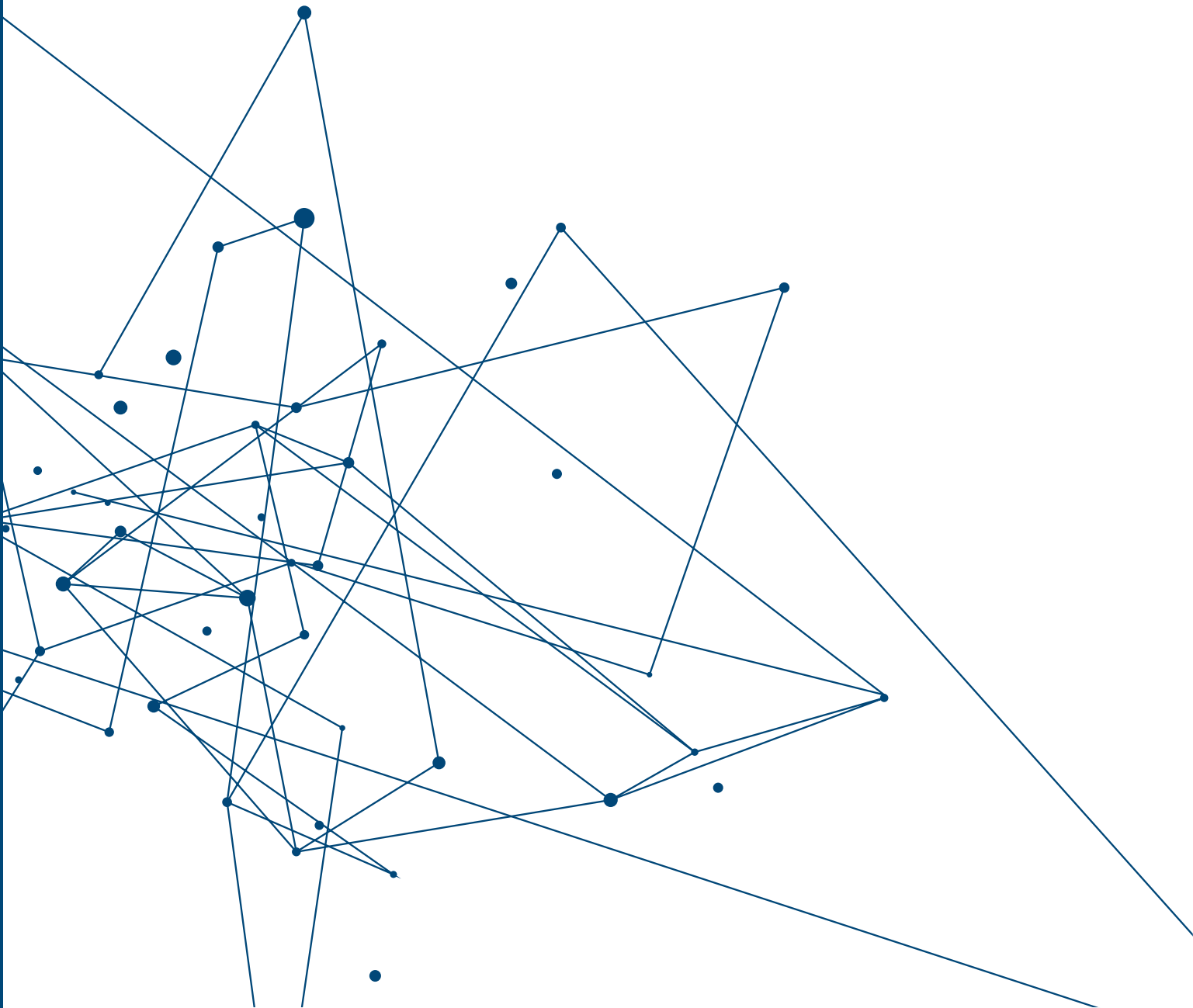


# France's Assessment of Turkey's Policy in the South Caucasus

## Implications for the EU

Aurélien Denizeau



French policy in the South Caucasus is driven more by distinct bilateral relationships – with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – than by any coherent regional vision. Due to its special ties with Armenia and its tensions with Azerbaijan, France’s approach to these two countries is bilateral and not part of a common EU diplomacy. Its relations with Georgia are closer to those of its EU partners. While France observes Turkey’s growing role in the region with concern, their relationship here is less conflictual than in other areas, such as the Eastern Mediterranean

This paper is part of a series of CATS Network Papers that aim to assess Turkey’s South Caucasus policy from the perspective of different actors.

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1.

# Introduction

France has long sought a leading role in EU strategic affairs and European defence.<sup>1</sup> Hence it cannot ignore a region that almost borders, and whose issues are therefore of concern to, the EU. Key commercial routes connecting Asia, especially Central Asia, to the European Union pass through the South Caucasus. And one of the region's states, namely Georgia, is an official candidate for EU membership. Consequently, the EU has an interest in the stability of the South Caucasus, in the development of trade routes within it, in the intensification of trade – particularly energy – and finally, in containing Russia's influence there. However, French leaders have put less effort into promoting a common EU approach on South Caucasus issues than they have for other regions and crises, such as the Greece–Turkey tensions. On the contrary, France sometimes appears to take a distinct approach from other EU member states, particularly in its relations with Turkey, as well as with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Turkey is now a major and influential player in the South Caucasus. After the end of the Cold War, Ankara turned its attention to the three former Soviet republics there, first and foremost Azerbaijan. It also subsequently opened up rather complicated relations with Armenia, despite the historical tensions between the two countries, which revolve around the Armenian–Azerbaijani rivalry and the memory of what the Armenian side refers to as a “genocide”. Turkey also developed relations with Georgia, which has become a close economic and political partner. In the 2000s, Turkey aspired to be a “centre-country”: Ahmet Davutoğlu, government adviser and foreign affairs minister between 2009 and 2014, saw it becoming the strategic heart of a vast geopolitical space between Europe, Asia, and Africa, and proposed ensuring its centrality in this area through proactive policy and initiatives.<sup>2</sup> This led Turkey to take an even greater interest in the South Caucasus, as the most direct transport, trade, and connectivity land route to Asia – especially Central Asia and further east (i.e., China). Initially this interest was directed towards expanding regional economic and infrastructure cooperation, with flagship projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline (2005). In recent years, following President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rapprochement with Turkish nationalists (since 2014, cemented in 2016), Turkey has

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<sup>1</sup> Pernille Riekker, *France and European defence: Continuity in long-term objectives, change in strategy*, FIIA briefing paper no. 253 (Helsinki: Finish Institute of International Affairs [FIIA], December 2018), [https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/bp253\\_france\\_eu\\_defence2.pdf](https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/bp253_france_eu_defence2.pdf) (accessed 16 October 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Türkiye merkez ülke olmalı” [Turkey should be a centre country], *Radikal*, 26 February 2004.

adopted a more assertive approach in the region, with increasingly active diplomatic and military support for Azerbaijan against the Armenian separatists of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO).

France often tends to regard Turkish foreign policy as a threat to the interests of EU member states, and is generally willing to unify EU countries around a common response.<sup>3</sup> However, France's reactions to Turkish actions in the South Caucasus are less clear and less assertive than they have been concerning Turkish initiatives in other regions, like the Eastern Mediterranean or Syria.<sup>4</sup> And this has not always been in line with other EU member states.

This policy paper examines France's specific perspective on Turkey's policy in the South Caucasus. It will first lay out the French vision for this region. Even though France has strong links with the countries of the South Caucasus, it does not generally treat the region as a whole or as part of a broader (global) geopolitical framework. Second, this paper will present France's perception of Turkish actions in the South Caucasus and demonstrate the influence of Franco-Turkish bilateral relations and issues. Thirdly, it will attempt to understand what France expects from the EU in the South Caucasus, particularly regarding Turkey's activities, and why France may still be inclined to act independently. In conclusion, recommendations to clarify and enhance the approach of both France and the EU are proposed.

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<sup>3</sup> Tançrède Josseran, "France facing Turkey in Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa: Hold your rank?", in *Turkish-French Relations: History, present and the future*, eds. Aurélien Denizeau and Ozan Örmeci (Cham: Springer, 2022): 198;  
Gönül Tor, "Don't cut Turkey out of European defence efforts because of Erdoğan", *The Financial Times*, 23 June 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Tançrède Josseran, 2024: 203-204.

2.

## France's Engagement in the South Caucasus

There are two paradoxes in the French approach to the South Caucasus. Firstly, while the public and the media are very interested in this region, it is much more difficult to find a clear definition of French government objectives. The major foreign policy documents published by the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs do not provide any specific strategy for this region; nor do public statements by French officials suggest any identifiable doctrine. While France has defined French strategies for the Sahel or the Eastern Mediterranean, no government document specifically addresses the South Caucasus. This may be because French policy in the South Caucasus is driven more by the three distinct bilateral relationships than by any coherent regional vision. There is, therefore, little in the way of French policy towards the South Caucasus as a whole; policy tends to be tied to the respective bilateral relationships.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, analysing the French approach toward the region means understanding its specific relations with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia.

In its bilateral relations with each of these countries, France attaches varying degrees of importance to the EU's posture. Concerning Georgia, it operates within a multilateral framework, striving to align its approach with that of other EU member states. However, France has not pursued a common EU policy in its relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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<sup>5</sup> France's ties with the peoples of the South Caucasus are much older than the current republics. They include, for example, by French investments in Baku in the early twentieth century; the case of Armenian and Azerbaijani Red Army soldiers who were captured and forcibly recruited to fight for the Nazis during the Second World War, but deserted and joined the French resistance, is also frequently evoked in history of bilateral relations. France was also one of the first countries to welcome Armenian survivors of the 1915 massacres.

