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WHAT REMAINS FROM TURKISH SOFT POWER IN THE CAUCASUS?

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The academic literature on *soft power* is abundant with many case studies from around the world. Initially, Joseph Nye conceptualized the term "soft power" in his essay "Bound to Lead." The term originally referred to an alternative dimension of the United States' global influence, which was separate from its traditional "hard power." According to Nye, hard power resources, such as military and security assets, are now less effective in interdependent international policies compared to the past. In contrast, the ability of a nation to develop an image and normative posturing is the crucial and ultimate form of soft power. As such, a country may serve its interests better by inspiring respect, admiration, and emulation than by using coercion.[1]

Before discussing soft power, it is crucial to define what exactly power is. According to most definitions, power is the capacity to influence other actors and shape their preferences. Accordingly, three basic conditions are required to exercise power. First, countries must have the capacity to influence other actors. Both concrete elements—such as military and economic prerogatives—as well as less quantifiable elements like culture, values, and mode of life constitute the first dimension of power. Second, actors in possession of such power must have the aspiration to capitalize on their assets. The third—and arguably most important—element of power is that other actors in the system must be cognizant of that power. For power to exist, other actors must align their attitudes with the interests of the party that possesses power.[2]

Thus appears the main distinction between hard and soft power. What causes non-power-holders to align their attitudes with the desires of a power-holder? Are such changes based on a cost-benefit analysis or the legitimacy of the power-holder? According to the literature, the most effective method of ensuring national interests is to use military and economic prerogatives to force other actors to undertake a cost-benefit calculation. In other words, most international actors pursue a "carrot and stick" strategy in the realm of foreign policy. An actor who prefers hard power will frighten, bribe, or coax an adverse party. In general, the literature makes a distinction between hard and soft power based on the persuasive techniques employed. Whereas hard power is tantamount to military and other coercive methods, soft power revolves around civilian, economic, and normative instruments.

For soft power to exist in practice, notions of legitimacy and credibility are crucial. In turn, legitimacy originates from three main sources.[3] First, legitimacy can derive from the normative values that a power-holder promotes. Second, legitimacy can stem from the political, social, economic, and/or cultural institutions of a country. If the people of other states view the institutions of a power-holder as effective and socially and economically just, then they are more likely to consider that country's foreign policy as legitimate as well. In other words, other actors should follow the lead of a "soft power" actor out of a perception that such a trajectory matches their identity and national interests. Third,

legitimacy can arise from the methods employed to execute foreign policy. Unilateral foreign policy strategies, which are executed without taking international concerns into account, may be repulsive to non-power-holders. According to this logic, other states, international organizations, and international law play a crucial role insomuch as they serve the national interests previously determined. In unilateralism, the objective is to force others to conform to the power-holder's thinking and, if necessary, to employ methods of coercion and encouragement to achieve this.

In sum, Nye identified three fundamental elements in defining soft power: a country's culture (i.e., the degree of its attractiveness to others), its political values (as a source of inspiration for others) and its foreign policy (perceived by others as legitimate and morally authoritative). But there are other sources of soft power; for instance, economic resources can also serve both soft and hard power.[4] As Nye underlines, soft power is more descriptive than a normative concept. Like any form of power, it can be wielded for good or bad purposes. The success of soft power depends firstly on the ability to create credibility, trust, and attraction. Joseph Nye's works were initially conceived to explain the United States' foreign policy. When applied to non-US actors such as the European Union, Japan, India, or Turkey,[5] his theories are likewise helpful in explaining a particular actor's standing on the regional or international scene.

"What causes non-power-holders to align their attitudes with the desires of a power-holder?"

The current article's priority is not to concentrate on the theoretical aspects of soft power or its corresponding definitions. Rather, the main objective is to analyze notions of soft power in the case of Turkey since the end of the Soviet Union. More precisely, we analyze Turkish soft power in the South Caucasus, which has been crucial to Turkish power over the past three decades. Indeed, the three South Caucasian states of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia— even more than the Middle East or Balkans—figure prominently in Turkey's economy, security, and identity politics. The paper's aim is to determine more accurately the extent of Turkey's soft power in the region between 2002 and 2011, as well as the foundations of this soft power and the reasons for the collapse of Turkish soft power in the context of the Syrian crisis. Our main contention is that Turkish soft power emerged thanks to a very peaceful atmosphere previous to the Arab Spring. Conversely, the failure of the Arab Spring and Turkey's subsequent involvement in the Syrian war are the main drivers behind the retrenchment of Turkish soft power in both the Middle East and South Caucasus. Nevertheless, we will conclude that Turkish soft power in the South Caucasus is not yet a complete fiasco, at least in comparison to Turkey's many failures in the Middle East and its relations with Europe and the US.

