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Research Report

Georgia and Abkhazia caught between Turkey and Russia: Turkey's changing relations with Russia and the West in 2015-2016 and their impact on Georgia and Abkhazia

SWP Comments, No. 54/2016

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Weiss, Andrea; Zabanova, Yana (2016) : Georgia and Abkhazia caught between Turkey and Russia: Turkey's changing relations with Russia and the West in 2015-2016 and their impact on Georgia and Abkhazia, SWP Comments, No. 54/2016, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256429>

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Georgia and Abkhazia Caught between Turkey and Russia

Turkey's Changing Relations with Russia and the West in 2015–2016 and Their Impact on Georgia and Abkhazia

Andrea Weiss and Yana Zabanova

Following seven months of severely strained relations, Turkey and Russia began to mend ties in late June 2016, when President Erdogan sent a conciliatory letter to his Russian counterpart. After the attempted coup d'état in Turkey three weeks later, Russian President Putin called Erdogan to express his support, providing added impetus to the normalisation process. By contrast, delayed and cautious reactions by Western leaders, as well as their criticism of the measures taken by the government after the failed coup, have caused disappointment in Turkey, where anti-Western sentiment is on the rise. While these developments have largely been discussed in terms of their implications for the Middle East, they have also affected Turkey and Russia's shared neighbourhood in the South Caucasus, including Georgia and its breakaway region of Abkhazia. The Turkish-Russian crisis called into question Abkhazia's strong ties with the large and active Turkish Abkhaz diaspora, an important economic and societal actor in the de-facto state. In Georgia proper, the impact has been more ambivalent, with potential implications for the country's Euro-Atlantic integration processes.

Relations between Turkey and Russia have long influenced their shared neighbourhood, the Caucasus. From the 18th century up until their demise, the Russian and Ottoman Empires vied for influence and territorial control in the region. For Georgians and Abkhaz, this meant being repeatedly tossed between the two rival powers, a legacy that has left its imprint on their complex relations with both Russia and Turkey. During the Cold War, Turkey's Western-oriented foreign policy largely ignored the

Because Abkhazia enjoys only limited recognition by the international community, the entity, its authorities, officials and government are all considered "de facto". To avoid redundancy, this publication does not use the qualifier in all instances, a pragmatic decision that should not be interpreted as taking a substantive stance on the issue of Abkhazia's independence.

Andrea Weiss and Yana Zabanova are researchers in the EU-funded project ISSICEU (Intra- and Inter-Societal Sources of Instability in the Caucasus and EU Opportunities to Respond). The views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

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Caucasus, then part of the Soviet Union. It was only after the collapse of the USSR that Turkey sought a more prominent role in the region, first in the early 1990s and then from 2002 onwards, in line with Ahmet Davutoglu's "strategic depth" doctrine, which calls for an "an activist engagement with all regional systems in Turkey's neighbourhood". Intent on becoming an energy and transport hub, Turkey has prioritised cooperation with Azerbaijan and Georgia on major regional infrastructure projects, such as oil and gas pipelines and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars rail link (currently under construction).

Today, Turkey and Georgia describe their mutual relationship as a strategic partnership; Turkey's role in the economic sphere is accurately described as that of a "merchant hegemon" (a term coined by the Caucasus expert Michael Cecire). Ever since Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, Turkey has been its leading trade partner and a major investor, playing an important role in softening the impact of the 2005 Russian trade embargo. A free trade agreement between Georgia and Turkey came into force in 2008, and visa requirements were bilaterally abolished in 2009. Turkey has consistently voiced support for Georgia's territorial integrity. From the mid-1990s onwards, it has also engaged in military cooperation with Georgia, providing military aid and troop training and modernising Georgian military facilities such as airfields.

The depth of Turkish-Georgian military cooperation has nevertheless largely been determined by Turkey's relations with Russia and the West. Because of Turkey's traditional reluctance to see a NATO or US presence in the Black Sea, it expressed reservations about Georgia's accession plans at the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit and invoked the Montreux Convention during the 2008 Russian-Georgian war to limit the passage of US naval ships into the Black Sea.