## 2.1

# France's Main Interest in the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus is not a high priority for France (unlike for Turkey), which sees more significant interests elsewhere: Europe, the Mediterranean, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Indo-Pacific. France's economic interests in the South Caucasus are relatively peripheral, and its strategic and military interests are not vital either. They have, however, become increasingly important in recent years. France's geopolitical interests in the region are shaped by elements external to it: relations with the South Caucasus's closest neighbours Russia, Turkey, and Iran; the issue of replacing Russian energy supplies; or the desire to appear influential (even in the South Caucasus) in order to boost France's image as a global power to its domestic populace and foreign partners, especially the Western world.

From an economic point of view, the South Caucasus is of minimal interest to France. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia are, respectively, France's 91st, 100th, and 122nd economic partners. Its trade with the three countries combined was worth €985.8 million in 2023, representing just more than 0,1 percent of France's overall foreign trade.<sup>6</sup> By way of comparison, in the same year, trade with Turkey alone amounted to €23,398.6 million, more than twenty times more, and around 2% of France's overall foreign trade.<sup>7</sup> Trade with Germany was worth €174,324.4 million.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, apart from Azerbaijani oil and gas, the products exported from the South Caucasus countries are not strategic in any way. Azerbaijan was not among France's top five gas

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, *Arménie, Fiche pays – Repères économiques [Armenia, Country profile – Economic indicators]* (Paris: April 2024a), [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays\\_armenie\\_20240507\\_1636\\_cle418496.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays_armenie_20240507_1636_cle418496.pdf) (accessed 02 May 2024); Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, *Azerbaïdjan, Fiche pays – Repères économiques [Azerbaijan, Country profile – Economic indicators]* (Paris: April 2024b), [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays\\_azerbaïdjan\\_20240507\\_1636\\_cle0b955d.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays_azerbaïdjan_20240507_1636_cle0b955d.pdf) (accessed 02 May 2024); Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, *Géorgie, Fiche pays – Repères économiques [Georgia, Country profile – Economic indicators]* (Paris: April 2024c), [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays\\_georgie\\_20240507\\_1638\\_cle4bb522.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays_georgie_20240507_1638_cle4bb522.pdf) (accessed 02 May 2024).

Unless otherwise indicated, all data presented in this section is taken from these data sheets.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, *Turquie, Fiche pays – Repères économiques [Turkey, Country profile – Economic indicators]* (Paris: April 2024d), [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays\\_turquie\\_20240507\\_1641\\_cle4241b9.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays_turquie_20240507_1641_cle4241b9.pdf) (accessed 02 May 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, *Allemagne, Fiche pays – Repères économiques [Germany, Country profile – Economic indicators]* (Paris: April 2024e), [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays\\_allemande\\_20240507\\_1636\\_cle8d62b1.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fichepays_allemande_20240507_1636_cle8d62b1.pdf) (accessed 02 May 2024).

suppliers (i.e., the United States, Russia, Qatar, Algeria, and Angola) in 2022. Besides, gas accounts for only 16 percent of France's primary energy mix.

French investment in the South Caucasus may be considered slightly more important than trade: in 2022, €1,283 million was invested in Azerbaijan (mainly in the oil and gas sector), €248 million in Georgia, and €228 million in Armenia.<sup>9</sup> However, this represents no more than 0.5 percent of France's total foreign investment – and even then, the total remains lower than France's investment in Turkey alone (€2,212 million).<sup>10</sup>

France is more interested in the South Caucasus politically and diplomatically, however. Since the end of the Cold War, successive French governments have viewed the region as a potential area for trade and negotiations among Russia, the Middle East, and the West. France has sought to play a diplomatic role as a mediator in regional conflicts, on the basis of its specific links with the three South Caucasus states, as well as its broader ambition to exert influence beyond its geopolitical weight. Since 1994, France has been one of the three co-chairs (along with Russia and the United States) of the OSCE Minsk Group, which was founded in 1992 to resolve the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (but has been dormant since the Second Karabakh War in 2020). President Nicolas Sarkozy negotiated the ceasefire between Russia and Georgia in 2008, acting on behalf of the EU. At the time, he took advantage of a US disengagement from the region, leaving room for diplomatic action by EU member states.<sup>11</sup> Since 2020, France has been one of the EU countries that has taken the greatest interest in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. This issue greatly interests French public opinion and is widely discussed in the media. However, the deterioration of bilateral relations with Azerbaijan since the 2010s limits France's possibilities and prevents it from acting as a mediator between the two parties.

Finally, the South Caucasus is also a secondary zone of cultural influence for France. Each of the region's capitals – Yerevan, Baku, and Tbilisi – has a French cultural institute. Armenia is a full member of the International Organisation of La Francophonie, while Georgia has observer status.

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<sup>9</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, 2024a.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, 2024d.

<sup>11</sup> Maxime Lefebvre, "Géorgie 2008, Ukraine 2022: pourquoi la France n'a pas su amener la paix une nouvelle fois", *The Conversation* (online), 15 August 2022, <https://theconversation.com/georgie-2008-ukraine-2022-pourquoi-la-france-na-pas-su-amener-la-paix-une-nouvelle-fois-188424> (accessed 13 May 2024).



## Relations with Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is France's main trading partner in the South Caucasus. The energy companies TotalEnergies and Engie have limited but strategic investments in the country, and are keen to participate in discussions and negotiations concerning oil and gas exploration in the Caspian Sea.<sup>12</sup> Both sides officially say they would like closer cultural and scientific ties, and a number of initiatives confirm this.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the Cultural Centre of the Embassy of Azerbaijan, located in the heart of Paris, regularly organises cultural events attended by a broad audience, including political figures.<sup>14</sup> In September 2016, the French–Azerbaijani University (UFAZ) was opened in Baku, which specializes in chemical engineering, geophysical engineering, computer science, and oil and gas engineering.

However, relations have deteriorated rapidly and significantly in recent years, and are now particularly difficult. The term “crisis” is often heard, and French media portray Azerbaijan as pursuing destabilisation or even aggression towards France.<sup>15</sup> In December 2023, these tensions led to the expulsion of two French diplomats from Azerbaijan on suspicion of espionage.<sup>16</sup> These tensions had serious repercussions for high-level French participation in COP29, which was held in Baku in autumn 2024. President Emmanuel Macron decided not to attend, in light of growing Azerbaijani criticism of France's actions in its overseas territories.<sup>17</sup> On 13 November – after the conference had already started – the French Minister for Ecological Transition, Agnès Pannier-Runacher, also announced that she would not be attending, after an

<sup>12</sup> Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport d'information sur les relations politiques et économiques entre la France et l'Azerbaïdjan au regard des objectifs français de développement de la paix et de la démocratie au Sud Caucase, Tome I* [National Assembly – Information report on political and economic relations between France and Azerbaijan with regard to France's objectives of developing peace and democracy in the South Caucasus, vol I] (Paris, 15 February 2017): 38–39, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/rap-info/i4511-ti.pdf> (accessed 24 May 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Ambassade de la République d'Azerbaïdjan en République française, *Coopération culturelle et scientifique* [Cultural and scientific cooperation] (Paris, n.d.) <https://paris.mfa.gov.az/fr/category/cooperation-culturelle-et-scientifique> (accessed 20 September 2024); Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, *France and Azerbaijan* (Paris, 21 December 2017), [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/azerbaijan/france-and-azerbaijan-65018/#sommaire\\_4](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/azerbaijan/france-and-azerbaijan-65018/#sommaire_4) (accessed 20 September 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Author's observations at think tank events and diplomatic receptions between 2014 and 2020.

<sup>15</sup> “Azerbaïdjan: ce pays qui veut déstabiliser la France” [Azerbaijan: the country that wants to destabilise France], *Blast* (online), 12 August 2024, <https://www.blast-info.fr/emissions/2024/azerbaïdjan-ce-pays-qui-veut-destabiliser-la-france-01aW68FSbOG1p4VFba9AQ> (accessed 25 September 2024); Capucine Licoys, “France–Azerbaïdjan: deux pays au bord de la crise diplomatique” [France–Azerbaijan: two countries on the brink of a diplomatic crisis], *La Croix*, 10 January 2024.

<sup>16</sup> “L'Azerbaïdjan annonce l'expulsion de deux diplomates français” [Azerbaijan announces the expulsion of two French diplomats], *Le Monde*, 26 December 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Follorou and Emmanuel Grynszpan, “COP29: entre la France et l'Azerbaïdjan, une crise sans précédent” [COP29: an unprecedented crisis between France and Azerbaijan], *Le Monde*, 11 November 2024.

inflammatory speech by President Aliyev which stated that the French authorities had killed thirteen pro-independence activists in New Caledonia. This signalled a French decision to escalate its bilateral dispute into the multilateral arena – which in this case meant denying itself a high-level seat at the negotiating table.

