

## CAN WE ENVISAGE A COLLABORATIVE EU-TURKEY APPROACH SUPPORTIVE OF REGIONALISM IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS TODAY?

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*This policy brief shifts the focus to Turkey's borderland with the South Caucasus. It looks at the issue of a possible cooperation between the EU and Turkey in their policy toward the South Caucasus and discusses the likelihood of accommodating Iran and Russia. The increasing tensions in the territorial conflicts and emerging intra-societal tensions call for a more focused policy toward the South Caucasus. The brief further elaborates possible forms of cooperative action in issues related to security, trade and energy, and people-to-people contacts.*

### INTRODUCTION: GENERAL CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

The regional context that pertains to the EU and Turkey has changed drastically and rapidly. The neighborhood has become a source of security threat from which neither Turkey nor the EU can isolate themselves: projecting stability across the borders looks to be a daunting task; transnational dynamics rather trigger the import of instability. In a context where hard security issues have the priority, policies aiming at supporting positive transformation and peaceful change require can be perceived as premature if not irrelevant. The initial aim of the European Neighborhood Policy was to project stability

across the external borders of the Union. Strengthening and building resilience around the Union has become a strategic objective and a new conceptualization of the EU's reframed neighborhood policy, as outlined in the Global Strategy of June 2016, aims today at protecting the EU against the real threats that emanate in the regions on the periphery of the Union. The sense of urgency is coupled with the feeling of increased vulnerability. The responsiveness to the threats that the Turkish state and society have been facing in the last six months have shown the high degree of

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resilience of the country with which very few EU member countries can compete. The resilience of Turkey, in the long term, cannot be taken for granted. The ongoing dynamics have clearly decedibilized the geopolitical approach that used to consider Turkey as a buffer country that would absorb tensions originating in the neighborhood and that it could constitute a bulwark against security

threats. Emerging intra-societal tensions call for a more focused policy toward the South Caucasus.

## 1. EU AND TURKISH POLICIES TOWARD THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Broadly speaking, the priorities of the EU and the Turkish policies in the South Caucasus are of a similar nature. Both the Turkish and EU policies toward the South Caucasus countries lack a regional framework. The EU is currently engaged in deepening its tailor-made partnerships with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Turkey's promotion of its priority axis with Georgia and Azerbaijan does not fully support regional integration in the South Caucasus as long as Armenia remains excluded. The EU assumes that its power of attraction can spur a transformation in the South Caucasus, whereas Turkey's vectors of influence are more direct.

For Turkey, in a context when the management of its southern border with Syria and Iraq has become a major challenge whose effects are being felt at the very center of the country, an eventual destabilization of its borderland with the South Caucasus would constitute a nightmare scenario. Turkey has never had a higher stake in preserving the stability in the South Caucasus. The EU, with its Eastern Partnership, adopted a multifaceted approach to strengthening the resilience in

the South Caucasus and building inclusive, prosperous, and secure societies.

It is equally important for Turkey to keep its access to the South Caucasus open: the trade and energy routes should stay accessible. The crisis with Russia after the downing of the MH17 jet showed more clearly the strategic importance of the East-West corridor, which allows Turkey to reach out to Central Asia and for Azerbaijan and Georgia to preserve their independence. From the EU perspective, free trade is a means of promoting prosperity and energy corridors are equally important in strengthening the energy security of the Union.

In the region, both Turkey and the EU have developed their most integrated ties with Georgia. Cross-border relations have been steadily developing along the Turkish-Georgian border, which is likely to have become the most Europeanized and secure border of Turkey, open to trade, capital, and people crossings. In 2015, the EU (31%) and Turkey (17%) constituted almost half of Georgia's foreign trade. In June 2014, the EU and Georgia signed

an association agreement, which entered into force on July 1, 2016. The agreement introduces a preferential trade regime—the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). This regime increases market access between the EU and, by extension, Turkey and Georgia, based on having better-matched regulations. Both Turkey and the EU look at Azerbaijan as an important partner in the field of energy security and search for diversification of the sources of supply.

