



Saakashvili Pulled the Trigger: Turkey between Russia and Georgia

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Turkey has been involved, historically and demographically, with many of the regions of “frozen conflict” in post-Soviet space. At this point, one might consider the position of Turkey as being at the epicenter of Euro-Atlantic and Russian extremes concerning the frozen conflicts. Georgia, since 1991, has been considered a valuable “strategic partner” by Turkey for several reasons. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan’s Caucasus Pact idea is a good opportunity to create an inclusive (Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) new foreign policy approach at this stage. This approach should be merged with the representation of all the frozen or unfrozen conflict areas, peoples, ethnic groups and regions included under the roof of such an alliance.

Turkey and the “frozen conflicts” in former Soviet space

Turkey has been involved, historically and demographically, with many of the regions of “frozen conflict” in post-Soviet space. The Gagauz question in Moldova, the status of Crimea and the resettlement of Crimean Tatars to their homeland in today’s Ukraine, the Chechen problem, the Abkhazian and South Osetian questions, the issue of Ajarian autonomy, the relocation of Ahıska Turks in Georgia, the problems of Borchali Azeris in Georgia, the dispute over Nagorno Karabakh, and many other frozen conflicts concern not only the representatives of these ethnic groups within Turkey but also Turkish governments, due to the activities of lobbyists acting on these ethnic groups’ behalf. In Turkey, many such lobbyists are well organized around advocacy and civil society organizations. They usually have a direct influence on both the Turkish public and on Turkey’s administrations. Beyond the agitations of the lobbyists, the frozen conflicts themselves represent potential instability in the region, as was recently seen in the

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latest South Osetia (5 Days) War. The status of these regions as ‘instabilizers’ is one of the reasons why Turkey, and probably the rest of the world, has had difficulty engaging in the economics and politics of the region. Another issue that characterizes the frozen conflicts is the existence of the former hegemon, Russia, as an integral part of all of them. This latter point is the reason why all these frozen conflicts have long been considered the major obstacle to Euro-Atlantic interests in post-Soviet space.¹ At this point, one might consider the position of Turkey as being at the epicenter of Euro-Atlantic and Russian extremes concerning the frozen conflicts.

Turkey and Georgia

Georgia, since 1991, has been considered a valuable “strategic partner” by Turkey for several reasons. The first reason really is strategic; having a weaker, friendly

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country between gigantic Russia and Turkey as a “buffer zone” makes good tactical sense. It is assumed that to be a neighbor of a superpower, old, new or reborn, is risky. Second, especially after the invasion of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia, and in the wake

of the Nagorno Karabakh problem, Georgia was valued again as the only direct corridor by which Turkey could reach Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and the rest of the Turkic republics. Thirdly, Georgia provides the best option for the transportation of Caspian energy riches to international markets via Turkey, bypassing both Russia and Iran. For a good part of the 1990s, the Georgian economy survived thanks to shuttle trade between Turkey’s Black Sea provinces and its own. The Turkish military helped its Georgian counterparts in their ambitious effort to meet NATO standards in their military and defense infrastructure. In some cases, Turkey trained Georgian military officials, and some basic, non-sophisticated equipment was transferred by Turkey to Georgia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan crude oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, and Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway projects were all aimed to strengthen Turkey’s ties with the Caucasus and the Caspian Basin. Georgia was seen as a key player in all these projects; the need to support Georgia has thus rarely been questioned, even during the Georgian civil war and the Abkhazian and South Osetian wars.

¹ Vladimir Socor, “The Frozen Conflicts: A Challenge to Euro-Atlantic Interests,” Report prepared by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, on the occasion of the NATO Summit 2004.

The Ajaria Experience and Osetia Fiasco

The general perception in the Turkish press is that Georgia's Saakashvili administration has failed to calculate the extent of the Russian reaction to its attempt to crack the self-declared South Osetian Republic.² But before considering the reverberations of Saakashvili's present actions, it may prove important to consider their political precedent. Many Turks have not even heard about Saakashvili's similar actions in Ajaria a couple of years ago. Ajaria was given to the Soviets in 1921 by the Kars Treaty between the Turkish Grand National Assembly and Soviet representatives from Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Article 6 of the treaty explicitly guaranteed the autonomy of the Muslim majority in Ajaria, which is why an Ajarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1921. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ajaria was ruled by an authoritarian former communist, Aslan Abashidze. Although Abashidze was not a separatist, he achieved a high degree of autonomy from Tbilisi, especially after the Georgian Civil War of 1992-1993.