There are several areas of disagreement and friction. The first is France's strong political and media support for Armenia and the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) especially since 2020. In November 2020, the French Senate voted to recognise the "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" as an independent state. The delivery of French military equipment to Armenia in 2023 led to new tensions.<sup>18</sup> Investigations of authoritarianism and corruption in Azerbaijan by certain French media outlets are a second source of tensions.<sup>19</sup> Finally, likely in response to the previous matters of disagreement, we are seeing growing Azerbaijani support for pro-independence and anti-colonialist autonomy movements directed against France, especially in New Caledonia. The Baku Initiative Group was established in summer 2023, in response to the vestiges of overseas colonialism by Europe's traditional Western powers. This officially independent foundation primarily targets the French presence in its overseas territories, as well as in Corsica.<sup>20</sup> For example, Azerbaijani flags were seen at pro-independence demonstrations in New Caledonia.<sup>21</sup> In autumn 2024, President Aliyev's open criticism of France's remaining overseas presence was the main reason given by Paris for the refusal of senior French representatives to participate in COP29.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The main arms delivery, which took place at the end of 2023, involved around fifty Bastion light armoured personnel carriers. Given that each vehicle can carry eight troops, the deal cannot have a decisive strategic impact. The other major contracts are mainly for military equipment such as night vision goggles and uniforms, as well as three Ground Master radars sold Thales in October 2023. It should be noted that these items are similar to those previously supplied to Ukraine, but in much smaller volumes.

<sup>19</sup> "L'Azerbaïdjan qualifié de 'dictature' par 'Cash investigation': un Etat ne peut pas poursuivre en diffamation, dit la justice française" [Azerbaijan described as a 'dictatorship' by 'Cash investigation': a state cannot sue for defamation, says the French courts], *Le Monde*, 19 September 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Cathy Liminana-Dembele, "Le Siècle de nos Décolonisations: Le Groupe d'Initiative de Baku (2)" [The Century of our Decolonisations: The Baku Initiative Group (2)], *Mediapart* (blog), 23 December 2023, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/memoires-du-colonialisme/article/231223/le-siecle-de-nos-decolonisations-le-groupe-dinitiative-de-baku-2> (accessed 20 October 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Saviana, "Nouvelle-Calédonie: révélations sur les ingérences de l'Azerbaïdjan et de la Russie" [New Caledonia: revelations of interference by Azerbaijan and Russia], *L'Express*, 26 September 2024.

<sup>22</sup> "COP29: la France annule sa participation après les accusations d'Ilham Aliyev" [COP29: France cancels its participation after Ilham Aliyev's accusations], *TRT Français* (online), 14 November 2024, <https://www.trtfrancais.com/actualites/cop29-la-france-annule-sa-participation-apres-les-accusations-dilham-aliev-18231998> (accessed 15 November 2024).

## 2.3

# Relations with Armenia

Relations between France and Armenia are warmer but also complex. There is a significant gap between French public discourse, which emphasises the partnership, and the actual reality of cooperation, which remains limited.

Historically the relationship has been shaped by the presence of a large Armenian diaspora in France. While exact numbers are hard to come by, France's Armenian population is believed to be the largest in Western Europe. Figures provided in 2011 by the Armenian Diaspora Research Centre suggest that nearly 600,000 persons of Armenians descent live in the country.<sup>23</sup> Most of them are descended from survivors of the 1915 genocide, meaning that their geographical provenance is not actually in the South Caucasus. The trauma of the genocide is still felt in the diaspora, which is more opposed to the Turkish state (and Azerbaijan, for that matter) than Armenia itself is.<sup>24</sup> Some Christian associations use the term “Chrétien d'Orient” [Eastern Christians] to identify Armenians with Christian minorities in the Middle East in Syria and Iraq, for example. This characterisation is controversial, as these situations are not comparable, but it generates sympathy for Armenians in some Christian activist circles. However, their influence on French politics in the region is negligible.

As a co-chair of the now-dormant Minsk Group, France tried until 2020 to maintain a position of equilibrium between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It maintained close ties with Armenia, as evidenced by its recognition in 2001 of the Armenian genocide and legislative attempts in 2012 to prohibit its denial. But – like all the other UN member states – it never recognised the “Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh”. Since 2020, however, its relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan have weakened and France begun to support Armenia more proactively. On 26 November 2020, the French Senate adopted a resolution calling for the recognition of the “Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh”. The delivery in October 2023 of three Thales Ground Master radars, enabling detection of enemy aircraft at distances of up to 250 kilometres, as well as Safran night vision scopey, marked the beginning of strategic military cooperation.<sup>25</sup> In February 2024, the French Minister of Defence, Sébastien Lecornu, travelled to Armenia to bolster their strategic cooperation. In December 2024, France and Armenia signed a new strategic cooperation plan, including the organisation of joint military exercises, cooperation in defence planning, training of Armenian forces by the French army, and

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<sup>23</sup> “Les Arméniens en France “, *Le Point*, 22 December 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “Arménie: après la panthéonisation de Missak Manouchian, le ministre français des Armées en visite à Erevan” [COP29: France cancels its participation after Ilham Aliev's accusations], *Sud-Ouest*, 22 February 2024.

advisory support.<sup>26</sup> French civil society and opposition parties also largely support military cooperation with Armenia. Opposition political figures like the nationalist right-wing candidate for the 2022 election, Éric Zemmour, and the left-wing opposition leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon also travelled to Armenia to express their support.

However, despite official willingness, cooperation remains weak in practice. France's trade with Armenia even smaller than with Georgia – to say nothing of Azerbaijan. “In practice, French support for Armenia is symbolic, but weapons deliveries are much smaller than those provided to other partners, and do not grant Armenia any real security architecture”, said Tigrane Yeghayan, an analyst specialising in the geopolitics of Armenia.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, France insists that supplied weaponry only be used defensively.<sup>28</sup>

Due to the weakness of the economic potential of this partnership and problems associated with corruption, French investments in Armenia remain relatively insignificant. The French telecommunications company Orange opened a branch in Armenia in 2009. However, it encountered economic difficulties and was not supported by the authorities; in 2015, it was acquired by Armenian internet provider Ucom. This failure highlights the challenges faced by French companies in establishing a presence in Armenia. Although dating back a decade or more, such past failures appear to have discouraged subsequent French investments. However, both governments share a political willingness to revive cooperation. In July 2024, the French ambassador to Armenia, Olivier Decottignies, led a delegation including specialists from Framatome to visit the Armenian nuclear power plant and discuss the possibility of cooperation. France is a potential nuclear power plant construction partner for Armenia, although Russia remains its first choice.<sup>29</sup> However, no new announcements have been made since the July 2024 visit.

In the area of transport infrastructure, France has shown particular interest in the Crossroads of Peace initiative launched by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in October 2023, which aims to improve connectivity between Armenia and neighbouring Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Georgia. It has enjoyed consistent rhetorical support in official French statements.<sup>30</sup> However, while Armenia claims

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<sup>26</sup> “Armenia, France sign defense cooperation program for 2025”, *Panarmenian* (online), 11 December 2024, <https://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/317784/> (accessed 15 January 2025).

<sup>27</sup> Phone interview with the author (26 June 2014).

<sup>28</sup> “Arménie: la France a ‘donné son accord’ pour la livraison de matériel militaire” [Armenia: France has ‘given its agreement’ for the delivery of military equipment], *Le Point* (online), 03 October 2023, [https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/armenie-la-france-a-donne-son-accord-pour-la-livraison-de-materiel-militaire-03-10-2023-2537938\\_24.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/armenie-la-france-a-donne-son-accord-pour-la-livraison-de-materiel-militaire-03-10-2023-2537938_24.php) (accessed 15 May 2024).

<sup>29</sup> “Armenia in Talks with Global Giants for Nuclear Power Plant Project”, *Caucasus Watch* (online), 27 March 2024, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/armenia-in-talks-with-global-giants-for-nuclear-power-plant-project.html> (accessed 25 October 2024).

<sup>30</sup> Siranush Ghazanchyan, “Armenian PM briefs French lawmakers on Crossroads of Peace project”, *Public Radio of Armenia* (online), 27 March 2024, <https://en.armradio.am/2024/03/27/armenian-pm-briefs->

that it wants this project to be part of the International North–South Transport Corridor linking Russia to India via Iran,<sup>31</sup> Macron also wants it to be part of the wider Trans–Caspian Corridor project: “France fully supports initiatives to enhance communication between the EU and Central Asia through the EU strategy, the Transcaucasian Corridor, and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s ‘Crossroads of Peace’ projects”, adding that “one cannot proceed without the other”.<sup>32</sup> This suggests Macron envisions Pashinyan’s initiative to be incorporated into the EU’s Global Gateway project, which does not ascribe pride of place to Armenia.

France also considers Kazakhstan to be a key partner in this project, and the two have jointly supported connectivity initiatives in the South Caucasus.<sup>33</sup> However, since these statements were made in autumn 2024, France has said nothing about the specific form of its support for any of these Trans–Caspian connectivity initiatives or projects will take. It will also be necessary to clarify the level of compatibility between French (and EU) plans and China’s offer, formulated by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, to “synergize high–quality Belt and Road cooperation with the European Union’s Global Gateway strategy.”<sup>34</sup> Given Washington’s hostility to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), EU participation in such an endeavour would require the EU to develop sufficient strategic autonomy. While US President Donald Trump’s current attitude suggests this possibility exists, it is by no means certain that EU member states can achieve a consensus on its execution. Otherwise, Pashinyan’s initiative will likely have to choose between being part of BRI or being linked to EU infrastructure. Moreover, the lack of any feasibility study for the Crossroads of Peace initiative is but one reason why there has been no significant financial commitment from any potential participant. Therefore, the initiative is unlikely to be commenced, let alone completed, for quite some time.

