians to travel to Turkey and establish initial business contacts in the early 1990s. As a result, since then more Armenians have travelled to and stayed in Turkey than has been the case in the opposite direction. Some Armenians settled in Turkey, mainly in Istanbul, others became labour migrants, while some established families in Turkey. However, given the nature of differences between Turkey and Armenia on a range of historical problems, the contacts established by ordinary people were not sufficient to pave the way for official, “track one” diplomacy.

Soon, as the prospects for normalization were stalled, different stakeholders and organizations attempted to contribute to the normalization process. A number of civil society, business and cultural initiatives have been implemented since then. Some of these initiatives were

rather successful and progressed continuously, while others were short-lived. The various projects conducted by these groups sought to bring two societies together, overcome cognitive and emotional challenges, establish inter-personal contacts and compensate for what politicians were unable to achieve. Interestingly, that process has run rather smoothly, although the true implications have yet to be quantified. The aim of this brief survey is to examine the key aspects of Turkish–Armenian track two diplomacy and its major achievements and failures over the past 20 years. Since 2007, the author has participated in various Turkish–Armenian projects, forums, and discussions and hence has developed a set of observations and perspectives that may help to grasp the underlying features in question. Note that for the past ten years, there have been a number of publications that provide a rather comprehensive picture of those projects that have been operating since the 1990s¹; therefore, this contribution focuses more on the internal discussions and dynamics of those projects, which previously were not addressed or only began recently.

Who Are the Participants and What Are They Attempting to Achieve?

From the outset, the US government has been particularly interested in facilitating contacts between the Turkish and Armenian societies. The US embassies in Yerevan and Ankara and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have invested enormously in developing contacts and attempting to build momentum in connections between the two societies. In the recent years, the European Union joined the process by funding a number of projects implemented by different

1 David Philips. 2005. *Unsilencing the Past: Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish–Armenian Reconciliation*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005; “*Armenian–Turkish Track 2 Diplomacy Projects: Assessment of Best Practices*”. International Center for Human Development. Yerevan, 2006; Esra Çuhadar and Burcu Gültekin Punsmann. 2012. *Reflecting on the Two Decades of Bridging the Divide: Taking Stock of Turkish–Armenian Civil Society Activities*. Ankara: TESAV.

civil society organizations from both Turkey and Armenia. These organizations typically formed a Consortium composed of equal number of participant organizations from each country and jointly implemented a number of projects.² From time to time, other organizations and research and educational institutions also organized joint events with the aim of establishing an alternative framework for discussions and networking, for instance, the German foundation Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Kadir Has University (based in Istanbul), Ankara Policy Centre, and the Centre for Eurasian Studies based in Ankara, the International Centre for Human Development based in Yerevan. Most of these projects pursued rather ambitious goals, e.g., contribute to the normalization of the process and serve as channels for communication between the two governments, while others were more modest, as they strove only to maintain minimal contacts between the two societies.

Most of these organizations have long been engaged in the Turkish–Armenian normalization process. Furthermore, frequent exchange of visits, joint statements, print and online publications, press conferences and interviews allowed the participants to accumulate a wealth of experience and knowledge in the Turkish–Armenian problems and the major challenges that the two societies face. These organizations were also able to establish some form of contacts with their respective governments and communicate certain messages that were discussed or raised during the meetings, discussions and implementation phase of the projects.

Although the events have been run rather smoothly and the parties were able to cooperate in many areas (business, education, media, etc.) and reach joint agreement on certain formulations, in some instances, those organizations and individuals participating in Turkish–Armenian joint projects faced a number of questions. One commonly referenced question them concerns the real-world impact that his or her participation can have on the process. Especially during times featuring a lack of political and diplomatic contacts between the two states, the participants questioned the rationale for participating in such projects.

Overall, participants from Turkey rarely questioned the need to have the Turkish–Armenian border opened. It was considered a necessity with respect to international law and vital to earn the trust of the Armenian society. This perspective contradicted the official Turkish posi-

tion, which tied the opening of the Turkish–Armenian border with the Karabakh conflict. The other observation that could be drawn from these projects concerns the ultimate objectives that they pursued. In rare cases, it was clear that disagreements surfaced over terminology. The Armenian participants primarily favoured the term ‘normalization of Turkish–Armenian relations’, rather than reconciliation, which some Turkish participants tended to favour. It was a common belief among the Armenian participants that reconciliation should follow the normalization process, which implied that reconciliation is a more challenging and difficult process. Normalization, in the Armenian terminology, implied certain basic confidence-building measures that would allow Armenian society to recognize that official Ankara is determined to develop normal relations with Armenia. In the eyes of many Armenians, it is exceedingly difficult to discuss normalization when the borders are unilaterally sealed. According to their perceptions, Turkish political leadership constantly threatens Armenia and the Armenian nation and regards the process through the lenses of the Armenian Genocide discourse or the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh.

The other problem that one can clearly identify concerns the fact the Armenian Diaspora was generally absent from the process. Of course, there were projects, for instance, operated by the French-Armenian organization “Yergir” that included Armenians from France, or the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Committee (TARC) project, which also had participants from the Armenian Diaspora (USA and Russia). However, the projects, which that are generally operated by organizations based in Turkey and Armenia, do not include Armenians from the Diaspora. This, in turn, creates certain perceptual problems in the Diaspora, which surfaced during the pan-Armenian tour of the Armenian president in September 2009 prior to signing the Zurich protocols. He was not welcomed in the Diaspora communities he visited in France, the USA, Lebanon and Russia. It should have been an indication that the majority of the Diaspora wants to have a greater say in the Turkish–Armenian normalization process. Protests in different parts of the world served as a message that, except for a few cases, the Diaspora generally objected to the conscious decision of the Armenian government to exclude the Diaspora from the process or consider its opinion at the later stage of the process when the Protocols on Normalization of Relations were made public.

The other observation that can be made regards the professional background of the participants. Typically, the participants in joint projects have predominantly been artists, journalists, or people from the media sphere and expert communities, retired diplomats. Quite often,

2 From the Turkish perspective, the organizations include Anadolu Kültür, the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly, and the Hrant Dink Foundation; from the Armenian perspective, the following organizations are involved, Civilitas Foundation, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Public Journalism Club and the Regional Studies Center.

the participants were the same people, with the same views and opinions about the same process, which visibly limited the “peace constituency” and precluded the engagement of the mainstream. Of course, the participation of journalists was sometimes done on purpose. Many projects sought to include journalists from both sides to allow the ideas and insights generated during the projects to disseminate in their respective nations. In some cases, journalists had to travel to different regions of the opposite countries to talk to the people and place their perspectives into the wider context. There have also been joint projects covering slightly different aspects of bilateral relations involving culture, arts and literature. In the recent years, the focus of many projects has shifted somewhat, as they began to target young people from both countries.

