

Between Russia and the West: Turkey as an Emerging Power and the Case of Abkhazia

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's foreign policy finds itself in transition. Considering the new emerging context and the constraints that Turkey faces, it is essential to assess the real determinants which would transform Turkish foreign policy to encompass a more pro-active, independent, and regional strategy. Abkhazia, since its recognition by Russia on August 26, 2008, is examined here as a case study. South Caucasian issues in general and Abkhazia in particular may be essential bargaining chips for Turkey to substantially improve its stance from the Black to the Caspian Seas, assuming its new-found "emancipation" from U.S. influence and thus becoming a real regional power in the region. If all these successful challenges are met successfully, then Turkey will move to the gravity center of an EU-Russia-Iran triangle, where it will occupy a pivotal and geostrategic position.

Keywords • Turkey's Foreign Policy • Abkhazia • Abkhaz Diaspora • Soft-Power, EU-Iran Relations • Turkey-Russia-Iran Relations

Introduction

According to prominent analyses by famous columnists and thinkers in international relations, the world is said to have entered a "post-post Cold War era." It is said to be characterized by limits constraining American power and by China's and Russia's growing influence as major regional and even global actors. China's increasing importance in Southeast Asia's economies, on the one hand, and Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008, on the other, demonstrates the willingness of both

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countries to assert their positions by any means, including military ones in the South Caucasian case.

What about Turkey, then, in this new emerging world? It fully and successfully integrated into the “simple” post-Cold War structure during the early 1990s, democratizing its political life and stabilizing its economic fundamentals. Turkey further confirmed its “Westernization” on a diplomatic level, strengthening its role in NATO, as well as assuming the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) leadership in Afghanistan in 2001. As for the European Union (EU), Turkish commitments and desire to adhere to the EU became stronger and were partially satisfied by the October 3, 2005, EU-Turkey agreement, which opened negotiations on some chapters of the *acquis*. This notwithstanding, it has increasingly appeared necessary in Ankara to also adapt to new and different international realities, in other words, the “post-post Cold War” period.

It firstly became clear that no breakthrough should be expected in the near future in regard to Turkey’s accession to the EU. Many *acquis* chapters either require considerable efforts and/or have proven very hard to adopt. In addition, neither Germany nor France, two of the main decision-makers on Turkey’s prospective membership, are ready to facilitate discussions. German and French reluctance has practically blocked the accession process, delaying Turkey’s membership by at least a decade.

It appeared secondly that it was time to dissociate Turkey’s foreign policy from that of U.S. foreign policy. Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by U.S.-led forces,¹ Turkish authorities chose to distance themselves somewhat from the United States. This wasn’t symbolically achieved until May 2, 2009, however, with Ahmed Davutoğlu’s appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Before his appointment, he had been “behind the scenes” building what was termed as a pro-active and multifaceted foreign policy.² He is now at the forefront of Turkish politics, free to implement his ideas and strong orientations. Eloquently describing his views, he sees that:

[Turkey] has to take on the role of an order-instituting country in all these regions. Turkey is no longer a country which only reacts to crises, but notices the crises before their emergence and

¹ Turkey decided, one month before the U.S.-led invasion, to disallow U.S. ground forces from operating from its territory.

² He is known for his 2001 book, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth), in which he demonstrates that Turkey has to become a key and independent country, giving up its position as a forward base for NATO and notably the U.S.

intervenes effectively, and gives shape to the order of its surrounding regions.³

Thirdly and finally, Turkey has had to take into consideration a new and regionally powerful Russia willing to engage in a deeper political and economic rapprochement. Duma Deputy Sergei Markov, close both to President Medvedev and to Prime Minister Putin, does not hide this fact, saying that:

Russia and Turkey have achieved a first level of partnership, notably in trade and economic areas. We need now to reach a higher level of cooperation and build a strategic political partnership.⁴

Geopolitically at the crossroads between Iran and Russia, Iran and the EU, the Caspian zone and the EU, Turkey has had to manage by itself all those bi- and multilateral relations. That means engaging in dialogue based on an equal footing and independence. Otherwise, Turkey would not be able to remain a pivotal player but would see its position reduced to that of a simple actor among many others, being a vertex of any of the above triangles only in a best-case scenario. That's why for example, from Turkey's point of view, it is so important to sharply distinguish its strategy toward Iran from that of partnership with Russia. These are two distinct and separate questions.⁵

In this respect, considering the post-post Cold War context, Turkey may become one of two or three major regional powers, including Russia and potentially the EU, in the Black Sea-Caspian Sea zone. Turkey's policy-makers seem aware of that emerging challenge. Their most recent decisions indicate that from now on Ankara will have to promote and defend its own strategic and independent (from any other external actors) interests. Turkey is set to play its own game in the area, using both, when necessary, hard and soft power assets. When compared to Russia, Iran, the EU, and the U.S. (to a lesser extent), Turkey's regional importance should, thus, not be underestimated and it is likely to increase in the near future.

There have indeed already been some positive steps undertaken: this includes Turkey's rapprochement with Armenia. After a first visit by President Gül to Yerevan for a football match, and after months of negotiations, bluffs, and set-backs, Turkey and Armenia eventually, on September 1, 2009, agreed on draft protocols for the normalization of their

³ *Taraf Newspaper*, May 5, 2009.

⁴ Author's interview with Sergei Markov, Foros Conference, Abkhazia, July 22, 2009.