In short, France seems to be pursuing a rather unilateral policy towards Armenia. Although it is trying to involve Brussels in its support for Yerevan, Paris neither seeks consensus nor agreement of its fellow EU member states before taking action. From the EU’s perspective, this close and specific relationship could be seen as positive, as it

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[french-lawmakers-on-crossroads-of-peace-project/](#) (accessed 28 September 2024);

“Macron endorses Armenian Government’s Crossroads of Peace project”, *Armenpress* (online), 07 September 2024, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1204348> (accessed 28 September 2024);

“French Senator lauds Armenian government’s Crossroads of Peace project”, *Armenpress* (online), 10 September 2024, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1199478> (accessed 28 September 2024).

<sup>31</sup> “India, Iran, and Armenia Reaffirm Commitment to Key Transport Project”, *Asbarez* (online), 13 December 2024, <https://asbarez.com/india-iran-and-armenia-reaffirm-commitment-to-key-transport-project/> (accessed 03 April 2025).

<sup>32</sup> “Macron endorses Armenian Government’s Crossroads of Peace project”, *Armenpress* (online), 07 September 2024, <https://armenpress.am/en/article/1204348> (accessed 28 September 2024).

<sup>33</sup> “France, Kazakhstan Support Armenia–Azerbaijan Peace Process in Strategic Partnership Statement”, *Asbarez* (online), 06 November 2024, <https://asbarez.com/france-kazakhstan-support-armenia-azerbaijan-peace-process-in-strategic-partnership-statement/> (accessed 25 December 2024).

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, “Keynote Speech by H.E. Wang Yi, At the 61st Munich Security Conference, Conversation with China”, Munich, 14 February 2025, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzd/202502/t20250215\\_11555665.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjzbzd/202502/t20250215_11555665.html) (accessed 07 July 2025).

could facilitate the EU's own discussions with Armenia. However, the unilateral aspect of France's strategy also limits the ability of EU member states to act in a coordinated way.

## 2.4

# Relations with Georgia

Due to its small size and lack of geographical proximity or strong historical ties, Georgia is generally not a priority for France. Even within the South Caucasus, it appears less important than Armenia and Azerbaijan. While there is a reciprocal political commitment, especially through to personal links between the French and Georgian political elites, this does not translate into specific economic or strategic cooperation.

The connections between the French and Georgian political spheres are important and unusual. Mikheil Saakashvili, president of Georgia from 2004 to 2013, studied in France and speaks fluent French. He was advised for several years by Raphaël Glucksmann, a French intellectual and a leading figure in the Socialist Party. Irakli Garibashvili, leader of the ruling Georgian Dream party and prime minister from 2021 to 2024, studied international relations in Paris for two years (2002–2004).

But the personal aspect is best embodied by Salomé Zourabichvili, president of Georgia from 2018 to 2024. The daughter of a Georgian immigrant, Zourabichvili was born and raised in France. She was a French citizen and worked as a French diplomat until the 2000s. In November 2003 she was appointed French ambassador to Georgia, where President Saakashvili asked the French government for permission to make her his foreign affairs minister. She was appointed to the position on 11 March 2004, and received Georgian citizenship, making her the first Georgian citizen to hold two passports officially. It should be noted, however, that Zourabichvili left the French diplomatic corps in 2005 and renounced her French citizenship after her election as president in 2018. She stated that she should represent only one country.<sup>35</sup> These interpersonal connections foster a sense of familiarity between certain French and Georgian elites. However, their impact is limited both in terms of public opinion, which mentions them relatively infrequently, and from an institutional perspective, even though French support for opposition-led demonstrations was observed after the resignation of Zourabichvili, as will be discussed below.

Despite the potential for closer cooperation, Georgia is not a major partner for France. Economic exchange is not a priority for either country. In 2020, France was only

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<sup>35</sup> Cécile Réto, "Salomé Zourabichvili, une Française à la tête d'une Géorgie en ébullition" [Salomé Zourabichvili, a Frenchwoman at the helm of a Georgia in turmoil], *Ouest-France*, 25 October 2024.



Georgia's fourth-largest economic supplier among EU members, behind Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, and twelfth overall.<sup>36</sup> Trade does not involve strategic products.

From a French perspective, the main strategic issue is Georgia's relationship with Russia. In 2008, France played an important role in halting the fighting between Georgia and Russia. President Nicolas Sarkozy and his Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner flew to Moscow on 12 August, to negotiate a ceasefire with President Dmitri Medvedev. On 9 September, Sarkozy obtained from the Russian president a timetable for withdrawing Russian troops from Georgian territory, except for the separatist provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>37</sup> However, this action was interpreted differently: while some observers felt that the French intervention had prevented Russia from invading additional Georgian territory, others accused France of giving in to Russian objectives and accepting the Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, France's two main objectives in this crisis were not directly concerned with the defence of Georgian interests, particularly its territorial integrity. Sarkozy's foremost goal was to reinforce France's position as an international mediator by achieving a rapid ceasefire. Secondly, the mediating role could have enabled France to improve its relations with Russia.<sup>39</sup> There was indeed – until the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war – a traditional inclination among France's political elites to maintain a dialogue with Moscow, because this allowed France to show a form of autonomy vis-à-vis the United States and the stature of a power of influence on a global scale.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Franco-Russian relations improved after 2008, notably during Medvedev's presidency (2008–2012).

In the context of support for Ukraine, France, like its European and Western partners, is concerned that Georgia could swing back towards Russia. In May 2024, France condemned Georgia's adoption of a law on "foreign influence" that is considered to be favourable to Russian interests, and denounced the violence used by the security forces against demonstrators protesting it (notwithstanding its similarity to police

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<sup>36</sup> Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique, *Géorgie – Relations bilatérales [Georgia – Bilateral relations]* (Paris, 17 August 2021), <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/GE/rerelations-bilaterales> (accessed 02 May 2024).

<sup>37</sup> Cyrille Beyer, *2008: la médiation en deux temps du président Sarkozy dans la guerre russo-géorgienne* [2008: President Sarkozy's two-stage mediation in the Russo-Georgian war] (Bry-sur-Marne cedex, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel [INA], 07 February 2022), <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/2008-la-mediation-en-deux-temps-du-president-sarkozy-dans-la-guerre-russo-georgienne> (accessed 23 March 2025).

<sup>38</sup> Maxime Lefebvre, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Helene Fevrier, "Guerre de 2008 en Géorgie: le Cadeau de la France à la Russie" [2008 war in Georgia: France's gift to Russia], *TV5Monde* (online), 07 August 2013, <https://information.tv5monde.com/international/guerre-de-2008-en-georgie-le-cadeau-de-la-france-la-russie-20009> (accessed 28 December 2024).

<sup>40</sup> Arnaud Dubien, "Nicolas Sarkozy et la Russie, ou le triomphe de la Realpolitik" [Nicolas Sarkozy and Russia, or the triumph of Realpolitik], *La Revue Internationale* 1, no. 71 (2010): 129–131; Jean de Gliniasty, *Petite histoire des relations franco-russes: entre géopolitique et idéologie [Petite histoire des relations franco-russes: entre géopolitique et idéologie]* (Paris: L'Inventaire, 2021).

tactics in various EU member states in vaguely analogous circumstances, including France).<sup>41</sup>

The Georgian parliamentary elections of 26 October 2024 were won by the ruling party Georgian Dream, in a defeat for the pro-EU opposition supported by Zurabishvili. However, the result did not fundamentally change the French view of Georgia. French media and analysts expressed concerns about two issues: the victory of the Georgian Dream party, which Paris and most other EU capitals consider to be increasingly close to Russia, against the coalition supported by Zurabishvili, which is deemed to be pro-EU, and the irregularities observed during the elections.<sup>42</sup> However, the elections received little media coverage in France and have been largely overlooked in the public debate.

On the diplomatic side, France, together with Germany and Poland, had requested an investigation into electoral irregularities. However, there appears to be little impact on bilateral relations. “It was this government [i.e., the one that remains in charge] that launched the process for membership of the EU,” noted one diplomat working in the Department of the Caucasus and Central Asia at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>43</sup> “Of course, Russia is also seeking to defend its influence in Georgia, and the conduct of the election was criticised by some observers. But France has been working with this government for several years. We know their ministers, their diplomats. The elections have changed nothing in that regard.”

The same diplomat pointed out that Zurabishvili had not held significant executive power under the Georgian constitution since it was reformed in 2017, even if she had been a good interlocutor for France. The presidential election on 14 December 2024 ended her presidency. Although she initially refused to resign, her successor, Mikheil Kavelashvili, was officially inaugurated on 29 December. Two days later, France again issued a critical joint statement with Germany and Poland. However, the statement concentrated on criticism of the suppression of demonstrations and did not mention the fate of the former president.<sup>44</sup> Since then, France has said little about the situation

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<sup>41</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, “Géorgie – La France déplore les violences contre les manifestants” [Georgia – France deplores the violence against demonstrators], Press release (Paris, 02 May 2024f), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/georgie/evenements/article/georgie-la-france-deplore-les-violences-contre-les-manifestants-02-05-24> (accessed 05 June 2024).

<sup>42</sup> For instance during this radio programme:

“Épisode 4/4: Géorgie: la fin du rêve européen?” [Episode 4/4: Georgia: the end of the European dream?], *France Culture* (online), 14 November 2024, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/cultures-monde/georgie-la-fin-du-reve-europeen-2223623> (accessed 16 November 2024).

<sup>43</sup> Interview conducted by the author (10 November 2024).

<sup>44</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, “Géorgie – Communiqué conjoint des ministres des Affaires étrangères de la France, de l’Allemagne et de la Pologne (31 décembre 2024)” [Georgia – Joint Communiqué by the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany and Poland (31 December 2024)], Press release (Paris, 31 December 2024g), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/georgie/evenements/article/georgie-communique-conjoint-des-ministres-des-ministres-des-affaires-etrangees> (accessed 19 February 2025).



in Georgia. French media interest faded in January 2025, and French officials have not made any major new statements since then.

