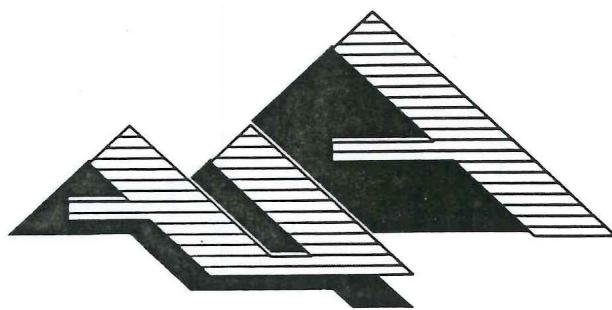


American University of Armenia

The Transcaucasus Today: Prospects for Regional Integration

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Extension Program

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**WHY DOES TURKEY FAVOR
REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN THE TRANSCAUCAZUS?**

Timur Kocaoglu

The Transcaucasus, composed of the newly independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, has become an area of growing international interest after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, not because of the current conflicts in the area, but because of the region's rediscovered importance for the future energy needs of the world. The economic significance of the region is twofold: First, in the case of Azerbaijan, this region possesses rich oil and natural gas fields, and second, it is located next to the rich oil and natural gas fields of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The strategic location of the Transcaucasus makes it an ideal and convenient route for the transportation of these two primary energy sources to Western markets. However, the existence of the unsolved territorial conflicts, especially the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is regarded as the main obstacle for regional integration within the Transcaucasus and its integration into the global economy.

Since the Transcaucasus is no longer isolated from the rest of the world as it was under the Soviet yoke, the economic prospects for this region are obviously connected with both regional political developments and foreign policy goals of other countries which have political and economic interests. Therefore, any regional conflict or cooperation in the Transcaucasus will affect the national interests in a number of foreign countries to varying degrees. The three regional actors who have land-borders with the region are Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The United States and a number of West European countries are not negligible players because of their international, political and economic weights. While the role of energy-rich Central Asian republics such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are minimal today, this may increase in the Transcaucasus in the near future.

In light of the strategic location of the Transcaucasus, Turkey has been highly interested in the region for the following two main reasons:

1. Border Security: After the independence of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, Turkey now shares its borders with all three Transcaucasian republics and even though it lost its direct land-borders with Russia, a super-power in the past, Russia remains a powerful nation at present.
2. Economic Benefits: Turkey strongly believes that in terms of finances and time, the Transcaucasus is one of the most convenient routes to transport Caspian and Central Asian oil and natural gas to world markets. The Transcaucasus is also the most important gateway for Turkey to boost its economic relations with the Central Asian republics.

Therefore, Turkey recognizes the need to follow a balanced foreign policy with each of the three Transcaucasian republics. According to Turkish Foreign Ministry officials, Ankara's policy towards the Transcaucasus since 1992 has had a number of goals, the most vital one being to support the sovereignty of all three republics wholeheartedly.⁽¹⁾ Ankara believes that a strong and

confident Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia can benefit Turkey, because each of them will rely less on Russia's military involvement and Turkey would like to see the Transcaucasus free of any major foreign military presence. On the other hand, Ankara knows very well that the best way for Moscow to refrain from following a policy of military build-up in the region is by increasing Russian business involvement in the Transcaucasus. In this respect, Iran is also welcome to invest in the region as a major and experienced oil and natural gas producer. Thus, Ankara believes that the business opportunities offered by this region are so enormous that Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan as regional states, Russia, Turkey, and Iran as regional actors, and finally the United States and other European as well as Asian nations as international players, could benefit from the transition of this region into a stable and safe passageway for oil and natural gas needs to world markets. However, this requires the peaceful settlement of the on-going armed conflicts in the region and each of the three republics has to help in confidence-building processes.

Many foreign observes and scholars acknowledge Turkey's careful and balanced policy toward the Transcaucasus.⁽²⁾ Ankara's Transcaucasian policy of the last five years however, has come under fire from three sides: first, general public opinion in Turkey has criticized the Ankara government for not taking a stronger stance in the face of Armenian armed aggression against Azerbaijan and its failure to provide military aid to Baku to protect its territory. The public in Turkey believes that the Armenian side has received armaments and financial aid from other nations, mostly from Russia, during the war in and around Nagorno Karabagh. Many publications in Turkey have been highly critical of the Turkish government and the Turkish Foreign Ministry particularly in this respect.⁽³⁾ Second, the Azerbaijanis have also criticized Turkey for not helping Azerbaijan or for Ankara's friendly gestures toward Armenia, such as the offer to supply electric energy to Yerevan during the winter of 1992-1993 which failed to materialize because of the project's adverse impact on Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.⁽⁴⁾ Finally, a number of scholars, mostly of Armenian origin or sympathizing with Armenia in the West, have criticized Ankara's policy toward the Transcaucasus as anti-Armenian.⁽⁵⁾

Can Ankara's political stance during the Nagorno Karabagh conflict be regarded as pro-Azerbaijani and anti-Armenian? The Azerbaijanis and the Turks of Turkey obviously share many common elements such as culture, mostly language, literature and history, as well as religion. Although one can not deny the psychological aspect of the close relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan, Ankara has been striving to base its foreign policy towards the Transcaucasus on objectives of regional stability rather than bonds of fraternity. However, Ankara regards Armenia's involvement in the Nagorno Karabagh conflict as an open aggression because Armenia's soldiers have been involved in the assault against Azerbaijani soil and have been occupying about 20% of Azerbaijan's territory. Ankara has been very vocal at various international meetings on the question of Nagorno Karabagh and firmly regards it as an indisputable part of Azerbaijan.⁽⁶⁾ Ankara insists on the OSCE's Lisbon principles which stipulate maintaining Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and the provision of extensive, internationally guaranteed autonomy for ethnic Armenians living within Azerbaijan's borders. Ankara has also been encouraging both Armenia and Azerbaijan to refrain from an armed solution to their dispute. A peaceful settlement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is in Turkey's best national interest, because the continuation of armed conflict between the two Transcaucasian states will only draw foreign military involvement into the region.