General Considerations of Turkish Soft Power and the "Turkish Model" Since the Founding of the Republic

Since its inception in 1923, the Republic of Turkey has wielded considerable soft power on the international stage on at least three separate occasions. Namely, Turkey arose as a potential development model for newly-independent states in the Middle East and South Asia in the mid-twentieth century, as well as in the Caucasus and Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. More recently, Turkey's internal political developments, cultural attractiveness, and economic performance in the 2000s translated into considerable soft power in the Middle East during the initial phases of the Arab Spring.

In all three cases, Turkey arose as a potential development model for states in the throes of major political transformations. In the first two cases, certain aspects of Turkey's own development trajectory were seen as sources of emulation among states that had recently gained independence following major global political and security reconfigurations. The legitimacy of its soft power rested primarily on normative values and institutional efficacy. Particularly crucial in this regard was the notion of Turkey as a predominantly Muslim country that had transitioned successfully from Ottoman stagnancy into a modern, secular entity with moderately effective political institutions and a religious establishment squarely under state control. Crucially, Turkey's position as a soft power-holder at these junctures was actively promoted by powerful third parties—namely the United States and Western Europe—that viewed Turkey as a positive source of emulation in the developing world.

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In the case of the Arab Spring, Turkey came to be lionized not among newly-independent states, but rather Arab states experiencing major internal political changes. Turkish soft power was arguably more robust in this third iteration, as the overall positive image of Turkey's internal politics was complemented by a constructive foreign policy, a more internationally pervasive popular culture, and impressive economic growth. Nevertheless, the third emergence of Turkish soft power was short-lived. Turkey's increasing involvement in the Syrian crisis has essentially torpedoed its constructive foreign policy image, led to more internal ethnic and sectarian strife, and bolstered nascent authoritarian tendencies in internal Turkish politics.

The Turkish Model and Twentieth Century Waves of Independence

The Republic of Turkey first emerged as a wielder of soft power and model for emulation following its creation after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his political allies conceptualized in the Republic of Turkey a modern, secular, pro-Western state at a time when secularism was an exception in the Islamic world.[6] For many Western countries, and especially France, Kemalist Turkey and its secular institutions represented a potential model for the development and modernization of other Muslim countries.[7] In Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and even some newly-independent former Ottoman provinces in the Middle East after the Second World War, local modernizers were often influenced by the Turkish Kemalist experience.[8] Likewise, Turkey was regarded as a potential country to emulate during the wave of independence movements in former colonies after the Second World War. In Tunisia for example, the secularization reforms of the Habib Bourguiba regime mirrored those of 1920s Kemalist Turkey, particularly in terms of the secularization of family law and the rationalization of reforms as a part of *itjihad*, or independent reasoning.[9]

The second historical juncture at which Turkey emerged as a potential model came after the collapse of the Soviet Union, where Mikhail Gorbachev's ill-fated glasnost and perestroika reforms ended the Communist Party's political preeminence and inadvertently led to calls for independence among nationalist counter-elites throughout much of the Soviet periphery.[10] When the Soviet Union finally ended in 1991 and its fifteen constituent Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) gained independence, fears arose in the West that the culturally Muslim republics of Azerbaijan and Central Asia could be tempted to follow a non-secular Iranian or Saudi model in their transition away from Soviet hegemony.[11] The idea thus emerged that Turkey—owing to its abundance of similarities with much of the region—could serve as a positive development model for these young "Muslim" republics.[12]

Many Turks entertained unrealistic notions that shared Islamic and Turkic identity could lead to a new sphere of Turkish influence in the newly-independent republics. Some nationalist circles in Turkey believed their country could be the leader of a new Turkic political bloc extending from the Balkans to the Great Wall of China, according to the formula employed by Süleyman Demirel.[13] Indeed, Anatolian Turks' proximity to Central Asia in terms of religion, language, and common history represented for many circles a supreme advantage in Ankara's potential bolstering of influence in the region.

