TURKEY IN THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA: THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

Evgenia GABER

Post-Graduate Student,
Department of International Relations,
I. Mechnikov Odessa State University
(Odessa, Ukraine)

Introduction

The geopolitical vacuum the Soviet Union left behind in Eurasia was filled with a new regional system brimming with new opportunities and even more regional and global threats.

On the one hand, the Soviet Union's disappearance from the world map and Moscow's obvious inability to replace it as the main political factor in the region gave Turkey a unique opportunity to move into the driving seat in the region. Moreover, Ankara could exploit the close cultural, ethnic, and linguistic ties going back to the past it shared with the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

However, on the other hand, disintegration of the common state created new dividing lines in the region best described as a mêlée of nationalities and religions; this fanned old contradictions and generated conditions for new ethnic, religious, and territorial conflicts.

This means that the three newly independent Caucasian states not only formed a buffer zone between Turkey and Russia, its old rival, but also developed into another seat of instability on its northeastern borders. Apprehensive of the unrestricted spread of radical Islam which, supported by Iran and extremist movements, could fill the post-Soviet power vacuum, Ankara and the Western capitals offered the new Caucasian and Central Asian states a Turkic model of development: a secular state in a predominantly Muslim country and market economy.

In these conditions, Turkey had to urgently find a new and efficient policy to capitalize on the absence or, at least, the weakness of the extra-regional actors in the Caucasus and Central Asia and to prevent further disintegration and possible armed conflicts in these highly inflammable regions.

This was not Turkey's only concern. A key strategic partner of the United States and NATO

in Central Asia and the Caucasus during the Cold War era, now, with no Soviet Union in sight, it could lose its exclusive status since the North Atlantic Alliance was looking for a new idea of its place and role in the world. In the new context, Turkey, likewise, needed a weighty argument in its dialog with the EU and the United States. To remain an indispensable partner of the West as an intermediary between the Soviet successor-states in the region and the Euro-Atlantic institutions, Ankara needed close ties with the newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Geographical and Geopolitical Specifics of the Caucasus and Central Asia

Over the last twenty years, Turkey has been operating on identical ideological arguments and pursuing similar strategic tasks in both regions, even though the Turkic factor is much weaker in the Caucasus with its non-Muslim and non-Turkic states. On the other hand, it would be wrong to reduce the Caucasian region to the three South Caucasian states (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). Indeed, there is the Northern Caucasus which, although part of the Russian Federation, has preserved its fairly close historical and cultural ties with Turkey.

Its ethnic and linguistic ties with Azerbaijan are even closer; they are underpinned by economic arguments, which are especially weighty in the energy sphere.

The shared interests and long (114 km) stretch of common border between Turkey and Georgia[1] suggest joint large-scale transportation and energy projects. Military cooperation, which Eduard Shevardnadze described as strategic partnership in 1999, remains an important component of the two countries' bilateral relations, which however is curbed by the country's desire to avoid an open confrontation with Russia.[2]

Despite Ankara's efforts to normalize relations with Erevan, the two countries have not yet restored diplomatic contacts mainly because of the indefinite status of Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey's refusal to recognize the events of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire as genocide of the Armenians.

This means that Turkey's regional policy is extremely complicated and limited by certain negative factors.

Historical Specifics of Turkey's Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 1990s

At different times Turkey has concentrated on different aspects of its Central Asian and Caucasian strategies, the scope of which depended on specific aims, resources (*internal capabilities*), the

[1] The 10 km of common border between Turkey and Azerbaijan is found only in the enclave of Nakhchivan.

[2] See: S. Jones, "Turkish Strategic Interests in the Transcaucasus," in: *Crossroads and Conflict: Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, London, 2000, p. 58.

geopolitical context, and the position of the great powers (*external constraints*). At all times, however, Turkey has relied on economic and cultural influence to pursue its foreign policy aims.