Prospects and Challenges

It has been generally agreed that these projects are critical to sustain even minimal contact between the two societies. It has also been reported that the Armenian government was not particularly supportive of civil society contacts, as it argued that the Turkish government was abusing these projects to claim that despite the opposition stemming from the Armenian government, the dialogue between the Turkish and Armenian societies were progressing smoothly. Notwithstanding these debatable interpretations, Armenian society has largely been supportive of these interactions, as there have not been any particular opposing views. By contrast, in Turkey, there some nationalist voices and opinions have been raised, which also reflect Azerbaijani concerns and views, that interactions with Armenian civil society organizations should be halted. At the societal and regional levels, the populations of the border regions of Armenia and Turkey have generally been lukewarm towards the process, with the possible exception of the İğdir region of Turkey, where the nationalist voices have become more vocal.

However, track two diplomacy has also been criticized by some, arguing that most of these projects have the same organizations as members and were unable to engage new people. This was particularly the case for Turkey. Both Turkish and Armenian critical voices have argued that after securing the support of liberal intellectuals and progressive voices in Turkey, the Turkish–Armenian civil society projects should have worked more consistently with radical (nationalists, conservatives) and opposing views. Engagement with these voices, according to this line of criticism, could have secured their attention, participation in and possible support for the Turkish–Armenian projects, which, in turn, would broaden the support of the grassroots level.

The geographical component was also no less significant. Turkish participants were mainly from Istanbul, and to a lesser extent from Ankara, Izmir, Kars, and Diyarbakir; similarly, the participants from Armenia were predominantly from Yerevan and to a small degree from Gyumri and Vanadzor. Moreover, Gyumri, the second-largest city in Armenia, is the most affected by the closed border because of its close location to the border. Although there have been some joint business initiatives between Kars- and Gyumri-based entrepreneurs, they were not sustainable.

It has been generally argued that the societies in both countries at large were not actively engaged in the discussions; however, this opinion is debatable, at least in Armenia. The findings of various projects were aired on TV programmes. That allowed Armenian society or, at least those who were interested in the topic, to follow the subject and expert opinions. In Turkey, however, the situation was different, and no TV channel aired specifically tailored programs on Turkish–Armenian relations. There have been a number of publications in the online media, however.

Outlook

Parallel to these developments, the growing authoritarianism in Turkey can limit the activities of civil society organizations, freedom of speech and freedom of press, which can have negative implications for track two diplomacy. The recurring statements of the Turkish President that Armenian citizens should be expelled from Turkey, the violation of Armenia’s air-space by Turkish military jets, and Turkey’s unyielding support for Azerbaijan may have negative implications for the existing channels of communication. The Turkish–Armenian normalization process requires determination and consistent support; otherwise it is too weak to be sustained. Armenia, by contrast, is overly dependent on foreign markets and, therefore, is eager to open up the border as soon as possible. Even now, after the “football diplomacy” has failed, political forces and civil society at large remain sympathetic to the idea of opening the border. Hence, it can be argued that Armenia regards the border as an economic opportunity, whereas, for Turkey, the border closure has been and remains a political tool that visibly weakens Armenia.

The discussion allows us to conclude that Turkish–Armenian problems may become more acute if the contacts between the countries’ civil societies were discontinued. What has been achieved thus far has already been partly undone in recent years. There has also been a slight change in the nature of the projects since 2008. In the light of the experience with the failed rapprochement in 2008–09, many projects simply concern pre-

servicing the existing minimum contacts. The existing differences and obstacles should not discourage donors and participants because the substantial problems that

exist are related to geopolitics and history and can only be overcome in the long term.

About the Author

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How Non-Governmental Are Civil Societal Relations Between Turkey and Azerbaijan?

By Hülya Demirdirek and Orhan Gafarlı, Ankara

Abstract

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, expressions such as the “brotherhood of Azerbaijan and Turkey” and “one nation, two states” found resonance in both countries. Here, we highlight how societal ties are most active on the discursive nationalist level but not independent of state influence—the reach of which extends to Azerbaijani diaspora organizations in Turkey.

Introduction

Being among the first countries to recognize the Republic of Azerbaijan’s independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey’s relations with Azerbaijan began to develop rapidly through shared nationalist rhetoric in the two nations. Reinforced by the wider use of social media and the proliferation of physical and virtual spaces and their overlapping constellations, the discourses of friendship, brotherhood and anti-Armenian sentiment among these nationalities are reproduced. The high number of Azerbaijani and Turkish brotherhood associations in Turkey, the more than ten thousand Azerbaijani students who study in Turkey, and the availability of mutually intelligible audio-visual media, particularly Turkish TV series—in addition to formal political and business connections—are a significant part of the societal ties that foster Turkish–Azerbaijani relations. While this may not always be visible in all social spaces, these elements collectively mould the discursive space of the brotherhood between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Discourse of “One Nation, Two States”

The Nagorno-Karabakh War, joint Turkish and Azerbaijani enmity against Armenians, the development of the ideas of Turkish nationalism and Pan-Turkism, and the emergence of discussions of nationalist ideas among

Azerbaijani historians (e.g., Ziya Bunyatov) beginning in the 1960s can be listed as the major elements fostering the emergence of the thesis of “one nation and two states”.

Within the brief period following the 1990s, Turkey’s nationalist discourse resonated within the local Azerbaijani population and expressions such as “two brother countries” and the “one nation” discourse were popularized. This was essentially made possible through the perception of a shared enemy (Armenia) and a shared language and “race”¹. Alibey Hüseyinzâde, Ahmet Ağaoğlu, and Mehmed Emin Resulzâde were all intellectuals of Azerbaijani heritage who also played a role in the development of Turkish nationalist discourse in Turkey.

The fact that Azerbaijan, a country with a population of 10 million, has come under the influence of Turkey, a country of 80 million, facilitates the discursive hegemony in Azerbaijan of nationalism and Islamic movements that originated in Turkey. Yet, who can be considered “Turkish actors” in Azerbaijan is a complicated story. Here, we adopt the opposite approach and illustrate how the Azerbaijani diaspora in Turkey may be seen as one of the “Turkish actors” in Azerbaijan.

¹ Reference to Turkic peoples is often made through the use of the term “Turkish race” (*Türk ırkı*) in both nationalist and casual conversations among Turkic speakers.

Since the first elected president of Azerbaijan after the fall of the Soviet Union, Abulfaz Elçibey lost power in 1993, the Azerbaijani state has been unable to influence diaspora groups in Turkey, failed to gain their allegiance and has resorted to an “artificial” process of diaspora creation. Although the role of business and capital flows is vital for the assessment of how religious and nationalist movements developed, they cannot be discussed here due to a lack of space.

