

Turkey's game for the Caucasus

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The foreign ministries of Turkey, Armenia and Switzerland (the latter having mediated in talks between the former two) reported on 31 August that two protocols envisaging the establishment of Turkish-Armenian relations and the opening of the border between the two countries had been developed. In turn, on 28 September, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan promised that diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia would be established on 10 October. Although Turkish diplomacy is likely to succeed in this task, chances for a full normalisation of relations are low. The risk of the internal situation in Armenia becoming destabilised, resistance from nationalist circles in Turkey and staunch opposition from Azerbaijan, the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the ambiguous stance Russia has taken will all impede the normalisation of bilateral relations.

The process of normalising Turkish-Armenian relations which has been observed over the past year is the most important element of Turkey's new policy towards the Caucasus, which it has launched since last year's Russian-Georgian war. Its priorities include enhancing co-operation with all countries in the region, reducing Turkey's dependence on Azerbaijan's interests, and Ankara's attempts to mediate in the resolution of conflicts in the Caucasus. Although Turkey's active policy towards the Caucasus has enabled it to present itself as an independent player, capable of dictating the tempo of the game in the region, its ability to maintain long-term influence will depend on the reaction from the Caucasian countries, Russia and the West to its activity, rather than on Ankara's determination alone.

The Turkish-Armenian game

The Turkish policy towards Armenia has intensified since the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. Its goals include establishing diplomatic relations with that country and opening the Turkish-Armenian border, which has been closed since 1993. In the long term, Turkey wants to open transport routes running through Armenia, and to get the country engaged in regional co-operation.

In September 2008, President Abdullah Gul visited Yerevan on the occasion of the Armenia-Turkey football game, where he met with the Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan. High-level meetings were held over the next few months. This brought about the development

in April 2009 of a 'road map' (an agreement setting out the rules for normalising Turkish-Armenian relations) and protocols envisaging the establishment of Turkish-Armenian diplomatic relations and the opening of the border between the two countries two months after the documents were signed (31 August 2009). Internal political consultations started in mid-September in Turkey and Armenia in order to bring about the agreements' ratification by their respective parliaments.

However, the process of normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations has met with a number of serious impediments, which mean that it could be blocked at any moment.

The process of normalising Turkish-Armenian relations may be blocked any time, due to the risk of internal situation being destabilised in Armenia and the opposition from nationalist circles in Turkey.

First of all, it arouses controversies in both Armenia and Turkey.

Objectively, a normalisation of relations with Turkey would be beneficial to Armenia. This would break the country's long-time isolation, open up its prospects for participation in regional transport projects thus lessening the country's dependence on Russia, and create more opportunities for developing contacts with Europe.

However, Yerevan's engagement in talks with Ankara is not an effect of an internal political consensus but of President Sargsyan's own high-risk strategy. He started it in the hope that if his tactics succeeded, Armenians would see him as a saviour who delivered their country from isolation. Then his position would be significantly reinforced, and he could have a guarantee of stable rule in the foreseeable future.

Most political forces in Armenia have raised serious objections to a rapprochement with Turkey. This is true both of nationalist circles (such as the Dashnaksutyun party and the Karabakh war veterans) and of opposition both in and outside parliament (including the Armenian National Congress, led by former president Levon Ter-Petrosyan). President Sargsyan's immediate predecessor, Robert Kocharyan, has also expressed scepticism regarding the normalisation of relations.

Opponents of this process claim that it is putting the security of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh at risk, and may upset the pillars of the Armenian state and the national identity by withdrawing the demand that Ankara recognise the Armenian massacres committed in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 as acts of genocide. They have also suggested that the government is concealing the real conditions of the agreement from the public, such as an alleged consent to surrender the Azerbaijani territories around Karabakh which are occupied by Armenians, and do not even want Armenia to officially recognise the state border with Turkey¹. This issue may upset the internal situation in Armenia. Street demonstrations and even a coup, attacks or assassination attempts on senior officials (which have already happened in the past) cannot be ruled out². This could freeze the process of normalisation of relations with Turkey.

Nationalist circles in Turkey do not want reconciliation with Armenia either. In their opinion, attempts at rapprochement with Armenia mean a betrayal of the interests of their ally Azerbaijan. The protocols announced on 31 August must be ratified by the parliaments of both countries before they can be signed. Unless any progress is made on the Karabakh issue, Turkish MPs will not be prepared to accept any normalisation of relations with Yerevan.

