

SCIENCE AND EDUCATION DIPLOMACY,

SOUTH CAUCASUS: COOPERATION PERSPECTIVES BETWEEN AZERBAIJAN AND GEORGIA (2002–2021) IN TURKEY'S POLITICS

DIPLOMACIA EN CIENCIA Y EDUCACIÓN, CÁUCASO SUR: PERSPECTIVAS DE COOPERACIÓN ENTRE AZERBAIYÁN Y GEORGIA (2002-2021) EN LA POLÍTICA DE TURQUÍA

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ABSTRACT

The importance of science and education diplomacy in the South Caucasus has grown markedly since the early 2000s, being Turkey an important collaborator through many institutions such as: the Turkish Academy of Sciences, the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey, and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency. However, existing literature has yet to provide a comprehensive evaluation of how these initiatives have specifically shaped cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia under Turkey's regional policies from 2002 to 2021. This study addresses that gap by employing a qualitative, historical-comparative methodology, drawing on official government documents, institutional reports, and statistical data to trace the evolution of bilateral science and education agreements. Findings reveal that TAS's first protocol with the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences in 2003, renewed on ANAS's 70th anniversary in 2015, and the 2008 protocol with the Georgian National Academy of Sciences have sustained joint symposiums, exchange programs, and co-publications. TÜBİTAK's project portfolio—including NATO-supported catalyst development (2002), metrology consultancy (2013), and cyber-defense training (2019)—and TİKA's extensive educational infrastructure investments have supplied critical material, and human resources. Political volatility—especially Turkey's limited engagement with Armenia—remains a constraint on regional integration. The findings underscore the strategic role of science diplomacy as a “soft power” instrument and suggest that expanding direct institutional links, enhancing multilateral platforms, and resolving diplomatic impasses could magnify Turkey's contributions to South Caucasus development. Future research should quantify the socio-economic impacts of these collaborations and explore pathways for inclusive trilateral engagement.

Keywords: Science diplomacy, Turkey–Azerbaijan scientific relations, Turkey–Georgia academic partnerships, Regional development policy, politics in the South Caucasus.

RESUMEN

La importancia de la diplomacia científica y educativa en el Cáucaso Sur ha crecido notablemente desde principios de la década de 2000, siendo Turquía un importante colaborador a través de numerosas instituciones, como la Academia Turca de Ciencias, el Consejo de Investigación Científica y Tecnológica de Turquía y la Agencia Turca de Cooperación y Coordinación. Sin embargo, la literatura existente aún no ha proporcionado una evaluación exhaustiva de cómo estas iniciativas han moldeado específicamente la cooperación entre Azerbaiyán y Georgia en el marco de las políticas regionales de Turquía entre 2002 y 2021. Este estudio aborda esta deficiencia mediante una metodología cualitativa histórico-comparativa, basada en documentos oficiales gubernamentales, informes institucionales y datos estadísticos para rastrear la evolución de los acuerdos bilaterales de ciencia y educación. Los hallazgos revelan que el primer protocolo de la TAS con la Academia Nacional de Ciencias de Azerbaiyán en 2003, renovado con motivo del 70.º aniversario de la ANAS en 2015, y el protocolo de 2008 con la Academia Nacional de Ciencias de Georgia han permitido

la celebración de simposios conjuntos, programas de intercambio y copublicaciones. La cartera de proyectos de TÜBİTAK —que incluye el desarrollo de catalizadores con apoyo de la OTAN (2002), la consultoría en metrología (2013) y la formación en ciberdefensa (2019)— y las cuantiosas inversiones de TİKA en infraestructura educativa han proporcionado materiales y recursos humanos cruciales. La volatilidad política —en particular, la limitada colaboración de Turquía con Armenia— sigue siendo un obstáculo para la integración regional. Los hallazgos subrayan el papel estratégico de la diplomacia científica como instrumento de “poder blando” y sugieren que la ampliación de los vínculos institucionales directos, el fortalecimiento de las plataformas multilaterales y la resolución de los impasses diplomáticos podrían potenciar las contribuciones de Turquía al desarrollo del Cáucaso Meridional. Las investigaciones futuras deberían cuantificar el impacto socioeconómico de estas colaboraciones y explorar vías para una colaboración trilateral inclusiva.

