1 Turkish soft power politics in Georgia

Making sense of political and cultural implications[1]

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Introduction

Until recently, relations between Turkey and Georgia attracted relatively little scholarly attention. Most studies mainly concentrated on the geopolitical, bilateral and regional dimensions of those relations, paying little or no attention to the soft power politics that Turkey has been exercising since the beginning of the 2000s. Georgia interests Turkey for various strategic and political reasons, although there are equally important cultural, religious and social factors that play a significant role in shaping Turkey's policy towards Georgia. It is the combination of these policies that shapes the essence and objectives of Turkey–Georgia relations.

To unveil the defining features of those relations, this chapter looks upon them through the lens of soft power politics. Primarily, it discusses various projects that a number of Turkish governmental and private institutions have carried out in economic, religious, cultural, educational and humanitarian spheres. It also touches upon the practical implications and the cultural and social perceptions of these projects in Georgia, as exemplified by the findings of in-depth interviews conducted by the author. In examining the religious dimension, this paper argues that the religious component of Turkey's soft power politics cannot be properly understood without considering the specific political and religious features of Georgia's domestic context. The study of Turkey's religious interests in Georgia needs to be contextualized in order to unveil its limitations.

Turkey's political priorities and their reception in Georgia

The research on Turkish foreign policy in the South Caucasus (Yavuz 1998, p. 19–41 Aras 2000, p. 53–68, Davutoğlu 2001, Kotchikian 2004, p. 33–44, Çelikpala 2007, p. 25–30, Davutoğlu 2008, p. 77–96, Kirişçi 2009, p. 29–57, Aras and Akpinar 2011, p. 36–58, Balci 2014, p. 43–52) can be divided into several groups. According to some experts, Turkey has elaborated and is carrying out a clear-cut and comprehensive regional policy in the South Caucasus, which has enabled it to become a key regional actor. Another group of researchers

claim that Turkey pursues different interests vis-à-vis each South Caucasian political entity, and thus there is no unified and integrated Turkish foreign policy in the South Caucasus: the three UN member states, two partially recognized states and one non-recognized de facto state have different rankings in Turkey's list of policy priorities. Yet another group of analysts posits that Turkey still lacks a long-term policy towards the states of the South Caucasus and that local processes alone define Turkish political objectives. Some even argue that the major obstacle for Turkey's all-embracing policy in the region is the absence of diplomatic relations with Armenia, the establishment of which would lead to Turkey's full and complete geopolitical presence in the region.

In particular, Michael Cecire argues that Turkey 'is visibly ascendant as a Caucasus power' and 'Turkey's Caucasus system' already functions in the region, where Turkey is perceived as a 'merchant hegemon'. Moreover, in his opinion, Turkey–Azerbaijan–Georgia trilateral cooperation has been a challenge to the common perception of the region being under Russian dominance (Cecire 2013, p. 111). According to Mitat Çelikpala, Asbed Kotchikian and Bayram Balci, Georgia's role is indispensable and profound as it provides the most direct and stable land route from Turkey to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Moreover, Georgia's engagement in Caspian energy projects as a transit country and Turkey's investments in the Georgian economy have made the two countries irreversibly interdependent (Kotchikian 2004, p. 43, Çelikpala 2007, p. 27–28, Balci 2014, p. 49). In addition to the energy security factor, Bülent Aras and Pınar Akpınar, in discussing Turkey's policy in Georgia, also pinpoint significant implications for regional stability and border security (Aras and Akpınar 2011, p. 63). Thus, most analysts are of the common opinion that Turkish policy in Georgia is dominated by the key role the latter plays in exporting Caspian and Central Asian energy resources to Europe. In other words, Turkey's and Azerbaijan's ability to successfully implement geopolitical projects is directly proportional to Georgia's foreseeable stability as a state.

In the research on the subject, there is also emphasis on the economic aspects of Turkish interests in Georgia, which suggests that Turkey's policy should be determined by Georgia's open and comprehensive economic policy. Based on this logic, tense relations between Russia and Georgia have left the latter with no alternative but to build even closer relations with Turkey, which is seen as either the inevitable alternative or as the nearest and most suitable bridge to Europe. Reiterating the statements of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili (Chveneburi.net, n.d.), Balci argues that Turkey is a window towards Europe for Georgia, which may allow Tbilisi to fulfil its aspirations beyond the Caucasus (2014, p. 50). Cecire is right in mentioning that to grasp the essence of Turkey–Georgia relations one must consider them within the context of the Turkey–Georgia–Azerbaijan trilateral format, acknowledging that Turkey–Georgia relations have for the most part stemmed from Turkey–Azerbaijan relations (2013, p. 119, 123). In any case, it

do not pay much attention to the religious, social and cultural implications which influence their bilateral relations to various degrees. Nor do they care to discuss how exactly Turkey, which has its own seemingly insurmountable problems with the EU, can serve as a bridge between Georgia and Europe.