Unlike its relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia, France is no more active towards Georgia than other EU member states of equivalent size, such as Germany or Italy. France does not appear to be taking any initiative, preferring to remain within the framework of EU diplomacy. This is largely accounted for by the Turkish angle. France's bilateral relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan are both affected by its ties with Turkey. As we will see below, Paris has a more difficult relationship with Ankara than most other EU member states. This specific relationship with Turkey leads to a divergent relationship with Yerevan (which has no formal relationship with Ankara) and Baku (which is one of Ankara's main allies).

By contrast, the Turkish issue has had no impact on relations between France and Georgia. The most significant geopolitical aspect of Franco-Georgian relations is Russia's influence, where France's approach is no different from that of its European Union partners. This could expedite a united EU approach towards Georgia, predicated on the belief that Russia is interfering in that country's internal affairs.

3.

## France's Perspective and Issues Related to Turkey's South Caucasus Policy

France has not adopted a systematic approach to South Caucasus affairs. As a result, its attitude towards Turkish actions in the region is not determined by a broader foreign policy vision incorporating specific goals linked to the South Caucasus understood as a regional whole; rather, France's regional policy is mainly determined in relation to its bilateral relationship with Ankara. While Turkey's support for Azerbaijan in the 2020 war (and its 2023 epilogue) caused Franco-Turkish tensions – with France criticising Turkish military support for Baku and Turkey accusing France of legitimising the Armenian occupation of Karabakh – the two countries' economic and development objectives in the South Caucasus are not mutually antagonistic.<sup>45</sup>

3.1

### A Lack of Internal Cooperation on South Caucasus Affairs

Internal cooperation between the institutions that define and execute French foreign policy (the Presidency of the Republic, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomats serving in Paris and various countries, the Ministry of Defence, the armed forces, etc.), is an important aspect of foreign policy coherency. Two limits are visible in

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<sup>45</sup> Sarah Leduc, "Haut-Karabakh: le nouveau sujet de frictions entre la France et la Turquie" [Nagorno-Karabakh: the new bone of contention between France and Turkey], *France 24* (online), 30 September 2023, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20200930-haut-karabakh-emmanuel-macron-juge-les-declarations-turques-inconsiderables-et-dangereuses> (accessed 05 June 2024).

connection with the South Caucasus. Firstly, cooperation between the different ministries and departments working on the region is not very strong. Secondly, there are ongoing internal debates on the policy to be pursued.

As there is no overarching French vision for the South Caucasus, so there is no coherent approach. For example, there are no structures for French diplomats in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to work together. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the three countries are part of the Sub-Directorate for Russia and Eastern Europe, which covers a vast geographical area within which the South Caucasus is peripheral. Consequently, each group focusses on bilateral relations without considering the positions and statements of other diplomats. According to an adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this strategy is encouraged by Macron's attitude.<sup>46</sup> The president's tone that can change very rapidly. During the 2020 war, he alternated between very harsh words about Azerbaijan's conduct and policies and more conciliatory statements, notably recognising the Armenian-occupied areas as Azerbaijani territory.<sup>47</sup>

A colonel in the Ministry of Defence describes the situation as follows:

From the point of view of defence, Turkey and by implication Azerbaijan are seen as threats to France. There is therefore a desire to cooperate with Armenia to create a common security structure. On the other hand, diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs consider cooperation with Turkey to be important, and more important than cooperation with Armenia.<sup>48</sup>

Such assertions are not confirmed by members of the diplomatic corps, however. Several diplomats interviewed for this report stated that they did not notice such a difference in approach. The approach to Georgia seems more unified, with no divergence between the different institutional visions for French foreign policy.

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<sup>46</sup> Interview conducted by the author (Paris, 14 June 2024).

<sup>47</sup> Francis Belvier, "Déclaration d'Emmanuel Macron: Le Haut-Karabagh, c'est un territoire azéri" [Statement by Emmanuel Macron: Nagorno-Karabakh is Azeri territory], *Mediapart* (blog), 22 November 2020, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/francis-belvier/blog/221120/declaration-demmanuel-macron-le-haut-karabagh-cest-un-territoire-azeri> (accessed 25 May 2024).

<sup>48</sup> Interview conducted by the author (Paris, 04 June 2024).

## 3.2

# An Approach Marked by Bilateral Tensions Between France and Turkey

Relations between France and Turkey have deteriorated sharply since the mid-2010s, in connection with both countries' international strategy and domestic politics. Turkey strongly criticised France's adoption in January 2012 of a law criminalising denial of the Armenian genocide, and the Turkish diaspora in France organised significant protests.<sup>49</sup> Even if the French Constitutional Court declared the law unconstitutional and annulled it in February 2012, Turkey perceived the affair as an act of direct hostility. Azerbaijan also responded by asking France to end its co-presidency of the Minsk Group, considering it to have abandoned its neutrality.<sup>50</sup>

Paris and Ankara have subsequently had a number of additional strategic disagreements. In Syria, France supported the Kurdish YPG (People's Defence Units) militia, which Turkey considers to be an offshoot of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and therefore a hostile terrorist group. In Libya, Turkey supported Faiez el-Sarraj's National Government of National Unity (2016–2021) and accused France of supporting the opposing forces of Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Lastly, a form of personal rivalry has led Macron (since 2017) and his Turkish counterpart, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (since 2014), to make highly negative comments about each other. When Macron said that NATO was “brain dead” in autumn 2019, he evoked Turkey's unilateral actions, which he said were not coordinated with the other member states. Erdoğan retorted that it was Macron himself who was suffering brain death.<sup>51</sup> After a maritime incident between the Turkish and French navies off the coast of Libya on 10 June 2020, France accused a Turkish frigate of illuminating its corvette *Le Courbet* with its guidance radar, in what it considered a hostile act.<sup>52</sup> Events of this kind led French strategic and political circles to regard Turkey as a potential threat to French interests, especially in the Mediterranean.<sup>53</sup> That situation lasted until at least 2021.

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<sup>49</sup> Aurélien Denizeau, *The Turkish Diaspora in France*, CATS Network Paper 06/2024 (Berlin: Centre for Applied Turkey Studies [CATS] at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], 08 May 2024), [https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS\\_Network\\_Paper\\_Briefs/CATS\\_NETWORK\\_PAPER\\_NO\\_6\\_08.05.2024.pdf](https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS_Network_Paper_Briefs/CATS_NETWORK_PAPER_NO_6_08.05.2024.pdf) (accessed 18 June 2024): 19–21.

<sup>50</sup> “Génocide arménien: Paris trahit sa mission au sein du Groupe de Minsk (Bakou)” [Armenian genocide: Paris betrays its mission within the Minsk Group (Baku)], *Sputnik* (online), 24 January 2012, <https://fr.sputniknews.africa/20120124/193134148.html> (accessed 25 December 2024).

<sup>51</sup> “Otan: Erdogan juge Macron ‘en état de mort cérébrale’” [NATO: Erdogan deems Macron ‘brain dead’], *Le Figaro*, 29 November 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Dominique Merchet, “Comment s’est déroulé l’incident naval entre la France et la Turquie” [How the naval incident between France and Turkey unfolded], *L’Opinion* (online), 19 June 2019, <https://www.lopinion.fr/international/comment-sest-deroule-lincident-naval-entre-la-france-et-la-turquie> (accessed 18 June 2024).

<sup>53</sup> Tancrède Jossier, 2024: 200–201.

Since 2021 France and Turkey have tried to improve their relations. New ambassadors have been exchanged in an attempt to allay tensions. While current relations can hardly be described as cordial, they are less tense than before. Although France has deepened its strategic cooperation with Greece, negotiations between Greece and Turkey have led to a slightly more stable situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. The war in Ukraine, which started in February 2022, brought France and Turkey to adopt similar positions, as both countries searched for a balance between support for Kyiv and dialogue with Moscow.<sup>54</sup> After their respective re-elections (Macron in 2022 and Erdoğan in 2023) closed the door on the possibility of an early change of leadership in either country, some signs of opening up were seen. The re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 is also encouraging closer ties between European countries and Turkey, as we shall see below. Despite the good relations between the Turkish President and his American counterpart, there are also concerns within the Turkish diplomatic apparatus about the uncertainties linked to the new US administration. In particular, Donald Trump's strong support for Benjamin Netanyahu's government and his unpredictable nature are leading Turkey to look towards partners considered more reliable.

In this context of tension and acrimony, French public opinion has been highly critical of Turkish policy, particularly of Turkey's support for Azerbaijan during the 2020 Second Karabakh War. Similarly, the warming of relations between the two countries since 2021 has to a certain extent led France to adopt a less negative view of Turkish policy towards Azerbaijan. However, while the general framework of Franco-Turkish relations should not be forgotten, this does not mean that France's approach to Turkey's policy in the South Caucasus is necessarily conflictual, as will be seen in the next section.

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<sup>54</sup> Clea Caulcutt, "Macron defends Russia dialogue and slams 'mistaken morality' seeking to stop him", *Politico* (online), 01 September 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-defend-dialogue-russia-mistaken-morality/> (accessed 06 April 2025).

### 3.3

## Implications on Turkey's Military Engagement with Azerbaijan from the French Perspective: A Main Subject of Interest

Since 2020, the aspect of Turkey's policies in the South Caucasus that has provoked the most discussion among French strategic, political, and media circles has been Ankara's support for Baku. However, a gap is evident between the reactions of public opinion and political parties, which are strongly opposed to Turkish policy, and the government, which has sought to maintain a more balanced approach.

