
Turkish-Southern Caucasus regional relations in 2008

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The presidential elections slated to take place in 2008 in the southern Caucasus will be one of the most important topics on the agenda for the coming year in the region. To wit, in Georgia, the Jan. 5 presidential elections have already taken place. The guiding forces in the election results in the southern Caucasus region is not the actual votes of the citizens, but the expressed convictions of the political administrations in power. In this sense, the upcoming presidential elections in both Azerbaijan and Armenia are not expected to bring about much in the way of significant changes to the current political administrations. Within this framework, it is also not anticipated that there will be any concrete developments as far as Nagorno-Karabakh is concerned. One of the most significant topics relating to Turkey's affairs with the southern Caucasus region is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project. It is expected that in 2008 the Turkish stage of this railway project will have its foundation laid and that construction will begin shortly afterwards.

Some of the trade projections for 2008 include the foreign trade volume between Azerbaijan and Turkey reaching \$1 billion, while Turkish investments are expected to be around \$5 billion and construction projects taken on by Turkish developers alone above \$2 billion. As it stands in terms of imports, Turkey is number four for Azerbaijan and number six in terms of nations to which Azerbaijan exports. Turkey makes more non-petrol sector related investments in Azerbaijan than any other nation in the world.

The likelihood that Kosovo will head toward independence in 2008 also means that Abkhazia will increase its demands for independence in the coming year. It also means that the Russian Federation may well decide to recognize Abkhazia officially. This in turn could spark Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili -- who emerged tattered and torn from a recent presidential election -- to use his country's strength against both Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to shore up power for his own administration.

Abkhazian leader Sergei Bagapsh is expected to visit Turkey sometime during 2008, a visit which may well be coordinated to coincide with a visit from Georgian leader Saakashvili. In 2007 the Georgian leadership completed work on the most important leg of legislation aiming to allow Ahiska Turks to return to their homeland in what is currently Georgia. It is anticipated that this legislation will go into implementation in 2008 and that, as such, the Ahiska Turkish population will in fact begin to return.

In terms of foreign trade volume between Turkey and Georgia, it is projected that for 2008, in the wake of a recently signed free trade agreement between these two nations, trade volume could rise to above \$800 million, while the value of construction projects being undertaken in Georgia by Turkish developers could exceed \$500 million. Turkey has become, in recent years, the number four nation in terms of investment in Georgia. Current Russian-Georgian tension could also rise in the coming year with the help of the problems in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. An additional note is that Georgia is expected to continue its efforts to enter NATO and its Membership Action Plan (MAP).

In 2008, the individual analysis of Armenia, Turkish-Armenian and Turkish-Armenian-Azeri relations could bring about the formation of new diplomatic relations, though without the opening up of currently sealed borders. On this front, it could well be anticipated that efforts by the US Embassy in Ankara

and by certain Turkish intellectual circles may see a notable increase over the coming year. The continuing negative stance by Armenia toward Turkey, combined with its judgmental behavior, will likely block the serious formation of diplomatic relations this coming year. In addition, the question of Nagorno-Karabakh is one that concerns the entire international community, as it relates to Armenia's approach to international law and respect for the principles of land unity. Turkey continues its support for the Prague accords, which came about in 2004 under the initiative of the Minsk Group co-leaders; this accord aims to find a peaceful solution to the ongoing problem in the southern Caucasus as it relates to Nagorno-Karabakh. Ankara, while hoping fervently for the normalization, if possible, of relations with neighboring Yerevan, is resolute in its determination not to take any steps until it sees positive steps on this front from Yerevan itself.