We can group the emergence and development of the diaspora in Turkey, referred to as the Azerbaijani, Azeri Turkish or Azeri, into three major clusters:

1. Turkish residents of the Azeri and Terekeme groups hailing from the provinces of İğdır and Kars in Turkey (estimates suggest approximately three million such individuals across the country).
2. The founding elite of Azerbaijanis who emigrated to Turkey from the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic during the period 1918–1920.
3. Finally, Azerbaijanis who have settled in Turkey since Azerbaijan gained independence in 1990, through the paths of education, business, political asylum and family reunification.

From Turkey’s perspective, the group that is the best candidate for assuming the role of a Turkish “actor” in Azerbaijan are individuals who emigrated in the years 1918–1920 and the local Azeri population (the Azeri population of İğdır and Kars). These two groups bear the qualities of being “actors” in the spheres of politics, religion and business. The Azerbaijan Cultural Association (*Azərbaycan Kültür Derneği*), founded (1949) in Turkey by the leadership of the first Republic in 1918–1920, had played a role in the reconstitution of the Azeri Republic within the borders of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991. MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, the Nationalist Action Party) and Idealist Hearths (Clubs) (*Ülkü Ocakları*), both nationalist groups in Turkey, have also played a role in this. However, the local Azeri population in Turkey has not closely followed political and social developments in Azerbaijan, nor has it become a significant political actor because of these reasons.

Notably, the Azeri population of three million in Turkey differs from other diaspora groups in the Caucasus in that they share not only a language (and accent) with the “home country” population but also their Shiite religious affiliation. Turkish nationalism is a synthesis of Sunni Islam and Turkish identity. Despite the then Turkish president Turgut Özal’s famous utterance in 1991 that “Azerbaijanis are Shiite, we are Sunni”, Sunni-Turkish segments in Turkey have played a major role in the development of the widely held perception amongst both peoples of “one nation, two states”.

Unlike other Caucasian diasporas in Turkey, which have had relations with the left and centre-left-leaning groups, the above-mentioned founders of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic who established the Azerbaijan Cultural Association (ACA) forged close links with Turkish right-wing and nationalist political groups. They have been MHP members and active supporters since 1969. Their support for the founding of the Azerbaijan Republic in 1991 illustrates their role as Turkish “actors”. Given their Turkish citizenship and active political life through their membership in the MHP, it is difficult to see this group in any other light. They have been perceived as an element of Turkey’s soft power in Azerbaijan. Consequently, following the departure of Elçibey from office, Heydar Aliyev and the ACA discontinued these ties. As this group was seen as serving Turkish interests while also being close to the opposition parties of *Musavat* and the Popular Front, Heydar Aliyev initiated efforts to form an “artificial diaspora” that would promote the interests of the Azerbaijani state in Turkey. In conjunction with this, exploiting the fragmentation of the nationalist movement in Turkey during the years between 1994 and 2009, Azerbaijan allowed the activities of the Idealist Hearths (*Ülkücüler*) and the Alperen Movement within Azerbaijan. Owing to their support for the opposition parties in Azerbaijan, the MHP leaders are regarded as unofficially unwanted guests. Moreover, Islamist movements (Gülen/Nursi and Naksibendi, Kadiriye) have begun to spread in Azerbaijan.

The networks built by Azerbaijanis who received their educations in Turkey and returned to Azerbaijan since the 1990s form another substantial group that operates as a Turkish actor and imports nationalist discourse to Azerbaijan. They have synthesized two essential ideologies: *Gülençilik* (as supporters of the Gülen movement) and nationalism. The two networks have long been intertwined and jointly lobbied for Turkish interests under the rubric of nationalist discourse without necessarily having the explicit aim of lobbying. The two important Azeri student organizations in Turkey are Students of the Turkish World (*Türk Dünyası Öyrenci Derneği*) and the Association of the Alumni of Turkish Universities (*Türkiye Üniversitelerinin Mezunlar Birliği*).² These have been active in Azerbaijan and have close links with the Azerbaijan State Committee on Diaspora Affairs (established in 2008). A further important organization is another alumni association, TUMIB (*Türkiye Üniversiteleri Mezunlar İctimai*

2 <<https://www.facebook.com/TUM%20B0B-T%20C3%BCrkiye-Universitetleri-Mezunlar%20B1-%20C4%B0ctimai-Birliyi-598911580133174/>>

Birliđi)³, which is known to be close to the government in Azerbaijan. The majority of these groups are organizations and networks whose premises are rooted in nationalist discourses.

There is an interesting side to the approach taken by political parties in Azerbaijan towards Turkey: those that opposed the rule of Heydar and İlham Aliyev, the majority of which emerged from the People's Front (founded in 1991). These parties have taken the role of representing Turkish actors' interests and adopted a pro-Turkey stance in their reading of politics and relations with the people: to be pro-Turkey is to accept Turkey's leadership in the Turkish World and act accordingly.

The perception of Turkey conveyed through the Azeri press and media is very important. For journalists emerging from the Azerbaijan Peoples' Movement, the Turkish factor is the most important issue. These newspapers include *Azadlıq*, *Yeni Musavat*, *Bizim Yol* and *Turkistan*. The Turkish nationalist network within the press is very strong relative to other groups. To be sure, many papers have been shut down and subsequently restarted over 25 years. Even if such publications cannot survive, their journalistic perspectives have been able to persist thanks to the transitive ability of Turkish nationalist networks, which have migrated to different papers.

Discourse of Shia Azeris Versus Sunni Turks

The Muslim population of Azerbaijan is 70% Shiite (Jafari) and 30% Sunni (Shafi'i). The Sunnis who have embraced Turkic/Turkish (*Türkçü*) nationalism are not numerous because most Sunnis (Shafi'i) have kin ties with other ethnic groups, such as the Avar and Lezgi in the North Caucasus. These Sunnis' ties with Turkey developed when the Naqşibendi and Kaderi Sufi sects settled in the region during the Ottoman period. These links were maintained during the era of Tsarist Russia but not during the Soviet era. After the Republic of Azerbaijan declared its independence in 1991, relations with religious orders in Turkey were re-established. Although the ties between Sunni (Shafi'i) Sufi orders might be considered the present source of Turkish Islamic influence in the Northern Sunni parts of Azerbaijan, it is also possible to observe impacts of Muslim radicalization resulting from the Saudi Medina School and ISIS networks. Although such radicalized groups are few in number, they continue to be present; a parallel process has been observed in Dagestan.

Most of the three million Azeris⁴ living in Turkey have shown little engagement in Azerbaijan, and their religious commitment has shifted towards Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. One might even suggest that the Shiite Azeris living in Turkey can, from an Iranian perspective, be considered Iranian actors in Azerbaijan. Since the Ottoman period, any version of Turkish nationalism that is not a Sunni-Turkish synthesis has been seen as an "other". The majority of Turkish nationalists living in Azerbaijan abstain from Shiism—tacitly, if not formally.