A set of complex and systemic factors has influenced the development of the Georgian political elite's perceptions of Turkey. In elaborating policy approaches towards Turkey, the attitudes of the Georgian leadership (both under Mikheil Saakashvili and later under the Georgian Dream coalition) seem determined by a number of geopolitical, economic, infrastructural and simply pragmatic factors. For instance, former Georgian President Saakashvili referred to Turkey–Georgia relations during his presidential term as a 'golden age' (Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili 2013, p. 21). Indeed, his administration was an outspoken supporter and protagonist of an even deeper Turkish presence both in the Georgian economy and in the whole region. During his presidency, Saakashvili spoke several times about the glory of Turkish history, culture and political system (Civil Georgia 2006). He also famously named Mustafa Kemal, the founder of modern Turkey, as one of his main political role models (Ackerman 2004). He was known for opening the doors of the Georgian economy to Turkish investors, who brought capital and opportunities to Georgia. In speaking about Turkey's interests in Georgia and in the region, he said: 'for Turkey specifically it is important to create a zone of stability with peaceful and friendly nations around it. Georgia was, maybe, the best case of the famous policy of "zero problems with neighbours"' (Civil Georgia 2006). During his term this thought was voiced more than once, perhaps reiterating similar remarks from the Turkish political elite. For instance, Ahmet Davutoğlu, former advisor to the prime minister, noted in an interview with *CNNTürk* on 2 January 2008: 'Turkey's "zero problem policy towards its neighbours" has been successfully implemented for the past four years. The most striking examples of Turkey's success in the region are its relations with Georgia'.[2] Nigyar Göksel also holds the opinion that 'Turkey and Georgia appear to present a model of integration in Europe's East' (2013, p. 2). Cecire furthers his argument that the Georgian direction has been successful by noting that, unlike many countries where Davutoğlu's much-quoted "strategic depth" doctrine was judged exceedingly negatively, the Caucasus became the policy's top beneficiary and its only success story (Cecire 2013, p. 113–115). It is important to add that when considering Turkey's Caucasian policy, analysts have rarely contextualized Turkey's policy towards Armenia nor have they problematized the implications of Turkey's fractured policy towards the Caucasus. Although Turkey was quick to recognize Armenia's independence in 1991, it refused to establish diplomatic relations with it and hermetically sealed the border by imposing a political, economic and communicational blockade on Armenia. Turkey's unilateral and unconditional support to Azerbaijan not only undermined the credibility of many of its regional initiatives but also raised several concerns about the long-term implications of Turkey's actions in the region.

Eka Tkeshelashvili, Georgia's former minister of foreign affairs and former secretary of the National Security Council, mentioned during an interview conducted by the author that 'in order to get the complete idea of the Turkish policy in Georgia one should clarify Georgia's pursued interest too. And only in combining the interests of those two we could thoroughly comprehend the policy objectives of the sides'. She also defined Georgia's interest as follows: 'to take advantage of Georgia's geographical position in the region, to become a "regional hub" and apply the key elements of economic liberalism in that process' (Interview with Eka Tkeshelashvili, 7/10/2014). Both Turkey and the Turkey–Georgia relationship were assigned a key importance in Georgia's National Security Concept for 2005 and in its revised version from 2011 (both documents were adopted during Saakashvili's presidency). In between the two versions, a few differences appeared. For instance, in the 2005 version of the document, Turkey was distinguished as a 'strategic partner', 'a leading regional partner', 'an important trade partner' and 'a valuable strategic partner' (National Security Concept 2005). Meanwhile, in the revised version of 2011, Turkey is characterized as 'Georgia's leading partner in the region', 'Georgia's largest and economic partner', 'a regional leader' and 'an important military partner' (National Security Concept 2011). Thus, in the revised version, the 'strategic partner' formulation is gone; the government at the time did not elaborate on the changes.

The things started to change, however, in the lead-up to the 2012 elections. While campaigning for the elections, a number of single-seat candidates from the Georgian Dream coalition (then in the opposition) for the Batumi, Shuakhevi and even Gardabani districts, as well as party leaders, artists and TV anchors, promoted anti-Turkish sentiments at election rallies. Most vocal among them was Murman Dumbadze, a former associate professor at Adjara State University and a former member of the conservative Republican Party, who built his reputation on being an ardent opponent of rebuilding mosques in Adjara. He was expelled from the Republican Party but was handpicked by the leader of the Georgian Dream coalition, Bidzina Ivanishvili, to be nominated as a coalition majoritarian candidate (Civil Georgia 2012). He was elected to Parliament and later became a deputy speaker. Beka Mindiashvili, an official at the Georgian Ombudsman's office, claims that since 2007 all election campaigns have been known for their 'electoral xenophobia', because of a calculatingly constructed 'image of enemy' and other phobias. He particularly underlined the fact that during the 2012 elections, the Georgian Dream coalition conceived of Turkophobia and 'a new "enemy" of the country was identified—the Aziziye mosque and the smell of chorba and doner kebab on Batumi Boulevard' (Mindiashvili 2012).

Following the change of power in 2012–2013, Georgia's new leadership, the Georgian Dream coalition, gave in to the concerns of some public circles. At the same time, it was also forced to recalibrate its anti-Turkish rhetoric following backlash from Azerbaijan and Turkey. Some statements in Bidzina Ivanishvili's new administration caused anxiety both to the previous administration and inside the Turkey–Azerbaijan alliance. Some statements made after the elections questioned the financial and economic expediency of some regional projects, most strikingly the Kars–Akhalkalaki railway which was initiated in 2007 to connect Turkey and Azerbaijan through Georgia. Turkish entrepreneurs in Georgia followed suit and voiced their fears about different bureaucratic obstacles that they had started to face. However, after visiting Baku and Ankara, Prime Minister Ivanishvili made a few remarks which eased the tense atmosphere. The following statement by former Georgian Minister of Defense Irakli Alasania, whose party was a member of the Georgian Dream coalition, reflected Tbilisi's position towards Turkey under the new leadership:

> At the meeting point of powerful countries and resource-rich regions, an adaptive and reality-oriented Georgian foreign policy is not only desirable but a strategic necessity. We embrace and cherish our European identity, but neither can we ignore the realities of geography and geopolitics. (Alasania 2013, p. 7)

In the same vein, Alasania marked Georgia's relations with Turkey as 'exemplary and accelerating as our interests increasingly intertwine' (ibid.).

