

The Russia-Turkey Confrontation and Its Implications for the South Caucasus

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The South Caucasus is facing a new wave of turmoil. The dynamically changing external security environment, together with internal developments in each of the South Caucasus states (and in the *de facto* states), contributes to the further disintegration of this area. On the one hand the gaps between all the regional actors are growing; on the other hand all are intensely searching for allies. They do so often in accordance with the familiar saying: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." The current Russian-Turkish confrontation, which only at first glance was unexpected, heavily contributes to these processes.

Against the background of developments in the Middle East and the serious refugee crisis in Europe, as well as a growing and widening terrorism threat in many parts of the world, it is possible to consider the South Caucasus as a relatively stable region. However, as a consequence of a) a factual withdrawal of the US from Eurasia, b) the increasing passivity of the European Union in this area, and c) the transformation of Russian-Turkish antagonisms into an open confrontation, the level of insecurity in the South Caucasus – the most vulnerable region of Eurasia – is intensifying. This area is gradually becoming a battleground between Russia and Turkey.¹ Simultaneously, the maneuvering space for the smaller regional actors – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – is narrowing. Their interaction with each other, as this process continues, becomes increasingly complicated. This article analyses security issues in the South Caucasus in reference to these shifts and examines possible scenarios in light of tensions in the Russia-Turkey relationship.

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¹The relative stability of the South Caucasus and its geopolitical location make this area very attractive for Iran. However, after removal of the Western sanctions, Iran is now focused on the Western dimension and will not now participate in the "Caucasus game." Conversely, China is becoming quite active in the South Caucasus, mainly through its initiative "One belt – One road."

Russia vs. Turkey: similarities and differences in approaches

Russia and Turkey, as the two major regional powers, both consider the entire South Caucasus region – although to differing degrees – an area of their national interests and of strategic importance. Each state possesses a different vision and approach to the main security issues in the areas of their overlapping strategic interests: the turbulent Middle East above all, but also the Black Sea area. Over the past ten years both have been trying to balance mutual interests and to resolve all conflicts peacefully, thereby avoiding confrontation over political, economic, and military issues and aggressive intervention into each other's affairs.² Moreover, these regional powers have had strong economic relations with each other and shared common approaches to, for example, the "colored revolutions," and human rights and freedoms. They have also shared a vision of the West's involvement in their domestic affairs, in particular that of the European Union. Finally, a clear shift exists in both states toward authoritarianism. The two leaders – Russian President V. Putin and Turkish President R.T. Erdoğan – were publicly praising each other's personalities and policies.³ In sum, until recently Russian-Turkish relations could be defined as pragmatic or, in certain areas – above all in the energy sector – even as a strategic partnership.⁴

The year 2015 became a watershed in the Russian-Turkish bilateral relationship, indicating growing disagreements between these two main actors in the Middle East and Eurasia. The current stage of this relationship signals a return to the historically enduring confrontational style of interaction. However, today the situation is aggravated by their strong interconnectedness and interdependence, as well as by (to some extent) the unpredictability of their future steps.

²Gayane Novikova, *Quid pro Quo in Turkey's Policy in the South Caucasus*. In: *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 2011, Spring, Vol. 10, No.1, Istanbul, pp. 133-150.

³Pavel K. Baev, *Russia and Turkey Find a Common Cause in Confronting the Specter of Revolution*, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 2014, Vol. 12, No. 4. Available at: http://turkishpolicy.com/pdf/vol_12-no_4-baev.pdf; Charles Recknagel, *Mirror Images: Are Putin And Erdogan Too Much Alike To Compromise?* November 25, 2015. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/putin-erdogan-mirror-image-too-much-alike-to-compromise/27388004.html>

⁴See in more detail: *The Joint Press Conference with President of Turkey, December 1, 2014* (in Russian). Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/4712>; *Putin: Erdogan is a man of strong character*, *Today's Zaman*, Dec 18, 2014. Available at: http://www.todayszaman.com/anasayfa_putin-erdogan-is-a-man-of-strong-character_367328.html