⁵ Author's interview with Mehmet Tuğtan, Bilgi University, Istanbul, July 27, 2009.

relations; these were to be signed the following month in mid-October.⁶ At that time, many experts expected that, under the pretext of a World Cup qualifying soccer match between the two countries in Istanbul, the presidents would be able to sign an agreement to reopen the border and reestablish diplomatic ties within a reasonable timeframe, after ratification by their respective parliaments. Documents were eventually signed on October 10, 2009, in Switzerland. In so doing, Turkey chose to overcome the views of its traditional and historical ally, Azerbaijan, which had argued against the restoration of diplomatic ties between Turkey and Armenia until territories bordering the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh had been returned under Baku's control. Turkish interests, however, simply prevailed over such "outdated" calculations, which included according to Azerbaijan too much weight as well as preserving Russia's privileged relations with Armenia in the South Caucasus.⁷

However, some doubts remain about Turkey's actual ability to take on and fulfill this new regional stance: it seems that Turkey still hesitates to fulfill a role as a significant and powerful actor. The "non-issue" of Abkhazia on the Turkish political scene is one of the most significant examples of this. Sheltering as it has since 1860 a substantial Abkhaz diaspora,⁸ which has maintained contact with its homeland through the existence of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet wars, and the embargo during the 1990s, Turkey has failed to react to the new realities that emerged in the aftermath of the war in 2008. It appears that Turkish authorities fail to see how symbolic the 2008 intervention by Russia was, especially in regard to the assertion of the latter's ambitions and renewed

⁶ The first affirms the shared desire of the two countries to establish good neighborly relations and their "willingness to chart a new pattern and course for their relations on the basis of common interests, goodwill, and in pursuit of peace, harmony, and mutual understanding." It further confirms their mutual recognition of the existing border between the two countries, and the shared decision to open it. The second protocol outlines three sets of measures to be undertaken to develop bilateral relations. The first of these is the opening of the border within two months of ratification of the protocols by the two countries' parliaments. The second encompasses regular consultations between the two countries' foreign ministries; a "dialogue on the historical dimension" (meaning the creation of Gul's proposed joint commission to research the 1915 killings); and developing transport, communications, and energy infrastructure and networks. The third is the creation of an intergovernmental commission plus sub-commissions to monitor the timely implementation of those proposed steps. Liz Fuller, "Will Serzh Sarkisian's Biggest Gamble Pay Off," *Caucasus Report*, RFE RL, October 15, 2009, <http://www.rferl.org/content/Will_Serzh_Sarkisians_Biggest_Gamble_Pay_Off/1852787.html> (December 5 2009).

⁷ Armenia is usually considered as Russia's bastion in the South Caucasus. Reopening the border with Turkey might disrupt this alliance, weakening Russian-Armenian ties and strengthening Turkish-Armenian relations.

⁸ The Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey was constituted by the first flow of refugees fleeing the Tsarist Empire after the Caucasian wars.

role in Eurasia. Nor is Turkish coolness toward Abkhaz independence a better option. It seems that Ankara fears dealing with Russia in taking advantage of multiple economic opportunities in Abkhazia and, at the same time, does not dare to displease Georgia, where Turkish businessmen have some trade assets.

Turkey's foreign policy is in transition. If on Armenia Ankara is changing its stance quite quickly, it may also move on the Abkhazian issue. Nothing a priori may hinder such an evolution. But considering the new emerging context and Turkey's constraints, it is essential to assess the real determinants which would transform Turkish foreign policy to encompass a more pro-active, independent, and regional strategy. Abkhazia, since its recognition by Russia on August 26, 2008, will serve as a useful lens by which to examine Turkish foreign policy. After examining the role of the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey and the situation in Abkhazia, Turkey's regional ambitions between Russia and Iran are brought into focus, highlighting from a Turkish point of view what is really at stake in Abkhazia and South Caucasian issues.

The Abkhaz Diaspora in Turkey – a Non-Political Actor

There are only a few examples of political diasporic organizations exerting a significant influence on the policies of their host states vis-à-vis their homeland: the Jewish and Armenian diasporas are probably the most well-known cases. Usually, diasporas do not manage to attain a sufficient level of political maturity abroad to be able to weigh on host states' policies toward their homeland. The situation of the Abkhaz in Turkey fits quite well in the latter category.

Historical legacy: within the Turkish political mainstream.

Refugees from the Caucasus arrived in large numbers to Turkey in the 1860s, benefiting from the loose civil and political structure of what was a declining power, the Ottoman Empire. Their integration became, however, an issue when the "Young" Turkish Republic was being consolidated in the 1920s, with the new Republican elites of that time imbued with a strong ideology of nationalism. Consequently, the descendents of those Caucasian refugees of various origins, gathered under the generic term "Circassians," preferred to incorporate themselves into the nation-state project along with the discourse of a homogeneous Turkey.⁹ None of the different Circassian groups quit the political Turkish mainstream or went against the Turkish political establishment

⁹ Ayhan Kaya, "Political Participation Strategies of the Circassian Diaspora in Turkey", *Mediterranean Politics*, 9, 2 (2004), pp. 321-339. The following paragraph is based on this paper.

as such. Opposition and new political strategies remained formalized and shaped by the dominating republican system. It was not until the 1970s that there appeared the first significant attempt by the Circassians to develop an ethnically-based opposition discourse, demanding republican recognition of some specific and distinct rights. Two political, and oppositional, formulations appeared: a Revolutionary group, the *Devrimci*, which saw these rights as being achieved through a socialist revolution in Turkey; and a returnist group, the *Dönüşçü*, advocating a return to the homeland. But, once again, after the military coup d'état in 1980 that silenced those claims, Circassian political groupings still "followed" the Turkish developments of that time. The revolutionaries almost disappeared during the 1980s and the returnists transformed into "Circassian nationalists," very close to the Turkish leftist groups themselves.

Within right-wing circles, a conservative Circassian reaction took shape at the beginning of the 1990s, defining itself as "Circassian Turk" or "Caucasian Turk" and highlighting in particular the Islamic component of its identity. In both cases, a new form of political mobilization emerged based on minority politics. But it did not really become concretized due to internal contradictions. As soon as a minority discourse for Circassians was established, it became very difficult to keep the Circassian peoples together. By definition, promoting minority rights means looking at what distinguishes the minority from the majority, and then, the division into separate "several minorities" within the Circassian minority cannot be avoided. Consequently, regarding Circassian political mobilization, only the classical Turkish political division remains a relevant frame within which to act and to seek representation. So far, Circassians still follow local political evolutions: some groups stick to the Turkish left; others are becoming closer to moderate Islamic Turkish groups now in power. In any case all groups divide themselves along internal national/ethnic lines between "Adyghe Turk," "Abkhaz Turk," or "Chechen Turk." Some of them stay neutral in regard to Turkey's political mainstream, others support the nationalist, Islamic, or left wing.