Since the 1990s, one of the most important Turkish actors has been the Gülen movement. First opening schools in Turkey and subsequently in the former Soviet Union after its dissolution, this movement has continued its activities in Azerbaijan and Central Asia through the schools that it has established there. In Azerbaijan, these schools have provided a Sunni-centred education (*Hanefi/Nurcu/Gülenci*) and served as the locus of significant networks that—through their voice in the state bureaucracy and in the media—have been attempting to establish a Turkey-centred world vision in Azerbaijan. Due to the conflicts that have taken place between the ruling AKP party and the Gülen Movement in Turkey, however, Turkey has demanded that restrictions be placed on the activities of these schools.

Conclusion

When we look at diasporas in Turkey, it is clear that the Azeri diaspora differs from the Georgian, Circassian and Chechnian diasporas, some of whose members were able to return to their "homeland" after 1991 and assumed positions that might be labelled "Turkish actors" in the Caucasus region. Although there are three million people in Turkey with an Azeri background, they did not return to Azerbaijan, nor did they become Turkish actors after the end of the Cold War for a number of reasons: the growing emphasis on the Shia identity of Azeris in Turkey after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, less prevalent nationalist tendencies in the region and the lack of common ethnic, linguistic and religious "consciousness" between Azeris in Turkey and the population of Azerbaijan. The efforts of the Azerbaijan State Committee on Diaspora Affairs to prevent the potential influence of Azeris who moved to Turkey from 1918 onwards and throughout the 1920s have been successful. Only the parties emerging from the Azerbaijani Popular Front were able to exist as Turkish actors due to their strong

3 <<https://www.facebook.com/TUM%C4%B0B-T%C3%BCrkiye-Universitetleri-Mezunlar%C4%B1-%C4%B0ctimai-Birliyi-598911580133174/>>

4 Although there are no official statistics on how many persons consider themselves as Azeri or Azeri Turkish (as they usually address themselves), three million is the figure widely assumed by various diaspora groups.

nationalist profile. Some Azeri youth of the post-Soviet era have also come under Turkish influence through religious movements and *Ülkü Ocakları*.

The governments of Azerbaijan have been intent on preventing Turkish hegemony in the country during the reign of both Aliyevs, yet they were interested in establishing the discourse of “one nation, two states” instead of what they believed to be the framework of the “big and

younger brother” discourse inherited from the period of the Popular Front and the presidency of Elçibey. As a result, although there is a “one nation, two states” discourse shared between the two countries, Azerbaijan is attempting to restrict Turkish political actors, while Baku is working through associations and businesses to exert its own influence in Turkey.

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The research for this article was supported by the EC-funded FP7 project “Intra- and Inter-Societal Sources of Instability in the Caucasus and EU Opportunities to Respond—ISSICEU” <<http://www.issiceu.eu/>>. The views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

Turkey’s Abkhaz Diaspora as an Intermediary Between Turkish and Abkhaz Societies

By Yana Zabanova, Berlin

Abstract

Although Turkey does not recognize Abkhazia and maintains a trade and transportation embargo on the de-facto republic, Turkey’s large historical Abkhaz diaspora has consistently challenged its government’s policies. Defying legal restrictions, the diaspora has been the chief driver behind Turkish investment and trade in Abkhazia. In the absence of official contacts between Abkhazia and Turkey, the leading diaspora organization, called Abhazfed, has become the main Turkish institutional counterpart for the Abkhaz authorities, combining the role of an “embassy” with that of a lobbying firm. In Abkhazia, a community of returnees from Turkey has been active in promoting business and grassroots ties between the two societies, assuming the position of intermediaries. Ties between Abkhazia and its diaspora in Turkey proved resilient even during the tensest period in Russian–Turkish relations (November 2015–June 2016).

Introduction

The small coastal town of Ochamchire/a in southern Abkhazia still bears the traces of the 1992–93 war with Georgia: abandoned family homes and public buildings, disused railway tracks overgrown with weeds, and a population that is less than one-third of its 1989 size. It also has a port, where one can see the brand new boats of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) coast guard, a large Turkish ship, several fishing vessels, and piles of coal. Each of these observations tells us something about Abkhazia. The Russian FSB is controlling Abkhazia’s borders based on a 2009 bilateral agreement. Coal and fish products are among Abkhazia’s main exports

to Turkey, its second-largest trading partner after Russia. And the key actor driving this trade—which Georgia seeks to stop and Russia and Turkey tolerate—is Turkey’s Abkhaz diaspora.

In the absence of official data¹, the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey places its own size at approximately 500,000, which makes it the largest population of Abkhaz worldwide. The number of ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazia, by contrast, is only 122,000 according to the 2011 census;

¹ Turkish national censuses do not ask questions on ethnicity, and minority status is only accorded to non-Muslim population groups.

in reality, it is likely to be even less.² Under Abkhaz laws, all Abkhaz and Abazins worldwide are automatically considered Abkhaz citizens. According to unofficial estimates, some 7,000 Turkish Abkhaz have made use of this provision, obtaining Abkhaz passports. This includes ca. 3,000 who have actually resettled to Abkhazia.

The Abkhaz leadership has always been aware of the diaspora's importance, viewing it as an important resource for addressing the republic's demographic problems, as a friendly actor able to challenge and subvert Turkey's policy of non-recognition and the Turkish embargo, and as a source of economic investment. Already in 1992, shortly before the outbreak of the war with Georgia, the republic's first de-facto President, Vladislav Ardzinba, travelled to Turkey to develop ties with the diaspora community. The following year, the Abkhaz authorities established the State Committee for Repatriation with the assistance of diaspora activists from Turkey. As for the diaspora itself, through its engagement with Abkhazia, it has transformed into a transnational actor with its own institutional identity. Abkhazia's unrecognized status has led the diaspora to take on a range of functions that are usually reserved for other actors and institutions, such as embassies or lobbying and PR agencies. The diaspora's evolution as a transnational actor, and the challenges associated with this role, are analysed in the following sections.

The Abkhaz in Turkey: Historical Background

Ethnic Abkhaz in Turkey are the descendants of the so-called *muhajirs* who fled the Russian Empire in the aftermath of the Caucasus War (1817–1864), which saw Russia cement its control over the region. The Abkhaz share a history of forced exile to the Ottoman Empire with several other Northwest Caucasian ethnic groups, the most numerous being the Adyghe. In Turkey, these groups are collectively referred to as *Çerkesler* (Circassians). They number several million and have maintained close ties with one another. The Abkhaz, like the Circassians, are well integrated and now increasingly urbanized. They take pride in having contributed to the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Areas of Abkhaz settlement in Turkey include Bilecik, Bolu, Bursa, Düzce, Eskişehir, Inegöl, Kocaeli, Sakarya, and Yozgat, as well as Istanbul and Ankara.