An important aspect of international relations that influences directly the Russian-Turkish confrontation is their respective relationship with the US, the European Union, and, of course, NATO. Russia's positioning of itself as an honest broker in Eurasia and the Middle East provokes, in the best case, misunderstanding in the West and a growing irritation in Turkey. The latter, however, cannot provide adequate countermeasures against Russia. Turkey has already begun to apply to the EU and to NATO for political and military support.⁵

Contradictory assessments of Russia and the West in respect to the Ukrainian crisis, different approaches to its resolution, ambiguous assessments of Russia's actions in Syria and of the refugee crisis in Europe – all of these factors played into Turkey's hands. It can now portray itself as the only trusted ally of the West in the Middle East and – to some extent – in Eurasia, and as the key actor in the war against the Islamic State. Against the background of a growing tension between Russia and NATO, the positive changes in the Turkey-EU relationship are becoming apparent: Turkey has received three billion Euros from the EU, as well as a reopening of the visa facilitation issue for Turkish citizens, in exchange for stronger efforts to prevent the refugee flow to Europe.⁶

The serious internal political problems in Russia and Turkey, which require immediate attention and resolution, also influence the level and character of their bilateral relationship. For Russia the turning points were the annexation of Crimea (or in Russian terms, the unification of Crimea with Russia), the Ukrainian crisis as a whole, and the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. The latter strongly and directly affect Russia's economic situation, which is deteriorating as a consequence of a dramatic drop in the price for energy. Overcoming this severe economic crisis will demand a full concentration of efforts of both the Russian government and Russian society on domestic problems. In all likelihood, on behalf of these

⁵*Statement of NATO Secretary General on Russian Air Space violation on January 30, 2016.* "I call on Russia to act responsibly and to fully respect NATO airspace. I welcome the direct contacts between Ankara and Moscow, and I call for calm and de-escalation. NATO stands in solidarity with Turkey and supports the territorial integrity of our Ally, Turkey." Available at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_127562.htm?selectedLocale=en

⁶*E.U. Offers Turkey 3 Billion Euros to Stem Migrant Flow*, The New York Times, November 29, 2015. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/30/world/europe/eu-offers-turkey-3-billion-euros-to-stem-migrant-flow.html?_r=0. Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council described Turkey as a "key strategic partner" on issues such as counterterrorism and the civil war in Syria.

efforts a new round of patriotic-military rhetoric will ensue.⁷ The newly-adopted National Security Strategy of Russia clearly establishes internal issues as of absolute priority.⁸

In the meantime Russia is trying to implement a pro-active and (in a sense) aggressively defensive foreign policy in many parts of the world. The National Security Strategy has defined the security threats and announced its readiness to fight and to defend Russia's role as "one of the leading world powers...[actively aiming] toward the maintenance of strategic stability and mutually beneficial relationships under conditions of a polycentric world" (Article 30). It stresses that "the use of military force to defend national interests is possible only if all other measures of a non-violent character are ineffective" (Article 29).⁹

In accordance with the scale of threats and the vision of its role in the world, Russia, in search of a new *modus operandi* with the West, has become involved also in military operations against the Islamic State in Syria. This has caused a very negative reaction in Turkey. The Russian strikes are designed to emphasize Russia's return in the Middle East, an area where its interests directly and indirectly confront Turkey's interests.

For Turkey the fall into instability is directly linked to developments in the Greater Middle East area. Turkey lost all the political benefits it possessed as a secular democratic state in the Muslim world at the beginning of the Arab awakening. Currently its internal and foreign policies are largely determined by the Syrian crisis, the huge flow of refugees from Syria (and to a lesser extent from Iraq), the direct confrontation with the Islamic State, the resumption of Kurdish tensions at the level of an undeclared war, and, finally, the authoritarian trend pursued by the government and its limiting of human rights and freedoms. Another dangerous development which contributes heavily to the deepening of the crises in foreign and internal affairs is the current confrontation with Russia, especially as it takes the form of Russian sanctions that significantly affect the Turkish

⁷*It is time to say farewell to the illusions re Putin's power – Russian Political Scientist Shevtsova* (in Russian). Apostrophe, November 30, 2015. Available at: <http://apostrophe.com.ua/article/world/2015-11-30/prishla-pora-konchat-s-illyuziyami-o-sile-putina---rossiyskiy-politolog-shevtsova/2660>

⁸*The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*. Adopted by the President of Russia on December 31, 2015 (in Russian). Available at: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/1/133.html>

⁹ Ibid.

economy. It should be emphasized that, albeit choosing the confrontational model of political behavior, the leaders of each state are carefully avoiding both tough rhetoric and actions related to joint programs in the energy sector.