Early in the 1990s, the country tried hard, but never formulated this as its goal, to spread its influence to countries where relations with Turkey shared common roots. This meant that Ankara was moving away from its previous policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of the neighboring Turkic and Muslim nations, which guaranteed non-interference of other states in the developments in various ethnic and religious groups in Turkey (the Kurds in particular). This was an important post-Cold War foreign policy U-turn. Turgut Özal, president of Turkey between November 1989 and April 1993, dreamed of a new Turkish sphere of influence stretching from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China.[3] At different stages, Turkish presidents used different levers of political influence.

National-ethnic and religious affinity. Turkey was one of the first to recognize the independence of the formerly Soviet Caucasian and Central Asian republics and opened its embassies in at least some of them with the obvious intention to assume the role of an intermediary between these countries and the rest of the world. In fact, it elbowed Moscow aside in this respect.

For centuries, the wars between the Russian and Ottoman empires for the territories and spheres of influence in Eurasia, the military and ideological confrontation between the U.S.S.R. and the NATO member state, and the struggle between Russia and Turkey for the status of regional leader remained the key geopolitical factors in the region. For the first time in Turkey's long history, the death of the Soviet Union destroyed the common land border with Russia, thus decreasing the risk of a direct clash. The new status quo is best guaranteed by the continued independence, stability, and territorial integrity of the Soviet successor-states. Since the very beginning of the post-Soviet era, the Turks have been guided by the following principles:

(1) Unconditional *recognition* and *unlimited support* of the sovereignty of the three Caucasian republics; encouragement of the development of state institutions; restoration of their economic prosperity; and contribution to their domestic stability and independent (of Moscow in particular) foreign policies.

(2) *Strengthening of the national unity and territorial integrity* of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia; this was vitally important for Turkey, the home of numerous national and ethnic groups living in compact enclaves along Turkey's state borders.[4]

In addition to wishing to pose as a good neighbor and a reliable partner of the newly independent republics, Turkey was also intent on pursuing its own interests: on the one hand, a radical shift in the balance of power might bring external actors into the region and fan their rivalry. On the other, seats of instability or social conflicts on its borders might challenge its own security: any of them could start a domino effect spreading social tension far and wide.

Early in the 1990s, Ankara expected that if the newly independent Caucasian and Central Asian states could be empowered enough to resist external interference and political pressure from stronger regional or global actors, they would seek a much closer union with Turkey as a strategic partner within the new security system. This would be a logical choice because of their historical and cultural affinity and close economic ties.

This was when the ideas of *pan-Turkism* became very popular; they manifested themselves in different forms ranging from radical calls to set up a Great Turan state in the territories of the Turkic republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus to much more moderate plans of a Turkic Commonwealth

[3] See: Z. Baran, "Turkey and the Caucasus," in: *Turkish Foreign Policy in Post Cold War Era*, Boca Raton, 2004, p. 269.

[4] See: M. Aydin, "Turkey's Caucasus Policies," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No. 23, 2010, p. 178.

of Nations or an Association of Independent Turkic States led by Turkey (in which the members would preserve their sovereignty).

The idea of a common state for all Turkic peoples never went beyond the rhetoric of marginal politicians (Arparslan Türkeş being one of them) and was never realized at the official level. By that time it had become abundantly clear that Turkey needed a special regional status to become a desired partner of the local states at the bilateral level.

The Turkic summits (convened in the first half of the 1990s by presidents Özal and Demirel) can be described as the most prominent practical manifestation of pan-Turkism. The latter used to say that Turkey and the Turkish republics "share the same blood, religion and language."[5]

The second Turkic summit revealed that the independent states (which had barely disentangled themselves from Moscow's grip) were in no hurry to join a political structure of any kind that might demand part of their sovereignty, even if transferred to a friendly country. Instead of recalling their Turkic roots and pondering on Turkic unity, Azerbaijan and the Turkic Central Asian republics preferred to develop their national identities to confirm the legitimacy of their statuses as Soviet successor-states.