During the interviews conducted by the author, respondents were asked whether the new leadership (Prime Minister Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream coalition) had adopted a different policy towards Turkey than the previous administrations. The dominant trend in the answers was that even though there was some continuity, the new leadership showed more circumspection and less enthusiasm towards certain Turkish projects. Professor at Caucasus University and former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergi Kapanadze notes that the change of power was followed by increasing anti-Turkish moods in Adjara, a semi-autonomous region with a large Muslim population, and in some other territories (Interview with Sergi Kapanadze, 7/10/2014). Overall, it can be noted that even though the new administration continued relations with Turkey, compared to the Saakashvili government, the new administration is less enthusiastic towards Turkey.

Turkish economic policy in Georgia

In addition to the political and geopolitical gains that Turkey has pursued in Georgia there have been considerable efforts from Ankara to promote Turkish business and economic projects.

Turkey and Azerbaijan have interchangeably taken the lead in foreign trade with Georgia since the mid-2000s. Naturally, statistics show the import and export of considerable volumes of energy resources, but Turkish investments and turnover in a number of spheres indicate that during recent years, Turkey has noticeably increased its economic presence overall. Analysis of the data provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia describes

the change and the dynamics over the last two decades (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2014b). While the trade volume between 1995 and 2003 did not exceed $200 million, from 2004 to 2007 the volume almost doubled. This was not only thanks to the Georgian leadership's economic policy after the Rose Revolution, but also a result of Ankara's active economic policy. In July 2006, the Russian market became almost inaccessible for Georgian products because Russia partially closed the Upper Lars border gate, the only checkpoint between the two countries, for renovation purposes. Turkey was quick to react, and a number of new initiatives were launched. As a result, Georgia and Turkey signed the Free Trade Agreement in November 2007, and as soon as it was put into force, the volume of bilateral trade drastically increased. Evidently, this was stimulated not only by the agreement but also by the closed Georgia–Russia border resulting from the South Ossetian war, a complete start-up of energy programs and other relevant factors related to Turkish economic performance.

One can observe a similar increase when analyzing Turkish foreign direct investments (FDI) in Georgia (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2014b and 2014c). In the case of both foreign trade and FDI, certain patterns emerge. For instance, between 1997 and 2003 Turkish total investments barely reached $103 million, however in the following nine years Turkish investments saw sweeping growth up to $864 million. Turkish investors in the Georgian economy are predominantly interested in the textile industry, agriculture, construction and energy. Dozens of Turkish construction companies, with a working volume of over $1 billion, are engaged in various projects including the construction of hydropower stations, roads and railroads (Chkhikvadze 2011, p. 6). In 1999, ten Turkish entrepreneurs founded an association of Georgian and Turkish businessmen called *Gürcu ve Türk Işadamlari derneği* (GÜRTIAD), which aimed to protect and promote their interests in Georgia. Now its governing body has 66 members, representing one executive from each Turkish company operating in Georgia (Gürtiad 2009).

Thus, the period between 2006 and 2007 was a turning point in enhancing trade and economic relations, after which the Georgian market became more open to Turkish capital and investments. That period also coincided with the Turkish "green capital" and business elite, the so-called Anatolian Tigers, looking for new markets. As a result, a number of Turkish enterprises actively penetrated the Georgian market. Most visible was the construction of new terminals in the Tbilisi and Batumi airports by TAV Urban Georgia, a subsidiary of TAV Group (Tepe-Akfen-Vie)[3], which was also able to obtain the long-term exclusive agreements for management of the airports and flight services[4]. The Georgian leadership, particularly Ivanishvili's administration, periodically criticized the high fees fixed by TAV for running these airports as they affected the ticket prices (Göksel 2013, p. 4). TAV's appearance in the Georgian market led five Turkish airline companies to be more actively engaged in Georgian air transportation (Turkish Airlines, AtlasJet, Pegasus,

from two Georgian airports to Ankara and Istanbul. The latter has also become an important transit hub for travelling in and out of Georgia. More notable is the agreement signed between Turkey and Georgia on 14 March 2006 regarding the joint operation of the Batumi Airport, which enabled the small Turkish city of Hopa—on the coast just 10 kilometres south of the border and without an airport—to be included in Turkey's domestic flight system. In other words, the Hopa Airport mentioned in the Turkish versions of various Turkish airlines' websites is in reality the same as Batumi Airport[5].

The branches of two commercial banks, T.C. Ziraat Bankası and Türkiye Iş Bankası, operate in Tbilisi and Batumi. The first bank was established in Tbilisi in 1998, initially under the name Emlak Bank Tbilisi Branch, and in 2001 was registered as JSC Ziraat Bankasi A.Ş. Tbilisi Branch. It should however be noted that the Turkish name "T.C. Ziraat Bankası" is written at the entrance of the bank. The second bank, JSC Turkey Işbank A.Ş. Batumi Branch, was opened in Batumi in July 2012, and has the same status as a bank branch in Turkey would have (National Bank of Georgia, Financial Indices, n.d.). Each of the banks has only one office and no other service centres on Georgia's territory. Moreover, reports prepared by the bank indicate that financial and credit transactions are relatively modest in comparison to other commercial banks operating in Georgia. This rather modest presence in the Georgian banking industry is explained by two factors: (a) Georgia's small economy is already over-banked, and (b) these branches simply followed their business to Georgia to perform services to a restricted number of clients (Patsuria 2012).