The incident with the Russian jet in November, 2015, brought to an end myths about the "eternal friendship" of the two leaders and the "strategic partnership" of these two states. The transition of Russian-Turkish hostilities from covert to open confrontation will have unpredictable consequences for both states and their neighborhoods, including for the South Caucasus. The situation in this region is becoming even more complicated owing to three factors:

-First, there is a nearly complete absence of a South Caucasus strategy in the foreign policies of Turkey and Russia; these regional powers quite often act spontaneously;

-Second, the three states of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – are influenced significantly by any shift in the Russia-Turkey relationship;

-Third, Russia and Turkey are each in search of a niche that allows maneuvering, and hence each will attempt to utilize tensions vis-à-vis other regional and non-regional actors in order to improve geostrategic position.¹⁰

Viewed in the context of this zero-sum game, the fragile stability of the South Caucasus can be easily violated. In fact, on the one hand Georgia's Association Agreement (including DCFTA) with the European Union violated Russia's monopoly over the management of all processes in the South Caucasus. On the other hand, Turkey, which is still unable to become an actively engaged actor in this area, will exploit any possibility to strengthen its position throughout the region.

In sum, the Russian-Turkish conflict, a) affects tremendously the security and socio-economic situation in the entire area of the South Caucasus; b) further complicates relations between the South Caucasus states and can influence the situation in the area of unresolved conflicts – including even factors that might lead to a new round of escalation of the tensions in the area of the Nagorno

¹⁰Even during his Ankara visit in December, 2014, the Russian President spoke about a readiness to cooperate with Turkey on regional issues, which "cannot be resolved without Turkey's participation." *The Joint Press Conference with President of Turkey, December 1, 2014* (in Russian). Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47126>

Karabakh conflict; and c) allows Turkey, under certain circumstances, to become more actively engaged in the regional dynamics.

The South Caucasus: between a rock and a hard place

Building their relations with Russia and Turkey, the South Caucasus states are, on the one hand, trying to avoid becoming trapped between a rock and a hard place. On the other hand, the relationships between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – all three are actors in the conditional political-military and economic schemes – reflect the already shaped relationships with the two regional powers. They manifest fully the growing tension in the region and outline the possible – unfortunately quite pessimistic – scenarios for further developments in the South Caucasus.

Armenia–Turkey–Azerbaijan

Perhaps the relationships in the Armenia–Turkey–Azerbaijan triangle can be characterized as ones of perpetual intensity. There are several inflexible problems that, in combination, create a situation of near deadlock. Among them are the absence of diplomatic relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and between Armenia and Turkey; the unresolved Nagorno Karabakh conflict (which teeters on the edge of a resumption of full-scale military action); the contested international recognition of the Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey; and the strong psychological dependency relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan. This quagmire of problems severely limits the possibilities of each actor in this triangle; at the same time it increases critically their interaction and interdependence. Until now all attempts to separate these problems from each other have been unsuccessful.

In this triangle Armenia – as a party to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and as a state whose people survived the genocide – is perceived by Azerbaijan as a hostile state and by Turkey as a source of irritation. Moreover, several internal and regional developments have made Azerbaijan more sensitive than Armenia to the processes surrounding the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, thereby preventing any step toward a compromise that would resolve the conflict. Among them are:

- The psychological inability by the Azerbaijani regime to accept the *de facto* independence of the NKR from Azerbaijan and the low likelihood that the latter's territorial integrity will be restored;

- The fear that growing social and economic inequality in Azerbaijan can provoke unrest in the capital Baku and its suburbia;

-The gradual growth, against a background of disillusionment with the West in Azerbaijani society at large and a paralysis of democratic forces, of the influence of Islamists (and therefore the growth in the number of Azerbaijani fighters among recruits to the Islamic State);¹¹ and the fear that their return to Azerbaijan poses in the mid-term a direct threat to the Aliyev regime.

