



საგარეო პოლიტიკისა და სტრატეგიული ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**GEORGIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS:
BEYOND THE HEADLINES**

EUGENE KOGAN



EXPERT OPINION

2015



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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The analysis focuses on Georgian-Turkish bilateral relations over the last two years. It highlights the relations that are fraught with contention, it shows a lack of interest on the side of Turkish non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and think tanks to pursue research on the subject and, finally, it goes beyond the routine headlines. The headlines, referring to meetings of presidents, ministers of foreign affairs and other dignitaries, are the prevailing trend in bilateral relations; however, when it comes to dealing with down-to-earth events very little is done and subsequently accomplished. Still, it needs to be emphasised that in the field of military-to-military co-operation, Turkey remains an important supporter of Georgia. However, as stated below, Turkish vocal support is not sufficient nor has it brought Georgia closer to NATO.

Interestingly enough, there is a paucity of information on the subject and, as a result, the author treats the subject with the utmost care.¹ In addition to the paucity of information, Georgian-Turkish relations are largely discussed either within the framework of Georgian-Azerbaijani relations² or the trilateral relations between Azerbaijan, -Georgia and Turkey.³ Even though Turkey considers Georgia to be the vital *transit* link for oil and gas pipelines and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway that is still under construction, bilateral relations between Georgia and Turkey are not as extensively developed as perhaps one expected. Why so is discussed further below.

There is a clear lack of strategic understanding in Turkey regarding Georgia's pivotal place as a transit country in the South Caucasus. If and when the Russian Federation regains control over Georgia it will render the isolation of Armenia, send a clear signal to Azerbaijan that Russia is the old-new Master in the region and also send a clear signal to Turkey that Turkey has to accept Russian territorial expansion in the South Caucasus as a *fait accompli*. The precedent for a Turkish *fait accompli* has been set by Russia after Russia annexed Crimea. Although in legal terms Turkey has not recognised the Russian annexation of Crimea, in practice Turkey has accepted the new reality. By implicitly accepting the Russian *fait accompli*, Turkey shows its weakness and reduces its support for Georgia to a minimum. On that point, the author disagrees with the view of the former Georgian Minister of Defence, Irakli Alasania, cited below. On the issue of Russian-Turkish relations, see the recent paper penned by the author.⁴

Despite the author's disagreement with the view of Irakli Alasania, it is nevertheless important to cite Alasania's strong conviction in the nature of

a solid Georgian-Turkish relationship. In the words of Alasania: “Both our economic relationship and the military-to-military co-operation that we have had with Turkey for 20 years demonstrate very solid ties. No matter what the Russian position towards Georgia is, it will *never* [author’s italics] affect the Georgia-Turkey relationship. I was convinced of this when I was in Turkey in 2013. We have a strategic defence co-operation that not only includes education but also military-to-military co-operation.”⁵ The author considers Alasania’s saying ‘never affect’ as far-fetched and unrealistic. There is a known saying about never saying never. Alasania further said that “The Turks are very supportive of Georgia’s strive to join NATO. The Turks were very vocally supportive at the last NATO-Georgia Council on a ministerial level and I am very grateful to the Turkish side for this. And I am pretty sure that they understand that Turkey will be better off if Georgia will be in NATO.”⁶ The Turks do understand but what Alasania failed to say and what the Turks will dismiss out of hand was that Turkish influence within NATO has been waning over the last five to six years at least. In other words, Turkish vocal support for Georgia’s strive to join NATO has *not* been translated into action and may *not* be translated into action in the coming years. Turkish rhetoric alone is not a sufficient argument for bringing Georgia into NATO and it is not a sufficient deterrent to forestall Russia’s taking over Georgia. As a result, it can be said that Turkish strategic interests are not aligned with those of Georgia but, rather, with those of Russia. Turkish officials will dismiss the author’s assertion out of hand. Finally, the strive of Georgia and Turkey to join the European Union (EU) is well-known but the EU as a target that both countries attempt to reach remains elusive, to say the least.