The other Caucasian states did not have much to do with the idea of pan-Turkism: their attitude toward it was limited to the Turkic minorities or to the territories with predominantly Muslim populations (Abkhazia and Ajaria, as well as the North Caucasian republics).

In fact, it was only on rare occasions that Ankara referred to religious affinity, first, because this would have contradicted the principle of laicism (the Turkic state's secular nature) formulated by Kemal Atatürk and, second, would have narrowed down the circle of potential partners to the Muslim communities. This would have left the Christian countries (Georgia and Armenia) out of the picture.

Moreover, open manifestations of pan-Turkism and/or pan-Islamism could have complicated Ankara's relations with Moscow, which was sensitive to the attempts of any other country to invade its traditional zones of influence. This explains why the most "sensitive" spheres of religion and culture were entrusted to non-governmental actors (all sorts of societies, charities, etc.), while Ankara concentrated, at the official level, on economic, diplomatic, and cultural cooperation with the newly independent states.

Cultural and educational expansion. The new political situation that took shape in the early 1990s in Europe played into Turkey's hands. For some strange reason, the newly independent republics, which appeared in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, shared their past and cultural heritage with Turkey.

In the late 20th century, this factor was of immense importance; Foreign Minister of Turkey Ismail Cem did not beat about the bush: we emphasized and relied on our common history and parallel cultural descriptions in all spheres of our foreign policy.[6]

While the political and economic activity in the region was geared at Turkey's close cooperation with the governments and business structures of the newly independent states, its efforts in the cultural sphere were directed toward establishing a common cultural expanse and friendly or even fraternal relations with the societies and citizens of these countries.

It turned out, however, that a common cultural expanse required more time than expected and much more ingenuity. The state found it hard to control the multitude of non-governmental actors that zealously promoted and disseminated Turkic culture.

---

[5] H. Hale, "Turkey and Regional Politics after the Cold War: Central Asia and the Middle East," in: *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774-2000,* London, 2000, p. 224.

[6] See: I. Cem, *Turkey in the 21st Century. Speeches and Texts Presented in International Fora (1995-2000),* Mersin, 2001, p. 26.

Turkish educational initiatives in the region were developing along two different, synchronous, and independent trends.

At the official level, educational policy was moderate and demonstratively secular, while private individuals of Turkish origin and Turkish organizations were obviously trying to restore Islam to its original place in the educational systems of the newly independent states. The Turkish authorities, therefore, found it much harder to pursue a consistent educational policy: every time the international community expressed its concerns, the Turkish authorities had to point to the unofficial nature of objectionable educational activities.

The Ministry of Education limited its educational efforts to summer schools and student exchange programs (implemented for students of Turkish on a permanent basis since the mid-1990s by TIKA, a government structure); in 1996, it helped Azerbaijan to shift from the Cyrillic (which had been used for several decades) to the Latin script.

The ministry opened secular schools which taught English and Turkish; they were outnumbered by far by private educational establishments set up on the money of Turkish religious societies and funds. The educational sphere became Islamized to a great extent.

Between 1991 and 1999, followers of Fethullah Gülen, a widely known preacher and founder of one of the educational networks which spread far and wide and operated at different levels of accreditation,[7] opened 73 schools, mainly in Azerbaijan, as well as in the Northern Caucasus and Tatarstan. The other CIS countries with Muslim populations (Central Asia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova) acquired their share of similar educational establishments.

On 11 January, 1990, the first group of Turkish *Islamist missionaries* visited Tbilisi and travelled to Ajaria where they organized "friendly talks" with the local people. In May 1990, another group of 37 arrived loaded with piles of textbooks, fiction, and audio and video training and educational materials. The missionaries visited Batumi, Tbilisi, Kazan, and Baku.