Despite the thriving intergovernmental cooperation (which has largely remained unaffected by political changes in Georgia), for Georgian society the geopolitical divisions between Turkey and Russia also reflect

fundamental civilisational rifts. Turkey is perceived first and foremost as a Muslim and culturally alien country. There are also very few civil society contacts between the two nations. By contrast, there is still a strong sentiment of cultural proximity to Russia, although the latter is viewed as a hegemonic power and, because of its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and its military presence there, as an "occupier."

Turkey does not recognize Abkhazia and has never lifted its trade and transportation embargo, imposed in 1996. However, Turkey's large and well-organized Abkhaz diaspora has defied legal restrictions by carrying out trade and investment activities in the republic, with Russia's tacit consent. As a result, Turkey accounts for some 18 percent of Abkhazia's total trade turnover, second only to Russia.

The Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora of around 500,000 (by its own estimates) dates back to the mass exile of ethnic Abkhaz to the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s and 1870s. It has been an active advocate of Abkhaz interests in Turkey since the early 1990s, lobbying for the restoration of a direct transport link with Abkhazia, organising Abkhaz-themed events in Turkey, facilitating the visits of Turkish businesspeople, MPs, municipal officials and journalists to Abkhazia, and even organising the polling process in Istanbul in the 2014 Abkhaz presidential elections.

The Abkhaz authorities, in turn, view the diaspora as an important political ally, as well as an economic and demographic resource, and have encouraged Turkish Abkhaz to resettle in Abkhazia. Today, the number of Turkish-Abkhaz "returnees" in the republic is estimated at 3,500, with the first official census expected to take place in 2017. As residence in Abkhazia is not a requirement for Abkhaz citizenship (which is open to all ethnic Abkhaz worldwide), the number of diaspora representatives holding Abkhaz passports is much larger (probably around 7,500). Many of them do business in Abkhazia. It is this special relationship that the Russian-Turkish crisis in 2015–2016 put to the test.

Abkhaz sanctions as a declaration of loyalty to Russia

Few took notice when, in January 2016, the tiny Abkhazia with its estimated population of 240,000 announced its decision to impose sanctions on Turkey, becoming Russia's only ally to do so. With less than 50 million EUR worth of imports from Turkey in 2014, Abkhazia's impact on the Turkish economy is close to zero. On the contrary, it was the Abkhaz economy that was more likely to suffer from disrupted links with Turkey. It would be easy to jump to the conclusion – as some observers did – that Abkhazia was forced to sever its ties to Turkey under pressure from Russia. Yet the way in which the sanctions were designed and implemented (or not implemented) strongly illustrates the importance of paying attention to the existing leeway for balancing and to local practices, instead of simply focusing on grand geopolitical narratives.

The Abkhaz announcement came two weeks after Vladislav Surkov, President Putin's aide in charge of relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, travelled to Sukhum(i) in late December 2015. (Since Georgia and Abkhazia use different versions of many place names, e.g. *Sukhumi* vs *Sukhum*, this publication opts for status-neutral alternatives.) At a press conference with the Abkhaz leader Raul Khajimba, Surkov warned that "some circles in Turkey view Abkhazia as their zone of interests", signalling that Russia was intent on putting Abkhazia's loyalty to the test. Whilst acknowledging the diaspora's special role, Surkov stressed the need to ban Turkish contractors from participating in infrastructure projects financed with Russian money, and to develop other restrictive measures. Locally, the news was met with surprise and consternation by those concerned about the sanctions' potentially negative impact on the Abkhaz economy and its ties with the diaspora.

The full list of sanctions was made public on 20 January 2016. It includes restrictions on the import of Turkish fish, fruits and vegetables; on the participation of Turkish

companies in infrastructure investment projects financed by Russia; and on the activities of Turkish-registered NGOs (effective 1 March 2016). In December 2015, the authorities had already announced that they would ban the lease of Turkish fishing vessels, on which Abkhaz fishing companies tended to rely.

To justify the introduction of these restrictive measures, the Abkhaz authorities pointed to Article 4 of the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership with Russia (2014), which obliges Abkhazia and Russia to coordinate their foreign policies. Incidentally, the final text of the Treaty (originally entitled "On Alliance and *Integration*") was itself the product of compromise after fierce protests in Abkhazia over such controversial provisions as opening Abkhaz citizenship to Russians and merging the Russian and Abkhaz armed forces.