As a result, it can be said that the strategic interests of both countries, despite the repeated rhetoric, do not coincide. Besides that point, the relations of both countries are fraught with contention.

In an article by Diba Nigar Goksel cited below, she writes that numerous strains were lying beneath the surface, and informed public discussion about these challenges has been *missing*⁷ [author’s italics]. As a result, she calls for an intellectual engagement on the part of Turks, Georgians and EU counterparts alike.⁸ Whether or not Goksel’s call will be heard and supported remains to be seen. At the moment, it appears that Goksel’s call is neither heard nor supported since all sides of that triangle are preoccupied with different issues.

Diba Nigar Goksel also clearly highlights bilateral issues of contention such as the neglect of old Georgian churches in north-west Turkey, the *perceived* [author's italics] Turkish economic dominance in Georgia, Azerbaijani or Turkish "monopolisation" of Georgian strategic assets [what kind of strategic assets exactly, remains unspecified, author's comment], and the spread of Turkish schools and mosques in Georgia.⁹ In a single article on the Georgian authorities' decision to dismantle a mosque minaret in the village of Cheta, it was stated that even though Georgian legislation does not *explicitly prohibit* [author's italics] the construction of minarets an unofficial ban persists in the country. The authorities invariably stand against such construction projects, fearing the rise of religious tensions¹⁰ that may have long-term negative consequences for both countries. Since that particular incident occurred, there were no other incidents reported. Does it mean that this particular issue is off the Georgian-Turkish agenda or the simmering tensions have been reduced or perhaps kept under control by both governments? The author does not know the answer but he nevertheless recommends monitoring the issue.

An additional issue of irritation rather than contention was the Turkish interaction with the breakaway region of Abkhazia.¹¹ However, with the signature of the Russian-Abkhazian Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership on 24 November 2014 and the subsequent annexation of Abkhazia by Russia, this issue was removed from the Georgian-Turkish agenda. Even if Turkey continues interaction with Abkhazia, Georgia cannot do much about it besides voicing its objections since the breakaway region has been ultimately incorporated into the Russian Federation. The latter will not allow Georgia to tamper in the domestic affairs of Russia, to say the least.

Despite the above-mentioned problems, there is at least one positive development in Turkish-Georgian relations; namely, Turkish investments in Georgia's energy sector. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili said on 11 October 2014 at an opening ceremony of the Paravani hydroelectric plant (HPP) that "Energy sector development and the 'rational' use of Georgia's hydropower potential is of huge importance for economic growth." The hydropower plant will supply electricity to the Georgian market during the winter period and export power to the Turkish market in the remaining nine months of the year.¹²

On the same day, Kakha Kaladze, Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, and Ahmet Calik, the high-ranking official of the Turkish company, Calik Holding, penned a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to construct a hydropower station on the Rioni River in the Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti region in the west of Georgia. Another plant is going to be built by the Ahlatci Group over the Dolra River in the north-western Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region.

Turkey has a growing demand for power while Georgia owns abundant power sources, including hydro. Demand for power in Turkey is forecast to double between 2010 and 2020. Thus, it sees Georgia as a reliable exporter to initiate investments in terms of the power supply. Large funding by the Turkish companies for energy projects in Georgia is pioneering a new window to meet Turkey's energy demands and, at the same time, boost Georgia's role in the regional energy arena.¹³

To conclude, despite the existence of issues of contention between the two countries and a lack of Turkey's strong military support for Georgia versus Russia, the development of Georgia's energy sector by Turkey and the benefits that Turkey receives from this development remains the key issue that binds the two countries. Thus, it can be said that Georgian-Turkish relations are indeed not extensively developed although both Georgian and Turkish officials will claim otherwise. As for the policy recommendations suggested by Diba Nigar Goksel, it appears that at the moment, and perhaps also for a foreseeable future, both Turkish NGOs and think tanks will keep mum. Whether or not their Georgian counterparts will maintain a similar position is not known to the author.

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