There are several reasons why French public opinion has been hostile to Turkish support for Azerbaijan since 2020. First, as already mentioned, the atmosphere between France and Turkey at the time was already fraught. There is also a feeling of French solidarity and sympathy towards Armenia, given the tragic history of the Armenian people and the influence of the well-integrated Armenian diaspora.<sup>55</sup> Media coverage of the Turkish action was generally very critical. The most significant political action was the Senate's resolution of late November 2020 calling on the government to recognise the "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh" as an independent state – a step that even Armenia had not taken.

However, if we look beyond the media and political reactions, we see that France's official reaction, as a major power, has been much more nuanced. Domestically the Senate resolution was largely perceived as a political manoeuvre designed to embarrass Macron and his government.<sup>56</sup> The French government condemned the use of force and called on Azerbaijan to halt the offensive launched on 27 September 2020 against the positions of the occupying forces in the former NKAO. France particularly criticised Turkey's action, with Macron publicly stating that it was "ill-considered" and "dangerous".<sup>57</sup>

This drew sharp criticism from Turkey, which accused France of supporting separatism in the former NKAO. But in November 2020, Macron reiterated that the former NKAO was part of Azerbaijani territory.<sup>58</sup> More broadly, this opposition appeared more as a result of Franco-Turkish tensions linked to other cases (especially

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<sup>55</sup> "Les Arméniens en France" [Armenians in France], *Le Point*, 22 December 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Maxime Gauin, "The France-Azerbaijan Relationship: Realities and Misunderstandings", *Baku Dialogues* 6, no. 2 (winter 2022–2023): 52–53.

<sup>57</sup> Sarah Leduc, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Francis Belvier, 2020.

Eastern Mediterranean) than the result of opposing visions. France was opposed to the means employed by Azerbaijan (and supported by Turkey) to restore its territorial integrity, but was not in principle opposed to the goal.<sup>59</sup> (The same logic informed French criticism of the September 2023 military operation.) In practice, France did not substantially react to the Azerbaijani move, with Macron refusing to impose sanctions against Baku.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the tensions that arose in 2020 during the Second Karabakh War resulted from previous tensions between Paris, Ankara, and Baku, but did not reflect a fundamental French hostility to Azerbaijani objectives. The element that confirms this analysis is that as soon as general Franco-Turkish relations began to warm, the strong opposition that could have been observed between them regarding the conflict over Karabakh conflict appeared to soften.

A shift in France's position has been observed since 2021, in the context of improving relations between France and Turkey. While public opinion, the political parties, and the media remain hostile to Ankara's support for Azerbaijan, French diplomats have adopted a different approach. Those with whom I spoke now present Turkey as a moderating factor, capable of shepherding Armenia and Azerbaijan towards a stable peace. However, there is currently no significant diplomatic cooperation between France and Turkey on this issue. At the same time, France continues to show its support for Yerevan by supplying arms. The attitude of the French diplomatic corps and government towards Turkey's role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict can be summarised as "wait and see". Still, it would be hard to point to a French initiative that could have triggered a reset of its relations with Azerbaijan (and vice versa).

This attitude is observed especially in connection with the normalisation process between Turkey and Armenia. While France condemned the use of force during the crises between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 and 2023, and while it is trying to establish closer ties with Armenia, it has not expressed strong views on the normalisation process. French public opinion is generally sceptical. Turkey continues to insist in public that the contentious issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan must be resolved before it can have a diplomatic, much less a substantive relationship with Yerevan (i.e., that normalisation between Ankara and Yerevan is conditional on a peace treaty between Baku and Yerevan). French observers, especially the media and

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<sup>59</sup> Ariel Guez, "Emmanuel Macron appelle l'Azerbaïdjan à une 'cessation immédiate de l'offensive' au Haut-Karabakh" [Emmanuel Macron calls on Azerbaijan to 'immediately cease the offensive' in Nagorno-Karabakh], *BFMTV* (online), 19 September 2023, [https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elysee/emmanuel-macron-appelle-l-azerbaïdjan-a-une-cessation-immédiate-de-l-offensive-au-haut-karabakh\\_AN-202309190945.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elysee/emmanuel-macron-appelle-l-azerbaïdjan-a-une-cessation-immédiate-de-l-offensive-au-haut-karabakh_AN-202309190945.html) (accessed 05 June 2024); Sarah Leduc, 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Marianne Lecach, "Haut-Karabagh: selon Emmanuel Macron, 'le temps n'est pas aux sanctions' contre l'Azerbaïdjan" [Nagorno-Karabakh: according to Emmanuel Macron, 'this is not the time for sanctions' against Azerbaijan], *Le Journal du Dimanche* (online), 05 October 2023, <https://www.lejdd.fr/international/haut-karabagh-selon-emmanuel-macron-le-temps-nest-pas-aux-sanctions-contre-lazerbaïdjan-138733> (accessed 05 June 2024).

research centres, believe that Turkey should exert pressure on Azerbaijan to reduce its demands, but doubt that Erdoğan is willing to do so.<sup>61</sup>

That scepticism is not expressed officially, however. In principle, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs supports the normalisation process between Turkey and Armenia.<sup>62</sup> However, official statements on the subject are rare and brief, and do not elaborate on the terms. “We can offer Armenia military and political cooperation to strengthen its position, but we should not comment officially on the terms of its reconciliation with Turkey”, said one diplomat from the Caucasus and Central Asia sub-directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That, she added, “would not serve Armenia well”.<sup>63</sup> French interference in the normalisation process would probably not be well received by the Turkish government and public, and would likely harden Ankara’s position towards Armenia. Surprisingly, this point is not really being taken into account by French political representatives, who regularly (and unhelpfully) comment on developments in the Armenian–Azerbaijani negotiations. Diplomats prefer not to comment on this attitude of French politicians, but it may be seen as a desire to send a message to French public opinion, at the expense of diplomatic efficacy.

### 3.4

## Implications for Turkey’s Economic and Development Engagement in the South Caucasus

Aside from the security implications, France does not perceive Turkey’s policy in the South Caucasus as a significant threat. However, there is neither a project nor a marked desire for cooperation. Although official French documents on South Caucasus policy or bilateral relations with the region’s states do not mention Turkey’s role, converging interests do exist. According to a diplomat at a French embassy in the region:

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<sup>61</sup> Jean-Sylvestre Montgrenier, *Arménie–Azerbaïdjan: Quel rôle joue la Turquie?* [Armenia–Azerbaijan: What role does Turkey play?] (Brussels: Institut Thomas More, 26 February 2024), <https://institut-thomas-more.org/2024/02/26/armenie-azerbaïdjan-%c2%b7-quel-role-joue-la-turquie/> (accessed 07 July 2025);

Guillaume Perrier, “Turquie–Arménie: quelle normalisation?” [Turkey–Armenia: what normalisation?], *Le Point*, 16 December 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, “Turquie – Visite du ministre arménien des Affaires étrangères (15 février 2023)”, Communiqué (Paris, 15 February 2023), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/turquie/evenements/article/turquie-visite-du-ministre-armenien-des-affaires-etranangeres-15-02-23> (accessed 05 January 2025).

<sup>63</sup> Telephone interview with the author (Istanbul, 05 February 2025).



Turkey's action in certain areas seems to us to be quite positive. For example, like France, Turkey is participating in demining in areas close to Nagorno-Karabakh. It is investing in education and transport infrastructure, and in the long term this will facilitate the region's development and will be good for us.<sup>64</sup>

But there is no significant initiative to act in common. Zacharie Gross, who was French ambassador to Azerbaijan between 2019 and 2022, sums up the French position on Turkey's policy as follows:

There is no particularly advanced cooperation between our two countries [in the South Caucasus theatre], but we have converging interests in the fields of education, connectivity, and ecology. So, there is no hostility, and there is potential for future cooperation.<sup>65</sup>

There is also another debate in France regarding Turkey's economic and cultural influence in the South Caucasus, particularly in the context of the Russian factor, which remains a significant economic and cultural player in the region. This raises the question of whether Turkey and Russia are acting as partners to expand their influence, or if Turkey's actions are also a means of counterbalancing and weakening Russian influence.<sup>66</sup> The former hypothesis presupposes a division of areas of influence and implies at least some coordination; the latter, in which Turkey and Russia's vie for influence in the Caucasus, is also possible. There is no consensus among French political elites and analysts on this point.

In any case, officially, France is not seeking to play a game of diplomatic balance and counterbalance in the region. "We are not trying to play one country off against another, as in a game of chess. Rather, France is seeking to promote its own influence in the region", explains Gross.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the idea that Turkey could reduce Russian influence in the Caucasus is never mentioned in French public statements. According to its diplomatic discourse, France is essentially seeking to defend its economic, commercial, and security interests in the region. It does not aim to redefine the local balance of power and influence.

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with the author (Lyon, 22 June 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Interview with the author (Paris, 28 June 2024).

<sup>66</sup> Marie Lepage, "La relation entre la Russie et la Turquie dans le Karabakh: coopération ou rivalité?" [The relationship between Russia and Turkey in Karabakh: cooperation or rivalry?], *Les Yeux du Monde* (online), 26 August 2021, <http://bit.ly/4kEcBVZ> (accessed 04 May 2024); Bruno Tertrais, "Au Caucase, la marche des empires a repris" [In the Caucasus, the march of empires has resumed], *L'Express*, 27 April 2024; "Haut-Karabakh: combien de vainqueurs?" [Haut-Karabakh: combien de vainqueurs?], *Radio France* (online), 18 November 2020, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-temps-du-debat/haut-karabakh-combien-de-vainqueurs-5730596> (accessed 13 May 2024).