The Abkhaz are but one group among Caucasian or self-called Circassian peoples. Like other groups, within the framework of minority politics at the end of the 1980s, they rapidly built up their own specific features. Language, of course, is one of the main factors of differentiation and a language revival was observed. (Abkhaz is not Adyghe, although both are quite close). Some old historical movements and notions also emerged, notably the long-lived idea that at the beginning of Atatürk's coming to power, Abkhaz did not accord their full support to the leader, whereas the other Circassian peoples explicitly backed the new "young" Turkish Republic. In addition, a geographical determination should be mentioned. Most of the Abkhaz diaspora live in several cities located in

Western Anatolia not far from Istanbul, i.e., Düzce, Adapazarı, Bilecik, Bursa, Eskişehir. Traditionally, Abkhaz women had valuable connections and work in Istanbul, including in the Sultan's premises.¹⁰ But, more than any other factor, it is the war in Abkhazia in 1992–93 that has been the main determinant in distinguishing the Abkhaz from other groups. It does not mean that the fracture between Abkhaz and Adyghe/Circassians only occurred in the 1990s, but rather that the gap between them substantially increased in this period. The Abkhaz in Turkey today therefore should be considered, as they themselves feel, distinct from the rest of the Circassian diaspora.

Divided and stuck in the Turkish political mainstream, the Circassian diaspora in Turkey does not occupy a particular political space. Regarding the Abkhaz, they do not represent an electorally significant part of the population. Though it has always been very difficult to estimate how many Circassians live and have lived in Turkey, various sources give estimates of between 3 and 5 million people from diverse Caucasian origins. Among them, only fifteen percent are of “Abkhaz origin,” around 600,000 people. The latter figure hardly constitutes an electoral stronghold, and, what is more, several voices can be heard within the Abkhaz diaspora itself. Abkhaz representation has thus neither been an electoral stake in Turkey nor has the issue of defending Abkhaz rights been a prominent one. As such, the existence of an Abkhaz diaspora has never been used as an electoral argument: that is to say it is quantitatively irrelevant. It was this fact that the first leaders of the Abkhaz diaspora, who rose to a preeminent position in the diaspora community in Turkey during the war in 1992, did not perhaps really understand.

Failure of traditional leaders

Circassians in Turkey have never existed as a united and influential political force. When in the 1950s other political parties were authorized, Circassians chose instead to focus on culture, leaving political mobilization and claims to the “native” Turkish parties. In 1956, for example, instead of a political organization, they founded the first Kafkaz Kultur Derneği (Caucasian Cultural Association). After 1990, taking into account the new events and opportunities in the post-Soviet zone, a large Caucasian umbrella, the Federation of Caucasian Associations (Kaf-Der), was established in Ankara.¹¹ It constitutes the widest Circassian associational network in Turkey with 34 branches in cities throughout the country and comprising of 56 associations. Shortly after the establishment of the latter, two other major structures emerged. Birleşik Kafkasya Derneği (United Caucasian Federation, with only 16 members)

¹⁰ Author's interview with Murat Paşu, Istanbul, July 14, 2009.

¹¹ This structure was registered in 1993.

and a Caucasus Federation (Kafkaz Vakfı) were created in 1995. All these distinct federations try to go beyond traditional cultural projects to develop real political representation of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. The first one, Kaf-Der, appears to be closer to liberal-nationalist discourses in the Caucasus, supporting the Circassian nationalist positions, whereas the two others are more Islamic-oriented. From a political perspective, quite significantly, these attempts at Circassian representation fail to circumvent the classic Turkish political division between the left, committed to promoting liberal and democratic values, and a more conservative wing, which today is embodied by the AKP and its moderate but effective Islamic stance. In addition to this, under the influence of minority politics, disagreements exist among them about the situation in the Russian Caucasus and in Georgia.

Very quickly, the Abkhaz in Turkey preferred to follow their own agenda through their own specific structure, i.e., the Caucasus-Abkhazian Solidarity Committee (1992).¹² Chechens also tended to act through smaller but specifically Chechnya-dedicated organizations, such as the Caucasus-Chechnya Solidarity Committee (1995) or the Shamil Vakfı. At the beginning, those sub-organizations proved to be far more effective, politically, than the whole umbrella. Their main task was to collect money from the diaspora in Turkey and to send it to the homeland to support the fight against Russia but also to aid reconstruction.

Their effectiveness, however, did not last long. Very soon, leaders of the committees reached the limit of their influence and power. Because of the weak electoral significance of each ethnic Caucasian diasporic population in Turkey, notably the Abkhaz, any legitimacy based on representation is insufficient to achieve a political capacity. Moreover, as mentioned before, because Caucasian groups remain within the Turkish political mainstream, those kinds of “representative” structures cannot be anything else than secondary to Turkey’s state organs and/or aspiring Turkish political forces. As soon as the war had ended in Abkhazia, such committees essentially functioned as state or para-state institutions. The Caucasus-Abkhazian Solidarity Committee is probably one of the best examples of this evolution. Ilfer Argun, the head of the Abkhaz Committee, took over the reins of leadership in 1995. Capitalizing on the Committee’s activities and prestige during the first war against Georgia, he built it up as the main representative organization of the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey. But, in reality, far from defending the rights of the Abkhaz minority, which are not really threatened and/or which are subsumed under the larger issue Turkish democratization, he has lobbied the Turkish government to make it improve its ties and relations, even

¹² In Turkish: Kafkas-Abhazya Dayanışma Komitesi, see <www.abkhazya.org> (November 30 2009).

on an informal basis, with Sukhum. Subsequently, he has become the “Abkhaz Ambassador” in Turkey. Indeed, the Committee pays and provides an office to the “official” representative of the Abkhaz government in Turkey, Vladimir Avidzba. He thus acts as the main driving force between on the one side Abkhaz authorities and, on the other side, Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Turkey’s Ministry of Trade. But by targeting official Turkish power structures and living at the same time in Turkey, the leadership tends to be much more dependent on Turkey than on Abkhazia. So, clearly, today the Caucasus-Abkhazian Solidarity Committee appears to be first and foremost a simple annex to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its diasporic representation counts for nothing, as it does not represent a significant electoral stake in Turkey. This is why it is said to be so careful in its actions: it strongly opposes, for example, any street “events” organized by other Caucasian groups.¹³ More harmful, though, is the seemingly huge gap between those who the committee claims to represent (Abkhaz diaspora) and what it is really doing (lobbying on the Abkhaz authorities’ behalf). Using the diaspora’s representation to obtain locally a political capacity, whereas in reality it has nothing to do with the real skills and purposes of the committee, considerably weakens its remaining credibility at two levels, among the diaspora of course, which feels instrumentalized, and in the view of Turkish officials who do not take it very seriously. The leadership should understand that they do not need to establish their political capacity based on democratic and representative legitimacy when it is not the case. They are bound to fail. Political capacity in contemporary and Westernized societies, like Turkey nowadays, can be built on new sources of legitimacy.