All of these factors provide the Aliyev regime with the opportunity to suppress the remaining democratic forces in the country, to fight against the Islamic opposition,¹² to demand more support from the interested external actors "for a fair resolution of the conflict," and to threaten to resolve the NK conflict by military means.

For Armenia the prolongation of the "neither war nor peace" situation in the area of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict implies both gains and losses. Negotiations within the format of the OSCE Minsk Group are continuing, the status of Nagorno Karabakh is still under discussion, and the Armenian forces control the territories around Nagorno Karabakh; thus, security is provided to its population. The most serious problems for Armenia, given this unresolved conflict, involve the threat of resumption of war by Azerbaijan, exclusion from the existing regional projects, and non-inclusion into projected new regional projects, in particular into the ambitious "One belt – One road" initiative proposed by China.

It is worth mentioning that the Nagorno Karabakh conflict remains a more serious obstacle on the way toward the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations than Armenia's efforts aimed at acquiring international recognition of the Armenian Genocide (and, correspondingly, countering the opposing efforts by Turkey). This is evident owing to the fact that, for Turkey, keeping the borders closed involves an additional – perhaps even more important – political and psychological aspect, one on the same plane as the Turkish-Azerbaijani strategic partnership and the brotherly relationship with

¹¹See in more detail: Arif Yunusov, *Islamic Factor in Azerbaijan* (in Russian). Baku: Adilogli, 2013, pp.66-124, 148-183, 222-224. The number of Azerbaijanis fighting for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq varies, according to different media sources, between 250 and 900.

¹²*The religious extremism is unacceptable for Azerbaijan*, December 10, 2015 (in Russian). Available at: http://www.contact.az/docs/2015/Want%20to%20Say/121000139655ru.htm#.VmrQA_UhMs; *Elders Demand Probe Into Deadly Violence During Azerbaijani Police Raid*, Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty, November 27, 2015. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-nardaran-raid-terrorist-criminal-gang/27393199.html>

Azerbaijan. Taking into consideration this big-picture constellation, any Armenian-Turkish rapprochement seems very problematic.¹³

However, it becomes even more complicated and intractable when viewed against the background of the intersecting and overlapping developments in the region. In fact, the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement *per se* is becoming a constituent part of the Russian-Turkish confrontation: from a political point of view Armenia, as a strategic ally of Russia, is forced to support Russia – thereby eradicating the prospects, even in the distant future, for normalization of relations with Turkey.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the context of a rapid deterioration of Russian-Turkish relations, Armenian-Turkish problems have become discussed by Russian politicians and analysts. The consequence has become clear: an aggravation of tensions along the Armenia-Turkey axis and a drawing of Armenia into a direct confrontation with Turkey.

Hence, immediately after the incident involving the Russian jet in November, 2015, the State Duma included into its agenda a bill on criminalizing the denial of the Armenian Genocide,¹⁵ thereby directly linking the proposal to the shooting down of the Russian bomber aircraft by Turkey. One prominent Russian political scientist, closely affiliated with the Kremlin, in an interview by the Armenian information agency, stated: "The deterioration of the relationship with Turkey, although it may sound quite cynical, will incline our Armenian partners and friends to take a more positive stance in their relationship with Russia. There is no doubt that these relationships will become even more strong. I think that, first of all, it will become apparent in a

¹³See in more detail: Gayane Novikova, *Blockade à trois: Das Beziehungsdreieck Armenien–Aserbaidshan–Türkei*. In: Osteuropa, Berlin, 65. Jg., 7–10/2015, S. 427–441. It should be mentioned that unlike Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, which are on the level of rare direct contacts between the presidents of the two states including the OSCE Minsk Group format, Armenian-Turkish relations engage the representatives of the business circles and the civil society; the state officials are much less involved.

¹⁴Of course, the whole package of Armenian-Turkish problems and contradictions, together with the unresolved NK conflict, already made certain the support of Russia by Armenia, as apparent on the occasion of the Crimean situation.