In the Soviet period, the diaspora's contacts to Abkhazia were virtually absent, with many Turkish-Abkhaz growing up unaware of Abkhazia's existence. The repres-

sive political atmosphere in Turkey at the time meant that non-Turkish allegiances were discouraged. Minorities had to adopt Turkish surnames, although Abkhaz families informally continued using their original names. There were Abkhaz diaspora organizations called "cultural associations" (*kültür dernekleri*) but their activities focussed primarily on folk music and dance, and the ideological climate was marked by domestic political divisions. Legal restrictions in Turkey made it impossible for these centres to unite under a common umbrella.

Things began to change in the 1970s, when more information about Abkhazia reached Turkey. In 1975, the first delegation of Turkish-Abkhaz intellectuals travelled to Abkhazia on a trip organized through the Soviet Ministry of Culture. Yet, contacts remained very limited until the late 1980s, when a new political openness allowed increasing numbers of young diaspora activists to travel to Abkhazia—first as part of cultural exchange and folk ensembles and, from 1991, to study at the Abkhaz State University.

Becoming a Transnational Actor

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey found itself face-to-face with the Caucasus, a region it had largely ignored throughout the Cold War period. Under President Turgut Özal (1989–1993), Turkey enthusiastically sought to gain influence in its new neighbourhood, with the Turkish public following developments in the region with newfound interest.

In August 1992, war broke out between Georgia and Abkhazia. This event galvanized the broader masses of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey (including the Abkhaz), speeding up its transformation into a transnational actor. Within days, diaspora representatives from 42 North Caucasian associations gathered in Istanbul to create the Caucasus-Abkhazia Solidarity Committee, which collected food, medicine, and money for the war effort.³ They also sent volunteers to fight in Abkhazia, launched a public campaign in Turkey to advocate for the Abkhaz cause, and successfully pushed for special hearings on the conflict in the Turkish parliament in 1992.

Although the diaspora did not succeed in bringing the Turkish government to recognize Abkhazia, it continued to support the unrecognized republic. In 1996, under pressure from Georgia, the Commonwealth of Independent States imposed a comprehensive trade and transportation embargo on Abkhazia. Turkey soon followed suit. The resulting isolation had disastrous con-

2 The 2011 census data on ethnic Abkhaz population are widely believed to be inflated to present the Abkhaz as a majority within the republic's population.

3 Çelikpala, Mitat. 2006. "From Immigrants to Diaspora: Influence of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey." *Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (3): 432.

sequences for the embattled Abkhaz economy. In this situation, the humanitarian aid shipments that diaspora organizations managed to deliver to Abkhazia became a lifeline for the beleaguered republic. The diaspora also began lobbying for the restoration of a direct transport link between Turkey and Abkhazia (there had been a direct ferry between the Turkish Black Sea port of Trabzon and Sukhum/i from 1994 until late 1995). Throughout this period, Abkhazia remained a top policy priority of major Circassian groups in Turkey and subsequently of the Federation of Caucasus Associations, or KAFFED (*Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu*), the largest Circassian umbrella organisation established in 2003.

Circassian vs. Abkhaz?

Another decisive development for the Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora was Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence in 2008. This change in Abkhazia's status led many within the diaspora to call for a new format of engagement with the homeland, moving away from a broader Circassian platform to concentrate on a distinct Abkhaz agenda. This sentiment was strengthened by mounting disagreements with various Circassian groups over the latter's increasingly critical stance towards Russia on such issues as the recognition of the 1864 Circassian genocide or plans to hold the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, a historical Circassian land. In 2010, five Abkhaz cultural centres split off from KAFFED to establish the Federation of Abkhaz Associations, or Abhazfed (*Abhaz Dernekleri Federasyonu*).

At present, Abhazfed has 13 members and functions as the main Turkish institutional counterpart for the Abkhaz authorities. It is an official partner of several Abkhaz state bodies, including the de-facto Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Based on an agreement with the State Committee for Repatriation, Abhazfed screens the applications of potential repatriates to confirm their Abkhaz descent (Turkish-issued documents do not indicate ethnicity and contain Turkish last names instead of ancestral Abkhaz ones). It also conducts informal background checks, sharing this security information with the authorities. In 2014, Abhazfed, much like an embassy, cooperated with the Abkhaz Central Election Commission to organize voting in Istanbul in Abkhazia's de-facto presidential elections. However, this status also comes with some limitations. As an official counterpart of the authorities, Abhazfed largely adopts their political agenda and refrains from engaging with broader sections of Abkhaz civil society or from taking a stance on internal political struggles within the republic.

In Turkey, Abhazfed maintains strong contacts with the business community, MPs and municipal officials in areas with large Abkhaz communities, and informal ties

with Turkish government officials (e.g., heads of departments in some ministries). Abhazfed has relied on this network to facilitate several visits by high-level Abkhaz delegations to Turkey, as well as to bring groups of Turkish entrepreneurs, MPs, municipal officials, and journalists to Abkhazia. Finally, Abhazfed also helps fund some cultural projects and student exchanges.

Despite some tensions with Abhazfed, KAFFED continues to support Abkhazia as well. Several prominent diaspora representatives active within KAFFED have a professional background in public relations and have organized Abkhaz-themed academic and cultural events, such as a 2009 international conference on Abkhazia's independence at Istanbul's Bilgi University, Abkhazian Culture Days in Istanbul's Kartal Municipality, or annual celebrations of the *Ayaayra* (Abkhaz Victory Day) in several localities in Turkey.

Returnees as Societal Intermediaries

The institutional format is, naturally, only one aspect of the diaspora's interaction with Abkhazia. The community of some 3,000 returnees (repatriates) from Turkey living in Abkhazia play a more prominent role in maintaining grassroots and business relationships. They maintain close ties to the diaspora in Turkey, travel frequently, and sometimes reside in both locations. The first group of returnees, largely spurred by ideological motives, arrived in Abkhazia in 1991, before the conflict with Georgia began, or came as volunteers during the war. A second group followed in the mid-1990s, until the 1996 CIS blockade effectively closed Abkhazia's borders. Finally, the most recent wave of returnees followed starting in the mid-2000s, accelerating after 2008.⁴ A number of returnees, especially among the early arrivals, have become prominent businessmen and public figures, with a few serving in the parliament or holding official positions. In 2015, Soner Gogua, a businessman and former MP, created the Apsny International Foundation that operates a number of projects in Abkhazia, ranging from financial assistance to disadvantaged families and disabled children to improving the teaching of Abkhaz in Mingrelian-populated areas. There are also several returnee writers, historians, translators, and journalists. For the most part, however, returnees tend to be employed in the SME sector and are not politically active. The sectors in which returnees are widely represented include greenhouse agriculture, fishing, and construction; they also operate cafes, restaurants, hotels and small shops. Good contacts with the returnee community remain essential for potential investors from Turkey.