Gradually, the missionary activities of the Gülen religious community spread far and wide from the Caucasus to the Russian regions with Turkic and/or Muslim populations (the Northern Caucasus, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, etc.); unofficial Fethullahci[8] centers were opened in Kazan and Ufa. According to Russian researchers, in 2003 alone, over 20 Turkish lyceums were opened in Russia (10 of them in Tatarstan, 4 in Bashkortostan, 3 in Daghestan, and 1 in Chuvashia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Tuva, Yakutia, and Khakassia each). The curriculum, which neglected world history and the history of Russia, concentrated on the history of the Ottoman Empire, its role in international relations, and its close ties with the region's countries.[9] Many of the subjects taught at these schools went beyond the limits of the school curricula to inculcate pro-Turkic and pro-Islamic sentiments in the rising generation.

These schools operated on the money of private firms or public organizations headed by members of the Gülen group. Late in the 1990s, it controlled 88 funds, 20 societies, 128 private schools,

[7] There is no agreement over the figure of Fethullah Gülen inside Turkey and beyond it; he was persecuted by the secular military regime; detained for clandestine religious activities; and accused of the intention to change the constitutional order of the Turkic Republic and liquidate its secular regime. He was also accused of setting up an educational network outside Turkey to educate and train loyal elite to rely on if and when Turkey was transformed into an Islamic state. He is fairly popular in the West, especially in the United States where he lived in 2000 in self-imposed exile to avoid arrest on the accusation of being involved in a planned coup in Turkey. Two former CIA officers and former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Morton Abramowitz supported him at the court hearing on granting him a residence permit in the United States. Some Turkish experts think that Washington would like to see Gülen's moderate Islamic movement developing into a "third force" in Turkey and a "powerful political movement" in the region. The secular elite of Turkey is firmly convinced, albeit without reliable evidence, that the United States and the CIA in particular support Gülen and his movement.

[8] The term applied to all Gülen followers.

[9] See: N. Kireev, "Metamorfozy politicheskogo islama," *Azia i Afrika segodnia,* No. 6, 2003, p. 22.

218 firms with different forms of ownership, 129 training courses, several boarding schools, 17 publications (some of them in English), and two radio stations. The *Zaman* newspaper with a circulation of 250 thousand in Turkey appeared in many large cities of the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. One of the popular TV channels which belonged to the Samanyolu (the Milky Way) TV group frequently broadcasted Gülen's addresses and sermons. The state TV and radio corporation TRT was limited to a single satellite TV channel Avrasya (Eurasia); it broadcasted in Turkish, which narrowed down its audience to those who knew the language. Even when the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party came to power, Ankara did not change its policy: very much as before, it did not openly support Gülen's "missionary" activities. On the other hand, in the 1990s-2000s, the persistent and active efforts of his followers in the Caucasus and Central Asia considerably strengthened Turkish influence in these regions.

The vague border between the official cultural and educational initiatives and those of the non-governmental actors and Ankara's "non-interference" or "friendly neutrality" in relation to the charity/religious funds stirred up suspicions and discontent in the newly independent countries which zealously protected and fortified their recent sovereignty. This fairly aggressive cultural expansion (Turkish schools, broadcasts of Turkish media in the regions, etc.) fanned tension in bilateral relations instead of strengthening ties, as expected, with the culturally and mentally close peoples of the Caucasus. After realizing the pernicious effects of its methods and the mounting resistance of the neighboring capitals, Ankara started looking for alternative routes to gaining a stronger position in the regions.

Economic influence. Under President Özal (1989-1993), the market economy developed at a fast pace; the country switched from its dependence on import to a predominantly export-oriented economy. This made the post-Soviet expanse a logical and priority field of private and state investments, business contacts, trade, and other forms of economic expansion.

At first, Turkish products were hardly competitive in Europe, but their quality, vastly superior to that of locally produced goods, gained them access to the Caucasian and Central Asian markets. After several years, the volume of trade turnover between Turkey and Azerbaijan increased almost 8-fold; Turkey pushed Russia into second place in Georgia.

At that time, Ankara was pursuing an active and consistent economic policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia: every year it increased the volumes of its investments; assumed financial obligations within long-term projects; realized programs of state aid and, in general, sought a prominent place in both regions. During the early period of independence, over 1,170 Turkish delegations visited the Caucasian countries[10]; President Özal and Prime Minister Demirel personally initiated several multisided economic projects with involved medium and big businesses from all the countries.