One of the first consolidation attempts on the part of Saakashvili administration in the spring of 2004 was to liquidate Ajaria by military means and force Abashidze to flee Moscow via the Turkish town of Trabzon. Although this development agitated some discussion among the Turkish intelligentsia about the rights of – and guarantee of Turkey over – the autonomy of Ajaria, Turkey took no steps and raised no vocal criticism of the issue. Since then, it is a well known fact that the Georgian cross was inserted into Ajaria's sovereign flag. Some might consider the success of the Saakashvili administration in “re-uniting Ajaria” with Georgia as an inspiration – or view it as a model for the current attempt to liquidate Osetian de-facto independence.

On the present occasion, Saakashvili's timing was quite perfect. The international arena was full of other matters. The very opening of the Olympics was a showcase for world leaders to meet each other and to appear before world public opinion. Unable to understand the timing and the use-of-force motives of Saakashvili, some major columnists in the Turkish media have started to make some analogies. One of them was quite extreme indeed. Ferai Tınç, in her column in Turkish daily *Hürriyet* asked Saakashvili: “Have the ones who shed a green light to Saddam for the invasion of Kuwait said to you that the Olympics are excellent timing?”³ The US and its allies were quite busy in Afghanistan in their search for more military manpower from NATO allies. They have asked Turkey repeatedly to increase the number of Turkish forces in Afghanistan and to send some major combat troops. Iraq still poses a major challenge for the US and her allies, including Georgia, a former troop contributor. The Georgian attack on Tskhinvali comes at a time when Iran-US nuclear disaccord is obvious and the international community is on

² Semih İdiz, “Türkiye’yi Batı’ya iten Rusya’dır,” *Milliyet*, 11 August 2008.

³ Ferai Tınç, “Gürcü Lideri Kim İtti?” *Hürriyet*, 11.8.2008.



the verge of taking new sanctions to force Iranians to give up their current position. The Georgian leadership might have calculated their attack against the separatist South Osetia as a new *fait accompli* just like their experience in Ajaria.

Ahıska (Meskhetian) Turks and Turkey

Quite unknown to the international public, the situation of the Ahıska Turks has been one of Turkey’s major concerns in its relations with Georgia since 1991. The Ahıska Turks were one of several ethnic groups subjected to mass (and in some

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cases quite murderous) exile/deportation to Central Asia in 1944. Along with Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, and Chechens, they were exiled to Central Asia and dispersed to more than four thousand locations in the former

Soviet Union. In 1989 and 1990 the Ahıska Turks were targets of local ethnic violence in Central Asia and many of them left Uzbekistan for Azerbaijan, Kazakstan and Russia.⁴ *Vatan Society*, the only representative institution of this very widely dispersed and impoverished population, spent a good deal of the 1990s and 2000s searching for ways to resettle the Ahıska Turks in their homeland in Georgia. Georgian authorities had one condition for this: Ahıska Turks were required to declare that they were ethnic Georgians.

After 2003-2004, with the Saakashvili administration in power, there appeared to be new hope for the Ahıska Turks. Turkey had already received minor numbers of Ahıska Turk refugees since 1991. However, the major point for Turkey was to assure over half a million Ahıska Turks that Turkey would help finance their relocation. In due course, numerous conferences and official gatherings were held concerning the situation of the Ahıska Turks. Saakashvili, during his May 2004 visit to Turkey, accordingly met with most of the representatives of the Ahıska Turks and promised to do everything possible in order to secure their resettlement.⁵ Since then almost nothing has been achieved and no steps have been taken by the Georgian administration on the part of the proposed resettlement, a situation which continues to cause resentment in Turkey. Moreover, in accordance with Georgia’s commitments to the European Union, the Ahıska Turks were obliged to apply for resettlement by the end of 2008. There have been very few applications to date, due both to the bureaucratic difficulties imposed by the

⁴ Calep Daniloff, “The Exile of the Meskheti Turks: Still Homesick Half a Century Later,” *Azerbaijan International*, Spring 1997, (5.1) pp. 12-16.

⁵ The speech of Turkish MP Ensar Ögüt at the Turkish Grand National Assembly, 22nd term, 2nd legislative year, 110th session, July 6, 2004.



Georgian administration and also to uncertainties regarding the recognition of the ethnic and religious identities of the applicants. Especially after the August 2008 South Osetia war, the near future appears to hold few prospects of any progress toward the resettlement of Ahıska Turks in their homeland.⁶ This gridlock naturally places further anti-Georgian pressure on Turkish governments domestically through the mobilization of civil society organizations working on behalf of the Ahıska Turks.

The Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey

Both Abkhazians and Osetians are a part of greater Causasian/Circassian diaspora in Turkey. Circassians in particular are quite famous for their solidarity and public spirit. After fighting against the Tsarist armies for a century, they found refuge in the Ottoman Empire throughout the 1900s in several waves of immigration, and were settled in disparate regions all over the Empire. The descendants of the Ottoman Circassians are to be found in Israel, Jordan, Syria, Greece, Macedonia, and even Bulgaria. But the bulks of the Circassians have remained within the borders of Anatolia and have taken important initiatives throughout the republican era.