4 E-mail interview with Jade Cemre Erciyes, Sukhum(i), January 2015.

The Diaspora and the 2015–2016 Russian–Turkish Crisis

Given Abkhazia's overwhelming dependence on Russia, its relations to the diaspora in Turkey are contingent on Russia's non-interference. Turkey's downing of a Russian military jet at the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015 dealt a harsh blow to bilateral relations, with Russia retaliating by imposing two rounds of harsh sanctions. (The two countries have recently begun to normalize ties after President Erdogan apologized for the incident in June 2016). Under Russian pressure and formally bound by the terms of the 2014 Strategic Partnership Treaty, Abkhazia adopted its own (admittedly much less comprehensive) sanctions, which came into force in March 2016. The sanctions, among other things, ban the import of several categories of foodstuffs from Turkey (none of which are particularly important for Abkhaz-Turkish trade), as well as the leasing of Turkish fishing vessels, which was common practice in Abkhazia due to the lack of its own fleet. While the sanctions may have served as a political signal, they are not applied in practice for several reasons. Nearly all Turkish investment in Abkhazia is diaspora-driven, and diaspora entrepreneurs who hold Abkhaz passports are exempt from sanctions. Abkhazia also continues to use Turkish fishing vessels for the simple reason that Russia has been unable to provide enough vessels to replace them. However, the sanctions do generate an atmosphere of uncertainty, new obstacles and higher transaction costs for business and societal interchange. Due to Russia's unilateral suspension of the visa-free regime with Turkey, diaspora representatives travelling to Abkhazia through Sochi now need to obtain a Russian visa and may be subjected to rigorous questioning and additional checks by the Russian FSB when crossing the border. However, it has recently become possible to enter Russia and Abkhazia visa-free with an Abkhaz passport, which many of diaspora representatives possess.

The Abkhaz diaspora has been intent on keeping channels of communication with Russia open. Soon

after the downing of the jet, both Abkhazfed and KAFFED visited the Russian Ambassador in Turkey to discuss the situation. While Abkhazfed has made a public statement expressing its loyalty to the Turkish state, it has also refrained from directly criticizing Russia; as for returnees, many of them condemned Turkey's actions but stressed the need for cooperation and dialogue. In fact, the Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora showed the potential to wield soft power instruments to bring Russia and Turkey closer together. In April 2016, a tripartite roundtable on Russian–Turkish relations was held in Sukhum(i), attended by a high-level official Abkhaz delegation, diaspora representatives and think tank analysts from Turkey, and, from the Russian side, representatives of the Russian Duma, the business community and think tanks close to the Russian government.⁵ The roundtable participants agreed on the need to work towards resolving the crisis in Russian–Turkish relations. With the normalization of ties currently underway, the outlook for Abkhazia's relations with its diaspora in Turkey is positive.

Conclusion

Although the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey has been unable to secure Turkish government recognition of Abkhazia, it has successfully undermined official restrictions on trade and relies on its contacts in the Turkish government, parliament, business community, media and society at large to advocate for Abkhaz interests. Over the past 25 years, the diaspora has developed into a truly transnational actor with an identity that is increasingly distinct from the rest of the wider Circassian community in Turkey. Positioning itself as an intermediary between Abkhazia and Turkey, the diaspora, including the returnee community in Abkhazia, contributes to the development of inter-societal ties, which have persisted despite the 2015–2016 crisis in Russian–Turkish relations.

About the Author

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The research for this article was supported by the EC-funded FP7 project “Intra- and Inter-Societal Sources of Instability in the Caucasus and EU Opportunities to Respond—ISSICEU” <<http://www.issiceu.eu/>>. The views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

5 Valerii Yakovlev, “Rossiya, Turtsiya i Abkhaziya. ‘Myagkaya sila’ v rossiisko-turetskikh otnosheniyakh” (Russia, Turkey and Abkhazia. “Soft power” in Russian–Turkish relations), *Kont*, 28 April 2016 <<https://cont.ws/post/258655>>

Turkish Georgians: The Forgotten Diaspora, Religion and Social Ties

By Andrea Weiss, Berlin

Abstract

Turkey is home to a Georgian diaspora of historical origins and of the Laz, a Kartvelian speaking population. This article outlines the historical origins of these transboundary diasporic populations and their importance for contemporary Georgian–Turkish relations in three spheres of societal ties: cultural, religious and business.

Introduction

Georgia and Turkey have excellent economic and interstate relations. Apart from the two states being “strategic partners” according to their foreign policy conceptions, in the years following Georgia’s rose revolution, Turkey has become Georgia’s most important trading partner. While the economic ties between the two countries are well documented, the individuals who play a role in them have received considerably less attention. Although diasporic and transboundary populations usually play a recognizable role as intermediators and avant-garde entrepreneurs in conducting business between countries, the Georgian diaspora in Turkey has remained unaddressed both in this respect and in terms of its role in social/societal ties between the two countries. This is also true in comparison to other diasporas that have been subject of research in Turkey, (e.g., the Circassian or the Abkhaz).

Who is the Georgian diaspora; does it exist at all? Erdemli¹ asks whether one can in fact speak of a Georgian diaspora in Turkey, applying various definitional criteria for what constitutes a “real diaspora,” and arrives at the conclusion that the Georgian diaspora is not a diaspora in a narrow sense due to its degree of assimilation and lack of internal cohesion. Rather than asking what types of populations could be considered a “diaspora,” it may be more fruitful to regard them as transboundary or diasporic populations.² Some considerations are in order when exploring the Georgian-speaking population, its internal diversity and the reasons that it resides outside the territory of Georgia.

Historical Migration Waves

Labor migrants from Georgia, who moved to Turkey after the collapse of the Soviet Union, or circular labor migrants, who (especially since the visa regime between the two countries was lifted in 2011) often go to work

in Turkey in shifts twice each year for three months, are also referred to as a ‘diaspora’ by the Georgian Ministry for Diaspora Relations. However, there is also a historical diaspora, mostly the descendants of 19th and early 20th century migrants, who are the focus of this article. Magnarella³, who studied the assimilation of Georgians in Turkey in the 1960s, refers to the Turkish census of 1965, which did not record ethnic background but instead the mother tongues and second languages of the population. According to the data from the 1965 census, 34,330 inhabitants of Turkey declared that Georgian was their mother tongue, while 48,974 people indicated that they spoke Georgian as their second language, with members of both groups being highly likely of Georgian descent. While the number of people of Georgian descent is doubtlessly much higher and likely numbers in the millions, Magnarella has also argued that the settlement patterns have fostered assimilation into the Turkish majority population, particularly in villages in which the population was mixed.