For their part, Central Asian leaders were not inclined to compromise their newfound sovereignty and thus did not seek a new Turkish "big brother" following Soviet rule. Nevertheless, they were interested in Turkey's experience insomuch as it underscored the ability of a Muslim-majority Turkic country to transform into a modern state.[14] In their efforts to move away from the Soviet legacy, many post-Soviet states regarded Turkey as a case study. In Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, for example, the transition from the Cyrillic alphabet to Latin script was realized in a comparative perspective with the earlier Turkish experience of Arabic to Latin script. In this respect, the Central Asian republics did not blindly imitate Turkey, although they had a keen interest and in some cases admiration for Turkey's experience of modernization.

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The West was arguably more invested in Turkey's image as a development model for the post-Soviet Muslim republics. Both US and European leaders viewed heightened Turkish influence as a source of stability in the region, [15] due in part to fears that post-Soviet Muslims could gravitate towards the Saudi or Khomeinist state-building models. Turkey's Western allies, thus, encouraged Turkey to "export" its secular state-building model, with the hope that Turkey could leverage its common ethnic identity to help establish good relations between the newly-independent "Muslim" republics and the West. Concomitantly, political circles in the West reckoned that exporting the Turkish model could facilitate the diffusion of Western values throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus and help these young states to defend their sovereignty against possible Russian resurgence in the region.

Overall the Turkish "model" and wider soft power initiatives had mixed results in Central Asia and the Caucasus. On the one hand, Turkey never came to lead a new Turkic regional order, at least not in the manner that certain political circles in Turkey had hoped at the time of the Soviet collapse. Turkey was unable to unify post-soviet Turkic or Muslim countries around a pan-Turkic or pan-Islamist idea, respectively. On the other hand, Central Asian states studied Turkey's modern state-formation experience closely, and although the Turkish model was not imitated per se, its existence provided a certain degree of guidance to young states in the throes of transition. Moreover, in certain fields, such as alphabet reform and state management of Islam, Turkey's experience was evidently a source of inspiration for much of Central Asia.

Turkish Soft Power and the Turkish Model in the Context of the Arab Spring

The third juncture at which Turkey emerged as a model for emulation came in the 2000s, and more specifically in the context of the Arab Spring. This third emergence of Turkish soft power stemmed largely from the success story of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in November 2002 along with its charismatic leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Thanks both to a more subdued regional geopolitical environment and significant popular support among the population, the AKP government was able to implement various political, economic, and social reforms that transformed Turkey into a very attractive and influential power in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and even much of Africa. Economically, this era coincided with the emergence of a new Turkish middle class and unparalleled economic performance.[16] Turkey became the seventeenth largest economy in the world and a member of the G20, and its economic growth since 2003 has been among the most robust globally.[17] Prominent Turkish companies known as "Anatolian tigers" increased exports of Turkish goods, and Turkey quickly transformed from a foreign aid recipient to a net foreign aid donor,[18] especially in certain African countries where Turkey pursued more active diplomacy.

The third Turkish model was also bolstered by Turkey's increasing attractiveness in the political and cultural spheres. Despite its roots in political Islamic thought, the AKP initially pursued a moderate political discourse and promoted a pragmatic vision for the co-existence of Islam and democracy that actually managed to improve Turkish democracy. [19] Between 2003 and 2011 the AKP adopted numerous political reforms and held regular democratic elections, thus making Turkey one of the only Muslim countries with legitimate democratic institutions. At the same time, and as an illustration of this soft power, Turkish culture, soap operas, series, and consumer brands became increasingly popular not only in Turkey's immediate neighborhood, but also in Africa, India, and even in South America, where Turkish series are well-regarded. Two examples of these series deserve special mention: Gümüs,[20] translated as "Noor Abroad";[21] and Muhteşem Yüzyıl, or "Magnificent Century."[22] While these series revolved around family life and romance in a traditional conservative Muslim context, as well as Turkey's Ottoman past, they were able to garner a widespread following due to their ability to associate Turkish cultural specificities and history with modern life, even for non-Turkish viewers.

The Turkish model in its third iteration was thus already attractive on the eve of the Arab Spring. In Turkey, the US, and Europe, many think tanks and research centers devoted part of their respective research agendas and publications to the notion of Turkish soft power and the Turkish model's applicability to an increasingly wider swathe of the Muslim world. Whereas the so-called Turkish model was conceptualized vis-à-vis post-Soviet states in the early 1990s, its applicability eventually shifted to the Middle East by the 2000s. When the Arab Spring shook the foundations of older authoritarian regimes in 2011, the regimes that collapsed were often replaced by new political formations with ideological positions closer to the AKP. New governments came to power in Tunisia and Egypt through democratic elections and, like the AKP, they drew inspiration from the political ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. For many analysts in Turkey, the Arab world, and even the West, Turkey served as the most logical model for the new Arab regimes; that is, democratically-elected regimes, albeit more conservative in outlook and colored by the philosophy of the Muslim Brotherhood.[23] The initial success of many Islamist parties during the Arab Spring seemed to confirm a desire in the Arab world to adopt the Turkish political model.