Implications for Abkhaz-Turkish economic ties

A closer look at the design of the sanctions and their subsequent implementation reveals the Abkhaz authorities' desire to minimise negative outcomes for the economy. The sanctions did not target such major import categories from Turkey as construction materials, fuel or textiles. Food imports from Turkey, although important, had already suffered the previous year as a result of the strong US dollar and weakening Russian rouble, the currency used in Abkhazia. With the price of Turkish food imports nearly doubling, many Abkhaz entrepreneurs had decided to switch to Russian products. The restrictions on Turkish NGOs were moot as well: virtually none are present and active in Abkhazia. The truly important partners for the Abkhaz authorities – the Abkhaz diaspora organisations – do not have official branches in Abkhazia and mainly organise their events in Turkey, inviting Abkhaz participants.

The ban on leasing Turkish fishing vessels, however, was potentially far more problematic. *Hamsa*, or European anchovy,

is the main commercial fish species in Abkhazia, and fish products are among the top export categories to Turkey. As Abkhazia does not have its own ships, it has been a common practice to lease them from Turkey (with a much smaller share coming from Crimea in recent years). The ban was announced abruptly at the beginning of the *hamsa* fishing season, which usually lasts from December until March, leaving businesses no time to adjust. The original plan to use Russian ships as substitutes failed because the latter lacked the capacity to fill the catch quotas. In the end, the ban was quietly ignored.

In addition, references to “Turkish companies” or “Turkish citizens” in the text of the sanctions are legally ambiguous. The diaspora Abkhaz, who conduct most Turkish trade and investment activities in Abkhazia, hold Abkhaz passports and are viewed exclusively as Abkhaz citizens under Abkhaz laws, which makes them exempt from the restrictive measures. Moreover, companies with Turkish capital are usually registered as Abkhaz companies rather than joint ventures, which means that the sanctions do not apply to them either.

Apart from the Abkhaz sanctions per se, Russia’s reintroduction of the visa requirement for Turkish citizens from 1 January 2016 has created an obstacle to diaspora contacts with the homeland. To travel to Abkhazia, Turkish Abkhaz use Sochi Airport in Russia, located some 10 km from the border crossing at the River Psou. Instead of the usually uncomplicated procedure, diaspora visitors now have to apply for a double or multiple-entry Russian visa in advance. At the peak of the crisis, some were subjected to lengthy interrogations upon arrival in Sochi or at the Psou border crossing.

In principle, it is possible to circumvent the need for a Russian visa by entering Abkhazia from the south via Georgia proper, for which Turkish citizens do not require a visa. This option is not used by the diaspora Abkhaz, however, and many are not aware of it at all, having relied on the uncompli-

cated border formalities at Psou until late 2015. Travelling through Georgia also entails a risk. According to its Law on Occupied Territories (2008), it is a crime to conduct economic activities in Abkhazia without the Georgian government’s permission. So is merely entering Abkhazia from Russia (which many diaspora representatives have done). Both are punishable by very steep fines. In addition, the southern crossing over Inguri bridge is located far from major airports and is poorly equipped.

However, diaspora Abkhaz from Turkey who have obtained Abkhaz passports have not been affected by the changes in the visa regime. They can exit Turkey with their Turkish passports and enter Russia with the Abkhaz ones, since Russia recognizes Abkhazia and has a visa-free regime with it. This fact may increase the demand for Abkhaz passports among the diaspora representatives with regular contacts with Abkhazia.

The resilience of societal and economic ties between Turkey and Abkhazia and their potential to adapt do not mean that the impact of the Russian-Turkish crisis has been negligible. The tensions, uncertainty and political risks resulting from the crisis lowered incentives for potential investors from Turkey to enter Abkhazia’s closed market. Russian visa requirements for Turkish citizens continue to be an obstacle to business and social exchange. Although the Abkhaz sanctions were either not implemented or had a limited effect, they did raise transaction costs. As one Turkish-Abkhaz businessman complained in an interview with the authors, the most direct result for him was the higher costs of processing cargo at Turkish customs. Many of these obstacles persist despite the ongoing normalisation in Russian-Turkish relations.