A still stammering new political generation

Political activism within the Abkhaz diaspora is not of course limited solely to the Caucasus-Abkhazian Solidarity Committee. A younger generation has since emerged and recently constituted distinct political structures in reaction to old and inefficient representative methods. Also based in Turkey, in Istanbul, they are developing a different approach, aiming rather at civil society and using different and far more effective lobbying and communication tools. The Friends of Abkhazia, or in Turkish *Abhazyanin Dostlari*,¹⁴ and to a lesser extent the Kafkas Forum,

¹³ Those last developments are based on 2 interviews made in Istanbul, July 2009. Interviewees prefer to remain anonymous.

¹⁴ <<http://www.thefriendsofabhazia.org/>> It was founded in 2008, before the war between Georgia and Russia.

Kafkasya Forumu,¹⁵ are now the two main alternatives to the Committee. Both of them are internet-based and rely on new communication technologies. These two groups' leaders also possess a better media strategy, being more dynamic and proactive. They avoid traditional lobbying that typically targets political officials at private dinner functions. Rather their initiatives are bold and striking, such as street demonstrations, even when just a few dozen people are present.¹⁶ Whether Turkish television accords much attention to their actions or not, photos and videos circulate both quickly and widely through local social networks such as Facebook and also Twitter. The two groups' purpose is to raise Turkish civil concerns and promote friendship toward Abkhazia and, for Kafkas Forum especially, toward the whole North Caucasus, particularly Chechnya.¹⁷ Their leaders focus on winning public opinion and do not seek to directly influence political decision-makers as such. They even manage to reach some international audiences thanks to their personal links and contacts with European journalists, researchers, and political personalities. For example, it is of significance that all the main organizers of Friends of Abkhazia, Sezai Babakuş and Ergun Ozgür in particular, work for a private PR company, CSA Celebrity Speakers, whose business it is to invite international figures to speak at meetings and conferences¹⁸ To a lesser extent, by facilitating the travel of foreigners to Abkhazia, they help promote the Abkhaz cause abroad, notably in Western Europe.¹⁹ The above is also true of the Kafkas Forum: most of its members belong to the young Turkish educated and English-speaking generation and for several years now have been developing transnational links with European and American NGOs.

These two new structures appear credible from a political point of view: their legitimacy, based on media and international networks, is almost immediately recognized. In spite of this, one of their main problems is that their websites are still not available in English. Moreover, regarding Kafkas Forum particularly, their strong anti-Russian position, which they openly admit to and are known for,²⁰ reduces in a way the relevance of their discourse. They tend to exaggerate Russian

¹⁵ <<http://www.kafkasyaforumu.org/>> Created in 2005, it covers the whole Caucasus. Their main projects, however, concern Abkhazia (Third way) and Chechnya (Project Marsho).

¹⁶ Author's interview with Ergun Ozgür, member of the Friends of Abkhazia, Istanbul, July 2009.

¹⁷ Author's interview with 2 representatives of the Kafkas Forum, Istanbul July 2009.

¹⁸ <<http://www.groupcsa.com/EN/index.php>> (November 30 2009).

¹⁹ Thanks go to the Friends of Abkhazia which assisted in the author's trip and stay in Abkhazia in the summer of 2009; an interview with Sergey Shamba, Abkhaz Minister for Foreign Affairs, will soon be published in *Politique Internationale* (Winter 2010).

²⁰ Author's interview with Abrek, Kafkas Forum, Istanbul, July 2009 – Author's interview with Ergun Ozgür, Friends of Abkhazia, Istanbul, July 2009.

moves or historical events. Contesting the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi (to take place in 2014) on the argument that genocide was perpetrated against the Circassians in the 1860s, sounds at best far-fetched. The word “genocide” should not be employed lightly. Chechens are more inclined to invoke accusations of genocide perpetrated against them than the Circassians. Besides, the group has been too quick to criticize President Bagpash’s policy toward Russia, without really taking into account the realities of the “new” country and the state of the local political opposition, which is largely incompetent.²¹ However, supporting at the same time both Abkhaz and Chechen independence is an uncommon enough cause to have made it become noticed and highlighted. Acting with greater maturity and effectiveness will thus likely come with experience.

It appears that the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey is not yet a determining factor in Turkey’s foreign policy calculations toward Russia and Abkhazia. The main historical and political Abkhaz framework has lost much of its credibility. The new ones meanwhile are still in a stage of political maturation. Today, it is the cultural component that is proving itself as the most important and relevant feature of Abkhaz activism in Turkey. The Solidarity Committee posts on its website many cultural programs and student language exchanges. Every year, for a few weeks, the Committee sends to Abkhazia a group of children to learn the language; in return, Abkhaz students visit Istanbul.²² The Caucasus-Abkhazia Cultural Association (Kafkas-Abhazya Kültür Derneği) in Selimiye on the Asian side of Istanbul, near Usküdar, is one of the most visited organizations by Abkhaz descendants living in Turkey.²³ Interestingly, even the Friends of Abkhazia advertize cultural performances (for example a concert in Istanbul by an Abkhaz soprano living in Moscow). According to an Abkhaz Ministerial official, the predominance of cultural activism among the diaspora is not exclusive to Turkey. The situation is similar in Jordan, where the Abkhaz Cultural Center is said to maintain even closer contacts with Abkhaz language schools than its Turkish counterpart.²⁴

Turkey in Abkhazia – a minimal impact

The Abkhaz diaspora does not play a strategic role in Turkey. Diasporic Abkhazians, when they return to visit their homeland, do not really have much of an impact there either. Based on very recent research undertaken

²¹ Kafkas Forum published a harsh and open letter to President Bagapsh regarding his relations with Moscow in the spring of 2009.