Turkish foreign policy served as another dimension of this political model. Between 2002 and 2010 Turkey had managed to cultivate good bilateral relations with almost all its neighbors, even those with whom Turkey had traditionally had difficult relations, such as Syria and Armenia. The "zero problems with neighbors" policy of Ahmet Davutoğlu—who first served as an advisor to the Turkish prime minister and then as Minister of Foreign affairs—was not always successful, yet it helped somewhat to improve Turkey's image in the world. Accordingly, Turkey at times acted as a mediator between Israel and Palestine, and in post-Saddam Iraq, Ankara played a role in the rapprochement between different ethno-confessional groups. Even in the Caucasus, Turkey helped de-escalate tensions between local actors and Moscow when it launched its Platform of Dialogue in the Caucasus following the five-day Russo-Georgian war in 2008.[24]

In addition to the AKP's political success story, Turkey's economic performance in the 2000s had clearly translated into soft power gains at the onset of the Arab Spring. According to a 2010 survey of Arab public opinion conducted by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), Turkey was perceived among Arabs as the most economically influential country in the region. In contrast to the rentier economies of major hydrocarbon exporters such as Saudi Arabia, respondents expressed admiration for Turkey's high levels of productivity and export-driven economic growth, with 76 percent indicating that they had "purchased or consumed" a Turkish product, thus indicating high penetration of Turkish products regionally.[25] Turkey's economic soft power was further reinforced—albeit briefly—in June 2010, when then-Prime Minister Erdoğan announced an agreement to establish a free-trade zone with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.[26]

Despite these initial political, foreign policy, cultural, and economic successes, however, Turkish policy in some Arab Spring countries began to worsen, particularly in light of the counterrevolution in Egypt and, most importantly, the Syrian Civil War. The latter signaled the end of the Arab Spring and, by extension, the end of Turkish soft power.

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The Collapse of Turkish Soft Power

The academic literature indicates a close relationship between the degree to which a state securitizes a particular issue, on the one hand, and the "hardness" of the methods employed to deal with that issue, on the other hand.[27] In other words, the security situation in a country and the surrounding region can significantly influence a government's ability to attract respect through soft power.

When the AKP came to power, the Turkish military's influence on domestic politics was in decline. Although Turkish foreign policy had traditionally fallen under the influence of military generals with a particular conception of the international system and Turkey's place in the region, the AKP's political reforms reduced the military's preeminence in both internal governance and foreign policy. In terms of regional security, between 2003 and 2011 there was no major conflict in Turkey's neighborhood comparable to the ongoing Syrian crisis, which has completely transformed

Turkey's domestic issues and foreign policy. The US invasion of Iraq, conversely, did not affect Turkey to a great extent, as the country's leaders opted not to cooperate in the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Moreover, Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbors" policy increased Ankara's overall attractiveness in the region prior to the Syrian crisis, however unimaginable it may appear under current conditions.[28] Moreover, Turkey's attractiveness in the region increased in spite of the modern Turkish state's reputation as the inheritor of the Ottoman Empire, with a similar spirit of expansion and domination. In fact, this Ottoman legacy had been briefly transformed into a positive attribute, in the sense that the neo-Ottomanism became synonymous with a spirit of good cooperation between Turkey and former Ottoman provinces. However, due to the Syrian crisis, Turkish soft power in both Turkey and the wider region has become severely limited.

Turkey now faces one of the most difficult periods of its modern history, with increasingly illiberal political tendencies, societal polarization, and a foreign policy in stalemate between its traditional loyalty to the West and its continuous flirtations with illiberal regimes in Russia, China, and Iran. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has ruled the country for almost 16 years, bears certain responsibility for this predicament. Even before the onset of the Syria crisis, Erdoğan had become more self-confident and assertive in domestic and foreign policy, when the AKP won its third ruling mandate with almost 50 percent of the vote in June 2011 general elections. However, there is a more direct link between Turkey's many current problems and the Syrian crisis that will continue to destabilize the region as a whole. [29] When the Syrian crisis erupted, Turkey was among the closest regional allies of Syria and its President Bashar al Assad. Thanks to their positive dialogue with Damascus, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu attempted to convince Assad to implement certain reforms in a bid to satisfy the Syrian opposition and find a peaceful solution to the turmoil that arose after the Arab Spring. Incapable of convincing the Syrian regime to accept a dialogue with its opposition, and following Arab League initiatives and Western calls for Assad's departure, Turkey eventually broke with Damascus and increasingly entered the Syrian fray in opposition to the Assad government. The most consequential negative effects of the Syrian crisis on Turkish domestic stability and soft power abroad can be summarized in three points.