The diaspora’s balancing strategy

The Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey reacted with great concern to the Russian-Turkish crisis. The Federation of Abkhaz Associations (*Abhaz Dernekleri Federasyonu*, or Abhazfed), which is the leading diaspora organi-

sation, established in 2010, has been known for its generally pro-Russian stance. In the wake of the rift between Russia and Turkey, Abkhazfed publicly stated its loyalty to the Turkish government, yet refrained from criticising Russia directly. Shortly after Turkey's downing of a Russian military jet on the Syrian border, Abkhazfed representatives visited the Russian Ambassador in Ankara to discuss future relations and promote dialogue. In April 2016, diaspora activists and Turkish think-tank analysts took part in a round table in Sukhum(i) with the participation of Abkhaz officials, as well as Russian MPs, businesspeople, and pro-government experts, to discuss options for improving Russian-Turkish relations. It is likely that the Abkhaz diaspora's conciliatory stance towards Russia protected it from harsher repercussions.

As for the domestic situation in Turkey after the attempted coup, including the crackdown on the Gülen network, its impact on Abkhazia has been limited. The Gülen movement does not have a strong presence in Abkhazia; the only Gülen boarding school that ever existed in the republic (Basharan Lyceum) was closed in 2010. Although several members of the Abkhaz political elite, including the Foreign Ministry's representative in Turkey, Inar Gitsba, are Basharan graduates, they do not maintain strong ties with the movement and have not been affected. Diaspora organisations in Turkey have largely continued business as usual as well. If anything, Turkey's post-coup intensification of cooperation with Russia has been welcomed in Abkhazia and among the diaspora.

Between trade and Turkophobia: Georgia's geopolitical and economic orientations

For Georgia, unlike Abkhazia, the crisis in Turkish-Russian relations was of less immediate importance. With few exceptions, the Georgian media, political establishment and civil society abstained from specifically discussing the implications of the crisis for

Georgia. A programme aired by the private Georgian TV channel Maestro on 26 November 2015 is illustrative of a debate that by and large did not take place in the open. The broadcast discussed the question of whom Georgia should side with in the conflict, rather than inquiring into the implications of the crisis.

Lasha Bugadze, a writer and the main guest in the programme, challenged the formulation of the question. He argued that the TV programme makers deliberately drew on popular perceptions of Russia and Turkey as civilisational fault lines, and thus tacitly embraced the propagandist logic of the Kremlin. Further, such a question a priori precludes an alignment with European values, which should be seen as separate from the EU and its exclusive claim to represent them, similarly to Orthodoxy from Russia.

The TV programme and its framing clearly showed how narratives grounded in geopolitical interpretations prevail in Georgian public discourse. According to these narratives, the small country of Georgia has been torn between two powers in a centuries-long struggle. While Russia is represented as the aggressive Goliath, Turkey plays the Muslim menace that may no longer conquer territories, but exercises power through cultural and economic means instead.

The Georgian framing of relations with Russia and Turkey in terms of civilisational alignments exposes a number of fault lines, one of them between a large majority of the population and a liberally-minded minority constituted by parts of the political elite. The former harbours anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish sentiments in line with narratives prevalent in national historiography and with dominant currents in the Georgian Orthodox Church. By contrast, out of liberal convictions and above all pragmatic considerations, the minority tends to welcome and encourage close (and ever closer) economic, political and military ties with Turkey. Yet another fault line runs between business preferences and perceived cultural proximity. According to a 2015 Caucasus

Barometer survey, 61 percent of Georgians approved of doing business with Turks, while a mere 27 percent approved of Georgian women marrying Turks.