The migration of Georgians into the territory of what is now Turkey was mostly a result of the Russian and later Soviet conquest of the Caucasus and can roughly be categorized into three waves: The first wave of emigration from Georgia came after the Russo–Turkish war of 1828/1829. As a result of the war, what is now the Georgian province of Samtskhe-Javakheti became part of the Russian Empire. Together with Adjara, it was part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, and the majority of the populations of both places had converted to Islam during Ottoman rule. The biggest influx of Georgians into the Ottoman Empire occurred during the second wave in the 1860s and 1870s until the end of the Russo–Turkish war of 1877/1878, during and after which approximately half a million were granted permission to leave for the Ottoman Empire. Their resettlement proved difficult, as the Ottoman Empire had to cope with a tremendous number of immigrants, the so-called *muhajirs*, from the Caucasus. Georgians did not receive preferential treatment and were settled in different regions spread across vast areas of the country but

1 Erdemli, Veysel. 2012. “Identifying the Georgians Living in Turkey as a Diasporic Community (Türkiye’de Yaşayan Gürcülerin Diaspora Olarak Tanımlanması).” *Avrasya İncelemeleri Dergisi (AVİD)*, 1/2: 343–361.

2 Although, for reasons of brevity, I continue to refer to them as the Georgian diaspora here, I consider them to be diasporic/transboundary populations.

3 Magnarella, P. J. (1976). „The Assimilation of Georgians in Turkey: A Case Study.“ *The Muslim World*, 66(1), 35–43.

predominantly in the provinces of Bursa, Adapazari and Ordu. The third wave occurred after the Soviet conquest of Georgia in the early 1920s; a significant part of this group then migrated further to other countries. While the first two waves of migration were largely composed of Muslims, the members of the third wave were far more diverse in terms of religious affiliation.

Georgians in Turkey

At present, interaction between the labor migrants and the descendants of the historical diaspora is rather weak—as a result of few shared spaces (and experiences). Georgians who settled in the territory of what is now Turkey are spread across the country, with some concentration on the central Black Sea coast and in the provinces east of Istanbul. The existence of a Georgian population that resides in the borderland with Georgia, mostly in the Artvin and Ardahan provinces, is the result of a mixed population in the border region and the drawing of the border, not migration. Many Georgians originally from these provinces have migrated to urban centers in other parts of Turkey. In terms of language, Georgians have assimilated into Turkish society to a greater extent than other Caucasian diasporic populations. The Georgian language has survived in rural areas of compact and sometimes-remote settlements, on the central Black Sea coast and, especially, in the Eastern border area.

Georgians are not the only speakers of a Kartvelian language—the Caucasian language group of which Georgian is the main language; but so are the Laz. Estimates of their population size range from 45 000 to 500 000. They reside primarily in Turkey on the very eastern part of the Black Sea coast bordering Georgia, only some 2000 in the village of Sarp*i* in Georgia.⁴ Despite that Georgians from Georgia readily embrace the Laz as *chvnebuli*, meaning “ours” and denoting the Georgian diaspora, the Laz of Turkey do not consider themselves to be Georgians (despite that intermarriages seem to have occurred frequently). The most widespread terminology and self-designation for Georgians in Turkey is either *gürcü* or *chvnebuli* (the equivalent of ‘ours’, in the sense of ‘our people’). The term *kartveli* is not widespread—one of the reasons is that it has more of a Christian connotation. The Georgian diasporic populations, embracing both the Georgian diaspora and Laz, are predominantly Muslim. Although the Laz are nominally Muslim, they generally practice Islam “only loosely”. Among Georgians in Turkey—as among most

diaspora groups—a secular perspective is widespread; however, there are also Muslim practitioners among them. In general, even the more secular diaspora is set apart by the fact that the diaspora is predominantly Muslim, while Georgia is a predominantly Christian country with a stark emphasis on its Christian identity. Therefore, the diaspora typically has more intense ties with the province of Adjara, not only because it is the adjacent border region but also due to its large Muslim population, which is roughly one-third of Adjara’s population.

Between 1937 and 1988, Sarp*i*, the main border crossing between the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia and Turkey, was closed and the Laz village of Sarp*i* divided. Despite a few delegations between the two countries and individuals from Turkey visiting since the late 1970s, 1988 marked a landslide. The ‘opening of the gates’ in 1988 is, rather than the mere physical opening of a border gate, a powerful metaphor—in both the Turkish and Georgian languages—that designates the mutual discovery of a lost world behind both sides of the iron curtain and, above all, the finding of (lost) relatives. Despite the experience of cultural differences that these processes of encountering with relatives entailed, the people forged new networks that lie at the heart of inter-societal contacts between the two countries. Current inter-societal relations between the diaspora and Georgia can be roughly placed into three categories: cultural, business and religious—most members of the diaspora are active in one sphere rather than in several, reflected by a rather scattered landscape of Georgian diaspora associations in Turkey. The lack of formalized cross-boundary associations, however, does not entail a lack of ties in general.

Relations Between Georgia and the Georgian Diaspora

Relations between intellectuals from the diaspora and scholars in Georgia have focused primarily on history and language; these relations are somewhat limited in scope because few people in the diaspora are primarily interested in these ties and simultaneously have a sufficiently strong comprehension of Georgian. These ties are not formalized in associations but are rather interpersonal ties or literary and academic networks. In Georgia, these ties are oriented primarily towards Tbilisi. In contrast, the religious ties of the Georgian diaspora to Georgia are oriented towards Adjara and its Muslim population. Not only the Christian population of Adjara but also some Turkish actors, above all the state (institutions), perceive the question of faith in Adjara as a potential vehicle for Turkish influence in Adjara, which the latter regards as part of its natural sphere of influence for historical reasons. In this climate of suspi-

⁴ Silvia Kutscher 2008. The language of the Laz in Turkey: Contact-induced change or gradual language loss? *Turkic Languages* 12, 82–102.

cion, local Muslims are wary of any interference or aid from Turkish actors, particularly of its public display. The Georgian Friendship Association (*Gürcüstan Dostluk Derneği*) seems to be the only formalized organization in which the diaspora has an active stake at the religious inter-societal level. However, inter-societal ties are also forged through the sponsorship of *iftars* (fast-breaking religious ceremonies) and the renovation of mosques by individuals from the Georgian diaspora. In recent years, a new generation of Muslim youths, who are active in religious education, have received religious education in Turkey and returned to Adjara. Many of these individuals received support from the diaspora in Turkey during their studies either through individual encounters or the Georgian Friendship Association.