First, the Syrian war has aggravated sectarian issues within Turkey. Despite having started as a peaceful political protest against the Assad regime, the Syrian uprising became increasingly sectarian in nature,[30] pitting the ruling Alawite minority against the Sunni majority that had been involved in the uprising. Some segments of society in Turkey have perceived the Syrian Civil War as a conflict between Alawites and Sunnis. Moreover, when Turkey entered the fray to accelerate the departure of Assad, the traditionally fragile relations between Turkish Sunnis and Alevi became more aggravated, insomuch as Turkey's Alevi population developed an increasingly anti-regime stance vis-à-vis Erdogan and perceived Sunnite oppression. The aggravation of the Sunni-Alevi cleavage within Turkey has thus had a negative effect on Turkish soft power.

Second, the Syrian crisis has aggravated the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Since the beginning of the Turkish Republic, Turkey's Kurdish minority has been ignored and marginalized, and several Kurdish uprisings have been repressed.[31] When the AKP came to power, it initiated a serious effort to resolve this conflict, introducing several social and political reforms to satisfy the Kurdish population. During the Syrian war, there was a dialogue between the Turkish government and Kurdish guerilla forces represented in Turkish politics by the pro-Kurdish party, Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Between March 2013 and June 2015, the peace process between the Turkish state and Kurdish guerillas continued despite the parties' diverging stances in the Syrian conflict. Indeed, whereas Ankara officially sought an end to the Assad regime, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and many Kurdish organizations—such as the HDP to a certain degree as well as the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the footprint of the PKK in Syria—maintained collaboration with Assad. This divergence between Turkey and the Kurdish national movement, as well as the PKK's reinforcement during the Syrian war, essentially torpedoed the peace process between the Turkish government and the Kurdish national movement in Turkey. Ankara's relationship with the Kurdish national movement was further complicated by newfound alliances between the PKK and Turkey's allies—particularly the United States—which were established to combat the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria. In short, the Kurdish question has become increasingly securitized in Turkey, and Turkish authorities have shifted from soft power to hard power in the management of the Kurdish issue as a result.

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Finally, and despite Turkey's previous success with peaceful diplomacy in the Middle East through its role as a conflict mediator,[32] Turkish involvement in the Syrian crisis has done considerable damage to the country's image in the immediate region and further abroad. Turkey's involvement in Syria has complicated its relations with Iran, which had an alternative vision for the resolution of the Syrian crisis,[33] and Russia, which has supported the Assad regime from the very beginning. Although viewed as a regional peacemaker prior to the Syrian crisis, the war in Syria has increasingly transformed Turkey's image into that of a belligerent and aggressive regional actor.

After 2011, the general deterioration of the situation in the Middle East caused by the Syrian crisis has negatively affected Turkish perceptions of security. This phenomenon is not specific to the Middle East; Turkey's image has rapidly deteriorated in Europe, the US, and, as explored in greater detail in the next section, the South Caucasus.

Turkey's Asymmetrical Soft Power in the South Caucasus: From post-Soviet Independence to Internal Turkish Instability

General considerations on Turkey's relations with the South Caucasus

Transcaucasia historically played an important role in late Ottoman and modern Turkish geopolitics. When Imperial Russia expanded into the region in the 19th century, many Muslims fled their respective Caucasian homelands and took refuge in various Ottoman provinces in Anatolia, the Middle East, and the Balkans, where descendants of these refugees still reside.[34] In Turkey, these refugees created dynamic associations to preserve their identities, with Abkhazian, Daghestani, Chechen, Georgian and Azeri associations counting among the most active.[35] During the Cold war, these Caucasian minorities could not play any role in relations between Turkey and their ancestral homelands, given that Turkey and the Soviet Union were in opposing camps. With the end of the Soviet Union, however, both North and South Caucasians became fundamental bridges between Turkey, on the one hand, and the Russian Federation and three South Caucasian countries, on the other. Each of the three South Caucasian countries—Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia—has a specific significance for Turkey in the post-Soviet context.

