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Thinking about the Caucasus as a Land Bridge between Turkey and Russia

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Turks and Russians have never had such amicable contacts, never intermingled and cooperated so closely. The historical reconciliation process between Turkey and Russia should generate the same degree of enthusiasm as did the French – German reconciliation process. The main actors of the advanced many-faceted partnership promoted by the Russian and Turkish governments are indeed civilians, namely businessmen and tourists. The increasing interdependence and interactions are rapidly eliminating many of the remaining traces of enmity. The recent announcement that both countries can agree on a visa free regime by spring 2010 is very good news.

Since the disappearance of the Turkish-Soviet border, Turkey and Russia have opted for a direct linkage across Black Sea starting with the energy field. The construction of the Blue Stream-one the major energy projects of the 90's-connecting Russia to Turkey beneath the Black Sea has been however a missed opportunity for the Caucasus. A gas pipeline running through the Caucasus between Russia and Turkey was very seriously considered. The option of a Caucasian route was ruled out in light of the political instability of the region. Politically, the easiest option has been to opt for the technically and financially most challenging option which would have avoided unreliable intermediaries. The region might have looked completely different, had Russia and Turkey be connected by transcaucasus gas pipeline.

Prime Minister Erdoan depicted, during his visit to Moscow on 12-13 January, the Turkish-Russian energy cooperation as exemplary. The deals reached during Prime Minister Putin's visit to Ankara in August 2009 raised the Turkish-Russian energy cooperation to a strategic level. Turkey allowed Russia's Gazprom to use its sector of the Black Sea for the South Stream pipeline to pump Russian and Central Asian gas to Europe bypassing Ukraine. And Russia agreed to join a consortium to build the Samsun-Ceyhan oil pipeline from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean supporting Turkey's drive to become a regional hub for gas and oil transits. The commercial aspects and timetable of the Samsun-Ceyhan, South Stream as well as issues related to the extension Blue Stream gas pipeline for possible shipments via Turkey to Cyprus and Israel were further developed during Prime Minister Erdoan's last visit to Moscow.

Efforts underway aimed at strengthening transportation across the Black Sea between the two countries. Turkey and Russia are planning to build a logistics center in Krasnodar, located 1,500 kilometers south of Moscow and is close to the Black Sea ports of Novorossiysk, Temruk, Taman, Kavkaz, Gelendzhik and Tuapse. Turkey, which seeks to export to Russia and other countries in the Black Sea and Caucasus region more efficiently, began feasibility studies in 2008. The center is expected to be a key base reaching all countries around the Black Sea in addition to Russia. Some 98% of cargo from Russia to Turkey is carried to Black Sea ports via railways. The plans call for the establishment of a non-stop ferry service between the ports of Kavkaz and Samsun, that will carry railcars across the sea from Russia

to Turkey with carriages being shipped to Samsun before continuing by rail to the Mediterranean port of Mersin.

Russia and Turkey are being linked across the Black Sea, whereas the Caucasus has become a barrier between them. The situation arisen from the conflicts of the South Caucasus is indeed less than optimal from Turkish and Russian perspectives. The communications links through the Caucasus are severed. A major part of the infrastructure connecting the Caucasus to Eastern Anatolia and Turkish Black Sea region - valuable legacy from the Russian empire - is not operational. Kars lost its traditional function of the key to Transcaucasus. Sochi cannot be the Russia's Southern gate and access to Vladikavkaz is dependent on the Upper Lars crossing at Kazbegi.

The Black Sea-Caucasus region had historically suffered from being a grey area of confrontation in the managed rivalry between Turkey and Russia. The current Turkish-Russian rapprochement should affect positively the region: is there a possibility to transfer the model of economic bilateral cooperation between Russia and Turkey that verges on interdependence to the shared neighborhood, the Caucasus?

Turkish-Russian relations have been steadily developing throughout the 90's while, on a parallel track, Moscow and Ankara have been extremely cautious to prevent a spill over of a tension emanating from the Caucasus to the whole bilateral relations.

Although neither Turkey nor Russia have any vital interest in South Caucasus, they are not given the option to forget about the region. Turkey and Russia have the uppermost stake in the stability of the South Caucasus. Ensuring the sustainable stability of the Caucasus region is the only relevant strategic concern for these two neighboring states. This objective is being progressively recognized as a key issue in Turkish-Russian bilateral relations. The Action Plan for Cooperation in Eurasia signed on 16 November 2001 by the foreign ministers of Russia and Turkey, Igor Ivanov and Ismail Cem, in New York during the UN General Assembly, created new room for cooperation. In the post 9/11 context, both countries expressed thereby their determination to carry their relations to a level of enhanced constructive partnership, extending to Eurasia and being based on "the shared belief that dialogue and cooperation in Eurasia will positively contribute to bring about peaceful, just and lasting political solutions to disputes in the region." In accordance to the Eurasia Action Plan, a Russian – Turkish High-Level Joint Working Group (HLJWG) and a Caucasus Task Force were established, bringing together high level officials from the Russian and Turkish ministries of foreign affairs.

