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Real friends? Georgia-Turkey relations in the wake of the July 15 coup attempt

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Georgian PM Giorgi Kvirikashvili became the first foreign head of state to visit Turkey after the failed coup attempt by parts of the Turkish military in the evening of Friday, July 15. Kvirikashvili met with his counterpart, PM Binali Yildirim, and President Erdoğan in Ankara on July 19 as part of an inaugural meeting of the High Level Georgia-Turkey Strategic Cooperation Council. The visit — the PM's first official to Turkey — was planned long before the attempted coup. Although the event focused on bilateral trade and economic issues, both parties emphasized that the official visit demonstrated Georgia's continued support for Turkey's democratically elected authorities, despite concerns that Erdoğan used the coup attempt as pretext for a major purge of political opponents at all levels of government. In the end of the day, regardless of what direction Turkey's politics take, Georgia does not have much of a choice but to toe its neighbor's line, come rain or shine.

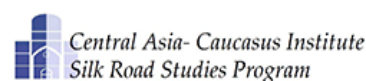


BACKGROUND: The Georgian government's response to reports of a possible coup in Turkey was clear and nigh immediate. The Georgian PM met with the Turkish ambassador to Georgia shortly after news of the coup attempt broke. Georgian FM Mikheil Janelidze called his counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to condemn the coup and reiterate support for the Turkish government. Georgia's leadership swiftly convened an emergency meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) on Saturday around 3 AM local time in Tbilisi to discuss the events in Turkey. Promptly after, Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said his government wants to "express our support to the democratically elected government in Turkey, and personally to President Erdoğan". PM Kvirikashvili remarked that "military coups are unacceptable for any democratic country" and that "Turkey is our strategic partner and stability in Turkey is very important for us". Georgia's United National Movement (UNM) opposition also made a statement, saying "peace, stability, and functioning of democratic institutions in our neighbor and strategic partner is of vital importance for Georgia". All in all, Tbilisi was keen to demonstrate that the country's close relationship with Turkey has strong bipartisan support, especially in light of the parliamentary election coming up in October 2016.

On Saturday July 16, Georgia closed its land and air border with Turkey, citing security concerns. Although restrictions were lifted less than twelve hours later, the snap decision was likely intended as a way to avoid any diplomatic impasses similar to the situation in Greece. There, in the aftermath of the failed putsch, eight asylum-seeking Turkish military personnel arrived in Alexandroupolis via helicopter. Turkey then asked Greece to extradite the men as soon as possible, a situation which became cause for concern as a legal and moral conundrum.

Georgia's reaction to the events in Turkey did not reflect part of a broader solidarity expressed by Ankara's other partners. In fact, it was an aberration. In a statement, the EU's HR/VP Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn called the post-coup attempt purges in Turkey's education system, judiciary, and the media "unacceptable". Frustrated, Turkey's minister for EU affairs publicly complained how "no European official came to Turkey in the wake of the failed coup attempt to show solidarity with our President or PM save UK Europe Minister". The considerable urgency with which the Georgian leadership has acted in unabatedly reaffirming its support for the Turkish government, and President Erdoğan specifically, should be viewed as a reflection of Tbilisi's unilateral dependence on Ankara's economic prowess. Aside from the European Union, Turkey has been and remains

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Georgia's single largest trade partner with a turnover worth USD 777.9 million, a 3% year-on-year increase. Turkish business has invested over USD 1 billion in Georgia's economy in the past 14 years. This dependence is strengthened even further by the bleak prospects elsewhere in the region. In the **first half of 2016**, Georgia's overall exports fell 12.3%, while imports were down 10% year-on-year. Despite inclusion in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) trade turnover with the EU decreased by 22% and by 25% with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Turnover with Azerbaijan, the fourth largest trading partner, was down 35.3%. Remittances from abroad to Georgia **declined** by 25% in 2015 compared to the previous year.

Tamerlane, Princeton University Press, September 2013.

Georgia and Turkey have also been strengthening a symbiotic relationship as regards military cooperation as well as energy and infrastructural projects, which has them keen on ensuring the other's stability. As regards energy, Georgia's **untapped** hydro power potential has Ankara **eagerly investing** in new projects to help complement its lagging domestic electricity production. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the TAP and TANAP projects, as part of the Southern Gas Stream (SGC), also necessitate political coordination. Georgia, Turkey, as well as Azerbaijan, having faced a **common challenge** in Russia's aggressive foreign policy, have been mulling a **potential harmonization** of foreign-security policies of their own.

IMPLICATIONS: Despite a mutually beneficial economic relationship and a common security challenge in Moscow's ambitions in the Black Sea and South Caucasus, Ankara and Tbilisi now appear to be looking in diametrically opposite foreign policy directions. Turkey is slowly breaking with the West, while Georgia yearns to be included by it. As a frontrunner state of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia has signed an AA/DCFTA with the EU and is due to receive visa liberalization this year. Meanwhile, if Erdoğan's Turkey ever did drive towards EU approximation, that train has since reversed course. Before the coup attempt, it did not hesitate to use the Syrian refugee crisis as tool to **blackmail** European leaders on the issue of visa-free travel and has **refused to change** its controversial terror laws which it uses against the Kurdish minority as part of the deal. As part of the purges following July 15, President Erdoğan made clear his ambition to **reinstate the capital punishment** despite EU warnings that it would lead to the suspension of accession talks.

As regards NATO, Georgia has **fought** to get a Membership Action Plan from the organization for years. It **opened** the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) in 2015 and has **provided support** to multiple international NATO operations. Meanwhile, Turkey never **fully cooperated** with the U.S. on Syria and currently appears to use the Incirlik air base as **bargaining chip** in the Fethullah Gülen extradition row with the United States. Furthermore, the nascent Turkey-Russia rapprochement means Ankara is now **likely to drop** its demand for regime change in Syria, which both the **United Kingdom** and **France** have demanded. NATO military presence in the country is in **jeopardy** as the post-coup attempt Turkey turns against the United States.

As it cleans house at home, Ankara expects loyalty from its regional allies. After Turkish pressure, Azerbaijan **shut down** a TV station allegedly connected to the Gülen movement, as well as a **newspaper** and the prominent **Qafqaz University**. On July 18, Turkey's consul to Georgia **remarked** that parents should not send their children to educational institutions which are "raising generations serving not the state, but this terrorist group". The Turkish side is slated to send an official appeal asking for Gülenist-affiliated schools in Georgia to be closed down as well. On July 21, the Turkish ambassador to Georgia visited the Ministry of Education, but denied that his visit had anything to do with the issue of possible school closures.

CONCLUSION: It is becoming increasingly evident that the Georgia-Turkey relationship is hardly driven by common ideals or political ambitions, but shared geography and economic reciprocity. Despite its aspirations of Euro-Atlantic integration and commitment to the reforms that this entails, Georgia hasn't much choice but to continue to leave Turkey's new pivot unchallenged no matter how authoritarian a turn the country takes. For now, Ankara's most recent efforts to normalize relations with Moscow coincide with Georgia's wish to do the same. Nonetheless, Ankara's openly hostile rhetoric towards the EU and NATO leaves its smaller neighbor in an ever more precarious situation relative to Russia. In the gathering storm, Georgia can do little else but inevitably concede to Turkish demands and prepare for uncertain times ahead.

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