Georgia and Turkey have well-established mutual interests that encourage the preservation of positive bilateral relations. For Turkey, Georgia represents a strategic gateway to the Caspian Sea and wider Turkic world. Georgia's role is all the more significant in this sense considering the continued closure of the Turkish-Armenian border. Similarly, the border with the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan spans only 11 kilometers, thus severely limiting Turkey's access points to the region. Moreover, good relations with Tbilisi are fundamentally important for Turkey and its economy.[36] Indeed, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which transports Caspian oil from Azerbaijan to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, spans the entirety of Georgia's territory. Similarly, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline expansion—which is almost fully constructed[37]—and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway—which officially began operating in October 2017[38]—are slated to create deeper economic interdependencies between Turkey and Georgia.[39] Mutual strategic interests between Turkey and Georgia thus oblige both to manage possible divergences on regional issues. In the same vein, Turkey is an important neighbor for Georgia and represents a gateway to Europe, thus limiting Georgia's isolation given its tense relations with Russia. Turkey's historically positive relations with Europe and European Union candidate status were also an important incentive for Georgia and other post-Soviet countries to develop good relations with Turkey. The current complications between Turkey and the West do not diminish Turkey's importance for Georgia. Rather, Georgia still considers Turkey as a part of the Western bloc and an important NATO member. Moreover, the current relative rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow further incentivizes Georgia to maintain good relations with Turkey.

Azerbaijan is Turkey's most natural ally in the Caucasus and the wider Turkic world as a whole. The exceptionally positive Turkish-Azerbaijani partnership relies on several foundations. Language and ethnic kinship serve as the main pillars of brotherhood between Turkey and Azerbaijan, given the mutual intelligibility between Turkish and Azeri and

the ethnic origins of both Anatolians and Azeris within the Oghuz branch of the larger Turkic family tree.[40] Although the two countries' populations differ somewhat in terms of religious affiliation—Turks adhere primarily to Sunnism whereas a majority of Azeris are technically Shia—religion does not represent an obstacle for the two countries and has never prevented both sides from maintaining good relations. Moreover, the two countries have at certain times espoused a generally pro-Western outlook, and both have complicated relations with neighboring Armenia.

In the Caucasus and among all of its immediate neighbors, it is Armenia with which Turkey has the most difficult relations. A troubled shared history, issues of identity, and geopolitical deadlock have put the two countries at opposite poles. Continuing debate over the mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman forces in 1915—which Armenia considers a genocide but Turkey a tragedy in the context of the First World War—is the main obstacle to a Turkish-Armenian normalization. Moreover, the territorial conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, in which Turkey naturally sides with Azerbaijan, further diminishes the chances of a Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. In fact, in 2009 both Turkey and Armenia made a concerted effort to normalize relations and open the Turkish-Armenian border, although Azerbaijan leveraged its relationship with Turkey to block the initiative. Despite these historically complicated relations, there nevertheless exists a certain degree of Turkish soft power in Armenia.

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Turkish soft power in the region

The strength of Turkish soft power has always varied across the three countries of the South Caucasus, as this power has been based on different foundations in each case and wielded via different instruments. Moreover, the incontestable decline of this soft power and the deterioration of Turkey's image has occurred to varying degrees in each country.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, Turkey has retained the most positive image in Azerbaijan, which is not particularly surprising considering the many commonalities between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Although relations between the two countries were nonexistent during the Soviet period, the opening of the border facilitated the quick diffusion of Turkish soft power in Azerbaijan and vice versa. In the field of education, Azerbaijanis arguably obtained more scholarships to study in Turkey than any other post-Soviet Muslim ethnic group. Such scholarships were part of a wider Turkish educational initiative to attract and form new post-Soviet elites in Turkey. Thousands of Azerbaijani students continue to come to Turkey, often remaining in Turkish cities or returning to Azerbaijan to strengthen Turkish-Azeri relations.[41] Conversely, the Turkish government also sent several hundred students to Azerbaijan. In the field of art and culture, many Azerbaijanis left their country to settle in Turkey. An important migration phenomenon exists between Turkey and Azerbaijan, whereby diasporas form in each respective country. Turkish TV channels are widespread in Azerbaijan. When it comes to religion, traditionally there has been important Islamic cooperation, despite the Sunni-Shia cleavage, between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Diyanet, which is the official directorate that manages religious issues in Turkey, has developed different programs to train religious cadres in Azerbaijan and in Turkey.[42] Diyanet opened a faculty of theology in Baku, and the Azerbaijani official body for the management of Islam—the Caucasus Muslim Board—maintains good relations with Turkey. Certain pan-Turkic organizations with origins in Turkey, such as Turksoy, have also been very active in Azerbaijan, and more so than in any other Turkic country.[43]