The crisis between Turkey and Russia has increased the importance of the East-West route connecting Turkey to Azerbaijan through Georgia. Russia was the main transit country for the Turkish logistic sector, operating between Turkey and Central Asia. The closure of the Northern route has allowed the East-West corridor, for the time being, to become an operational trade route for the logistical sector. The Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railroad project has been re-prioritized as an important topic of the Turkish-Azerbaijani agenda. The importance of the East-West energy corridor and, more precisely, of the Transanatolian gas pipeline that would connect Turkey to the Azerbaijani resources

of the Shah Deniz 2 has been strengthened.

The state of relations with Armenia is a major hindrance in efforts at building resilience and strengthening independence in the South Caucasus for both Turkey and the EU. Armenia's integration into the Eurasian Economic Union cuts it though from deeper relations/integration with the European Economic Space. Turkey, for the past two decades, has been a reliable ally of Azerbaijan, including in the latter's policies of isolating Armenia. Since the failure of the protocols for the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, the issue of the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border has been linked explicitly with the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As Armenians' fear of Turks increases in connection to the security needs created by the continuation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, their policy options decrease proportionately. Twenty-five years of semi-closed borders surely had its effects on Armenia's policy making. With no recent experience of open borders with all its neighbors, the Armenian society has grown accustomed to the situation.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. THE RUSSIAN FACTOR IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Russia is a factor that can seriously constrain and curtail EU and Turkish policies in the South Caucasus. Confrontation with Russia limits the impact of actions and restraints access to the South Caucasus. Russia is still an insider in all three countries and has strong influence at the political, economic and societal levels. The Russian North Caucasus is an organic part of the region,

inseparable from its Southern part beyond the Caucasian range. Russia is home to large ethnic Caucasian diasporas in the North Caucasus and beyond. Finally, Russia is an insider because of the tight business connections, which have direct political implications. Russia matters in the security equations; the unsettled conflicts over Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh contribute

to perpetuate this situation. With its military bases in Abkhazia and Armenia, Russia preserves the capacity to impact on conflict dynamics in the region; furthermore, the security agreements that conflict sides have with Russia contribute, to a large extent, to the balance of power.

Russia is a factor that any actor interested in fostering political and societal transformations in the region has to reckon with. All three states of the South Caucasus have preserved and redefined, as in the case of Georgia, a privileged relationship with Russia. The preservation of their independence and maximization of power require the perspectives of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to find a counterweight to Russia.

The EU-Russia political crisis, as a result of the Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine, leaves little space for any cooperative approach within the context of the South Caucasus. Transatlantic strategies in the Black Sea that resurfaced in the context of a Turkish-Russian row because of the conflict in Syria pushed compromise even further, impacting any chance for a dialog with Russia. The NATO Summit in Warsaw on July 8-9, 2016, made it very clear that Russia is a key threat to the alliance and named the Black Sea as one of the main potential points of conflagration<sup>2</sup>. Also, one of the results of the Summit is that NATO is now planning to increase its presence in the Black Sea as a response to Russia's military build-up there.

In June 2016, at the Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, President Putin called for the restoration of ties with Europe. In July 2016, the EU has extended sanctions on Russia

for another six months—until January 31, 2017. However, there are signs of growing differences within the EU and even within Germany on this issue. Within the EU, Italy, Slovakia, Greece, and Hungary tend to criticize the sanctions. In Germany, Chancellor Merkel (CDU) insists that sanctions should stay in place unless the Minsk Agreement are implemented. Foreign Minister Steinmeier (SPD) has called for restructuring/modifying sanctions to create the potential for reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine. In June, Steinmeier criticized Western “sabre-rattling” against Russia, referring to large-scale NATO exercises in Poland.<sup>3</sup> We can expect a progressive de-escalation of tensions between the EU and Russia.