¹⁵*Russian Lawmakers Propose Bill On Accountability For Armenia Genocide Denial*. November 25, 2015. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-armenia-genocide-accountability/27387944.html>. *The State Duma will think about the punishment for Armenia Genocide denial* (in Russian). November 25, 2015. Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2015/11/25/genocid/>

strengthening of our positions on the Armenian-Turkish border. And, if Yerevan agrees, a reinforcement of the Russian military base in Gyumri will follow. In my opinion, such a reinforcement became a necessity quite a long time ago."¹⁶

In light of the context of this statement, it is necessary to pay attention to two aspects. The first is related to the "positive developments" in the Armenian-Russian relationship; the second is related to the Russian military presence and Armenia's security.

The decision to join the Eurasian Economic Union was based on the following factors:

1) The Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and the events in Ukraine in 2014 both demonstrated quite clearly that the EU will not provide security guarantees under any conditions to any of the Eastern Partnership member-states. As a party to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Armenia needs security guarantees above all. Therefore, Russia has been seen, on the basis of bilateral and multilateral military agreements, as the main security guarantor for Armenia.

2) Facing a growing number of domestic problems, including a refugee crisis, the EU is not willing or able to provide adequate financial support to keep the Armenian economy alive. In the meantime, Russia is the owner or co-owner of the main strategic infrastructure of Armenia. At the moment when the final decision to join the EEU was taken by the Armenian President, Russia was able to maintain the stability of its economy and to act in the international arena as a self-confident world power.

3) There are approximately 1.5 million Armenians in the Diaspora in Russia. The private remittances sent home by Armenian labor migrants in Russia constituted roughly 17 percent of Armenia's GDP in 2013.

However, the reality looks a little different. Owing to the Ukraine crisis, the massive slide of energy prices in the global markets, and the sanctions against Russia, the volume of remittances to Armenia has been reduced significantly. This has substantially affected the state's economic situation. In the context of the Armenian government's not very effective activity, interparty disputes in the absence of a real political opposition, constitutional reforms likely to consolidate a one-party rule, and the high level of unemployment (17.8

¹⁶*Vyacheslav Nikonov: Russia's build-up on Armenian-Turkish border became a necessity long ago.* ArmInfo, December 3, 2015. Available at: <http://www.arminfo.info/index.cfm?objectid=55173D50-99A8-11E5-B3640EB7C0D21663>

percent) and poverty (about 42 percent of population, according to the 2014 data),¹⁷ the decrease in the volume of remittances from labor migrants is becoming, together with other developments, a significant factor contributing to growing social unrest.¹⁸

The economic crisis in Russia, in combination with rising nationalism throughout Russian society will inevitably influence all integration projects led by Russia, above all in regard to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Indeed, this project has demonstrated its lack of vitality in the present extreme situation. There is also a danger that, under the given circumstances, Russia will not be able to fulfill its obligations under the bilateral Russian-Armenian economic treaties. If this occurs, the Armenian economy will be adversely influenced. And Armenia should not expect help from the other partners in the EAEU.¹⁹

Nor should Armenia expect economic assistance from the European Union either. Reopening negotiations with the EU aimed at forming a new bilateral agreement is, of course, a positive shift. However, under the present circumstances, any future agreement will, in the best case, affect the scope of so called "soft power" only, such as human rights and individual freedoms, the rule of law, and good governance procedures. In the long term, changes in these areas will surely influence positively the future of the state.

Finally, the next – and stronger – argument in favor of integration with the Eurasian Union was linked to the issue of guarantees for Armenia's security. Several issues should be acknowledged:

-the 102nd Russian military base is deployed on the territory of Armenia; in accord with the signed Protocol on the Introduction of Amendments to the Treaty on the Russian Military Base in Armenia (August 2010), its presence was extended until 2044;

¹⁷Over 40 percent of Armenia's population is below the poverty line, according to a recent poll. October 17, 2014. Available at: http://arka.am/en/news/society/over_40_percent_of_armenia_s_population_is_below_poverty_line_poll_says/