It is therefore possible to say that the main setback for Turkish foreign policy goals in the Transcaucasus is the continuation of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey is very supportive of the activities of the Minsk Group as is the United States who has also signaled its desire to see an agreement soon on the basis of Lisbon. There are also signs that the other co-chairman of the Minsk Group, namely Russia and France, are now more interested in an accord between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁽⁷⁾

Turkey believes that it is in Armenia's best interest also to reach a peaceful settlement with Azerbaijan. Armenian companies in particular, but also the country and its population in general will benefit from the flow of oil and natural gas through pipelines stretching from Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan to Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Iran, and Russia. So far, Ankara has vigorously pushed for a pipeline route from Azerbaijan to Georgia and then to the Mediterranean coast of Turkey. However, Ankara says that not only a single pipeline route, but several pipeline routes are required to transport the enormous amount of oil and natural gas reserves of Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia.⁽⁸⁾ The "multiple pipeline project" also includes a pipeline route that passes through Azerbaijan, Armenia (the Zangezour area), Nakhichevan, and Turkey. Ankara believes that the "multiple pipeline policy" is of vital importance for all three Transcaucasian states, as well as Russia, Iran, Turkey and other countries involved.⁽⁹⁾

We should remember that the history of political relations between the Armenians and the Turks goes back to 1918 while the Ottoman Empire was the first state that recognized the independent Armenian state in 1918. The first Armenian-Turkish peace treaty was signed on June 4, 1918. Later the Ankara government and the independent Republic of Armenia signed two peace treaties, one on November 3, 1920, and the other on October 13, 1921 which is still in force.⁽¹⁰⁾ Turkey was also one of the first countries to recognize Armenia as an independent state on December 16, 1991.⁽¹¹⁾ However, Ankara now finds it very difficult to begin full diplomatic relations as long as Armenia continues to occupy Azerbaijani territories.

Ankara's main concern in the Transcaucasus is the violation of the territorial integrity of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and because of this Ankara insisted on recognizing the national boundaries of all three Transcaucasian republics when they became independent in late 1991. There are many Turkish citizens of both Georgian and Abkhaz ancestry living in Turkey and these communities may have contradictory opinions regarding the conflict in Georgia, but Ankara wants and supports the peaceful settlement of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict without damaging Georgia's territorial integrity.

According to Turkish Foreign Ministry officials, Ankara would be pleased if all three Transcaucasian states start to build on their commonalities rather than exaggerating their differences and disputes. It would be beneficial for the people of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia if their scholars collaborate in writing a common regional history of the Transcaucasus focusing on cultural, economic and political opportunities that existed in the past and continue today. Ankara believes that the economic prospects, especially the export and transportation of energy supplies to the world market, will play a vital role in drawing Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to cooperate more closely in the process of regional integration in the Transcaucasus because none of the three regional states can remain in isolation from each other and the international community when the world is becoming more and more a single global village.

1. Based on interviews conducted with several senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara on June 12, 1997.
2. Graham E. Fuller, Lan O. Lesser, Turkey's New Geopolitics: From the Balkans to Western China, Boulder: Westview Press, 1993; p. 76-85; Vojtech Mastny and R. Craig Nation, Turkey Between East and West: New Challenges for a Rising Regional Power, Boulder: Westview Press, 1996; p. 89-91.
3. Mustafa Budak, *Azerbaycan-Ermenistan İlliskilerinde Daglik Karabag Meselesi ve Turkiye'nin Politikasi* in Kafkas Arastirmalari II (Istanbul, 1996), p. 107-139; *Turkiye'nin Kafkasya Politikasi Nedir, Ne Olmalıdır?* Ankara: Kaf Der Yayınlari, 1996.
4. Duygu Bazoglu Sezer, *Turkey in the New Security Environment in the Balkan and Black Sea Region*, in Vojtech Mastny and R. Craig Nation, Turkey Between East and West: New Challenges for a Rising Regional Power, ibid, p. 89.
5. Levon Chorbajian, Patrick Donabedian, Claude Mutafian, The Caucasian Knot: History & Geopolitics of Nagorno-Karabagh, London: Zed Books, 1994; Ronald Grigor Suny, Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
6. Saha Bolukbasi, *Ankara's Baku-Centered Transcaucasia Policy: Has it Failed?* in Middle East Journal, Vol. 51, No: 1 (Winter 1997), p. 80-94.
7. Paul Goble, *Analysis from Washington - Dealing on Karabagh*, in Daily Analysis for May 29 RFE/RL NEWSLINE, May 29, 1997: <RFERL-L@LISTSERV.ACSU.BUFFALO.EDU>
8. Turkish Foreign Ministry officials during the interview on June 12, 1997.
9. The Georgian government is also very supportive of this "multiple pipeline policy", as remarked by Tamaz Gamkrelidze, a legislator and the President of the Center for East-West Studies in Tbilisi, in a seminar on Russia and NIS (Center for Strategic Research Papers, No: 1/96, Ankara), p. 101.
10. Kamuran Gurun, *Turkiye-Ermenistan İlliskileri*, in Avrasya Etudleri (Ankara), No: 1 (1996); p. 62.
11. Paul Henze, *Turkiye-Ermenistan: Eski Sorunlar, Yeni Beklentiler*, in Avrasya Etudleri (Ankara), No: 1 (1996); p. 45.