Turkey's relations with the Caucasus have evolved in the last 15 years in the context of a steady improvement of Turkish-Russian relations. Turkey gave the priority to Russia in its regional policies. Both countries had been cautious that tensions emanating from the Caucasus do not spill over their bilateral relations and had succeeded in overcoming the legacy of the Cold War in their bilateral relations. The Turkish-Russian political relations decreased to their lowest since the end of the Cold War in November 2015-June 2016: the crisis resulted from the conflict in Syria and not from a discord in the Black Sea Caucasus region.

The crisis showed as well to what extent Turkey and Russia have managed to build a web of interdependence, starting with energy relations, which clearly help to mitigate the political crisis. The energy relations were not affected, social and business networks helped to maintain a

level of dialogue and trust despite harsh political rhetoric of the Russian President against Turkey. Interestingly, on a societal level, even the harsh anti-Turkish rhetoric discourse encouraged by the Russian leadership did not trigger any hostile attitude within the Turkish society against Russia. In this respect, the transnational societal links that exist between Turkey and the peoples of the Russian Federation, together with the web of business ties, seem to have played a mitigation role.

The Turkish and Russian governments came to the conclusion that Turkish-Russian bilateral relations matter for the future of the region: both countries have seen what it costs them to sever their relations. The economic cost of the crisis was indeed minimal, compared to the strategic cost both for Russia and Turkey. The Russian sanctions applied outside the post-Soviet and CIS geography and, more specifically, against an open economy well integrated with world markets have a limited impact. More than the harm caused by the sanctions, it is the possibility of lifting them that can give an additional incentive when sides are already in talks about the normalization of relations. The Turkish President Erdoğan sent a letter to President Putin in which he expressed his deep sympathy and condolences to the relatives of the deceased Russian pilot and called Russia “a friend and a strategic partner” and expressed readiness to tackle security challenges in the region and fight

terrorism together with Moscow on June 27, 2016 only some ten days before the NATO Summit in Warsaw. Russia considered the letter as an apology: it became the first move to help fix the relations. President Putin’s expression of solidarity after the ISIS attack against the Istanbul Airport on June 28, 2016 and the announcement on the same occasion of the lifting, in the very near future, of the ban on Russian charter flights to Turkey caused sympathy in the nation. The fact that the perpetrators were identified as nationals of the Russian Federation and Central Asia brought arguments in support of the need to collaborate against terrorism. Moscow’s unequivocal and swift condemnation of the putsch attempt on July 15, 2016 in a contrast to the silence of Turkey’s traditional Western allies, gave a strong impetus to the normalization of the bilateral relations and paved the way to the meeting in St. Petersburg of the Turkish and Russian head of the states on August 9, 2016. The decisions were made to put back on track the two energy projects, the twenty-billion-dollar Akkuyu nuclear plant constructed by the Russian company Atomstroyexport near Mersin on Turkey’s Eastern Mediterranean coast and the Turkish Stream pipeline project, which will carry Russian gas to Turkey and the EU. Russia announced a phased lifting of sanctions. President Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to Turkey on October 10, 2016 and took part in the Joint Economic Commission and Energy Forum meetings in Istanbul.

### 3. INTEGRATING IRAN IN POLICIES TOWARDS THE CAUCASUS

Iran's policy toward the South Caucasus is essentially a pragmatic one, shaped by realpolitik, historical experiences, and balance-of-power calculations. While Tehran may be eager to assert itself as a regional power, it is able to acknowledge the limitations of its own capacity and the constraint of external challenges. Its regional policy is, therefore, relatively cautious and balanced. Regional stability and security are of particular importance and have often taken precedence over the ideological preoccupations in Iran's policy choices in the South Caucasus, inherent to a revolutionary and religious regime. Considered from the perspective of the countries of the South Caucasus, Iran offers new alternatives in the field of energy and a gateway through infrastructure development. Additionally, for these three countries caught in a web of asymmetrical relations, Iran is potentially a counterweight to both Russia and Turkey. Given that Iran is home to over 15 million ethnic Azerbaijanis, Azerbaijan (population just over 9.5 million) is a major priority for Iran. There is also a religious component to their relationship, as both populations are largely Shiite, but live under different systems: Azerbaijan's secular government (with a Soviet heritage) and Iran's theocracy. There are a few bones of contention between the two. Iran maintains good relations with Azerbaijan's arch enemy, Armenia, and Azerbaijan has good relations with Israel. The Nagorno-Karabakh issue has played a sensitive role in the public opinion among Iranian Azeris, and the Islamic Republic