²² Author’s interview with Murat Paşu, and Ergun Özgür, Istanbul, July 2009.

²³ Author’s observations, Istanbul, July 2009.

²⁴ Author’s interview, Sukhum, July 2009.

by a Turkish-Abkhaz scholar, Cemre Jade, now living in Sukhum, the figures of those returning Abkhazia are quite revealing.²⁵ There have been several return waves of Abkhazians from Turkey to Abkhazia. Between the late 1980s and 1993–94, around 2,000 families returned to Abkhazia. But because of the harsh embargo imposed by CIS countries, almost all those families left Abkhazia to resettle in Turkey. After 2003 and up until 2008, when conditions became better, only 107 families returned. After August 2008, and Russia's recognition of independence, there was a repatriation of around 500 families from Turkey to Abkhazia. But for a majority of them, links have not been completely cut: they keep a foot in Turkey, not wanting to lose everything that they have built abroad. Round-trips would therefore seem to be the rule; it should also be noted that many of them speak neither Abkhaz nor Russian and that they do not integrate easily. Legally and materially, Abkhaz authorities are apparently helping them to resettle: a specifically-dedicated committee is tasked with finding housing, but it has been undermined by corruption and incompetency. Return is a priority neither for the Abkhaz government nor for the descendants of those refugees who fled during the Tsarist conquest at the end of the 19th century (*moukhajiris*). This very slow process gives an insight into the Turkish non-presence and lack of interest in Abkhazia.

Sporadic Turkish presence in economy

There are only a few Turkish investments in Abkhazia and most of them are related to the tourist sector. Several hotels along the coast between Gagra and Sukhum have been built and are managed by Turkish businessmen of Abkhaz origin. One of the most famous, and probably the most important, hotels stands in the nice village of Pitsunda.²⁶ In all other economic sectors, however, Abkhazia relies on Russian financial aid, material supply, and protection. Accordingly, the Abkhaz economy is completely dependent on its northern neighbor. Furthermore, Moscow pays directly the pensions of Russian citizens living in Abkhazia. Since a majority of Abkhaz hold a Russian passport, Russia is thus effectively paying for all Abkhaz pensioners. It is also directly financing the reconstruction of roads and railways, with Russian companies arriving with their own workers and facilities. In addition, Russian authorities lend huge amounts of money every year to ensure the maintenance of schools and hospitals.²⁷ Yuri Luzhkov, the Mayor of Moscow, is even directly and personally involved in supporting a school in the center of

²⁵ Author's interview, Sukhum, July 2009 – Additional information obtained during a previous interview with an official from the Abkhaz Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sukhum, July 2009.

²⁶ Author's personal observations, Pitsunda, July 2009.

²⁷ Author's interview, Abkhaz Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sukhum, July 2009.

the Abkhaz capital. Other Russian figures, Konstantin Zatulin being a prominent example, own various tourist or industrial businesses.²⁸ Secondly, many Abkhaz products are exported to Russia, such as agricultural subtropical products and wine. Thirdly, most strategic investments in telecommunications, energy production, housing, and tourist infrastructure originate from Russia; like most of the 1.5 million Russian tourists that visit Abkhazia on vacation between May and October each year. Indeed, for many years now, the Abkhaz economy has been relatively stable and has gradually recovered to demonstrate growth, but only thanks to Russia's injections of money.²⁹ The Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014 will only reinforce Abkhazia's dependence on Russia, as the latter will function as a "large warehouse" to the Games as well as provide a reserve workforce.

Faced with stiff competition from Russian business, Turkish business has been unable to establish itself in Abkhazia. There is also a simple practical reason for this: the absence of direct and official sea or air communication between Istanbul/Trabzon and Sukhum. Legally and objectively, Turkey, being outside the CIS, is not bound up by the embargo imposed by Georgia in 1996. But still, Ankara has respected the embargo for the sake of maintaining a good relationship with Georgia. Turkish authorities have only allowed the unofficial shipping of building materials: ostensibly headed for Russia but which at the last moment deviates toward Sukhum. Turkey, however, has never dared to organize passenger transportation, since Georgian customs officials have quite often confiscated material shipments.³⁰ Regarding air connections, the situation has also been far from easy. To travel to Abkhazia, Turkish citizens first have to travel through Russia (Sochi being the closest airport to the Abkhaz border) and so have to obtain a double-entry Russian visa. Such formalities and recurrent difficulties at the border points have simply deterred most potential visitors. As long as direct connections are not agreed upon between Turkey, Abkhazia, and Russia, Ankara will not see its trading and economic influence grow there. Interestingly, furthermore, those negotiations have largely sidelined the role of the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey. The Abkhaz representative in charge of relations with Turkey, who lived in Turkey until 1991 and who maintains contacts there, pursues discussions directly with the Turkish prime minister as well as other ministers.³¹ Clearly, this "bypassing" diminishes the political usefulness of the Abkhaz diaspora within Turkey.

²⁸ Author's personal observations, Sukhum, July 2009.

²⁹ Author's interview, Presidential office, Sukhum, July 2009.

³⁰ Author's interview, Presidential office, Sukhum, July 2009.

³¹ Author's interview, Soner Gogua, deputy, Sukhum, July 2009.