The cost of the return of the war to South Caucasus in August 2008 has been very high for the entire region. The initiative for a "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" (CSCP) was made public on 13 August 2008 by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Moscow. Announced by Turkey in a context of increasing polarization and harsh rhetoric, the CSCP maintained the channels of communication and dialogue open with Russia and has been a good tactical move to overcome tensions

between Georgia and Russia. Furthermore, it helped Turkey to develop at least at the discourse level a pro-active policy in the Caucasus. Despite the fact that Russia dislikes encroachments into its spheres of influence, it recognised the commonality of interests with Turkey and welcomed the initiative by adopting a pragmatic approach and accepting political dynamism on behalf of Turkey in the Caucasus. The Caucasus Platform initiative has brought about a new development: for the first time, good Turkish – Russian understanding was being openly used to resolve problems in the common geographic neighborhood. Contrary to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) that has always avoided such issues, it was stated that the CSCP will be orientated toward problem solving.

The CSCP revealed a Turkish-Russian shared desire to change the regional context characterized by the state of neither peace nor war. The explicit linkage between regional stability and conflict resolution came as an innovation. The Caucasus Platform aims at developing a functional method of finding solutions to the problems within the region and is based on the acknowledgement that tensions stem from a profound lack of confidence among states of the region. Furthermore it is a step forward in developing a sense of regional accountability and ownership from insiders. Russia has the potential to become a more active peacebroker between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Turkey can contribute more actively to the settlement of the conflict between Georgians and Abkhazians.

The new momentum in the process of the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations has been a major source of legitimacy for the CSCP, which 1,5 year after its announcement has still not been precisely formulated. At this stage, the interruption of the Turkish-Armenian bilateral relations will dissipate the international attention focused on the region and decrease the chances to reach in a foreseeable future an agreement on the conflict over Karabakh. Russia expressed openly his support for the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations. The opening of the Turkish-Armenian border, the last closed one of Europe, will bring new opportunities for Turkish and Russian business sectors active on the Armenian side of the border in infrastructure projects.

Prime Minister Vladimer Putin stated during his talks with Prime Minister Erdogan in Moscow that ‘the sooner the two countries ratify the protocols, the better for the region it will be’ and that ‘Russia, like no other country, is interested in normalization of relations in the region among all the countries, our neighbours’.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is one of the underlying root causes of insecurity in the region. The term of “frozen conflict”. The term has been depicted as misleading and potentially dangerous: actually the dispute is in a state of constant dynamic change. With roughly 60,000 Armenian and Azerbaijani troops separated by a 175-km self-regulating ceasefire line (Line of Contact), the situation is inherently unstable. For the time being, the Line of Contact is occasionally monitored by a very small team of five OSCE observers, which means that the sides will always have the possibility to blame each other for any serious violation of the 1994 ceasefire agreement.

There is a pressing need to try to change the status quo in a predictable and controllable manner. It seems there is a possibility that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev hosts Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan at a trilateral meeting in Moscow in late January. A joint declaration of the sides full consent over the updated version of the Madrid Principles is expected.

The resumption of the flight connection between Moscow and Tbilisi and the announcement of the reopening in March of the Verkhny Lars crossing between Russia and Georgia have been welcomed by Turkey. Turkey can play a major role in overcoming the isolation of Abkhazia and help to open up North-South transit routes between Turkey and Russia.

There is a pressing need to transfer the unique economic cooperation between Russia and Turkey – a cooperation that verges on interdependence - to South Caucasus. Foreign investments are still being often associated with ownership, control and territorial gain. There is a need to promote pragmatically-oriented approaches based on self-interest and business initiatives, and to stress the importance of competition, rather than confrontation and domination. In this regard, Turkey and Russia can set the example. The two traditional foes found a political common ground. Economics and private sector actors have been the driving force in this rapprochement.

The Caucasus has the potential to become a land bridge between Turkey and Russia. Being perceived as a buffer zone has proved very harmful. Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan can be at the heart of an economically attractive region enlarged to South Russia (Rostov and Krasnodar territories) and to Eastern Turkey (Eastern Anatolia and Eastern Black Sea regions).