The enhancement of economic cooperation after 2004 and the growth of Turkey's macroeconomic figures stimulated the Georgian labour force to explore employment opportunities there. Especially after 2006, due to the cancellation of the visa regime between the two countries, an unprecedented number of people left for Turkey. In the following years, Turkey became one of the most important destinations for Georgian labour migration (ERGEM 2013). Remittances from Turkey to Georgia have shown some interesting patterns too. Those data show that just like in the cases of trade turnover and foreign investments, 2004 was a turning point for money transfers as well. Between 2004 and 2007, remittances from Turkey totalled $46.7 million; after the Free Trade Agreement was signed (21 November 2007), they reached $179.4 million in 2008–2013 (National Bank of Georgia, Statistics, n.d.).

Nonetheless, it is thought in some Georgian public and analytical circles that despite the Georgian leadership's work in engaging Turkish investments, the results fell short. As Alexander Rondeli, president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, put it during an interview: 'the Turkish great capital never came to Georgia' (Interview with Alexander Rondeli, 6/10/2014). Most of the interviewees shared that idea and agreed that the efforts to attract Turkish capital did not go hand in hand with the observable results. In their thinking, no matter how open the Georgian market was

for Turkish (or any) capital, it was not flexible and could be no more attractive than its actual size allowed.

Though the political forces in Georgia are for the most part positively oriented towards the expansion of Turkish capital and business, some political figures openly express their concern over Turkey's growing role. On top of the negative position taken by members of the Georgian Dream coalition during the pre-election campaign and following the elections, there are some political forces outside the parliament, namely the nationalist Free Georgia party and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, which have been particularly outspoken. For example, the head of the Free Georgia party, Kakha Kukava, mentioned in an interview:

> We certainly welcome the investments, but there are a lot of cases when the Turkish entrepreneurs' behaviour is obscure. For example, people selling shawarma in Batumi and Tbilisi central avenues and highways put Turkey's flag next to it. Their motivation is incomprehensible; what is the need for sticking the Turkish flag beside shawarma? Such actions are not perceived amicably in Georgia. (Interview with Kakha Kukava, 11/10/2014)

He added that his party perceived Turkey as a threat to Georgia's national interests, but also explained that he was against extreme measures and was of the opinion that Turkey's expansion to Georgia must be prevented by diplomatic means (ibid.).

Cultural–religious implications of Turkish soft power politics in Georgia

In parallel with the economic expansion, Turkish leadership has also attached a particular importance to religious, educational, cultural and humanitarian initiatives. Some interpreted the advancement of these initiatives as purposeful steps to shape a positive attitude towards Turkey in Georgian society; others saw a lack of synchronization among these policies, questioning whether they were systematically designed and implemented from one centre. The fact remains that just like in dozens of other countries, Turkey started to apply leverage to spread its religious, ideological and cultural influence in Georgia. By and large, those initiatives are coordinated by three increasingly influential state institutions attached to the Turkish Prime Ministry: the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (*Türkiye İşbirliği ve Kalkınma İdaresi*, TİKA), Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centres (Öktem 2012) and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet).

TİKA has implemented a number of large-scale projects in Georgia since 1994. The programs completed in recent years have included the improvement of social and economic infrastructures and services, repairing and furnishing educational programs (vocational, language teaching, etc.), health care and improvement of drinking water and sanitation. It should be noted, however, that the Georgian beneficiaries of TİKA are mostly the Muslim-populated territories, and only a few programs have been implemented in Tbilisi and Gori. According to the 2012 annual report, Georgia has received 4.23 per cent of TİKA's overall financial, vocational and technical support, which made Georgia the seventh largest TİKA beneficiary by spending size (Yıldız p. 24–25, 158–165). Georgia is also the second largest beneficiary in the post-Soviet space, after Kyrgyzstan. The 2014 annual report, which was published in late 2016, however, shows that Georgia's share from TİKA budget has significantly decreased as it was the sixth in the list of seven countries in the Central Asia and Caucasus region receiving assistance from TİKA (TİKA annual report, 2014, p. 28–31).

In 2007, Ankara decided to set up Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centres worldwide, which aimed at balancing the influence of the Gülen Schools and promoting the Turkish language, literature, history, culture and art. These centres have been established based on the model of the Goethe-Institut, British Council, Instituto Cervantes and other similar institutions (Kaya 2013, p. 56–59). Bülent Arinç, the Turkish deputy prime minister, inaugurated the Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre in Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University in May 2012. The chairman of the Yunus Emre Foundation, Ali Fuat Bilkan, mentioned in his opening address that the political and economic relations between Turkey and Georgia 'had attained a perfect level, thus the establishment of Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre in Tbilisi would be a bridge between the Turkish and the Georgian languages, culture and arts and would heighten the cooperation between the two countries' (The Tbilisi Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre Opened 2012). At the opening ceremony the president of the university noted that the centre would be 'of great service to the educational and cultural life of Georgia' (ibid.). According to the Embassy of Turkey in Georgia, the Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre has also opened departments of Turkish Studies in Akaki Tsereteli State University in Kutaisi, the second largest city in Georgia, and in the State Educational University of Akhaltsikhe, a city in the southeast of Georgia which is largely inhabited by Armenians (Dışişleri Bakanlığı 2012).