Adjara is not only the major hub for religious activity by diaspora members but also for their business activities—as it is a hub for economic activities by Turkish actors in general. Although the public perception does not always regard such actors as members of the diaspora, but as Turks and Turkish citizens, people in Adjara are aware of at least a few cases in point in their own wider networks. The contribution of these members of the Georgian diaspora—either as investors and/or as managers and facilitators—is considerable, and business ties can be considered major inter-societal ties. Batumi airport, which was modeled after the Geneva airport, is simultaneously an international airport for Georgia and a domestic Turkish airport and is run by the Turkish company TAV Urban Georgia. According to the diaspora journal *Chveneburi* the well-known Turkish businessman Ergün Atabay, an active member of the Georgian diaspora, is one of the airport investors. In the educational sector in Adjara which—due to the

investments made—can partly be considered in the business category, although such efforts are not necessarily profit-oriented, Shahin school, which provides internationally oriented primary and secondary education and belongs to the Gülen (a religious movement) orbit, was founded by a diaspora member in 1994. A branch of BAU (Bahçeşehir University) recently opened a medical faculty in Batumi at the initiative and under the direction of a cardiologist from the Georgian diaspora. Other examples can be found across a wide spectrum of business areas: in the textile industry, in slot clubs and casinos, in construction and in tourism (hotels and restaurants). While *chveneburi* are either larger investors or intermediaries and facilitators, many of them from the bordering Artvin province, Laz—with the exception of Nurol—instead occupy a medium stratum of entrepreneurs owning and running restaurants and smaller businesses. This seems to be in line with their self-perception as entrepreneurial and flexible. Nurol Holding, owned by the Çarmıklı family from Arhavi, is probably the largest investor among the diasporic population businesses and encompasses many sectors, above all, tourism such as the Sheraton Batumi, and the construction sector.

Conclusion

Although the concept of a solidified Georgian diaspora in Turkey might be misleading, diasporic transboundary populations play a significant role in Georgian–Turkish societal relations, particularly in the region of Adjara. Despite their low visibility, when considering all three spheres outlined above—cultural, religious and business ties—their impact is significant, given their sheer number.

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The research for this article was supported by the EC-funded FP7 project “Intra- and Inter-Societal Sources of Instability in the Caucasus and EU Opportunities to Respond—ISSICEU” <<http://www.issiceu.eu/>>. The views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank numerous interview partners of the project, Anna Kiknadze, Alper Ataser and Nino Siprashvili for their research assistance in the project, and particularly, Mustafa Yakut and Osman Nuri Baştabak for their help and sharing their contacts and insights with me.

CHRONICLE

From 14 June to 19 July 2016

14 June 2016	Georgian Defense Minister Tina Khidasheli meets with her French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian in Paris to discuss military cooperation between the two countries and the upcoming NATO summit in Warsaw
15 June 2016	Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili commences his visit to Germany and meets with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin; during the visit, he opens a Georgian-German business forum
16 June 2016	Russian state company Gazprom says it has signed a contract with the Georgian company Gasko+ on the sidelines of the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum to supply gas from July 2016 until the end of 2016
20 June 2016	Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Russian city of Saint Petersburg and pledge their readiness to reach a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict
22 June 2016	The Georgian Parliament approves sending twenty Georgian soldiers to the Central African Republic as part of the EU's military training mission (EUTM RCA)
23 June 2016	Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze meets with the EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini in Brussels to sign a Security of Information Agreement between the EU and Georgia
24 June 2016	During an official visit to Armenia, Pope Francis denounces the mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman troops during World War I as "genocide"
26 June 2016	Pope Francis calls for closer ties between the Vatican and Armenia's Orthodox Church on the final day of his visit to the country
27 June 2016	Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili signs a free trade agreement with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in Bern during an official visit to Switzerland lasting two days
27 June 2016	Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, meets with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin, in Prague as part of an informal dialogue launched between the two countries in 2012
29 June 2016	German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier warns about a possible escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, calls for a strengthening of the ceasefire during a visit to Armenia, and exhorts Armenia and Turkey to hold talks to resolve their differences
29 June 2016	Georgian Prime Minister's special envoy for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, announces that a Georgian citizen jailed in Russia for spying has been released and handed over to Georgia on 28 June
30 June 2016	US Secretary of State John Kerry notes in separate phone calls to the presidents of Armenian and Azerbaijan that the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire is holding and urges both countries to continue avoiding tensions
1 July 2016	The Free Democrats (FD) opposition party in Georgia vows to significantly increase pensions and introduce a minimum wage if it secures a victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections in October
6 July 2016	US Secretary of State John Kerry signs a memorandum on "deepening the defense and security partnership" between the US and Georgia during an official visit to the Caucasus country
6 July 2016	The head of local government in the Georgian Adjara Autonomous Republic, Archil Khabadze, resigns ahead of elections
7 July 2016	Supporters of two jailed leaders of the Armenian nationalist opposition movement Founding Parliament march in the capital Yerevan to demand their release
7 July 2016	US Secretary of State John Kerry meets with leaders of opposition parties and Parliament Speaker Davit Usupashvili during a visit to Georgia
8 July 2016	During the NATO Summit in Warsaw Georgia and NATO agree on new steps to strengthen the country's defense capabilities, in particular air defense and air surveillance
11 July 2016	A referendum on early presidential elections in the breakaway region of Abkhazia is declared invalid due to low voter turnout
14 July 2016	European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn says in the Georgian sea resort of Batumi that Georgian citizens will be granted visa-free travel to EU countries of the Schengen zone by October
16 July 2016	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev holds talks with his Ukrainian counterpart, Petro Poroshenko, in Baku to sign bilateral agreements on political, economic, energy and transport issues

17–18 July 2016	A group of armed men belonging to Sasna Dzer, the military wing of the nationalist opposition group Founding Parliament, storm a police headquarters in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, demanding the release of their leader, killing one police officer, and taking several hostages, who were later released. Police block access to the occupied premises. The incident causes mass riots outside the block police headquarters during the following days
19 July 2016	During a meeting with his Turkish counterpart Binali Yildirim in Ankara, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili expresses the hope that the launch of a High Level Strategic Cooperation Council between the two countries will contribute to the “institutionalization” of bilateral ties

Compiled by Lili Di Puppò

For the full chronicle since 2009 see <www.laender-analysen.de/cad>

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST**Editors**

Tamara Brunner, Lili Di Puppo, Iris Kempe, Natia Mestvirishvili, Matthias Neumann, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines

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The Caucasus Analytical Digest (CAD) is a monthly internet publication jointly produced by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (<<http://www.crrccenters.org/>>), the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen (<www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de>), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich (<www.css.ethz.ch>), and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Caucasus Analytical Digest analyzes the political, economic, and social situation in the three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia within the context of international and security dimensions of this region's development.

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Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, and Michael Clemens

ISSN 1867 9323 © 2016 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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