Turkey's foreign economic activities were based on close cooperation between the public and private sectors. During the official visits, the country's leaders were almost invariably accompanied by Turkish businessmen (mainly members of chambers of industry and commerce and owners of large construction, textile, and food companies) who looked for partners in the corresponding economic sectors of the neighboring states. In 1992, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) was created "to [provide] development assistance primarily to … countries that border on Turkey, as well as [improve] cooperation" and control the money allocated for these purposes.

In June 1992, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) was set up on Turkey's initiative to invigorate economic, trade and, to a lesser extent, political relations in the Black Sea basin. This structure deserves attention at least for the fact that it remains the only international

[10] See: M. Aydin, "Between Euphoria and Realpolitik: Turkish Policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus," in: *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st century: A Changing Role in World Politics,* Burlington, 2003, p. 142.

regional structure that brought together the three South Caucasian states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia). Many of its ambitious plans have been realized even though the majority of initiatives remained on paper. This is primarily true of the most ambitious of the projects: an integrated transportation system along the Black Sea coast.

On the whole, Turkey was pursuing a fairly successful *state economic policy* in the region, although the results proved much more modest than was expected. Its policy was too active; it was seeking leadership and ignored the available resources, which left much to be desired and invited sharp criticism inside and outside the country. Opponents complained that the state extended financial assistance to foreign countries at the expense of the domestic economy; this put a strain on resources, increased the budget deficit, and fanned inflation. After five years of pursuing its new foreign policy course, Ankara had to retreat: it admitted that it could not honor its financial obligations to the Caucasian countries.

While in 1994 Turkey extended $300,407 and $783,317 in the form of state aid to Georgia and Azerbaijan, respectively, in 1997, these countries received $87,494 and $243,948 from Ankara.[11] The opposition criticized the government's ineffective economic policy, while most of Turkey's regional partners were left bitterly disappointed and dissatisfied.

In *the private sector*, cooperation between Turkish businessmen and the "fraternal peoples" of the Caucasus remained fairly dynamic for a long time. It should be said that "Turkey overplayed its hand and upset the newly independent republics by acting too much like a big brother in the region," to borrow an apt formula from Turkish Academic Z. Baran.[12] Turkish businessmen who had slighted local entrepreneurs, wanted profits here and now no matter what, and failed to fulfill their obligations, created a persistent negative image of Turkish business, which remained alive for many years.

Close ties between certain groups of Turkish businessmen and Islam caused concerns in neighboring countries. In the 1990s, the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MÜSIAD) was set up in Istanbul as an opponent to the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TÜSIAD) set up in 1971. While the latter is described as a respected structure that represents the interests of big business and is oriented toward liberal economies of the Western type, the former can be described as its alternative set up by well-fortified Islamic business.[13]

By the late 1990s, these factors cost the Turkish capital its privileged position and domination on the Caucasian and Central Asian markets; Turkish businesses had to compete with Russian, Western, and Iranian businesses. It should be said, however, that its share in these markets remains fairly large.

Neo-Ottomanism or Pragmatism? Turkey Returns to the Caucasus

It is commonly believed that the Strategic Depth Doctrine formulated by Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2001[14] opened a new era in his country's regional policy and predetermined its foreign policy course for the next decade.

[11] See: Ibid., pp. 141-142.

[12] See: Z. Baran, op. cit., p. 271.

[13] See: I. Ulchenko, "MÜSIAD i TÜSIAD. 'Musulmanskiy' i 'svetsky' varianty razvitiia ekonomiki strany: chya vozmet?" *Azia i Afrika segodnia,* No. 9, 2003, p. 50.

[14] See: A. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Turkiye'nin Uluslararasi Konumu* (32. baski), Istanbul, 2009 (1st ed.—2001).