has endeavored to maintain a positive balance policy between Armenia and Azerbaijan. During the escalation of violence along the line of contact in April 2016, the Azeri population of Ardabil demonstrated solidarity with Azerbaijan during the Friday prayer. In addition, a dispute over the delimitation of the Caspian Sea and its resources influenced bilateral relations. Tehran's likely third priority is trade with Georgia and, foremost, Armenia. For the latter, Iran has been the only open shared border besides Georgia. Armenia will be keen to further expand on trade and energy cooperation, while Georgia, which is seen as a staunch Western ally, is also keen to extend its business and trade through links with Iran. These prospects could constitute a positive role for Iran in the region without much cost for other external actors.

The geostrategic rivalry between Turkey and Iran, two neighbors and regional powers with close cultural ties, have deep historical roots. The two countries reached a modus vivendi: the Turkish-Iranian border aligned in 1639 is today the oldest border of Turkey. Turkey has had normal relations with Iran before the lifting of the sanctions. Trade between the two countries had been hampered by the imposition of financial restrictions on Iran, which prevented Turkey from paying for the energy resources it imported from Iran, therefore restricting the flow of gas and oil. As of today, almost 90% of Iran's gas exports goes to Turkey. Since December 2001, Turkey imports 10

bcm of gas from Iran each year. The lifting of sanctions, according to projections made in both countries, is likely to triple the volume of trade between the two countries to thirty billion dollars in two years.

The coup attempt and its failure have given a major boost to the Turkey-Iran relationship. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif voiced support for the government in the early hours of the unrest. Both countries had already started bridging their differences over Syria with the acknowledgment that Syrian insurgency has brought home the fact—both to Ankara and Tehran—that the principal beneficiaries of the breakup of Syria, which is likely to happen if Assad falls, will be the Syrian Kurds. Another beneficiary will be the PYD, which has strong links not only to the PKK in Turkey, but also to the PJAK, the Kurdish insurgent movement engaged in fighting Tehran.

Iran is nervous, especially since there is uncertainty about the implementation of the nuclear deal under a new American president. It seems that Iran has tried to foster multilateral cooperation in the region, especially in the Caucasus, to advance its

policies. The meetings of the presidents of Moscow-Baku-Tehran and meeting of foreign ministers of Ankara-Baku-Tehran are considered to be a part of this policy.

For the EU, the non-functioning relationship with Iran is politically very costly. Iran is too big and too important regional actor to be ignored. The cost for the EU to pursue its policies vis-à-vis the region will be much higher and less effective with Iran absent from the table. In order for the EU to make any headway in addressing issues of concern and build a more stable relationship with Iran, the EU must devise a medium to long-term strategy for regular, sustained dialog with Iran. Iran and Europe have a long history together and individual Member States all have their own specific relationship with Iran. In April 2016, the EU High Representative visited Tehran, together with several Commissioners and officials, in order to pursue a more vigorous and broadened exchange and relationship with Iran. The EU and Iran need to establish a strategic and structured dialog, as well as the EU and Turkey, which still have not been able to do so.