Presidential election in Abkhazia: a non-issue for Turkey

The election of the Abkhaz president, set to occur on December 12, 2009, appears to be a non-issue in the neighboring countries as well as, to some extent, in Abkhazia itself. There is almost no doubt that the incumbent President Sergei Bagapsh will be elected. Whether he wins at the first- or the second-round run-off remains to be seen. But in any case, none of his four competitors, who have registered at the Central Election Commission, can really challenge Bagapsh's achievements during his first mandate. Despite his troubled election in 2004, he manages to obtain from Moscow assurances to keep the border on the Psou River relatively open, thus softening the embargo and allowing the Abkhaz to recreate a semblance of normal life and consumption after years of privations. It can therefore be argued that he has presided over the improvement of social and economic conditions in the small republic. He also, of course, has derived benefit from Russia's recognition of Abkhazia in August 2008, with all the implications that entails for the republic's security. In fact, Abkhazia has probably never been better protected as it is today. More than 3,500 Russian soldiers are permanently deployed in the state, directly controlling the border with Georgia. Accordingly, the issue of security ranks high among the concerns of the Abkhaz population.³² On one issue, however, Bagapsh has been forced to backtrack and concede victory to the opposition. In July 2009, he intended to amend the law on citizenship to allow ethnic Georgians living in the eastern Gal region to be granted with Abkhaz citizenship. He faced in response a unanimous Parliament that voted against the signing into law of this amendment. This defeat is, however, not enough to threaten his position at the next election. The electoral stakes do not revolve around this identity question and no one in Abkhazia seriously suspects President Bagapsh of allowing Georgians to colonize Abkhazia. The issue of Russian influence dominates the December elections, with candidates discussing not only "the optimum level of cooperation with, and maximum acceptable level of, economic and security dependence on the Russian Federation, but also the best way to develop the republic's economy without inflicting irreversible environmental damage, and lastly how to continue on building a genuine and democratic civil society."³³

All the four other presidential hopefuls, however, have failed to constitute a real, strong, and credible opposition. In addition to two "minor" candidates, the academic Vitaly Bganba and a business-related figure, Zaur Ardzinba, director of the State Steamship Company, the two

³² Author's interview, Soner Gogua, deputy, Sukhum, July 2009.

³³ "Five Presidential Candidates registered in Abkhazia"; RFE RL, *Caucasus Report*, November 7 2009, <http://www.rferl.org/content/Five_Presidential_Candidates_Registered_In_Abkhazia/1872025.html> (December 5 2009).

most important challengers are former vice-president and the closest challenger in the 2004 ballot, Raul Khajimba, and Beslan Butba, businessman and chairman of the Economic Development Party of Abkhazia. None of them have proven able to build an effective political strategy. First of all, whereas during this summer Ardzinba, Khajimba, and Butba looked to create an opposition bloc and to support among them the one who would have the best chances of competing with Bagapsh,³⁴ quite quickly it appeared that the three opposition figures would each go separately to the ballot, thus dividing effectively by three their chances to accede to an hypothetical second round. Moreover, both Butba and Khajimba failed to overcome their respective weaknesses: their lack of visibility, lack of supportive networks beyond Sukhum,³⁵ and, in the case of Khajimba, a lack of credibility as an opponent after three-and-a-half years spent in power as vice-president and as head of state security.³⁶ Many influential personalities in Abkhazia are indeed wondering how he can criticize the state and government on what has been done during the past presidential term, considering that he has been deeply implicated in it.³⁷

Lastly, the argumentative basis falls short of coherency and conviction. Both Khajimba and Butba accuse Bagapsh of selling out on Abkhazia's interests, and pushing through ill-thought-out agreements for short-term commercial gain. Butba even quotes that two thirds of the Abkhaz budget is made up of Russian financial subsidies, but that these are wrongly used to pay wages and current state expenditures when that money should contribute to capital spending.³⁸ Both argue that instead of this policy, the government should pursue economic and financial self-sufficiency, independent of Russia. But at the same time, Khajimba appears closer to Russian authorities than Bagapsh, and Butba has also asserted that, "Abkhazia can only build its foreign policy through Russia."³⁹ In this context, seen from the outside, the best option has appeared to be "no interference," letting Bagapsh capitalize on his achievements and strengthening Abkhazia's capacity for independence. Russia (but also Turkey), which is the main actor with the interest to

³⁴ Author's interview, Beslan Butba, Sukhum, July 2009.

³⁵ Author's interview, Cemre Jade, Sukhum, July 2009 – She worked for several months in 2008 as a social-marketing expert for the Butba Foundation; one of her tasks was to assess Beslan Butba's popularity in Abkhazia.

³⁶ Raul Khajimba stepped down only in May 2009.

³⁷ Author's interview, Soner Gogua, Sukhum, July 2009 - Marina Gumba, head of the pro-government political movement Amtsakhara. For her opinions, see: "Limited Scope for Different Views in Abkhazia", IWPR, *Caucasus Reporting*, n° 517, October 30 2009, <http://www.iwpr.net/index.php?apc_state=hen&s=o&o=l=EN&p=crs&s=f&o=357090> (December 5 2009).

³⁸ Author's interview, Beslan Butba, Sukhum, July 2009.

³⁹ Author's interview, Beslan Butba, Sukhum, July 2009.

potentially be able to interfere in Abkhaz affairs, did not explicitly support one of the candidates.⁴⁰ No stake so far has been worth moving and influencing.

Abkhazia in itself will be unlikely to mobilize Turkey's strategic thinking. Except for some tourist investments and direct export opportunities from Trabzon, Turkish interests in Abkhazia do not suppose a deeper engagement than what has already been undertaken by Ankara. Beyond purely economic and financial interests, Turkey's involvement in Abkhazia is not likely to increase in the near future. This failure to engage more in Abkhazia means that Turkey loses an opportunity to increase its regional power.

Between Russia and Iran: Turkey as an Emerging Power

South Caucasian issues in general and Abkhazia in particular may be essential bargaining chips for Turkey to substantially improve its stance from the Black to the Caspian Seas, assuming its new-found "emancipation" from U.S. influence and thus becoming a real regional power in the region. There are here and now several opportunities for Turkey to seize and some strategic steps to take regarding Armenia, Georgia, and Iran, respectively. All of them would allow Turkey to better face and manage Russia's policies in that region.

Armenian openings and growing Turkish spaces of negotiations on its Eastern side

The long-expected and historical normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia is now proceeding apace. Considering only economic and material aspects, Yerevan will obviously benefit far more from this rapprochement than Ankara. The former still lives under a near-total blockade regarding its exports: only US\$2 million worth of Armenian products are exported to Turkey compared to the US\$250 million worth of Turkish goods imported by Armenia.⁴¹ The normalization process will largely correct this huge trade imbalance. International Monetary Fund (IMF) officials expect "a significant growth in the economy, with an increase in the volume of exports and a growth in investments." For example, still pending and dependent on the progress in opening the Turkish-Armenian border, is a deal between the Turkish UNIT Company and high Voltage Electric Networks of Armenia to sell 1.5 billion kW of Armenian electricity to Turkey. The size of this contract clearly demonstrates the potential for cooperation

⁴⁰ This fact had been confirmed as early as November 1 by the very effective and well-informed press agency <www.Kavkaz-uzel.ru>.