¹ The border was established in 1921 under the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Kars. The Republic of Armenia has not officially recognised the border (although it was recognised by the government of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, which signed the treaty). Nationalist circles in Armenia claim that since their country has not officially recognised the Treaty of Kars, the legally binding document is in fact the Treaty of Sevres signed in 1920 by Turkey and Western allies, under which Armenia was granted access to the Black Sea (although this is not Yerevan's official stance).

² In 1998, the first president of Armenia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who wanted a compromise over Nagorno-Karabakh, was forced to step down under pressure from public protests. In turn several high-ranking Armenian politicians, including Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisyan and Parliamentary Speaker Karen Demirchyan, were killed in the October 1999 shooting in the Armenian parliament, which was probably staged by opponents of a peace accord.

Protests from Azerbaijan and the deadlock over Nagorno-Karabakh

Azerbaijan has vehemently protested against the possible opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, insisting that the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh must be resolved first. Baku has threatened Ankara with retaliatory moves such as cutting gas supplies, choosing other routes for the increased transfer of energy raw materials instead of Turkish ones (such as those running through Georgia and the Black Sea to Romania), the withdrawal of Azerbaijani assets worth approximately US\$15 billion from Turkish banks, and placing impediments to Turkish business in Azerbaijan³. The protests from Baku have forced Ankara to harden its stance, officially stating that the opening of the border will depend on progress in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (the most frequently mentioned condition is that Armenian troops withdraw from occupied Azerbaijani territories).

Meanwhile, Yerevan has definitively rejected any links between opening the border and the Karabakh issue, insisting that relations should be normalised without any preconditions.

As yet, little seems to indicate any likelihood of a breakthrough in the Karabakh conflict. Seemingly, a framework agreement on this issue can be reached within the next few months. Armenian-Azerbaijani meetings are being held under the aegis of the OSCE Minsk Group, whose representatives have reported the increasing likelihood of a compromise between the two parties. Additionally, on 10 July 2009, the presidents of the USA, Russia and France, which are members of the Minsk Group, issued a statement specifying the agreed basic rules of the future accord. It is envisaged that Armenia will return the occupied territories, a temporary status for Karabakh will be determined, the corridor between the enclave and Armenia will remain under Armenian control, a referendum concerning the status of Karabakh will be held after a decade or so, refugees will return to the occupied territories and

Karabakh itself, and international security guarantees will be granted to the enclave, which will include the deployment of peacekeeping forces there⁴.

However, the Minsk Group's enthusiasm has been contradicted by confrontational statements made by representatives

of the conflicting parties (for example, Azerbaijan has again resorted to warlike rhetoric), as well as by increasingly frequent military incidents in Karabakh. Another serious barrier which prevents the resolution of the conflict is the mutual distrust between the parties and the lack of readiness by the public in both countries to accept any compromise.

Although both Armenia and Azerbaijan are willing to accept the basic rules of the accord, they have been unable to agree on its details. These include the rules for the return of refugees, the referendum on the future of Karabakh and the security guarantees for Karabakh. It seems unlikely that Armenia will agree to surrender the occupied territories without receiving a firm guarantee, such as stationing peacekeeping forces in Karabakh. Since Moscow opposes the presence of troops from any third countries in the region, the only potential force which could guarantee security in the enclave are Russian troops. However, this scenario has been rejected by Azerbaijan, which does not want to become dependent on Russia.

³ After the Turkish-Armenian road map was signed, Azerbaijan stated that despite its dependence on oil and gas exports to and through Turkey, it had serious means to put pressure on Ankara. At that time, President Ilham Aliyev cancelled his visit to Turkey, threats to cut gas supplies were made, and an Azerbaijani lobby in Turkey was activated, which for some time slowed down the process of Turkish-Armenian negotiations and forced Ankara to set clear conditions for opening the border.

⁴ These are the 'Madrid rules' set by the OSCE in 2007.

Regardless of the enthusiasm presented by the OSCE Minsk Group's co-chairmen, chances for a breakthrough in the negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh are low.

Does Moscow not want normalisation?