¹⁸In June-July, 2015, youth in Yerevan initiated a protest movement against the planned increase of tariffs for electricity. See in more detail: Gayane Novikova, *A Precarious Case: Interaction Between State and Society in Armenia*. Available at: <http://www.spectrum.am/en/article/a-precarious-case-interaction-between-state-and-society-in-armenia/>

¹⁹According to the National Statistic Service of Armenia, the foreign trade turnover of Armenia in the January-December, 2015, decreased in comparison to the same period of 2014 from 20.6 percent (compared to an increase of 1 percent in 2014, and 5.6 percent in 2013). Available at: http://www.finport.am/full_news.php?id=23654&lang=2#sthash.dR8FZNpV.dpuf

-the Armenian-Turkish border is guarded by Armenian and Russian troops;

-in accord with the same Protocol, the geographic and strategic responsibility sphere of this base was enlarged. In particular, the new version of Article 3 of the Protocol states that, in addition to the function of defending the interests of the Russian Federation, the Russian armed forces will provide security to the Republic of Armenia across the entire perimeter of its borders, which includes also the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.²⁰

A demand was voiced, in the context of the Russian-Turkish confrontation in Moscow, to denunciate the Moscow (1921) Treaty on Friendship and Brotherhood between Bolshevik Russia and Kemalist Turkey. This Treaty was related directly to Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh.²¹ Turkey's Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoğlu responded with a statement on the eve of his visit in Baku: "Our position on the occupied lands of Azerbaijan, particularly Nagorno Karabakh, is clear and open. Turkey will support Azerbaijan by all means unless all Azerbaijani lands are liberated."²² He also stressed the necessity of strengthening the regional alliance of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.²³

Russia – Azerbaijan – Turkey

The developments in the Russia – Azerbaijan – Turkey triangle, in light of the crisis in the Russia-Turkey relationship, coerced Azerbaijan to make a choice. Its policy of balancing off the regional and world powers, and its unwillingness to join any political-military and economic alliance, are subjected to a powerful test as a result of the fact that Azerbaijan could implement relatively independent policies only under conditions of a) high global prices for energy sources and b) political and social stability in Turkey, which is the most important energy and transport hub for Azerbaijan.

²⁰*Deal Signed on Extending Russian Military Presence in Armenia*, Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty, August 20, 2010. Available at: http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Armenia_Sign_Extended_Defense_Pact_/2133043.html

²¹See: *The Moscow Treaty between Russia and Turkey on March 16, 1921*. Available at: http://hrono.ru/dokum/192_dok/19210316ru_tur.html

²²*Davutoğlu: Our position on Karabakh is clear and open*. December 3, 2015. Available at: <http://news.az/articles/karabakh/103245>

²³*Ceremonial visit Davutoglu, but with the political meaning*. December 4, 2015. Available at: <http://www.contact.az/docs/2015/Analytics/120400138867en.htm#VtV58s9f3IU>

In 2009, Azerbaijan was able to influence the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. It reminded Turkey that the Armenia –Turkey border was sealed because of developments in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. In November, 2015, Turkey needed Azerbaijan's support in its confrontation with Russia – and indeed it received strong support from the Azerbaijani public.²⁴ On the official level, President Ilham Aliyev offered a very cautious statement during his meeting with Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu: "Azerbaijan regrets, and is concerned about, the tension in relationships between Turkey and Russia."²⁵

For Azerbaijan to maintain friendly and advanced strategic relations with both parties to the conflict is critical for several reasons.²⁶ Most important is the fact that Russia is Azerbaijan's major supplier of modern offensive weapons. However, all of Azerbaijan's energy and transportation projects are linked to Turkey. Besides, in September, 2010, immediately after the signing of the Russian-Armenian Protocols on the Russian military base in Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan signed an Agreement on a Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support. This document pledges both Turkey and Azerbaijan