Ankara's various political and cultural initiatives vis-à-vis Azerbaijan contributed to a very positive image of Turkey in Azerbaijan. The notion of "Two States One Nation"—which emphasizes that Azerbaijanis and Turks share many cultural commonalities but reside in separate sovereign states—is very popular among intellectuals and the general population of both countries.[44] Among pro-Western Azerbaijani intellectuals, Turkey has generally been perceived as a brother and strong ally with close proximity to Europe and its values, at least until the recent changes in Turkey's internal politics. Azerbaijani intellectuals also view bilateral relations with Turkey as a key component of Azerbaijani sovereignty and an asset against a potentially resurgent Russia. Simultaneously, more conservative segments of

Azerbaijani society have expressed admiration for Turkey on account of the country's strong Turkish and/or Muslim identity and influence in the world. Even Azerbaijan's staunchly Shia political party—the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan—applauded the AKP when it came to power in 2002 despite having a general wariness toward resurgent pan-Turkic identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During a 2004 interview, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA) Chairman Movsum Samedov stated that the AKP victory served as a model for his own party. Despite Turkey's attractiveness, however, some Azerbaijani intellectuals eventually became irritated by Turkish influence. These voices warned of excessive Turkish influence that could, in the long term, diminish Azerbaijani identity and impede Azerbaijan's state-building process.

In Georgia, Turkish soft power is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, relations between Turkey and Georgia are excellent due to economic and geopolitical considerations. In Turkey, there are of citizens with Georgian origins, who play an important role in bilateral relations. Pro-western and secular elites in Georgia have been very pleased with Turkey's European ambitions and view good relations with Turkey as complementary to good relations with Europe. In contrast to positive relations at the state level, however, Turkey's image and soft power in Georgia have limits. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), along with associated conservative and traditional religious circles in Georgia, often resent what they view as excessive Turkish influence. Such sentiment is especially pronounced in Adjara, which has seen an influx of Turkish development money in recent years[45] and where much of the local ethnic Georgian Muslim population has traditionally cooperated with Turkey, particularly in advocating for the construction of a new mosque in Batumi and patronizing boarding schools for Adjara's young Muslims. For their part, many Orthodox Christians in Adjara and Georgia at large interpret such events as a part of a wider attempt at "Turkification" and have used these issues as a rallying point to anti-Turkish, anti-Muslim narratives.

"The Syrian war has aggravated sectarian issues within Turkey."

Although conceptualizing Turkish soft power in Armenia is comparatively more complicated, there is an undeniable Turkish presence in the country. From a commercial standpoint, Turkish consumer products are widespread in Armenian markets, and many Armenians travel to Turkey for business purposes.[46] In Istanbul, there is an important diaspora of Armenians who relocated after the fall of the Soviet Union. Despite the weight of history and the eternal presence of the genocide issue in Turkish-Armenian relations, there nevertheless exists in Armenia a certain level of non-contentious interest in Turkey. The University of Erevan hosts an important Turkish studies department where many Armenian students study Turkish. In the realm of civil society, various NGOs and "think tanks," such as the Regional Studies Center (RSC), have pushed for a rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia despite the failure of the 2009 rapprochement attempt.[47] In 2013, the Turkish presidency issued a statement of condolence to the Armenian victims of Ottoman mass killings in 1915. Although the statement did not mention the term genocide, it nonetheless represented progress in Turkey's approach to this issue.

Finally, any discussion of Turkish soft power in general—and particularly with regard to the South Caucasus—must make special mention of the Gülen movement and its contribution to the development of Turkish soft power abroad. A very complex and ambiguous organization—part sect, religious movement, and transnational educational initiative—the Gülen movement, which does not have an equivalent in the Islamic world, played an incontestable role in the diffusion of Turkish soft power globally.[48] Education and the shaping of new elites have always been at the core of the movement, which was established in Turkey in the 1970s and began its international education services abroad with the end of the Eastern Bloc.[49] The former Soviet Union was the first international space where the movement became active. In Azerbaijan, the Gülen movement was behind the establishment of at least 30 educational institutions. An influential university founded by people close to Fethullah Gülen was among the most visible universities in Baku. In Georgia, Gülenists were instrumental in the establishment of the Black Sea University in Batumi as well as three high schools in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Batumi.