The activity of the third state institution, the Presidency of Religious Affairs or the Diyanet, has focused on a couple of spheres in Georgia which predominantly relate to religious and spiritual issues. Unlike the previous two institutions, the Diyanet has been active in Turkey since 1924, and has expanded its activity abroad since the 1980s. Subsequently, it has significant experience in dealing with Muslim communities abroad. According to the 2014 national census, only 10.7 per cent of the Georgian population identified as Muslim (2014 Census). However, the leaders of Muslim organizations claim that the real number is at least twice that, as many people don't feel comfortable declaring their religious identity. The Muslim populations in Georgia live primarily in the regions of Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and Adjara and comprise followers of both Shi'ism and Sunnism. The Diyanet and its consultants

provide various religious services in Georgia: helping Georgian nationals in organizing the hajj, teaching imams, training theologians and providing scholarships for post-graduate studies. It also coordinates financial support and advising in the restoration of mosques and the building of new ones (Korkut 2010, p. 117–139). The Turkish consulate in Batumi supports the Diyanet in spreading Islamic literature in Georgian in Adjara, and sends Turkish religious leaders there to preach in various mosques (Balci and Motika 2007, p. 349). The Diyanet leadership visits Georgia regularly and holds meetings with the leaders of Georgia's muftiates. It was also behind the initiative to open the second biggest madrasa in Georgia in the village of Meore Kesalo in 2000 (Ganich 2011). In 1995, the Presidency of Religious Affairs established the Eurasian Islamic Council (Avrasya Islam Şurası, EIC), which has become an important factor in promoting Turkey's interests among Muslim communities in the Balkans and former Soviet states (Öktem 2012, p. 89). So far, the EIC has organized eight conferences which have been attended by Georgian Muslim community leaders, including muftis from Adjara.

Despite the Diyanet's seemingly widespread involvement, Balci and Motika argue that its impact is far less significant than that of religious brotherhoods, Turkish transnational religious movements and missionary organizations and their local partners, which lack the Diyanet's means but are more efficient in promoting Islam and the re-Islamization of formerly Muslim people in Adjara (2007, p. 348–349). Thus, a number of religious brotherhoods and schools of Sufism, which are officially banned in Turkey since 1925, were quick to open branch offices in Adjara and in Tbilisi. For instance, there are at least a few dozen unregistered madrasas and convention centres in Adjara which allegedly belong to the Naqshbandi, Süleymancı, Nurchular and Fethullahcı religious movements and orders (Ivanov 2011, p. 93–94, Mkrtchyan and Khutsishvili 2014, p. 254). The informal operation of these organizations oftentimes collides with the activities of the Diyanet. In addition, Vladimir Ivanov claims that Turkish citizens of Georgian origin contributed to the spread of Islam in Georgia, particularly in Adjara (Ivanov 2011, p. 94). It is believed that Turkish businessmen operating in Georgia also support these movements (Balci and Motika 2007, p. 348).

In addition to the above-mentioned state institutions, a number of Turkish educational institutions belonging to the Fethullah Gülen network also operate in Georgia. Before the rift between the Turkish ruling party—especially Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—and Fethullah Gülen in December 2013, that network provided significant support to many Turkish policy initiatives. As long as the Turkish government and the Gülen network peacefully coexisted in Turkey, many of their activities in Georgia, and elsewhere for that matter, complemented each other and were mutually supportive. As independent actors the two groups have sometimes challenged each other and engaged in fierce competition, but by and large the government and the Gülen network have contributed to creating a positive image of Turkey among many

The Gülen schools in Georgia are widely known as "Turkish schools" and operate under the auspices of the Çağlar Educational Institutions (*Çağlar Eğitim Kurumları*, ÇEK), established in February 1993. Since then, the ÇEK has established seven schools and one university in Georgia[6]. With the exception of the first two schools and the university, the other five were established after the Rose Revolution during Saakashvili's presidency. Turkish citizens are largely responsible for both administrative duties and the teaching at the Gülen schools. These schools are known for state-of-the-art facilities and advanced technical solutions. They pay special attention to participation in the Turkish Language Olympiads (*Türkçe Olimpiyatları*), which allow students to visit Turkey, be acquainted with the program organizers and establish contacts. Notably, a flexible and complementary system has been established between the schools and the university. Pre-school and middle school graduates receive tuition fee discounts when studying at university. During their university years, students also have the opportunity to periodically take part in Turkish cultural events and often visit Turkish educational and academic institutions. Even though these schools were established by the Gülenists, according to a professor at the International Black Sea University, there is no overt propaganda for the Gülen movement or for Turkey in the curriculum (Interview with Nika Chitadze, 10/10/2014). Meanwhile, the Turkish flag flies alongside the Georgian flag in front of all the buildings, and both flags, shaking hands with each other, are imprinted on the logos of all the schools. At any rate, students and teachers encounter Turkey-associated symbols every day. In fact, Balci and Motika claimed in 2007 that the Fethullahi schools 'contribute to balance the poor image of Turks in Georgia, and over the medium term they will certainly educate some of the country's new elite' (2007, p. 348). The Turkish Embassy in Georgia also carries out programs not listed in the embassy's website. For instance, Alexander Rondeli said that his organization had implemented the Atatürk Lessons in Leadership program with the assistance of the Turkish Embassy in Tbilisi. During the program's four months of operation, around two dozen officials from different ministries delivered lectures on different topics, and in the last week of the course a Turkish diplomat gave a series of lectures titled 'Atatürk's Role in Establishing the New State'. Tens of thousands of Georgian Laris were allocated for that program (Interview with Alexander Rondeli, 6/10/2014). In light of the various Turkish outreach projects in Georgia, the next important question is whether they are having the desired effect.