²⁴The web-portal *minval.az* conducted a poll on the Russian-Turkish confrontation. In response to the question – "The relations between Russia and Turkey are deteriorating. What side should Azerbaijan take?" – 70% voted in favor of Turkey (708 respondents), 10 % (106 people) voted for Russia, 18% (181 people) took a neutral position, and 2% (23 respondents) could not decide. The total number of voters was 1,018. See: *70% of respondents advise Baku to support Turkey in its conflict with Russia* (in Russian). November 26, 2015. Available at: <http://minval.az/news/123516394>; *To live amongst wolves, you should howl like a wolf*. December 02, 2015 (in Russian). The Caucasus Geopolitical Club. Available at: <http://kavkazgeoclub.ru/content/s-volkom-druzhit-po-volchi-vyt>

²⁵*Ilham Aliyev on Russia-Turkey military confrontation* (in Russian). November 27, 2015. Available at: <http://haqqin.az/news/57958>

²⁶According to the different sources, from one-and-half to two million Azerbaijanis live in Russia. According to the Centre for Economic and Social Development, Baku, remittances they send home annually is estimated to be roughly 3 billion USD. This is a significant sum for Azerbaijan's budget. Russia and Azerbaijan have common interests in the Caspian Sea, as well as in respect to the fight against Islamist fighters in the North Caucasus. However, if necessary, Russia can mobilize the national minorities in the north of Azerbaijan (in particular, the Lezgins and Avars) to provoke instability. In the meantime, Azerbaijan and Turkey, in addition to long-standing strong ethnic, cultural, and religious ties, have developed important political and military relations.

to support each other and to "use all possibilities" in the event of a military attack – or "aggression" – against either party.²⁷

Given this situation, Azerbaijan cannot make any geopolitical choices without exposing itself to serious danger.

Azerbaijan – Georgia – Turkey

Georgia also finds itself in a quite complicated situation. This is evident if several factors are acknowledged: a) this state's very cautious steps toward normalization of relationships with Russia have occurred against the background of Georgia's constant fear of provocations and destabilization by Russia; b) Georgia's desire, especially in light of deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, to move along a path toward Euro-integration; c) the significant linkage of Georgia's economy with the economies of Azerbaijan and Turkey; and d) Georgia's vulnerability to threats posed by Islamist militants who settle in and use its territory as a transit area.²⁸ Taking into account also the situation in Abkhazia,²⁹ it is obvious that Georgia will, on the one hand, continue to stay neutral in the Russian-Turkish confrontation and, on the other hand, develop in-depth regional cooperation. At this level it plays an extremely important geostrategic role as a transit state for Caspian energy sources to the West.

Georgia constitutes a minor interest for Russia, which fully controls Abkhazia and South Ossetia (and, indeed, can use them against Georgia at any moment) and possesses the capacity to place strong

²⁷ *Azerbaijan-Turkey Military Pact Signals Impatience with Minsk Talks – Analysts*, January 18, 2011. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62732>.

²⁸ Daniil Turovsky, *If there would be a hall to play rugby – there would be no need for Jihad* (in Russian). November 24, 2014. Available at: https://meduza.io/feature/2014/11/24/byl-by-zal-dlya-regbi-ne-nuzhen-by-l-dzhi-had?utm_source=email&utm_medium=vecherka&utm_campaign=2015-09-09
Marcin Mamon, *The Mujahedeen's Valley: A Remote Region of Georgia Loses its Children to ISIS*, July 09, 2015. Available at: <https://theintercept.com/2015/07/09/mujahedeensvalley/?comments=1>

²⁹ Turkey is Abkhazia's second most important trade partner (after Russia). However, under pressure from Russia Abkhazia was forced to introduce restrictive measures against Turkish companies. See in more detail: Vasili Rukhadze, *Defying Georgia, Turkey Gradually Cultivates its Influence in Separatist Abkhazia*. Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. 12, Issue 177, October 1, 2015. Available at: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44437&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=70461bd8f1f1e45f27e56b6cff0729#.VtK0Ds9f3IU. *Activity of Turkish companies to be restricted in Abkhazia*, December 30, 2015. Available at: <http://www.interpressnews.ge/en/politicss/74978-activity-of-turkish-companies-to-be-restricted-in-abkhazia.html?ar=A>

pressure on Armenia. Conversely, Georgia plays a crucial role for Turkey. For this reason it is important for Turkey (and Azerbaijan) not only to keep Georgia in a pro-Western posture, but also to engage it in the trilateral political-military alliance. For Georgia the establishment with Turkey and Azerbaijan of a partner relationship in the military sphere (especially against the background of intensified antagonism between Russia and Turkey) became a natural move: Turkey's membership in NATO and Georgia's aspirations for membership in this political-military alliance, as well as its economic dependence on Turkey and Azerbaijan, can only contribute to Georgia's palette of strategic choices.