The existence of anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish stereotypes and prejudices constitutes a tool box for political mobilisation, as could be seen, for instance, in the 2012 parliamentary election campaign in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. Situated on the Black Sea coast at the border with Turkey, Adjara boasts a significant Muslim population as a result of centuries-long Ottoman rule, along with a significant presence of Turkish companies of all sizes, a lively entertainment industry (including casinos, which are banned in Turkey), and a sizeable Turkish expatriate community. In the campaign for the October 2016 parliamentary elections, these issues once again resurfaced on a national scale. David Tarkhan-Mouravi, the leader of the Alliance for Patriots, a right-wing oriented party bloc, claimed in an election debate that Turkey was an enemy not only to Georgia, but to the whole civilised world. He compared the roughly 20 percent of Georgia's territory that Russia has occupied to the 33 percent of Georgian territory that Turkey "occupies", referring to areas with Georgian populations in Eastern Turkey, including the historical Georgian province of Tao-Klarjeti. The implication was that Turkey was gradually annexing Adjara.

Turkey as a less predictable Euro-Atlantic partner for Georgia

Apart from valuing Turkey as a leading trade and investment partner, both the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement governments have seen Turkey as a vehicle and vector of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. After the crisis with Russia broke out in November 2015, Turkey became a vocal supporter of Georgia's NATO membership. In April 2016, departing from Turkey's usual stance, President Erdogan called for NATO forces in the Black Sea (where none are currently deployed). As

Erdogan told NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, Russia's massive military build-up following the 2014 annexation of Crimea was turning the Black Sea into a "Russian lake".

At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO decided to explore options for expanding its presence in the Black Sea. Although many predicted that Turkey would withdraw support after its reconciliation with Russia, at the October 2016 meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels, Turkey was one of the six NATO members to express a willingness to contribute to strengthening NATO's presence in the Black Sea "on land, at sea and in the air". A more detailed discussion is expected to take place in January 2017.

The announcement was duly welcomed in Georgia, but the actual shape of the proposed force remains to be seen. Turkey's relations with NATO remain ambivalent (there are both pro-NATO and pro-Eurasianist factions within the Turkish military and political elites), and President Erdogan has hinted at applying for full Turkish membership in the Russian- and Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

The failed coup d'état in Turkey has had a more immediate impact on Georgia than the Russian-Turkish crisis. Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili incidentally became the first foreign head of government to visit Turkey after the July 15 events. Although his visit had been scheduled in advance, he used the occasion to strongly condemn the attempted coup and voice support for the Turkish government.

Since the failed coup, Ankara has called on a number of countries in the Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus – including Georgia – to close down schools affiliated with the Gülen movement. There are seven such schools in Georgia, all of them operated by the Çağlar Eğitim Kurumları Association (three are located in Tbilisi, and one each in Kutasi, Batumi, Rustavi and Marneuli). Yasin Temizkan, the Turkish consul in Adjara's capital Batumi, blamed the Refaiddin Shahin College in Batumi for

“breeding” terrorists. However, the schools have gone through lengthy accreditation procedures with the Georgian Ministry of Education and enjoy an excellent reputation among the Georgian middle class. So far, Georgia (unlike Azerbaijan) has largely resisted these calls. Although one school in Tbilisi was closed, pupils were merely transferred to the two remaining schools.

While the post-coup developments in Turkey have undermined its role as Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration partner, the October 2016 Georgian parliamentary elections have sidelined the most vocal domestic advocates of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic path. The Republican Party and the Free Democrats headed by former minister of defence Irakli Alasania, which had left the Georgian Dream coalition in 2016 and 2014 respectively, failed to pass the five-per-cent threshold. The Alliance for Patriots, which toyed with anti-Turkish stereotypes and to which some analysts ascribe a pro-Russian leaning, was able to enter parliament, but scored only the required five per cent. The Centrist party, which had openly campaigned for Russian passports and pensions to be distributed to all Georgian citizens, was banned from running in the elections by a court order. The race was dominated by the contest between the United National Movement and Georgian Dream, which won the majority of votes.

The new Georgian Dream government is likely to maintain current relations with Turkey in the economic and security spheres, continue attempts at a balanced relationship with Russia, and largely stick to the Euro-Atlantic direction. However, it is not likely to push as hard for Euro-Atlantic integration as in the past, nor is Turkey going to play a significant role as a vector in this regard.

All in all, developments in Turkish-Russian relations will keep affecting Georgia and its neighbourhood relations. Georgia’s scope for action, meanwhile, is limited.

