

## **Recipes for Stability in the Caucasus**

**Author:** [Thomas de Waal](#)

Turkey makes an unexpected bid to assume the role of peacemaker in the Nagorny Karabakh dispute

Since the idea of a "Stability Pact" for the Caucasus was first discussed at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in November 1999, it has gone through as many permutations as there are states in the region - and has widely been dismissed as an impractical panacea.

A one-day "brainstorming session" held in the same city on February 17 failed to produce a breakthrough but it was a rare example of open dialogue between people from the South Caucasus region who rarely talk to one another.

If the main agenda was the "Search for Stability in the Caucasus", the session boasted another important subtext. This was the first time senior Armenian and Turkish officials had sat in the same room since a series of resolutions in European parliaments had dubbed the 1915 massacre of Armenians in Ottoman Anatolia "genocide", unleashing a wave of recriminations across Turkey.

Although Turkey recognised Armenia's independence in 1991, it made no move to establish diplomatic relations with Yerevan and closed its borders with its neighbour in protest at Armenian occupation of areas of Azerbaijan during the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.

However before the recent genocide debate arose, relations between the two countries had shown signs of thawing whilst businessmen and politicians had begun to exchange visits.

Speaking at the Istanbul meeting, Turkey's foreign minister, Ismail Cem, made an unexpected bid to be a Karabakh peace-maker, proposing a trilateral meeting between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. "I think that bringing together officials from both countries with Turkey could seriously contribute to the search for a solution," he said.

Neither Cem nor his officials made any attempt to flesh out his statement and there was no indication that he was hoping to widen the bilateral peace talks between Presidents Heidar Aliev and Robert Kocharian. In response, the Armenian foreign ministry said that Turkish mediation over Karabakh was impossible.

However, the proposal stood as a symbolic olive branch. Cem appeared to be indicating that Turkey and Armenia needed to discuss how and when their contiguous border would open in the event of a peace settlement.

The original structure for a security pact, as suggested by former Turkish president Suleiman Demirel, was 3+3+2 -- the three South Caucasian countries plus their three big neighbours, Iran, Russia and Turkey plus the European Union and the United States.

The Centre for European Policy Studies, a Brussels-based think-tank, expanded on this idea last year with a detailed -- and extremely ambitious -- policy document that proposed the creation of a Southern Caucasus Community, modelled on the European Union.

All of this was disputed in Istanbul. A Russian representative insisted on talking about "the four Caucasian

countries," emphasizing that Russia also has territory in the Caucasus, and also called for "cooperation against terrorism" - a thinly veiled reference to Moscow's war in Chechnya.

Azerbaijan's deputy foreign minister, Araz Azimov, said that his country could not accept the "stability of the status quo" -- in other words a deal that froze Armenia's occupation of part of its territory and ignored "sovereignty and territorial integrity".

Carey Cavanaugh, the US State Department's Special Negotiator for the Newly Independent States, came up with a culinary metaphor that could overcome these differences. What was needed, he said, was a "recipe for stability where everything has to end up as the preparation of one meal", a process in which every country would make its own unique contribution.

Non-governmental speakers drew attention to many of the obstacles to integration in the Caucasus. German economist Friedmann Muller pointed out that the South Caucasus was an "economically inefficient region" and the joint GDP of the three Caucasian countries was just \$11 billion, 6% of the GDP of Turkey. "This is a question to be resolved from within the region and not from outside," he said.

In an impressive intervention, Turkish historian Halil Berktaý argued that the modern states were crippled by the nationalist histories they were teaching to their peoples. It was vitally important, he said, to reform national education systems so as to "change the mutually hermetic insular hate narratives upon which the state is predicated".

Berktaý is one of the founders of a pioneering Joint History Project, which brings together historians from the Balkans to examine these issues. He said the same kind of forum was needed to remove nationalist propaganda from the dark and complex history of the Caucasus.

The meeting ended with a commitment to continue the dialogue, although not before several speakers had argued that the next session required the participation of the three main separatist autonomous entities in the Caucasus - Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh - none of whom were represented on this occasion.

Thomas de Waal will be reporting from the Caucasus this year for the BBC World Service and researching a book on the Karabakh conflict. He is co-author, with Carlotta Gall, of "Chechnya: A Small Victorious War" (Pan).

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