The violation of the internationally recognized territorial integrity of Georgia and Azerbaijan, in the context of unresolved conflicts, has created a further link between these nations, as has Turkey's fear in regard to the activity of Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. Given this context, the Ministers of Defense of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia decided at their meeting on December, 2015, in Istanbul to sign – as soon as possible – a joint declaration on strengthening trilateral cooperation in the defense sphere.³⁰

Conclusion

A number of salient conclusions can be drawn from the above observations:

First, the complicated political-military situation that surrounds the South Caucasus states requires from each of them utmost caution in constructing relationships with Russia and Turkey.

Second, the existence of unresolved conflicts plays an enduring part. On the one hand, they restrict the flexibility of the ruling elites of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in respect to both internal and external political processes. On the other hand – and here above all the Nagorno Karabakh conflict captures our attention – it is impossible to rule out completely a specific danger: namely, that, given the intensity of Russian-Turkish antagonisms, either Russia or Turkey can be tempted to play this card. In this scenario, Armenia and Azerbaijan will be drawn into direct confrontation with each other over Nagorno Karabakh. Catastrophic consequences for the entire region will follow. Moreover, if Turkey unambiguously chooses to favor Azerbaijan, Russia cannot allow itself to take sides: full support of Armenia would

³⁰ *Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia military ties step up to a new level*. December 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.azernews.az/azerbaijan/90934.html>

mean a complete loss of Azerbaijan and, conversely, Russia's full support of Azerbaijan places its relations with Armenia at risk.

Third, against the backdrop of growing Russian-Turkish tensions and contradictions, both the strengthening of the Russian military base on Armenian territory and the intensification and deepening of Azerbaijani-Georgian-Turkish military cooperation are indications that the South Caucasus region is already involved in "containment" strategies so familiar to us from the Cold war period. The polarization throughout the region becomes even more evident when the membership of Armenia and Russia in CSTO³¹ and the membership of Turkey in NATO are acknowledged.

Fourth, Iran's active inclusion in economic processes in the South Caucasus region will intensify, in parallel, both Russian-Azerbaijani-Iranian ties and Russian-Armenian-Iranian ties. These developments will further complicate Turkish-Iranian relations.

Fifth, all three South Caucasus states are experiencing serious economic crises, ones that contain a high potential to call forth widespread social and political transformations capable of endangering the fragile – although to different degrees – political stability in each state.

Sixth, in opposition to these very tense background developments in the South Caucasus and beyond, it remains extremely important to discover mechanisms that will preserve and strengthen existing contacts between representatives of the civil societies of the South Caucasus states, Russia, and Turkey. Strong efforts should be made to restrict any militaristic rhetoric at both the governmental and social levels, and to prevent the creation of enemy images in these societies.

Seventh, given the current geopolitical and geostrategic situation in the South Caucasus and beyond, it remains premature to discuss regional cooperation projects that include participation by all three regional states. However, the fight against any expansion of Islamist activity in the Big Caucasus must remain a common goal. It could probably become a platform for cooperation at the regional level.

Eighth, in light of the present confrontational relationship between Russia and Turkey, it can be expected that the Armenian-Turkey relationship will stagnate, cooperation between Armenia and

³¹In case of a resumption of full-scale military actions in the area of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Armenia, as a member of CSTO, should not expect support from other members of this organization. The significant roles are played by bilateral Russian-Armenian treaties and agreements.

Georgia will remain at a low level, and cooperation between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia will intensify. That Russia possesses several leverage mechanisms to control political and economic processes in each regional state should be acknowledged. Most probably, it will increase pressure on all three states with the aim of either compelling their cooperation with Russia, or, at a minimum, of constraining Turkey's advance in the region. In this process, Armenia and Iran will play significant roles in Russia's policy.