Emerging disapproval towards Turkish policy

A public opinion survey conducted every year between 2009 and 2013 by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) (n.d.) shows a notable tendency among Georgians (cross-country data sets 2009–2015). Two questions were asked to gauge public opinion about the Turks: (a) what people thought of doing joint business with Turks and (b) what they thought of Georgian

women marrying Turks. The following table (Table 1.1) reflects the change in public opinion throughout the last five years.

The president of the CRRC noted that the Georgian public is in fact predominantly in favour of developing interstate relations with Turkey, rather than enhancing inter-societal and interpersonal relations (Interview with Turmanidze).

Taking the above-mentioned facts into consideration, what is the reason for the observed differences in perception between the Georgian public and the political leadership regarding the Turkish presence in Georgia? Which groups (public, political or institutional) are expressing opinions that differ from those of the authorities in regards to Turkey's growing influence? One of these, of course, is the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has been an important factor in shaping Georgian identity and has often played a major role in domestic political discourse. Although 'its impact on Georgian foreign policy can best be described as marginal' (Jones and Kakhishvili 2013, p. 22), it has nonetheless been instrumental in shaping and disseminating anti-Turkish sentiments within Georgian society. With apparent endorsement from the Georgian Dream coalition, the church grew more outspoken about its religious objectives, which included defending the exclusive rights of the Orthodox Church in Georgia, re-Christianization in Islamic communities and defying rising Islamist tendencies.

As a matter of fact, Georgians' attitudes towards Turkey and the Turks also continue to be shaped by specific historical factors. Primarily, the memory of conflicts and encounters during the Ottoman period is still vivid in the general Georgian public perception (Djikija 1947, Paičaje 1989). Some analysts contextualize the historical factor of public opinion within modern influences. Rondeli argues that '[without] Turkey's support in the first years of independence, it was quite possible that Georgia might not even exist' (Interview with Alexander Rondeli, 6/10/2014). Çelikpala similarly stresses that 'Turkey prevented Georgia from turning into a failed state by supporting

Table 1.1 Public opinion about Turks in Georgia

Date	*What do you think of doing joint business with the Turks?*	*Do you approve of Georgian women marrying the Turks?*
2009	75% Yes	19% Yes
2010	66% Yes	19% Yes
2011	66% Yes	21% Yes
2012	65% Yes	20% Yes
2013	72% Yes	23% Yes
2015	61% Yes	27% Yes

the efforts to create a strong and efficient state' (Çelikpala 2007, p. 28). 'At the same time', Rondeli goes on,

> [T]he historical memory is, in any case, alive, and a great part of the population is still vigilant against the Turks. The public perception about the Turks may be divided in two groups: those, who mostly approve a Russia-oriented policy, do not acknowledge the Turks a priori, and those who are more realistic, are for the Turks. When you are under Russia's pressure, then you naturally have to look at both Turkey and Iran differently. Of course, a large [anti-Turkish] propaganda is carried out for most of the part by circles closely related to the church, sometimes they deserve it and sometimes not. Anti-Turkish propaganda has always existed, for example, if it comes to the Turkish brothels, then the Georgian mass media trumpets on and on, but in case of Georgian brothels, not a single word is said. (Interview with Alexander Rondeli, 6/10/2014)

Kapanadze comments that 'the roles of Russia and Turkey have been often discussed in public debates. And in this comparison it is being pinpointed that Turkey in fact has occupied more territories from Georgia than Russia did, so what is the difference?' (Interview with Sergi Kapanadze, 7/10/2014).

For his part, Saakashvili regrets not having sent many young people to Turkey for travel and studies during his term.

> Very few people in my country actually know Turkey. This explains why some old prejudices remain. There are many prejudices left behind. But they could be easily overcome. It was overcome at the government level. But (...) we did not realize that prejudices prevailed among some parts of the population. (Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili 2013, p. 20–21)

As Göksel puts it, the Turkish–Georgian economic and strategic integration projects have not been accompanied by the development of ties between opinion shapers and analysts/strategists in the civil society, think tank or media communities. Strikingly, neither the strategic setting as it affects Georgia–Turkey relations nor the ups and downs in bilateral relations have received much attention in public debates (Göksel 2013, p. 5). In Kapanadze's view, Turkey's cultural policy is not visible in the public, despite all efforts. It does not push the public to become pro-Turkish, and Georgian traditions are not being replaced with Turkish ones. He claims that Turkey does play a significant role, but not as much as the EU and the US do (Interview with Sergi Kapanadze, 7/10/2014). On the other hand, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, director of the Institute for Eurasian Studies, claims that because of Turkish 'cultural expansion' to Georgia, 'an image of Turkey is cultivated in Georgia, as a very advanced nation, which as it turns out, had done only positive things during its history' (Mikhaylov 2015).

Turkish organizations run a variety of humanitarian, cultural and educational programs, which have attracted wide attention in Georgia. Those projects are serving their purpose and generally a positive rather than negative image of Turkey has been slowly but steadily taking shape in Georgia. Simultaneously, different political and social groups are trying to reach out to the public and communicate what they see as the "true nature" of the Turkish presence in Georgia, with various negative implications. Religious and historical arguments are widely used to back up their opinions, which still seem to be quite dominant among the Georgian population.