Turkish-Armenian relations can only be normalised if Moscow takes at least a neutral stance. Turkish diplomacy is aware of the risk of Russia blocking the process, which may put pressure on the Armenian authorities or cause internal destabilisation in Armenia. For this reason, Turkey has been very cautious about the moves it makes. Ankara has been trying to convince Moscow that it does not intend to undermine Russian interests or challenge the role of Russia as the key player in the Caucasus. Numerous visits by Turkish government representatives to Russia, and statements encouraging Moscow to engage more actively in resolving the Karabakh conflict, are aimed at proving that Ankara has precisely such intentions. As part of the Caucasus Stability and Co-operation Pact, a planned platform for co-operation between Russia, Turkey and the Caucasian countries which Ankara proposed in August 2008, Turkey has also guaranteed Russia a major role. The Turkish side is also trying to emphasise that their policy towards the Caucasus is autonomous and independent of the West, and especially the USA. It cannot be ruled out that Ankara hopes that Moscow

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will adopt a favourable stance, taking into account good Russian-Turkish co-operation in the field of energy.

Meanwhile, Russia has reacted to prospects of normalising Turkish-Armenian relations in quite an ambiguous way.

Following the announcement of the Turkish-Armenian protocols on 31 August, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement expressing a positive attitude to the normalisation process. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that Moscow is ready to accept the opening of the border in exchange for certain concessions from both sides. It could require Turkey to recognise Abkhazia's independence (reports that Ankara is considering this move have appeared in the Turkish media), and it could ask Armenia to destabilise the situation in the Georgian province of Javakheti, which is inhabited by ethnic Armenians; this would disturb the internal situation in Georgia, and thus create a pretext for another Russian intervention⁵.

However, the previous Russian policy, and the signs received from Russia so far, seem to prove that Moscow is rather reluctant to accept the normalisation process.

Since the early 1990s, one of the pillars of Russian policy towards the Southern Caucasus has been the isolation of Armenia and keeping it within its own zone of influence. The unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the closed border with Turkey have been useful tools of that policy. Russia is certainly aware of anti-Russian sentiments in Armenia, that country's desire to establish closer relations with the West and the fact that Armenians perceive their alliance with Russia as a need resulting from their country's international situation. It is rather unlikely that Moscow will get rid of such a convenient means of pressure on Armenia, namely the closed border with Turkey. Besides, Moscow has traditionally seen Turkey as its rival in the Caucasus; for the Kremlin, Turkey is a country which wants to weaken Russian influence for historical reasons and, as a result of its ambitions, to play a greater role in the region⁶.

⁵ Armenian authorities have so far avoided the issue of Javakheti. However, it is worth noting that President Sargsyan raised the issue of the status of the Armenian language in Javakheti, and of Armenian churches in Georgia, during the visit to Yerevan by the Georgian foreign minister Grigol Vashadze on 4–5 September 2009.

⁶ Moscow's negative perception of Turkish policy towards the Southern Caucasus is also an effect of the belief (which is widespread in Russia) that Turkey has had an adverse impact on the situation in the Northern Caucasus. Russian media often report on Chechen militants hiding in Turkey, the support offered by radical Islamic circles in Turkey to Northern Caucasian Islamic underground structures, and on Turkish citizens who have fought alongside Caucasian militants against Russian troops.

Also, in response to Turkey's attempts to encourage greater engagement in the resolution of the conflict, Russia issued statements claiming that third-party interference with the Armenian-Azerbaijani negotiations was inadmissible. It is also worth noting the way in which the Russian media present Turkish-Armenian issues, suggesting that the normalisation process is inspired by Washington, and warning that opening the border would deal a serious blow to Russian policy in the Caucasus.

All this seems to suggest that Moscow has a reluctant approach to the normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations, yet still has the sense of controlling the situation, and retaining an awareness of the size of the obstacles impeding this process. If its interests are endangered, such obstacles may provide useful instruments to destabilise the situation in Armenia, which will freeze the normalisation process.

The Turkish offensive in the Caucasus

The process of normalising Turkish-Armenian relations is the most essential element of the present Turkish policy towards the Caucasus. Its intensification has become possible owing to the change of the geopolitical situation in the region caused by the recent Russian-Georgian war. As a consequence of the war, the West – which is unwilling to irritate Russia – reduced its activity and focused on maintaining the influence it had had before, which was effectively limited to supporting the stabilisation of Georgia. After the war, which showed Moscow's strength and determination to protect its interests, Russia did not take any major

activity in the Caucasus. Thus a gap was created between the interests and actions of Russia and the West, which had been blocking each other's moves; this gave Ankara the opportunity to intensify its own activity there.