<sup>67</sup> Interview with the author (Paris, 28 June 2024).

4.

# Expectations of France Toward Turkey and the EU in the South Caucasus

While France has been historically very committed to the idea of building a common EU foreign and defence policy, it finds itself in an ambiguous position regarding Turkey's policy in the South Caucasus and the role the EU can play in this context. On the one hand, France has often tried to unify the position of EU member states to counter Turkish initiatives, although its efforts have not always been successful. On the other hand, France often acts unilaterally in the South Caucasus, prioritising the pursuit of its own national interests – even if it may try to involve EU diplomacy where that approach appears to Paris to be possible.

4.1

## The French Failure to Achieve a Unified EU Strategy Concerning Earlier Turkish Challenges

Events at the end of the 2010s are crucial for understanding why France is currently not expecting a common EU response to Turkey's foreign policy actions. From 2019, France intensified its initiatives to demonstrate solidarity with Greece, whose Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was contested by Turkey. On several occasions France sent naval vessels and aircraft to patrol the Greek maritime space to limit Turkey's ambitions. In late September 2021, France and Greece signed a strategic partnership involving a joint defence clause and the delivery of French frigates and corvettes to the Greek navy. However, Paris now feels that the EU has not supported it in this policy. That criticism is expressed more openly in the media and by political parties.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Yves Bourdillon, "Sinan Ulgen: 'La France se trouve isolée au sein de l'OTAN contre la Turquie'" [Sinan Ulgen: 'France is isolated within NATO against Turkey'], *Les Echos* (online), 05 July 2020,

Accusations have been made against Germany, whose then Chancellor Angela Merkel is said to have wanted to avoid upsetting German voters of Turkish origin.<sup>69</sup> Although that criticism has never been made openly by the French authorities, interviews with senior officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence suggest the same conclusion: there has been no common EU response to Turkey's provocations against Greece. It should also be noted that at the beginning of 2025, the prospect of Turkey acquiring air-to-air missiles from France raised concerns in Greece. This proposal, which is part of the aforementioned rapprochement between France and Turkey, would also enable France to appear less one-sidedly committed to Greece.<sup>70</sup>

In fact, if the development of the EU's common foreign and defence policy strategy has accelerated, it is not because of Turkey, as France seemed to have been expecting at the end of the 2010s, but because of the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022. As an adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me: "Each European country has a different strategy towards Turkey. If we are to discuss with the Turks, France must be pragmatic and find partners who share its positions, without waiting for a common European position."<sup>71</sup> In other words, France accepts the idea that many EU member states wish to develop stronger relations with Turkey, and a number of them may even lean towards Ankara on certain issues where Turkish and French interests diverge.

Paris is not seeking to bring EU countries together in their dealings with Turkey, especially during the current period when most EU member states are seeking to be closer to Ankara. However, if new bilateral problems emerge and another EU member state shares France's possible concerns about Turkey on a specific issue, Paris will seek a partnership with that state to strengthen its position, exactly as it did with Greece.

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<https://www.lesechos.fr/monde/afrique-moyen-orient/sinan-ulgen-la-france-se-trouve-isolee-au-sein-de-lotan-contre-la-turquie-1221344> (accessed 12 June 2024).

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Schnee, "Union Européenne: Pourquoi l'Allemagne bloque les demandes de sanctions françaises contre la Turquie" [European Union: Why Germany is blocking French demands for sanctions against Turkey], *Marianne*, 02 November 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Estelle Nilsson-Julien, "La vente de missiles français à la Turquie suscite l'inquiétude de la Grèce" [The sale of French missiles to Turkey raises concerns in Greece], *Euronews* (online), 30 January 2025, <https://fr.euronews.com/2025/01/30/la-vente-de-missiles-francais-a-la-turquie-suscite-linquiétude-de-la-grèce> (accessed 03 March 2025).

<sup>71</sup> Interview with the author (Paris, 14 June 2024).

## 4.2

# Expectations of France on EU Policy Towards the South Caucasus and Turkey's Policy in this Region

France believes that the EU can be a power multiplier in the event of a new crisis in the South Caucasus, as it did in 2008 when Sarkozy leveraged his country's Presidency of the European Council to add weight to his mediation in the Georgia–Russia ceasefire talks and present his initiative as representing a common EU policy.<sup>72</sup> In relation to current tensions, France again believes that the EU can be an asset in certain crises.<sup>73</sup> In 2017, a report by the French National Assembly emphasised the importance of acting at the EU level, in particular regarding Azerbaijan, which would benefit from such cooperation.<sup>74</sup> Jean–Pierre Lacroix, Director of the United Nations, International Organisations, Human Rights and the Francophonie Department at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, pointed out that “Azerbaijan is not the same size as Russia, and it needs a partnership with the EU. We therefore have levers at our disposal, which we need to use as effectively as possible.”<sup>75</sup>

When Macron and his German counterpart Olaf Scholz arranged for Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev to meet in Moldova on 1 June 2023, to discuss peace, this occurred in cooperation with European Council President Charles Michel. The initiative was presented more as a European action than a Franco–German one, which gave it greater weight.<sup>76</sup> Even if Paris does not consider the EU as such to be capable of acting as a geopolitical power in the South Caucasus, it does acknowledge that the EU framework can lend greater weight to its own initiatives vis-à-vis the other players in the region. However, the failure of this format, especially due to the persistence of French–Azerbaijani tensions, could cause France to reconsider.

When it comes to Turkey's actions in the Caucasus, France seems to rely less on the EU framework. This is explained by two factors mentioned above. Firstly, the relationship between France and Turkey is not particularly conflictual in the South

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<sup>72</sup> Maxime Lefebvre, 2022.

<sup>73</sup> “Le Caucase, entre coopération et confrontation des puissances” [The Caucasus, between cooperation and confrontation of powers], *Paris Academy of Geopolitics* (online), 22 January 2024, <https://academiedegeopolitiquedeparis.com/le-caucase-entre-cooperation-et-confrontation-des-puissances/> (accessed 03 May 2024).

<sup>74</sup> François Rochebloine, 2017: 117–119.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid: 119.

<sup>76</sup> Sébastien Boussois, “Pourquoi l’Europe pense pouvoir signer la paix entre Azerbaïdjanais et Arméniens avant la fin de l’année” [Why Europe thinks it can sign a peace agreement between Azerbaijanis and Armenians before the end of the year], *Journal général de l’Europe* (online), 06 June 2023, <https://www.journalgeneraldeurope.org/2023/06/06/pourquoi-leurope-pense-pouvoir-signer-la-paix-entre-azerbaïdjanais-et-armeniens-avant-la-fin-de-lannee/> (accessed 18 June 2024).

Caucasus, and the two even manage to find common interests. Secondly, given the past reactions of its EU partners, France does not believe that a common EU policy towards Turkey is possible. Anyway, as mentioned above, the South Caucasus is not a priority area of interest for France. “If we are looking for EU support in a disagreement with Turkey, it will be about Africa or the Mediterranean, somewhere that is essential for us, rather than in the Caucasus or Central Asia”, an adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me.<sup>77</sup> The expectations are, therefore, rather low.

The idea that the EU is powerless to act as a foreign policy force is a recurrent theme in French debates. In particular, the Union is considered weak compared to other powers, such as Turkey, Russia, China, Iran, and the United States. The idea that the EU cannot act where other major powers have important interests is frequently stressed in French public debates.<sup>78</sup> The recent emphasis on a “coalition of the willing” approach to providing a “reassurance force” for Ukraine speaks to this point.

French expectations regarding the EU’s stance on Turkey’s policy in the South Caucasus are not significantly different from those concerning other regions and topics. France hopes that the EU will support it and help it better defend its national interests. Since France is neither directly opposed to Turkish policies in the South Caucasus nor directly cooperating with Ankara, the EU does not seem to be a vital tool for French foreign policy there. Some possibilities discussed in the French public debate remain theoretical, as it is unclear whether France has the necessary tools to act in the region. France could, for instance, be tempted to try to secure minimum guarantees for Armenian minorities in Azerbaijan, especially the few remaining in Karabakh; it could also defend the idea of the return of some ethnic-Armenian there. It is not certain that this would work, but it is likely that France would attempt to act in this direction, at least to maintain its image as a defender of some Armenian interests.

France could even be tempted to use the Eastern Partnership, which connects the three South Caucasus countries with the EU. The partnership’s main objective is to help them transition to a representative liberal democratic form of government – a consensual objective that could unify EU member states.<sup>79</sup> For example, Paris could be tempted to ask Brussels to make progress on these issues a condition for deepening political and economic cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan within the framework of the partnership. Without being explicitly directed against Turkey, this

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with the author (Paris, 14 June 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Jean-François Drevet, “Les nouveaux défis de l’UE dans le Caucase”, *Telos* (online), 30 November 2023, <https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/politique-francaise-et-internationale/les-nouveaux-defis-de-lue-dans-le-caucase.html> (accessed 31 May 2024); Tigrane Yégavian, “Nouvelle donne dans le Caucase” [A new deal in the Caucasus], *Conflits*, no. 40 (July–August 2022): 25–26.