## 4. TOWARD A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH BETWEEN THE EU, TURKEY, RUSSIA, AND IRAN

### **Security relations**

Russia is by far the main actor in the security equation of the South Caucasus. Iran has no direct or indirect security involvement in the region. The region is not a top priority for Tehran, given its other pressing priorities, such as the rivalry with Saudi Arabia, its policy toward Israel, and broader Middle

East challenges, foremost ISIS. In that sense Iran, like Turkey, the EU, and the US, is not interested in becoming too involved in the South Caucasus conflicts, leaving Russia to dominate the region from a security point of view. Turkey has established close military cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan and has been providing support

for the modernization of the armed forces of both countries. All three countries signed a security agreement for the protection of the East-West energy corridor. Turkey's security agreements, even the alliance set with Azerbaijan, have little operational effect on the ground. Turkey is far from the theater of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; it can extend, in the most extreme case, protection to Georgia. Turkey, similar to Iran and the EU (and the US), is inclined to accept the primacy of Russia in the post-Soviet space. Interestingly, Russia seems eager to include—to a certain extent—both Iran and Turkey in collective security talks. On August 8, 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani concluded a trilateral meeting by signing a declaration on increased cooperation between their countries. The next day, President Putin met his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in St. Petersburg and, on August 10, 2016, he held a meeting with Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan.

### **Settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**

After the resumption of hostilities along the Line of Contact in April 2016, Moscow reinitiated a trilateral format of negotiation, already experienced in 2008–2012. Moscow showed its capacity to contain and de-escalate tensions as well as restore the ceasefire, as fragile as such process can be. Moscow organized a trilateral summit in St. Petersburg on June 20, 2016 that brought together the Armenian and Azerbaijani head of states. The head of the three states issued a joint statement in which they confirmed their adherence to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, expressed their support

of the ceasefire regime, and announced that talks in the trilateral format would be continued in addition to the work of the OSCE's Minsk group. In the document, in defining its role in the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict, Russia virtually positions itself not only as a co-chair country in the Minsk group, but also as an independent mediator. Even if suspected of not being an honest broker, Moscow managed to balance delicately between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia is Moscow's military ally and a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, while Baku is an important economic partner. Moreover, Russia and Azerbaijan share a portion of land border that is critical for the safety of both countries. Regional countries and the two other co-chair countries of the Minsk group, as well as the EU, are not in the position to criticize Russia for its efforts, while the diplomatic resources they mobilized for the settlement of the conflict are insufficient and the risks of new escalation of tensions is high.<sup>4</sup> Due to its long absence from the Caucasus scene and the failure of its mediation attempts in the '90s during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, Tehran does not play a role in conflict resolution initiatives. Turkey, which has a high stake in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, is not eligible as a mediator: by positioning itself on the side of Azerbaijan, it has become a partial player and, furthermore, has no direct political relations with Armenia. Turkey can be involved in the negotiations before normalizing its relations with Armenia. The only possibility would be that Moscow asks openly for Turkey's involvement. The trilateral discussions seem to have mentioned the possibility to take into



account the linkage between the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute and the normalization of Turkish Armenian relations.

The role of the EU in the settlement efforts of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is very small. The Global Strategy defines a specific role for the EU in the field of the resolution of protracted conflict in the Eastern Partnership countries, and enhance its efforts in preemptive peacebuilding and diplomacy. So far the EU has mainly supported programs to promote confidence-building measures between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as between Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, while today in the post-April 2016 context, the mechanisms for the prevention of armed incidents and the provision of security are most required.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the EU is potentially the best actor to provide a peacekeeping force, acceptable for the sides, in the eventuality of a peace agreement.

### **Abkhazia's engagement for security in the Black Sea**

Turkey and the EU can jointly try to find innovative ways to engage with Abkhazia. There might be possibilities for developing a cooperative approach with both Russian and Georgian consents. This effort should help to decrease tensions in the Eastern Black Sea. Such an approach would be in line with the priority of "fostering inclusive government at all levels", by blending "top-down and bottom-up efforts fostering the building block of sustainable statehood" described in the Global Strategy Paper.