As a "central country with multiple regional identities" (A. Davutoğlu), Turkey is in a much better position to spread its "soft power" to its neighbors (based on cultural and religious affinity, common historical roots, and economic interdependence).

Turkey's military might and its security concerns were responsible for its image as a source of hard power. In recent years, however, Turkish foreign policy has been radically revised, while the national security concept came to include not only the military, but also economic, energy, social, and other dimensions. The new course is described as "de-securitization,"[15] "economization of foreign policy," and "the rise of a trading state."[16]

Turkey's *cultural and economic expanse has spread far beyond its political borders*; this allows Ankara to develop relations at the intergovernmental level and to encourage personal contacts and social ties between "kindred" societies, thus spreading its influence to vast territories.

The "central country" conception and "new activism" based on it stirred up a lot of talk about the "Ottoman heritage" which Ankara tapped in the hope of restoring its geopolitical influence in the vast territories stretching from the Balkans to the Caucasus and from North Africa to the Middle East. Accused of *neo-Ottomanism* from all sides, Ankara seized every opportunity to point out that peace and stability in the regions where it plays a constructive role remain its sole objective. The country's leaders repeatedly criticized the newly coined term.[17]

It must be admitted that the term neo-Ottomanism hardly fits Turkey's regional policy: it is highly pragmatic rather than hegemonic. Despite its Islamic roots, which explain why the Justice and Development Party re-oriented the country's foreign policy, it is still geared at economic interests and geopolitical considerations.[18] Today, the summits of Turkic-speaking countries are less concerned with pan-Turkism and an Islamic Great Turan confederation as with tilling the soil for trade contracts and energy projects.[19]

At all times, Turkey has been guided by economic *pragmatism* as a foreign policy principle (frequently camouflaged as an ideology); this was true of Central Asia and the Caucasus and was openly admitted in the 2000s.

According to a widely shared conviction and contrary to expectations, the Justice and Development Party (in power since 2002) pursues a highly pragmatic foreign policy. Indeed, in the context of the long and far from ambiguous political carrier of Recep Erdoğan, the party leader and current prime minister, many expected the moderate Islamists to promote the "Muslim" foreign policy vector to the detriment of all other traditional biases. However, Turkey's relations with Russia (one of its largest trade partners and a strong regional power which had already restored a large share of its potential) and the United States (the invariable strategic partner and military-political ally) went on very much as before.

Diversification of the sources and suppliers of energy was the central task; Turkey wanted to decrease its dependence on Russia, so far the main source of imported natural gas. The fact that the Caucasus was developing into the potentially largest fuel producer and the much higher domestic demand for natural gas fed Ankara's regional ambitions.[20]

---

[15] See: U. Sinan, "A Place in the Sun or Fifteen Minutes of Fame? Understanding Turkey's New Foreign Policy," available at [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/turkey_new_foreign_policy.pdf].

[16] See: K. Kirisci, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 40, 2009, pp. 29-57.

[17] See: A. Davutoğlu, "I Am Not a Neo-Ottoman," *Today's Zaman*, 25 November, 2009; I. Kalin, "A Neo-Ottomanism," *The Majalla*, available at [http://www.majalla.com/en/interview/article11115.ece]. Ibrahim Kalin, Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister of Turkey.

[18] See: S. Larabbee, "Turkey's New Geopolitics," *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 2010, p. 160; Z. Onis, "The New Wave of Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey," *DIIS Report*, 2009, p. 10.

[19] See: "Budet sozdan Vysshiy sovet strategicheskogo sotrudnichestva Azerbaidzhana i Turtsii," 15 September, 2010, available at [http://ru.trend.az/regions/met/turkey/1751009.html].

[20] See: I. Temel, "Turkey: A New Actor in the Field of Energy Politics," *Perceptions*, March-May 1996, p. 58.

Political and strategic considerations played an important role in Turkey's energy policy: seen from Ankara, gas and oil production in the Caspian looked like a trump card to be used in its rivalry with Russia and Iran over political and economic domination in the Caucasus. Indeed, as the central part of the East-West corridor Turkey stood a much better chance of increasing its strategic weight with the European Union and the United States.