<sup>79</sup> Gaïd Minassian, “Le conflit du Haut-Karabakh: paix possible ou guerre probable?” [The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: possible peace or probable war?], *Questions Internationales*, no. 52 (November–December 2011): 87.

would enable France to limit the risk of finding itself isolated (or in the minority) in its dealings with Turkey in the region. It is, however, unclear whether such a policy, which is desired by France, would convince other EU member states or have any real impact on Azerbaijan.

On the other hand, if relations between France and Turkey continue to improve, they could be tempted to open up economic and development cooperation. In this case, France would likely attempt to utilise EU tools, such as the EU–Turkey Customs Union agreement and the EU’s capacity to negotiate global economic agreements, and place the cooperation within a broader global framework. Indeed, Turkey is willing to reform the customs union and would like to see new negotiations on this subject. Successful negotiations between France and Turkey on this issue could kick-start a positive cooperation dynamic. The recent political trouble in Turkey linked with the arrest and imprisonment of Erdoğan’s main rival, Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, does not seem to have harmed the improvement in bilateral relations. France reacted very discreetly and appeared to be trying to be seen not to interfere in this internal political crisis. In any case, however, France will see the EU more as a secondary tool that may be useful to use than as the core of its strategy.

5.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper highlights France's relatively limited interest in the South Caucasus as a geopolitical entity. In this context, relations between France and Turkey, which are more significant in other regions, are a secondary issue from the French perspective. France does not therefore expect a specific EU policy.

5.1

## Points of Convergence and Divergence Between France and Turkey in the South Caucasus

As co-chair of the now dormant Minsk Group, France had tried to maintain a balanced approach in the Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite a degree of criticism over Turkish support for Baku, France has also realised that its influence is not as strong as expected. It now feels that Turkish mediation may help bring about a peace settlement on this specific issue. Erdoğan appears as a pragmatic leader, desiring to stabilise the region to facilitate the development of trade routes towards the East. He would, therefore, have an interest in securing peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. While France is not cooperating with Turkey on this mediation, it is not opposed to it, also believing that greater stability would secure its trade, transport, and economic interests.

Finally, France does not negatively perceive Turkey's desire to invest in economic development, education, and infrastructure in the countries of the South Caucasus. Indeed, it believes that this can contribute to the regional stabilisation and development, and therefore to the security of an area near the EU's current borders.

In the 2010s, France sought to unify EU policy towards Turkey. However, unity now appears difficult to achieve. Consequently, France is no longer trying to direct a specific EU policy towards the South Caucasus. But it still believes that EU support can



be useful in resolving specific crises and specific policies oriented toward its interests, especially in supporting the security of its Armenian partner.

## 5.2

# Recommendations for France

France's first priority should be to establish a more coherent strategy in the South Caucasus, one that is not based only on its bilateral relations with each of the region's three countries but also takes more general geopolitical issues into account: the threat represented by Russian power and influence to EU member states and certain partners like Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus countries; the need to develop new trade routes between Asia and Europe; the increasingly obvious bifurcation between American and European strategies regarding Ukraine; and France's difficult and often-changing relationship with Turkey.

The idea of seeking closer relations with Turkey in this evolving global context is now being discussed in France.<sup>80</sup> However, France cannot expect the EU to adopt a unified policy towards Turkey (not only in the context of the South Caucasus but also more broadly). What Paris should do instead is identify points of common interest (which already seems rather difficult) to act less alone and more often in a European synergy in the South Caucasus.

Despite its willingness to strike a balance, and in particular due to its public opinion, media, and domestic political debate, Turkey and Azerbaijan consider France to be overly favourable to Armenia, which has led to tensions with these two countries. In this context, the risk for France is hostility, particularly from Azerbaijan, towards the initiatives it would like to take in the region (economic partnerships, cultural exchanges, etc.). France must consequently act in a more careful manner, avoid and limit multilateral action (especially regarding the Armenian-Azerbaijan issues), and try to address Baku-Yerevan matters within the EU framework.

The South Caucasus is not a region whose economy is specifically important for France. However, stability here could improve connectivity between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East whilst limiting regional crises. While France, the EU, and Turkey may not share the same vision of successful stabilisation, they could certainly agree on the

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<sup>80</sup> For example, by the influential retired diplomat Gérard Araud:

@GerardAraud, "La géopolitique actuelle ne nous laisse pas d'autre choix rationnel que de nous rapprocher de la Turquie. Ce serait également le sien. L'ennemi de mon ennemi .... Les sentiments s'effacent devant les intérêts." [The current geopolitical situation leaves us no rational choice but to move closer to Turkey. It would be in Turkey's interest as well. The enemy of my enemy .... Sentiment gives way to interests.], X, 08 March 2025, <https://x.com/GerardAraud/status/1898281665908166768> (accessed 12 March 2025).



need for a sustainable peace agreement between Yerevan and Baku, as well as the development of infrastructure to open up the region and facilitate its economic growth. To achieve these objectives France could encourage the EU to cooperate with Turkey on infrastructure and development.

Specific recommendations include:

- France needs to try to unify its approach toward the South Caucasus in order to use all its foreign and strategic policy instruments in a coherent manner. France must develop a coherent strategy to limit Russian influence in the South Caucasus. That implies working with Turkey, which is also concerned about the possibility of growing Russian influence. France needs concrete diplomatic talks with Turkey to identify topics of common concern and find joint strategies to address them.
- Turkey and Azerbaijan consider France to be too strongly pro-Armenian, which reduces Paris's capacity to negotiate and promote specific policies and strategies (such as economic cooperation and trade routes) on its own. France must consequently try to frame its strategy in the region more within the EU framework: in every action concerning these two countries, France should strive to speak on behalf of or within the framework of the EU, rather than as a lone player.
- France, the EU, and Turkey share a common interest in developing roads and other infrastructure to enhance connectivity between Asia and Europe. This is a point where France and its partners in the EU can negotiate with Turkey in unison.
- If connectivity is to be achieved, France must insist on a long-term and sustainable peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

### 5.3

## Recommendations for the EU

France acts as a relatively independent player in the South Caucasus. Although it insists on EU cooperation in its rhetoric, in practice its actions on certain issues, and in particular its bilateral relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia, extend beyond the EU framework. France believes that it has not received appropriate support from the EU in other crises that have pitted it against Turkey, to which it feels entitled.

The issues of Franco-Turkish bilateral relations, the tensions between their leaders, the accusations of mutual interference in the domestic affairs of the two countries, and their opposition on geopolitical issues, such as Libya and Syria, do not directly involve the interests of the EU. Instead, they are primarily concerned with France's

desire to position itself as a major geopolitical player, as well as issues of French domestic policy.

In other words, when dealing with Ankara, France believes that the national interests of each EU member state are more important than the principle of EU solidarity. This is why France has pledged strong support to Armenia in the context of bilateral relationships with Turkey and Azerbaijan, rather than in an EU context. However, this policy has led to tensions with both countries, which France will struggle to manage without support from other EU member states. This is where Brussels could play a role: by taking the lead in advancing relations between Ankara, Baku, and Yerevan, it could prevent Paris from continuing to act unilaterally. Given that it is currently seeking unity among EU member states to address the global challenges associated with the Trump Administration, France could accept such a development. However, that seems rather unlikely, given the difficulty of making the interests of EU member states converge as well as the repercussions of Turkey's ongoing domestic political crisis.

It is probably easier to establish a common EU policy towards Turkey in the South Caucasus than it is in other regions. Unlike in the Eastern Mediterranean, France and Turkey are not in direct confrontation in the South Caucasus. France has shown its support for Armenia, particularly against perceived threats from Azerbaijan, but has not engaged directly against Turkey's presence in the region. In fact, the main crises that followed pitted France not against Turkey, but against Azerbaijan. In this context, it is conceivable that France and its EU partners could develop a common policy towards Turkey's actions in the South Caucasus. This policy could focus particularly on facilitating the development of trade routes to the East.

Even in the likely event that the South Caucasus countries refuse to be treated as a mere transport or transit zone, this development would still be helped by both Turkey and EU member states. The peace agreement announced by Armenia and Azerbaijan in early March 2025 could facilitate the achievement of this goal, i.e., the development of trade routes passing through South Caucasus countries. Another common policy could be stronger support for a democratic Georgia aligned with the West. This means proposing partnerships that will further solidify Georgia's ties to the EU and its political and economic institutions. France and Turkey could consequently help reinforce links between Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and the West, and de-couple the South Caucasus countries from Russia.

Specific recommendations include:

- France generally believes that it has not received enough support from the EU in past crises concerning Turkey. It consequently tends to act on its own in the South Caucasus, particularly in matters concerning Turkey and Azerbaijan. The EU must develop a common and coherent approach and strategy regarding Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey to discourage France from acting on its own and to encourage it instead to act within an EU framework.
- Since France is not in direct confrontation with Turkey in the South Caucasus, the EU should encourage it and other member states to propose a common approach there. The European Commission can play a crucial role in this process by identifying the common elements of national Turkish and South Caucasus politics and attempting to unify them.
- Concerning Georgia, the EU can count on France's support in encouraging pro-EU and pro-Western forces in the country. Even if France is not a key player in Georgia, its long-term links with pro-EU Georgian political elites can be an asset in any attempt by the EU to influence the evolution of Georgian political life. France could be encouraged and supported in maintaining strong ties with Georgia's pro-EU political elite, both on its own behalf and within the framework of the EU.

# Abbreviations

BRI	<i>Belt and Road Initiative</i>
EEZ	<i>Exclusive Economic Zone</i>
NKAO	<i>Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast</i>
PKK	<i>Kurdistan Workers' Party</i>
UFAZ	<i>French-Azerbaijan University</i>
YPG	<i>People's Defence Units</i>

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