### **Energy and Trade**

The East-West energy corridors are based

on a Turkish-Azerbaijani-EU cooperation<sup>6</sup>. If concretized, the Russia-promoted Turkish Stream project, which was brought back on the agenda with the normalization of Turkish-Russian relations, will enhance Turkey's role of a transit country for the transportation of the Russian gas toward the EU. Iran's integration into energy and infrastructure projects has a huge potential to diversify trade patterns in the South Caucasus region. Competing Armenian and Azerbaijani projects and Russian eagerness to allow the linkage of the South Caucasus with Iran will be decisive in this respect.

Although Iran boasts the second-largest gas reserves in the world, it has not been able to export; it even imports gas from Turkmenistan. It would take enormous Chinese or Western investments to start producing and exporting in either direction. Iranian gas could render the Southern corridor a more significant source of natural gas for Europe, but this depends on how Tehran positions itself with regards to the West and how keen Azerbaijan is to block access by Iran or profit from transit.

On the economic front, Russia wants to reduce the possibility of any alternative gas pipelines to Europe, specifically from Iran to Turkey through Azerbaijan. Another important priority for Azerbaijan is to weaken Armenia by excluding it from North-South transport and energy corridors. Yerevan is trying to develop economic ties with Iran by increasing its gas imports and becoming a transit country for Iranian gas to Georgia. The Armenian part of the North-South highway, which is part of the North-South transport corridor, to be completed in 2019, will become the shortest ground connection between the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea.

### ■ Societal level

This collaborative approach between Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the EU should also include a societal level. People-to-people contact is often prioritized in EU policy documents. People-to-people contact between the EU and its partners are indeed comparatively very low, hindered by visa regulations. Russia, Turkey, and Iran have quite intensive societal interactions with the South Caucasus sustained by historical and cultural ties as well as trade and tourism. Societies intermingled extensively and developed cross-communal and transnational ties. The EU's decision to postpone visa

liberalization to Georgia caused a huge disappointment in the country. This is seen as a political decision and not a technical one as it was supposed to be. In its report from December 2015 the European Commission confirmed that Georgia had met the necessary requirements and, in March 2016, the Commission officially proposed to introduce a visa-free regime for Georgia. The EU has to find ways to overcome impediments to the mobility of people. It can, on the other hand, share its experience in how to do programming and set sustainable mechanisms in the area of cultural and educational exchanges.

## CONCLUSION

Broadly speaking, the priorities of the EU and Turkish policies in the South Caucasus are of a similar nature. The EU assumes that its power of attraction can spur transformation in the South Caucasus, whereas Turkey's vectors of influence are more direct.

They both have a stake in having stability in the South Caucasus and are open to the outside world. Interestingly, Georgia, as the country among the three that is most willingly searching with the EU integration, is also the closest to Turkey. The state of relations with Armenia is a major hindrance in efforts to build resilience and strengthening independence in the South Caucasus for both Turkey and the EU. In this case, Turkey's incapacity to set direct relations with Armenia was impacted, in return, in the sustainability of Armenia's European path.

The good understanding between Iran, Turkey, and Russia, although oriented

toward the Middle East, can set a pattern of cooperation in the Caucasus, which constitutes the land connection and the historical zone of contact between the three political entities. Russia is by far the main actor in the security equation of the South Caucasus. Turkey, similar to Iran and the EU, is inclined to accept the primacy of Russia in the post-Soviet space. Interestingly, Russia seems eager to include, to a certain extent, both Iran and Turkey in collective security talks. These interactions between Iran, Turkey, and Russia, involving within different formats Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, open new avenues for multilateral action in the region. The EU can positively support initiatives for security, conflict settlement, and enhanced people-to-people contacts by bringing in additional resources and institutional experience of integrated action. The EU, which is no longer an agenda shaper in the driver's seat, can best serve as a facilitator.

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**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Burcu Gültekin Punsmann, 'Review of Isolation Policies within and around the South Caucasus', Caucasus Edition, Journal of Conflict Transformation, 18 July, 2016, <http://caucasusedition.net/analysis/review-of-isolation-policies-within-and-around-the-south-caucasus/>
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