⁴¹ "Armenians Lick Lips at Prospect of Turkish Trade", *IWPR Caucasus Reporting*, 512, September 25, 2009.

and mutual advantage.⁴² On the Turkish side, moreover, the gains will also be in terms of augmenting Turkey's regional power.

Undoubtedly, Turkey, by engaging with Armenia, has substantially increased its influence in the South Caucasus, easing some of the inconvenient pressures coming from Azerbaijan and Georgia. This represents a very well-played foreign policy coup. Significantly, despite some minor criticism toward the protocol, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal recognizes the achievement of Turkish diplomacy.⁴³ Regarding Azerbaijan, Turkey's move is clearly a success. The first reports announcing a Turkish-Armenian rapprochement triggered furious outrage among decision-makers in Baku: they used any levers available to try to change Ankara's willingness to go further with Armenia. On the one hand, Baku requested Ankara to renounce its 15 percent lift-off of gas volumes bound for the EU. Keeping 15 percent of European supplies allows Turkey to pay for gas from Azerbaijan far more cheaply than it could do normally. On the other hand, Baku played on its cultural, linguistic, and ethnic proximity with the Turkish people, arguing for solidarity with Azerbaijan and raising domestic criticism against Ankara's rapprochement with Armenia. None of those arguments remained at the end of the summer. Ankara accepted to lift its prerequisite in July on the eve of the Nabucco Summit but continued afterwards to negotiate with Azerbaijan on this issue. Negotiations have continued even after the Intergovernmental Agreement in Turkey on July 13.

More importantly, growing domestic discontent in Azerbaijan has been softened by new Turkish guarantees about Nagorno-Karabakh. Precisely on that issue, normalization with Armenia could only bring about promising prospects, with Turkey offering its Armenian neighbor a vast, new, and legally-accessible market and asking in return for some concessions to facilitate a real, definitive, and sustainable solution. As for Georgia, this opening of the Turkish-Armenian borders puts into question Tbilisi's unique position as the sole transit Western-oriented country: Georgia's strategic position should not be overestimated from Turkey's point of view.

The NATO-Russo-Georgian compromise, a Turkish bet

To maintain the status quo in the South Caucasus may not be in Turkey's real interest. Following Russia's war against Georgia in August 2008 and its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Turkish authorities, putting forward their proposal for a Caucasian Stability and Cooperation Platform in September 2008, have clearly opted for stability

⁴² IWPR, *Ibid.*

⁴³ <www.nethaber.com>, September 16, 2009.

and sought to avoid any changes based on military operations. Willing to preserve its good and friendly relations with Tbilisi, Ankara did not initiate or officially accept any contact with Abkhazia and its representatives. Things have changed in recent weeks, however. On September 18, Unal Cevikoz, the Deputy Under Secretary for Political Affairs in the Turkish Foreign Ministry, who is of Circassian descent, visited Sukhum and met with Abkhazian Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba. That official visit would appear to have been in preparation for a future visit by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, in order, according to his own words, to “get acquainted with [Abkhazia] and attempt to regulate its relations with Georgia.”⁴⁴ He even went on to insist, just after Unal Cevikoz’s return, that the existence of the Abkhaz community in Turkey compels Ankara to consider how to resolve the issue of South Caucasian stability. For one, if Ankara decides to get to grips with the issue of Abkhazia, this could bolster Turkey’s bid for regional leadership. But this entails a three- step scenario.

As a first step, it should not be too politically costly to open direct sea and air passenger connections with destinations in Abkhazia. As seen above, Turkey though not by definition legally constrained by the CIS-imposed embargo from 1996 (but lifted by Russia in March 2008), has de facto limited its contacts with Abkhazia to energy resources, raw and building materials, as well as agricultural products and shipping. According to Georgian laws, this trade is illegal and over the course of a decade more than sixty such Turkish convoys have been apprehended and accused of illegally crossing into Georgian territorial waters. Recently, two captains, one Turkish,⁴⁵ the other Azerbaijani, were sentenced to 24 years in prison by a Georgian court. In any case, given the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey, Georgia has lost some of its strategic importance from Turkey’s point of view. And while Turkish businessmen still have interests in Georgia and parts of Turkish energy resources transit through Georgia, without access to the west through Turkey, Tbilisi would find itself in autarky. Turkey would not lose much leverage in opening direct sea and air connections. The second and third steps would, however, change completely the diplomatic scale of the proposed scenario. Turkey has to take into account Russian interests and to manage the potentially reluctant reaction on the part of Moscow to seeing Abkhazia becoming really independent.

As second and third steps, which are inextricably linked and should be presented as such in Turkish diplomatic initiatives, Ankara could propose to exchange Georgian integration into NATO in compensation for Turkish official recognition of Abkhazia’s independence after a

⁴⁴ Paul Goble, *Moscow Times*, September 16, 2009.

⁴⁵ *Sunday’s Zaman*, September 6, 2009 – Turkish diplomats are actively negotiating with Georgia for his release, which should occur very soon.

certain period and under certain conditions. It should probably occur after Georgia has become a full NATO member and if Abkhazia confirms its democratic path, guaranteeing press freedom,⁴⁶ free political associations, and fair electoral consultations. Presidential elections in December 2009 will be the first test, but the next ones in 2014 will serve as a better benchmark to estimate Abkhazian progress on democracy and liberalization. Considering that schema, it is essential that Turkey only recognizes Abkhazia's sovereignty and not South Ossetia's or that of Nagorno-Karabakh or Transdniestria. Though this approach could be accused of double standards, it would give authorities in Ankara the clout and credibility to refuse (of course from Turkey's point of view) renewed Kurdish separatist claims.

