

Political v. Economic: The Case of Armenian-Georgian Relations in Light of Armenia's Relations with Turkey

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Introduction

The relationship between economy and conflict by itself implies interaction of mainly two variables: economic and political. The research generated based on cases across the world concentrates on natural resources and civil wars examining mainly the domestic dimension¹. Others provide accounts of economic interdependence, emphasizing the need to pay better attention to political factors.² Numerous case studies, at a closer inspection, provide mainly for mixed models of interplay of the two factors. In this context, it is warranted to consider a model where political and economic factors are two rather distinct mechanisms of interdependence. This could be represented by a case where country A is dependent on country B in economic terms, while country B is dependent on country A in political terms. Below I introduce the case of Armenian-Georgian relations, which most closely approximates such a model, to show the interplay of economic and political factors on a case in the South Caucasus that showcases two distinct types of dependence. The main purpose is to show how dormant political issues resurface as economic factors become less prominent. This therefore underscores the primacy of economic factors in interstate relations in line with the main argument of economic theories of conflict, and shows that lack of economic dependence may carry a potential for conflict in interstate relations.

Relations between Armenia and Georgia since Independence

Armenian policies towards Georgia have been traditionally shaped by two factors: interest in safe transit for the Armenian and Armenia-bound goods through Georgia, and the situation with the Armenian minority in Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, that leave Georgia as the only route to Russian and European markets, have developed among the Armenian leadership a strong sense of economic dependence on Georgia. This reality made Yerevan tailor its policies to the transit needs and cooperate with Tbilisi to manage grievances of the Armenian minority in Georgia.

On the other hand, Georgia, a multiethnic state that experienced two secessionist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with large population of Armenians who also posed political demands, developed a degree of dependence on Yerevan. This dependence was manifested by resort to Armenia to calm down ethnic Armenians in Georgia every time they accused Tbilisi of conducting discriminatory policies towards

¹ Michael Ross, *Natural Resources and Civil War: An Overview*, World Bank, 2003, Phillipe Le Billon, *The Political Economy of Resource Wars*

² *Economic Exit, Interdependence and Conflict*, Mark J.C. Crescenzi, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol 65 No3 (Aug.2003)

the Armenian minority. Ruling elites in Georgia also relied on Yerevan to influence Georgia's Armenians during elections.³

On the regional level, lack of relations with Turkey has always been an important, although a non-active variable in Yerevan's interactions with Tbilisi. Animosity between Georgia and Russia, Armenia's strategic ally, on the other hand has had a direct impact, which in recent years created at least two situations that tested Yerevan's commitment to stability in Georgia.

In 2005, the restated policy of non-interference in Georgia's domestic affairs amid the crisis over the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki was an important occasion for then Armenia's President Robert Kocharyan, a hard-liner with nationalist agenda, to demonstrate adherence to the already established line. The protests of Javakheti Armenians in March 2005 against removal of the base – a source of employment for many – that also carried a perceived security threat for the Armenian community populating a region bordering on Turkey, triggered President Kocharyan's visit to Georgia on 1 April 2005, at the invitation of President Saakashvili, and was widely perceived as Armenia's contribution to stabilize the situation.⁴

The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, and Russia's recognition of the Abkazi and South Ossetian independence was another predicament. It put Armenia under pressure, prompting President Serge Sargsyan to publicly pose the question of recognition of the two entities and elaborate such a position that would find understanding in Russia and reassure Georgia. In his annual speech to the diplomatic corps delivered on 3 September 2008, Sargsyan stated it was impossible to consider recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Nagorno-Karabakh – an entity in a similar situation – remained unrecognized by Armenia.⁵

Cautious policies of the political leadership have always been in sharp contrast with public demands to adopt a harder line on problems in Javakheti, especially frequently voiced by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation – Dashnaktsutiun Party as well as many Yerevan-based Javakheti Armenians who have been successfully organizing themselves around that idea in Armenia's political system.

Armenian-Turkish Rapprochement and Georgia

The situation started to change with the initiative to open up relations between Armenia and Turkey.

³ Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities, International Crisis Group, Europe Report N. 178. 22 November 2006.

⁴ [RA President Robert Kocharyan Visiting Georgia](http://www.armradio.am/news/?part=off&id=2253), Public Radio. Available at <http://www.armradio.am/news/?part=off&id=2253>. See also, Demonstration in Javakheti Marks Increased Tensions in Armenian Populated Regions of Georgia, By *Grigor Hakobyan* (04/06/2005 issue of the CACI Analyst), <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/2937>,

⁵ Speech of President Sargsyan at the meeting with diplomatic corps, 3 September 2008. Available at <http://www.president.am/events/statements/arm/?year=2008&pn=2&id=4> (Armenian only)

On 1 September 2009, the next day after the Turkish-Armenian Protocols, that are supposed to open the border between Turkey and Armenia, were made public, President Sargsyan described protection of Armenian monuments, registration of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia and recognition of Armenian as a regional language in Javakheti as cornerstones for Armenia-Georgia relation.⁶

The idea that the opening with Turkey will bring about a harder line regarding Georgia was immediately captured by the organizations advocating the cause of Javakheti Armenians. Shirak Torosyan, an MP from President Sargsyan's ruling Republican Party and chairman of "Javakhq [Javakheti] Compatriot Association", a Yerevan-based organization uniting Armenians from Javakheti, stated on 4 December 2009 that after gaining alternative transit routes Armenian authorities will toughen their position with respect to problems in Javakheti.⁷ The three principles spelled out by Sargsyan may as well have a mobilizing effect. On 18 February 2010, an advocacy body set up in December 2009 to coordinate efforts around Javakheti cause, in its first meeting criticised Tbilisi's policies in Javakheti and highlighted the principles put forward by Sargsyan.⁸

Conclusions

The opening of the Turkish-Armenian border will enhance Armenia's regional role and offer a better bargaining position with Georgia. The case analyzed above demonstrates that political considerations dormant due to prevalent economic concerns immediately come forward as soon as economic dependence diminishes or shows a potential for decrease. This underscores the supremacy of economic considerations over political demands and further demonstrates that absence of economic interdependence may have a potential for conflicts.

⁶ Statement of President Sargsyan at the annual gathering of the MFA senior executive staff and Heads of the Armenian Embassies and Consulates abroad. Available at <http://www.president.am/events/statements/eng/?id=47>

⁷ Shirak Torosyan, Armenian-Georgian Relations to Benefit from Armenia-Turkey Normalisation, by Nvard Davtyan, Radiolur, Public Radio of Armenia. Available at <http://www.armradio.am/news/?part=pol&id=16316>

⁸ The Issue of Javakhq Armenians discussed Again, Alisa Gevorgyan, Public Radio website, (in Armenian). Available at <http://www.armradio.am/arm/news/?part=pol&id=36689>