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# Turkey And The Caucasus : A Caucasian Cheese Circle

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The secret diplomacy of cheesemaking

ON AN icy February morning a clutch of Turks and Armenians huddled in a hotel in Kars, with Turkish intelligence officials looking on. On May 14th their secret, a giant round of cheese, was unveiled in Gyumri, over the sealed border in Armenia. Under the label of "Caucasian cheese", the yellow slab symbolises reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia, and across the Caucasus.

The idea of a regional "peace" cheese (Georgia and Azerbaijan are involved too) met suspicion when mooted a year ago, says Alin Ozinian of the Turkish Armenian Business Development Council. "We didn't know how the authorities would react," said Zeki Aydin, a Turkish cheese producer, who made the ten-hour trip from Kars to Gyumri via Georgia. "We want our borders to be reopened, good neighbourly ties, so we took a chance," said Ilhan Koculu, a fellow cheesemaker.

Vefa Ferejova, an Azeri campaigning to bury the hatchet with Armenia, was also there, saying "We are told to hate Armenians: I will not." Armenia and Azerbaijan are at loggerheads over Nagorno-Karabakh, a patch of land that Armenia wrested from Azerbaijan in the early 1990s. This prompted Turkey to seal its border (but not air links) with Armenia in 1993. American-brokered peace talks have failed, and Azerbaijan now threatens to resort to force.

Yet there are hopeful signs that Turkey and Armenia may make up. Turkey's president, Abdullah Gul, was among the first to congratulate Serzh Sarkisian, who became Armenia's president in a tainted election in February. Unofficial talks to establish diplomatic ties could resume at any time. Indeed, there is a whiff of desperation in the air. Turkey's ruling Justice and Development (AK) Party is under threat of closure by the constitutional court for allegedly wanting to bring in sharia law. AK's overtures to Armenia may be aimed at garnering some Western support.

Mr Sarkisian's government is heading for trouble when gas prices double this winter. An end to Turkey's blockade could temper popular unrest. But hawks in Turkey and Armenia can still count on Azerbaijan. Allegations that Armenia is sheltering Kurdish rebels have stirred anger in Turkey. Where did they come from? "The Azeri press," snorts Mr Aydin. Even the best cheese cannot change everybody's attitudes overnight.

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