Turkey (and subsequently NATO) in such a three-step move could gain a lot in political prestige and regional authority. Firstly, Turkey will impose itself as the main political broker in the South Caucasian region, able to achieve breakthroughs on crux issues: normalization with Armenia, Georgia's entry into NATO. The next challenge would be the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, which may be witness to developments very soon following Armenian-Turkish dialogue – this after years of U.S., French, and Russian failure within the Minsk group framework. Secondly, Turkey will prove to Russia that it should be taken seriously and not treated as a subordinate ally. Thirdly, engagement will substantially raise Turkey's attractiveness for the EU. Brussels has proved unable so far to deploy a coherent political strategy in the South Caucasus. Frightened of displeasing Moscow, the EU has kept a low, economic profile limited to financially supporting market and social developments. Turkey offers a reliable and safe political forefront, which as a partner better suits the EU's goals and interests than does Russia's influence and zero-sum games in the region.

Iran, as a powerful but non-regional player

In historical terms, Iran feels entitled to claim an influence in the South Caucasus. Nevertheless, Iranian tools of influence in the three South Caucasian states are currently of minor significance. Shi'ism in Azerbaijan, shared by a majority, proves to be far from sufficient to constitute an Iranian asset. Its differences with Sunnism are indeed quite loose and it should be noticed that the nationalist feeling tends to overcome any other identity factor. Iran, similar to other countries, is reinforcing its economic presence in Armenia but not strikingly so; it is

⁴⁶ There are doubts, however, concerning this, as on September 21, a journalist, Anton Krivenyuk, received a 3 year suspended sentence for an article criticizing President Bagapsh's decision to hand over the railway network to Russian control. See "Abkhaz Media Fear Free Speech Under Threat", *IWPR Caucasus Reporting*, 512, September 25, 2009.

rather Turkey that is notably deriving benefit from its already well-advanced normalization process with Armenia. Lastly, regarding Georgia, Iranian interests are close to zero. Therefore, including Iran in any regional political informal or formal project would be at best useless and at worst counter-productive. It would only serve to add to the mix the ambitions of an aspiring power, hoping to see its influence increase in a zone where it has no “natural” relays. Turkey seems well-aware of this fact, judging by its proposal for the Stability and Cooperation Platform, which initially included only Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. Russia on the contrary seems to support the opposite, seeing no problems in dominating the Caucasus, together with Turkey and Iran, as long as the U.S. and the EU are excluded. Duma Deputy Sergei Markov explicitly states that:⁴⁷

There are for the Caucasus several scenarios. The first one is balkanization, each of the three countries following its own interests without or against the others. The second one is another Great Game, each of the three countries becoming a stake in a major powers rivalry. The third one is a kind of superstructure dominated by an alliance between Turkey, Iran and Russia, clearing out any EU and U.S. presence.

Markov does not elaborate, however, on how efficient any Turkish-Iranian-Russian cooperation in the region would be. Seen from Moscow, the problem is not how to make this triumvirate operational but rather how to limit Turkish influence and interest in this zone, which have become stronger following the opening with Armenia.

Turkey has to deal separately with the issue of Iran and partnership with Russia.⁴⁸ To put it in another way, it is essential for Ankara’s decision-makers to reduce Iran’s global ambitions in the Caucasus and to deal with it not as a regional player but as an international question. It is necessary to “internationalize,” or to widen as much as possible, any contact, any relations, and any negotiations between Turkey and Iran. Some issues, such as the nuclear Iranian project or the radical Shiit connections in Iraq and Lebanon, are already by definition internationalized. For others, such as potential Iranian gas supplies to the Nabucco pipeline or Iran’s interests in Abkhazia,⁴⁹ there are still many problems to be solved. Regarding the energy issue, Turkey should act as a mediator between Iran and the European Union. It is indeed in Turkey’s strategic interest to become a gas hub. So, from the consumers’

⁴⁷ Author’s interview with Sergei Markov, Foros Conference, Abkhazia, July 22, 2009.

⁴⁸ Author’s interview with Mehmet Tuğtan, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ An Iranian delegation visited Abkhazia from July 11 to July 14, 2009. Author’s interview, Sukhum, Abkhazia.

(European countries) point of view, where the gas comes from is not as important as the reliability of supply, which would then become the hub's problem. Turkey, acting as a shell-country for Iranian and other Middle-East (Egypt, Iraq) resources, would play more than just a simple regional role: it would embody the energy link between Iran to the EU. As far as Abkhazia is concerned, Turkey surely has no interest in seeing Iranian contacts with Abkhazia develop. But would these develop in the first place? What could Iran offer Abkhazia that Turkey could not offer? It is up to Turkey to take or retake the initiative on that issue, perhaps according to the second point of the three-step approach outlined by this article: balancing recognition of Abkhazia by Georgia's integration into NATO.

Conclusion

If all these challenges are met successfully, then Turkey will move to the gravity center of an EU-Russia-Iran triangle, where it will occupy a pivotal and geostrategic position. Turkey could thus be in a position to compete on an equal footing with Russian influence from the Black Sea to the Caucasus. Together in the western Eurasian area, the two countries could maintain an oligopolistic position, keeping outside any other aspiring powers such as Iran and the U.S., as well as the European Union. For example, they would be able to decide and influence positively the frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the future of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There is also a small chance, as far as military affairs are concerned, that the Montreux Treaty status quo will be put into question.

Second, with Iran, Turkey has to keep to its stance of developing a bilateral dialogue and rapprochement, playing a mediator role between Iran and the West. Turkey alone has to connect Iran with those external actors and thus emphasize the international dimension of the present Iranian problem. Russia here, from a Turkish perspective, is one actor among others. Third, in regard to the EU, there is the question of Russia and how to balance involvement in South Stream with its commitments to Nabucco. Ankara seems to be using this strategy wisely, as it has obtained from Russia significant concessions regarding oil transit.

In going down this path, Turkey would in fact reach a paradoxical stalemate in its relations with the EU. Having become a regional leader, membership of the EU may prove to be far less attractive for Turkey. However, from a European perspective, a strong Turkey that is influential in its regional environment is what Brussels actually needs. If the EU is not ready in the foreseeable future to integrate Turkey, arguing that the Europeans would lose their sense of mission and *raison d'être*, then Turkey itself should not lose time in waiting for the EU. It should

instead actively engage in a regional strategy, leaving the EU with the responsibility to decide whether it wants to become a political power or to remain as a safe and comfortable haven, yet bound to immobility.