Especially during the first Chechen War (1994-1996) the Circassians showed their solidarity to a great extent. Immense aid and media campaigns bombarded the Turkish public. Governments during this period felt the pressure of this public barrage acutely, and took action both by accepting Chechen refugees and by declining to impose strict control over the type of “aid” going through Turkey to Chechnya. But, during the second Chechen War, with multiple factors (i.e., the appearance of a visible “Jihadist” influence there, changes in the international dynamics, and the different governments both in Russia and Turkey), Circassian solidarity with Chechnya waned. In contrast, the solidarity concerning Abkhazian and South Osetian causes has maintained its strength since the beginning of the 1990s. One of the major civil societal platforms of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey is called as the Federation of Caucasian Associations. The memorandum this group published on the 9th of August concerning the South Osetia war was entitled “Memorandum Concerning the Invasion of South Osetia by Georgia”. The title alone serves to explain the stance of the Turkish Circassian community on the issue. A similar protest was published by another group, the Friends of Abkhazia in Turkey. Of course, the stance reflected in these documents is expected to have an impact on the government and political parties; it should also be expected that Turkish public opinion will be shaped in part by the lenses of such an approach.⁷

⁶ Çağrı Erhan, “Gürcistan’daki Durum Ahıska Türklerinin Dönüşünü İmkansız Kılıyor,” *ASAM Analysis*, 11 August 2008.

⁷ This point of view has a long precedent: the Federation has declared that the inclusion of South Osetia and Abkhazia in Georgia in the first place were criminal acts on the part of Stalin, who acted in order to promote his home country Georgia within the Soviet Union. See Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu, “Gürcistan’ın Güney Osetya’yı İşgali Nedeni İle Yayınladığımız Bidiridir,” 9.8.2008.



Georgians in Turkey

There is a tiny Georgian minority in Turkey. Although politically quite active over the years, it is difficult to argue that they have shown a similar solidarity to that enjoyed by the Circassians. Turkish Georgians are Muslim descendants of Ajarians who stayed or preferred to stay on this side of the border during and after the 1921 delimitation. Probably for the first time in Turkish history, Turkish Georgians have organized a protest meeting in Istanbul in support of Georgia. Although outnumbered by the Circassians, they are expected to have an influence over politicians of Black Sea origin, probably including the prime minister himself. Given the long-standing historical and demographic concerns raised by both sides, Turkey needs an approach that will satisfy Turkish Georgians as well as the Ahıska Turks.

Kosovo's Impact and Saakashvili as a Leader

Although Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of Kosovo, none of the Turkic republics followed suit. In this respect they have chosen to stick with Russia. Both the Kosovo War of 1999 and Kosovo's

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independence in 2008 were considered important backlashes against Russian diplomacy and power politics. If one includes Tbilisi's “unequivocal geopolitical choice in

favor of the West” and NATO⁸ it might be easier to understand how Georgia could become the very fragile target of Russian “diplomacy.” Saakashvili has given the best opportunity to Russia for challenging the new world order.⁹ Without any short-term prospects for EU membership, decorating or furnishing almost all state institutions in Georgia with EU flags not only demonstrates Georgian leadership's commitment to this cause: it sends a message to Russia. But this gesture is tragicomic as well. The author, just a couple of months ago, saw many ruined schools and hospitals in the Georgian countryside with brand new Georgian and EU flags in front of them. Russia is exactly ready to do anything possible to see a more pro-Russian or a more “independent” administration in Georgia.

However the historical background of the inclusion of these two regions into the lands of Georgia is a bit different.

⁸ Igor Torbakov, “New Caucasus War: All Sides are Likely to Lose,” Upcoming article by Dr. Torbakov sent to the author in 11.8.2008.

⁹ Fehmi Kuru, “Dikkatle ve İhtiyatla,” *Yeni Şafak*, 12 August 2008.