It seems that the most important goal of the Turkish offensive in the Caucasus is to strengthen Ankara's position in the region, and to present itself in the international arena (to the EU, among other entities)

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To open a new page in the Caucasian policy, Turkey has had to revise its previous paradigms, principally its close alliance with Azerbaijan, which was blocking its relations with Yerevan; as a consequence of this, Turkey was in fact held hostage by Baku. The new policy appears to be aimed at enhancing co-operation with all the countries in the region, redefining relations with Azerbaijan, promoting regional initiatives (for example, by building transport routes) and Ankara's mediation in conflicts in the Caucasus.

Ankara's recent actions include:

- diplomatic activity during the Russian-Georgian war, including attempts to mediate between the parties to the conflict and taking an ostentatiously neutral stance; at that time Turks also put forward the Caucasus Stability and Co-operation Pact initiative;
- efforts to normalise relations with Armenia and resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict;
- taking activity with regard to the separatist republic of Abkhazia, such as developing economic relations and political dialogue⁷.

⁷ One example of Turkish diplomatic activity with regard to Abkhazia was the visit by Unal Cevikoz, a representative of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to Sukhumi on 10 September 2009, during which he talked to the separatist president Sergey Bagapsh among other activities. Also, Turkish commercial ships run between Turkey and Abkhazia quite regularly.

Ankara's moderate success

Considering the aforementioned impediments, a complete normalisation of Turkish-Armenian relations seems rather unlikely in the short term. Diplomatic relations will probably be established. However, since chances of the Turkish parliament ratifying the Turkish-Armenian protocols (and thus opening the border) are quite low, this will be just one more step towards reconciliation, rather than a breakthrough.

Despite the difficulties Ankara has faced while implementing its initiatives for the region, recent Turkish policy can be evaluated as a moderate success. Ankara has presented itself as an independent player which is capable of shaping the geopolitical situation in the region. It is Turkey which is currently dictating the tempo of the game in the Caucasus, while Russian and Western policies in that region are rather reactive.

Whether this success will transform into durable influence in the region will depend not on Ankara's determination but on how the Turkish moves are perceived by the countries in the region, the West and Russia, and at this point, the reactions of none of them can be guessed.

Paradoxically, the Turkish successes may prove most beneficial to Armenia; a normalisation of relations with Turkey would reduce its dependence on Russia and enable it to establish closer co-operation with the West. In turn, Ankara's new policy may seem alarming to Georgia and Azerbaijan. Although co-operation with Ankara is a major element of their respective policies, success for Turkish initiatives would require Baku and Tbilisi to revise their foreign policies. From the Georgian point of view, the development of relations between Turkey and Abkhazia is especially dangerous. In turn, Azerbaijan feels uneasy about the fact that it will no longer be given exceptional treatment by Turkey, as has been proven by Ankara's initiative to normalise relations with Armenia⁸. It cannot be ruled out that Azerbaijan will establish closer relations with Russia as an effect of Turkey continuing this policy⁹.

The opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, which is supported by both the EU and the USA, and a resolution of the Karabakh conflict would be beneficial from the Western point of view. This would create an opportunity to reduce Russian influence in the Caucasus, unblock transport routes in the southern part of the region, and establish stronger bonds between the Caucasus and Europe. However, a stronger position for Turkey could give rise to attempts to divide influences in the region between Turkey and Russia.

Nevertheless, the stance Russia has taken would appear to be decisive in this case. An increased Turkish presence in the Caucasus could offer some benefits to Moscow (the possible recognition of Abkhazia as an independent country by Ankara, and the ability to put stronger pressure on Georgia in case the Turkish-Armenian border is opened). However Moscow, which still believes that Caucasus lies within its own zone of influence, will in principle object to any increase in other countries' presence in this region. Therefore, in all probability it will not support the Turkish initiatives.

⁸ Such fears have been augmented by the assertive gas policy Ankara has adopted; it does not wish to play the role of a transit country for Azerbaijani raw materials, but wants to re-export them to the West.

⁹ Signs of this can already be observed. An example of a similar policy is the gas memorandum signed on 27 March 2008 by Russia's Gazprom and Azerbaijan's Socar, which envisages starting formal talks to set rules for selling Azerbaijani gas to Russia as of January 2010. For more information on Azerbaijan's gas policy, see Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, 'Azerbaijan's gas export policy', *EastWeek*, 1 April 2009.



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