To achieve this, Turkey sought close political and diplomatic ties with the fuel-rich Caspian coastal states, Azerbaijan in particular. It was actively involved in drafting oil and gas pipelines to bring energy resources from the Caspian via Azerbaijan and Georgia to its own territory and further on to Western Europe.

In 2006, the commissioned Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (BTC) brought Turkey closer to its cherished dream of becoming an "energy hub" through which oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caucasus would reach the European Union. The project, which connected Azerbaijan with the Western markets, was of immense importance in the context of the East-West energy corridor.

Without going into details regarding the functioning and planned oil and gas pipelines, the general trend of Turkey's initiatives can easily be traced: an integrated energy system for the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia in which it will play the central role and without which none of the projects can be realized. In short, Ankara is pursuing the status of a regional pivotal actor.

Turkey has come very close to its cherished dream: the BTC, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, and Blue Stream gas pipelines are already in operation (since 2005 Turkey has been officially cooperating with Russia within the Blue Stream project). Today, the project to connect Kazakhstan and the BTC is being developed; Turkey will receive more Russian gas along the Blue Stream-2 pipeline and will probably serve as a transit country for Turkmen, Iranian, and Iraqi gas.

The frantic efforts to develop energy transportation networks are fraught with negative consequences: any attempt to tip the balance of power will cause discontent among the other actors and increase regional tension.

"At the same time, however, 'the belief that whoever secures the major share of oil pipeline transit will gain enhanced influence not only throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia but also on a global political scale,' highlights the concerns about the future stability of the region. In terms of regional geopolitics, the competition for influence among the regional states, with its ideological, religious and political dimensions, lowers the threshold for possible armed conflicts erupting in the region."[21]

Conclusion

Turkey has considerably broadened its presence in Azerbaijan and the post-Soviet Turkic Central Asian republics, particularly in the economic and cultural spheres; it has failed, however, to realize its cherished dream of political domination due to opposition from the other regional states and the foreign policy blunders of the Turkish political establishment.

The euphoria of the early post-Soviet years when everything looked possible and within reach has evaporated to give way to more realistic assessments of the geopolitical complexities in the Caucasus and Turkey's limitations. Today, the early pan-Turkic rhetoric has been replaced with economic considerations and the intention to broaden the markets for Turkish goods and services.

[21] "New Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Cases of Instability and Predicament by Dr. Mustafa Aydin," available at [http://www.sam.gov.tr/perceptions/sampapers/NewGeopoliticsofCentralAsiaandtheCaucasus.pdf].

So far, energy supplies for domestic needs and new transportation routes of Caspian hydrocarbons to Europe via Turkey remain on the agenda.

Turkey has realized its ambitions in trade and economic cooperation; its involvement in alternative energy projects looks very promising for the future of regional cooperation.

The "active diplomacy" of the Justice and Development Party and its "no problems with neighbors" foreign policy hold vast potential.

Turkey can use its unique geographic location and its historical and cultural ties with the Caucasian peoples to improve the general climate in the region. It is advisable to start new educational and cultural programs (student exchanges in particular) to launch a public dialog among ethnic groups to achieve better mutual understanding.

To pay off, these measures should breed confidence rather than the fear of Turkey's informal influence in the Caucasus. Pan-Turkism proved to be ineffective and ill-suited to the demands of the time: its arguments look misplaced in the country's current foreign policy rhetoric.

Sooner or later Ankara will be forced to make a strategic choice; it seems that cooperation with the trans-Atlantic institutions and continued military-political cooperation with the United States should be prescribed. In fact, without American support Turkey stands little chance of becoming a regional leader. Left alone to face Russia, its eternal rival, Turkey will find it hard to oppose it and its growing power and political impact. While developing partner relations with Moscow in the economic sphere, trade, and tourism, Turkey should not reject a long-term strategic alliance with Washington.