The Turkish media, especially those sources closest to the government, are full of accusations against Saakashvili. There is almost no doubt among the Turkish public that he is responsible for all these messes. One writer queries, “Do you see how an irresponsible, ambitious, hasty [person], no statesmen at all, employing nationalism and religious symbols without any control, a clamorous leader, has forced his country, his allies and his enemies into huge turmoil? He has taken one of the most sensitive regions of the world to the brink of a major war.”¹⁰

These accusations are not without basis in fact. Moreover, Saakashvili’s chauvinistic policy against the Muslim population (Ajaras, Azeris, Ahıska Turks and others), Abkhazians and Osetians also raises concerns in Turkey.¹¹ The one major promise made by the Saakashvili administration to the Georgian people was to enter into the EU and NATO quickly. For this purpose, Saakashvili needed to eliminate South Osetian and Abkhazian demands and he was also asked by the EU to help the Ahıska Turks resettle their homeland. But he preferred to allocate approximately 70% of the national budget to military build-up. While the countryside was quite miserable economically, Tbilisi started to look like a surreally reborn historic city. Perhaps even more troubling, Saakashvili did not hesitate to use disproportionate police force against democratically demonstrating opposition members last year. Saakashvili has failed to create civilian jobs, preferring to invest in the military and the state. Not surprisingly, Saakashvili lost support from his people during last winter’s presidential elections and during the May 2008 parliamentary elections. It was the Saakashvili administration that opened Pandora’s Box by beginning to bomb South Osetia as a result of a search for a *fait accompli* or a miscalculation.

Saakashvili, until now, has not behaved with the dignity of a president of a great people but rather has acted as a war correspondent for CNN. One day sees him declaring war, the other declaring ceasefire, and the following day begging the international community for help. He might once have secured the full-fledged support of poor Georgians in this catastrophe by employing his extremely religious and nationalistic slogans. He is a caricature now. Failing to consult his allies, his neighbors and his own domestic opposition, Saakashvili is now the target of nearly everyone. This situation marks a total discreditation of his leadership qualities. It should not be forgotten that it was Saakashvili who pulled the trigger.

Turkey in this Equation

Turkey has close historical, strategic, economic and ethnic linkages to all parties in the confrontation. Therefore, Turkey has to take all of these into consideration. The following points could be relevant for Turkish crisis management and the re-formulation of Turkish foreign policy concerning the region:

¹⁰ İbrahim Karagül, “Bir Delinin Başımıza Açtığı Belaya Bakın,” *Yeni Şafak*, 12 August 2008.

¹¹ Hakan Albayrak, “Saakashvili ve Şovenist Siyasetin İflası,” *Yeni Şafak*, 11 August 2008.



1. Turkey should refrain from taking the initiative or in fact any direct action toward mediating the conflict. Any involvement stands to have important results in both the domestic and international politics of the country. A Turkish initiative might alienate Russia, an important economic and energy partner internationally. It would definitely alienate members of the domestic Circassian diaspora and the political elites in the country who support their cause. Any expression of open political sympathy with the Georgian administration would alienate the nationalist civil society and political powers in Turkey that are in close contact with the Ahıska Turks and Borchali Azeris in Georgia.
2. Turkey should bring the humanitarian side of the current catastrophe to the forefront. War-torn Georgian regions, devastated South Osetia, and economically backward Abkhazia should be the direct recipients of Turkish aid campaigns and investment. Humanitarian support would satisfy domestic lobbies and Russia alike. Turkey should accept refugees from Georgia's war-torn regions in the short run and should establish direct economic relations with Abkhazia and South Osetia. This should include direct flights from Istanbul to Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. The future of these regions should be liberated from the decisions of chauvinistic and irresponsible parties' personal decisions.
3. In the medium and long term, Turkey should take the initiative to re-build Georgia with huge grants. However this time the grants should concentrate on building the country's civilian infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals, and electricity and water investments. The humanitarian-centered approach should also be valid for this re-building attempt. Within this context, Turkey and Western allies should allocate funds to invite thousands of Georgian, Abkhazian, Osetian, Azeri, Ahıska, Mingrelian all other ethnic students to complete their higher education in the liberal democracies of the West.
4. In the post-war re-formulation of Turkish foreign policy, the Tbilisi-centered approach should be replaced by a multi-faceted approach, including the creation of political ties with Abkhazia, South Osetia and Ajaria. If Turkey fails to make such connections, those regions are destined to establish ties only with the Russian Federation, currently the only country in the world struggling to explain the problems of the region's people. This burden should be lifted from the shoulders of Russia. Power politics and Russia's ambitions for hegemony arguable shadow Russia's humanitarian aid to those regions.
5. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's Caucasus Pact idea is a good opportunity to create an inclusive (Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) new foreign policy approach at this stage. This approach should be merged with the representation of all the frozen or unfrozen conflict areas, peoples, ethnic groups and regions included under the roof

of such an alliance. Erdoğan's approach could be productively supported by economic and energy concerns and, perhaps more importantly, with more humanitarian and inter-ethnic dialogue patterns.

6. If Turkey could develop such an inclusive approach, not only establishing relations with the "centers" of the nation states but also with the "problematic regions" by capitalizing on its historical and ethnic heritage, it would succeed in establishing secure links between its allies in the West and those regions without alienating any regional power.