Adjara: questions of cultural and religious heritage

Besides achievements in bilateral cooperation, certain complexities still exist between the two countries. We will focus here mostly on the emblematic and revealing case of Adjara.

The National Statistic Office of Georgia has published a report on the population of Adjara, which reveals some interesting trends. First, the population in the administrative region of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara has grown by more than 26,000 people between 2004 and 2014, reaching 396,000 (National Statistic Office of Georgia, 2014a). Besides internal migration, the growth in the population is due to several thousand Turkish citizens of Georgian origin being granted Georgian citizenship (the circulated figure is 20,000); they are assumed to have settled mainly in Batumi. As was argued in various interviews, only Turkish nationals who were able to prove their Georgian origin were granted citizenship.

The Turkish economic and cultural presence is more visible in Adjara than in other parts of Georgia. According to data from 2002, more than 120,000 Muslims lived there, amounting to 30 per cent of all Georgian Muslims. The figure is likely to be higher today. Their main places of residence are Batumi, the mountainous regions of Keda and to a lesser extent Khulo, Kobuleti and Shuakhevi (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 107). A 2013 report also explains that the socioeconomic conditions in the mountainous regions of Adjara are harsh, and the local Muslim population undergoes various manipulations from the Turkish side in addition to facing discrimination by the local self-governing authorities (ibid.).

Turkish religious organizations have a few dozen boarding schools in Adjara where children from poor families get free education, after which many go to Turkey for religious studies. Notably, since 1993 thousands of Georgian citizens—mostly from Adjara and Kvemo Kartli, a region of southeastern Georgia with a large Muslim population—have left for Turkey for religious education (both higher and vocational) and Quranic courses (Aslamova 2014). Most of them have returned and enlisted for service in mosques in different Georgian settlements. It is worth noting that besides Turkey, some Georgian Muslims also leave for Iran and Saudi Arabia (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, there were 311 mosques in Georgia

(Diyanet 2014), although most of them are prayer houses officially registered as mosques. Based on data from 2009, 184 of those mosques are in Adjara, 140 of which have been built in recent years.

In the past few years, debates over a number of programs implemented by Turkey in Georgia have become especially intense, particularly concerning the restoration of mosques or construction of new ones. The Georgian Orthodox Church is resolutely struggling against the Turkish presence in Georgia, fighting for the conversion of local Muslims to Christianity and the reconstruction of Georgian churches on Turkish territory. A number of Georgian clergymen who preach about Adjara's de-Turkification have been most renowned for their anti-Turkish hard-line stance. They organize mass baptisms administered 'for the sake of getting people back to their ancestors' religion' (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 122–123). One of the priests, Father Theodor, states that 'Islam came to Adjara with blood and violence (...) Those who adopted Islam stayed pure-blooded Georgians and refused to mix their blood with the Turkish blood' (Aslamova 2014). The construction of a huge Orthodox church right in the centre of Khulo, a predominantly Muslim town in Adjara, is a vivid instance of the Georgian Orthodox Church's efforts. The local population saw that step as provocative and conflictual (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 121). Other notable actions include the dismantling of mosques and minarets in a number of Muslim-populated settlements (Chela, Samtatskaro, Nigvziani and Tsintskaro), burning down a mosque (in the village of Mughanlo, Gardabani region) or even protests against the Friday prayers in some mosques, which some may argue are directed by the Orthodox Church.

Crucially, some analysts and political circles hint at the development of potential hotbeds of tension based on religious identity. Some people claim that Turkey's activity in Georgia and its support to Georgian Muslims is targeted at creating a stronghold in Georgia. However, it is Georgian Muslims, and to an extent Muslims of other ethnic groups, who find those claims unacceptable, because those accusations paint them as incomplete Georgians and alienated citizens. In addition, they insist that Turkey pursues economic interests in Georgia at large, and Georgian Muslims lack effective tools to become a fifth column for Turkey (Menagarishvili *et al.* 2013, p. 128). The last few years have seen more and more reports filed about confrontations, threats, intimidations, verbal offences and warnings between the residents of communities in Guria, Kvemo Kartli and especially Adjara. There were reports of Christian villagers referring to their Muslim neighbours as 'Tatars' and 'followers of some foreign religion', which were perceived negatively and in a pejorative light by Georgian Muslims (Sutidze 2013). Emerging instances of minor conflict prompted many young people in Adjara to reconfigure their religious identities 'in order to be perceived as more legitimate members of the Georgian nation' (Liles 2012, p. 2).

Another controversial issue in the relations between Georgia and Turkey involves the maintenance and disposition of the cultural heritage of both countries. Alongside the development of interstate relations, particularly

since 2005, the Georgian Orthodox Church has been consistently posing the issue of reconstructing a few churches and monasteries in the northeastern part of Turkey (Oshki, Ishkhan, Khandzta, Otkhta, Ardashen and Khakhuli) (Pravoslavie.ru 2013). Although the authenticity of the Georgian Orthodox Church's claim to those sites is regularly questioned by the Armenian Apostolic Church and some Armenian historians and art historians, at this point the Georgian Orthodox Church is more persistent in pressing the reconstruction of those churches. Simultaneously, the Turkish side insists on the reconstruction of the Aziziye Mosque in Batumi and the repair of the Kvirike Mosque in Kobuleti and the Ahmadiya and Jakeli Mosques in Akhaltsikhe. It should be noted that the conditions put forward by the two parties and the lists of religious structures on the table periodically change (Mindiashvili 2012).