The relationship between Gülen establishments and Turkish soft power was always evident. Although English was the main language taught in all Gülen schools, Turkish was also very widely used. Moreover, these schools formed new Turkish-speaking elites that were connected to Turkish business and educational companies and served as bridges between Turkey and their various countries of origin. Finally, Gülen-affiliated schools, business enterprises, and media

outlets reinforced business and commercial relations between Turkey and the South Caucasus. As long as relations between this movement and the Turkish state remained friendly, it was easy for the movement to spread its influence in foreign locations where Turkish diplomacy cooperated with various Gülenist structures since the beginning of the 1990s, and more intensively when the AKP came to power. The rupture between the movement and the Turkish government in 2013,[50] and the fact that the movement took part in the failed coup attempt in July 2016[51] against Turkey's elected government had a very negative effect on its activities abroad. In many countries—albeit not always with direct pressure from the Turkish government—the vast majority of Gülenist structures were closed or brought under tighter control. In Azerbaijan and Georgia, the movement's assets have been seized and some of its active members expelled (the Gülen movement had no presence in Armenia). The diminishing of this movement in the South Caucasus represented a loss for Turkish soft power. According to Turkish authorities, however, who have branded the movement as a terrorist organization, banning Gülenist structures in Turkey and combating them abroad is the only way to protect the Turkish state and avoid new coups that could destroy the Turkish state apparatus.

"Azerbaijan is Turkey's most natural ally in the Caucasus and the wider Turkic world as a whole."

Conclusion: What Remains of Turkish Soft Power in the Caucasus?

Gone are the days when Turkey was considered as a transition model for the newly-independent states of post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. In fact, we may even conceptualize Turkey as something of a *counter-model*, as the authoritarian states of Central Asia now seem to be providing a development template for Turkey. Indeed, since the escalation of conflict in Syria, power structures have become increasingly authoritarian in Turkey, the notion of security increasingly central to Turkish domestic and foreign policy, and Turkish democracy overall less attractive as a result.

The main question now is whether the decline in Turkey's soft power is a permanent trend or a temporary aberration, and specifically whether this soft power decline could be more a result of a temporary period of destabilization caused by multiple impacts of the Syrian crisis. There are good reasons to think that Turkey could become more stable and attractive in terms of soft power if the Syrian crisis is resolved. Nevertheless, even before the Syrian war, a rupture could already be observed between Turkey and West, which stemmed largely from the EU's rejection of Turkey. Turkey had thus already been pushed to cultivate relations with more authoritarian countries such as Russia, China, and Iran. If sustained, this break with the West and rapprochement with illiberal authoritarian partners will constitute a definitive rupture in Turkish politics that will affect its image in the world and particularly in the Caucasus.

"Ankara's various political and cultural initiatives vis-à-vis Azerbaijan contributed to a very positive image of Turkey in Azerbaijan."

More precisely, the recent Russo-Turkish rapprochement, which was a necessity for Turkey due to its increasingly difficult relations with the EU, NATO, and the United States, could tarnish its image and attractiveness in the Caucasus, where there is an underlying mistrust towards Russia as a result of its colonial legacy in the region. In the three South Caucasian republics, the memory of the first modern, independent Caucasian states between 1918 and 1920 still holds strong. This brief stint of independence collapsed following Soviet-Turkish rapprochement in the early 1920s. Accordingly, in the South Caucasus, there is still a very stark impression that good relations between Turkey and

Russia could limit the current Caucasian republics' independence. Thus, it stands to reason that Turkey's rupture with the West, rapprochement with a nascent illiberal world order, and continued internal destabilization vis-à-vis regional conflict could diminish the Turkish model's attractiveness for the foreseeable future.

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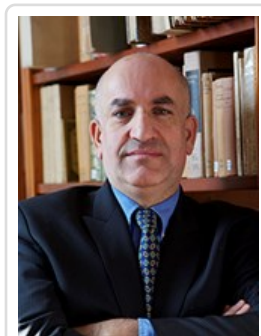
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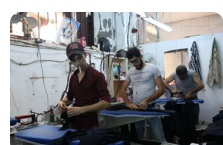(/blog/35/a-dangerous-policy-of-turkish-containment-in-the-eastern-mediterranean)

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