Conclusions

The Russian-Turkish crisis and its aftermath, as well as domestic developments in Turkey following the failed coup of July 2016, have affected Georgia and Abkhazia in different ways. Their reactions to these events illustrate both the pervasiveness of geopolitical narratives in the Caucasus and the importance of local practices and balancing.

While Abkhazia and Georgia have vastly different relations with Russia, Turkey plays a special role for both of them. Given Abkhazia’s security and economic dependence on Russia (which provides 70 percent of its state budget) and its close links to the diaspora in Turkey, Abkhazia clearly has much to lose from a Turkish-Russian confrontation, which explains why the authorities and local actors took some pains to contain the damage from the crisis. While the Turkish-Russian rapprochement has largely allayed Abkhaz fears of having to sever ties with the diaspora, some effects of the crisis persist, such as the sluggish roll-back of Russian sanctions, the visa requirements for Turkish citizens, and, finally, the concern that the situation might repeat itself in the future. After all, there are still many significant disagreements between Turkey and Russia, the level of trust between the two nations is low, and Turkey feels threatened by Russia’s growing military presence in the Black Sea.

Although Georgia is in a different position, the benefits it might derive from prolonged Turkish-Russian tensions are limited, while the costs – such as instability in the larger neighbourhood or the potential for retaliation from Russia – could be high. Hence Georgia by and large welcomed the normalisation of Russian-Turkish relations. Turkey will continue to be important to Georgia in many respects, above all economically. Yet Turkey’s growing ambivalence about the West, as well as its crack-down on democratic institutions, makes it a less predictable and committed partner for Georgia in its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. There is also some concern

among Georgia's pro-Western elites that with Turkey stepping up its cooperation with Russia and with Russia actively developing a trilateral cooperation format with Iran and Azerbaijan, new regional constellations might emerge which could potentially sideline Georgia, especially if the EU and US downscale their engagement in the region.

Recommendations

This analysis points to several lessons to be learned. EU and German policy-makers would be well-advised to be more sceptical towards purely geopolitical interpretations of developments in the region. Instead, they should approach Georgia's (and Abkhazia's) geopolitical framing and narratives as deliberate attempts at "truth"-making. In terms of regional analysis, as the case of the Abkhaz sanctions demonstrates, it is absolutely essential to focus on local practices (including at the micro level) and to take into account local knowledge and adaptability.

As the EU's leverage over Georgia is far greater than its very limited influence in Abkhazia, it should continue to engage with Georgia in a variety of spheres and formats, rather than limit its involvement to issues of stability which are so prominent in the revised European Neighbourhood Strategy. It should also pay attention to religious minority rights in Georgia, encouraging the authorities to react to incidents of hate speech, harassment and attacks. It should closely monitor the changing regional environment in the Caucasus, including the emergence of new actor constellations.

The EU might also recommend that Georgia review some of the provisions of its Law on Occupied Territories. As the example of the Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora shows, the law disincentivises potential intermediaries with a prior history of engagement in Abkhazia from seeking cooperation with the Georgian authorities and local stakeholders because it criminal-

ises nearly all unauthorised activities in Abkhazia. Instead of reinforcing narratives of geopolitical incompatibility within Georgian and Abkhaz society, EU policies should aim at strengthening economic and inter-societal ties between and across local actors.

In the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the European Union adopted a policy of "engagement without recognition" towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The policy is premised on the understanding that isolation only pushes the breakaway entities closer to Russia and solidifies their negative attitudes towards Georgia and the West (which is in line with the findings of *Not Frozen!*, a 2016 SWP Research Paper on unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet space). Given Turkey's links to both Georgia and Abkhazia, it makes sense to include a Turkish component in the policy, something that has not been done so far.

While the EU's influence on the Turkish government is very limited, it may still cooperate with Turkish civil society (including, but not limited to, the Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora) on issues related to Georgia and Abkhazia. One way of reinvigorating engagement without recognition could be to facilitate Georgian-Turkish-Abkhazian societal dialogue (with a special but not exclusive focus on young people) which remains much less developed than their economic ties. Some topical issues for discussion could include migration and refugees, interfaith relations, or cross-border environmental issues. While these measures will not resolve the conflict, they may be useful in providing a fresh format for cross-border people-to-people contacts.

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ISSN 1861-1761