Georgian religious leaders insist that before talking about building a new mosque or repairing one in Adjara, one should seriously address the issue of preserving the churches of the Tayk-Kgharjk (Tao-Klarjeti) diocese, located mostly in northeastern Turkey. They also argue about their inalienable right to administer religious ceremonies and services there. The Georgian clergy demands that just like Armenians, Greeks and Jews, Georgians should be granted minority rights in Turkey, which will provide them with legal status and which they believe will be followed by the return of churches and monasteries to the Georgian Orthodox Church[7]. The Turkish side counter-argues that even if the Georgians living in Turkey were granted religious minority status due to their growing number, it would have no retroactive effect on the return of the supposedly Georgian church estates and inventory seized in 1936.

In discussing the realities in Adjara and the status of Georgian religious buildings in Turkey, one might get the impression that the whole Georgian public disagrees with Turkish policy either silently or audibly. In fact, the following argument by Eka Tkeshelashvili reflects the mindset of Saakashvili's presidency:

> [F]rankly speaking (...) Turkey has never played any deconstructive role in Adjara and has done nothing which might cause anybody's discontent. For those living in Adjara, Turkey's neighbourhood is very beneficiary in essence; active cooperation in economic, touristic and trade spheres creates no uneasiness at all. (Interview with Eka Tkashelashvili, 7/10/2014)

She also criticized those organizations and public circles which condemn Turkey but glorify Russia, calling them 'deconstructive and anti-democratic forces' (ibid.).

Conclusion

Georgia's importance for Turkey is more than evident and the annually grow- The analysis of political and economic

dynamics indicates that in deepening bilateral relations, Turkey and Georgia pursue different objectives deriving from different (geo)political realities and ambitions. If Turkey aspires to a geopolitical, economic, religious and socio-cultural presence in Georgia, then Georgian policy towards Turkey is based primarily on trade, economic and social factors. Most Georgian public and political figures, as well as the vast majority of the research community, is positively oriented towards Turkey's presence in Georgia's economic and strategic spheres. Nevertheless, there is visible and growing resistance from some political forces, the Georgian Orthodox Church and church-affiliated circles. Due to the importance of these groups for Georgian society, a sizeable part of the population supports the resistance. The people debate about the inherent problems that Georgia faces when it allows a strong Turkish presence in Georgia's strategically important domains. Since 2004, Turkey's growing influence in the Georgian economy, Georgia's engagement in the energy programs directed from the Caspian region to the West and the ongoing ambiguity in relations between Georgia and Russia have created a systemic opportunity for Turkey to extend its political influence in Georgia.

Religion also plays a role in Turkey's policy towards Georgia. Unlike the economic and political dimensions of Turkey's soft power politics, the religious component faces certain difficulties and hurdles. The criticism and counteractions by the Georgian Orthodox Church and different sections of Georgian society have visibly limited the options for Turkish religious influence. In spite of that, a limited number of communities in Georgia are poised to cooperate with Turkey in religious affairs. For now, Turkey has not been able to completely rely on these groups for two reasons: their number is small and cooperation could lead to conflict with the religious majority organization in Georgia. This indicates that the religious part of Turkey's soft power policy towards Georgia remains subordinated to the general goals. As manifestations of soft power on religious groups have become more visible, the distinction between the religious aspects and the cultural and economic aspects of soft power has grown.

Notes

1 Certain ideas and approaches of this research have been discussed in my previous works 'The Kars-Akhalkalaki Railway Project: Why Armenia Should Revisit its Position', *Turkish Review*, 6 (3), 2016, p. 130–135, and 'Cooperation Paradigms in the South Caucasus and Beyond: Making Sense of Turkish–Georgian relations', *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines*, 4, 2014, p. 103–125.

2 This argument was made by Davutoğlu as an advisor to the prime minister. The script of the interview was published as an article: *Davutoğlu* 2008, p. 80.

3 The latter has built more than 20 airports both in and out of Turkey.

4 The Batumi Airport is to be administered by TAV until 2027, and the Tbilisi Airport exploitation contract was prolonged from predetermined 2027 to 2037.

5 Passengers departing from Hopa check-in at the Turkish Airlines Office situated at the Hopa port, and then they are taken to the Batumi Airport by HAVAS company buses. That journey takes about 30 minutes, and what is more, the buses do not

stop at the Turkey–Georgia border. Then they pass on the territory of the Batumi Airport, and passengers are taken to the departure hall waiting to get on board the planes. Upon the arrival, the same HAVAS busses meet the passengers leaving for Hopa right beside the plane, which takes people to Hopa, once again never having a stop on the border control point. The flight numbers from Batumi and Hopa are the same, but the tickets have quite different prices, since in case of Hopa there are domestic prices, and Batumi Airport taxes are not paid.

6 Schools belonging to that network are: *Tbilisi Private Demireli School*, est. in 1993; *R. Sahin Friendship Primary Secondary School*, est. in 1994; *Kutaisi Niko Nikoladze Primary Secondary School*, est. in 2004; *Primary School "Skhivi"*, est. in 2011; *Tiflis Nikolaz Tsereteli International School*, est. in 2006; *Rustabi Rustaveli Primary Secondary School*, est. in 2007; *Marneuli Agmashenebeli Primary School*, est. in 2011; and *International Black Sea University* in Tbilisi, est. in 1995.

7 Georgian Patriarchate suggests Turkey allow services in Christian churches in return for allowing a mosque to be built in Georgia, April 2013.

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