Palabras clave: Diplomacia científica, Relaciones científicas entre Turquía y Azerbaiyán, Colaboraciones académicas entre Turquía y Georgia, Política de desarrollo regional, Política en el Cáucaso Sur.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey, distinguished by its strong political support for education, culture, technological development, and humanitarian political concepts, has also established various forms of cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus in many areas (Kelkitli, 2020). This reflects its respect for democratic principles and humanist values. Against the backdrop of global political and economic processes, Turkey has expressed its democratic stance by recognizing the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the South Caucasus states, ensuring the constitutional rights in these areas, promoting the development of historical, cultural, and other relations between peoples, and advancing neighborhood relations based on a friendly foundation. This strengthens the argument that Turkey is a key guarantor of the region's stability and security (Bayer & Keyman, 2012; Piriñçi, 2024). At the same time, Turkey's role and position in the region are undeniable in the objective resolution of ongoing conflicts based on certain political and ideological issues, providing humanitarian support to conflict zones, and regulating clashes and incidents according to the progressive norms of international humanitarian law. As is well known, the South Caucasus region has historically been of significant importance to great power centers, making it a focal point of conflicts.

However, Turkey's strong historical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic ties with the South Caucasus republics have made it a leading political force in the region. This has contributed to the strengthening of Turkey's influence both in the region and globally. In particular, the victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2002 parliamentary elections marked the establishment of a new, more progressive, and humanist political and diplomatic governance in Turkey, initiating a new phase both domestically and in foreign policy. With the rise of the AKP to power, Turkey's international reputation strengthened, internal stability deepened, and the confidence of the people, who had suffered significantly from terrorism and the destructive activities of disruptive elements, grew stronger towards a prosperous future. Significant progress was made in the fields of science, education, culture, technology, and humanitarian sectors, and Turkey's political authority in international political institutions was reinforced.

In this context, relations with the South Caucasus countries, including Azerbaijan, began to acquire a completely new dimension (Namaz, 2025). The leadership of the Justice and Development Party, starting from the early 21st century, successfully shaped contemporary Turkey through its efforts to transform the country into a global political brand, enhance the socio-economic well-being of the Turkish people, and ensure the comprehensive development of science, culture, literature, arts, technology, education, medicine, and other sectors. This phenomenon has also become a leading brand for the South Caucasus region, providing an opportunity to serve as an international guarantor for regional stability, security, economic resilience, and the regulation of diplomatic relations. The scientific cooperation between the South Caucasus republics and Turkey should be considered an important factor in both cultural and socio-economic development (Kiran & Acikalin, 2021). Turkey's initiatives and activities in this field have been aimed at supporting scientific development in a comprehensive manner within the context of regional stability. One of the first steps taken in this regard was the meeting of the Turkey–Azerbaijan High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2013. During this meeting, 7 agreements and protocols were signed. Within this framework, a “Protocol on Cooperation in Science and Technology” was signed between TÜBİTAK and the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (ANAS).

The protocol, which envisioned scientific and technological cooperation between the two countries, was signed by the President of TÜBİTAK, Professor Dr. Yücel Altunbaşak, and Azerbaijan's Ambassador to Turkey, Faig Bagirov, on behalf of ANAS. Under this protocol, support was

provided for joint scientific research projects and the organization of joint seminars between Turkish and Azerbaijani scientists, as well as for the exchange of scholars and the sharing of scientific and technological knowledge between the two countries (TÜBİTAK, 2013). TÜBİTAK's next step in cooperation with the South Caucasus countries was with Georgia. A Cooperation Protocol was signed through an exchange of notes between TÜBİTAK and the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation to establish concrete connections. The protocol, signed by TÜBİTAK President Professor Dr. A. Arif Ergin and the Executive Director of the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation, Professor Dr. Marin Chitashvili, aimed to support joint scientific research projects and joint scientific and technological events between Turkish and Georgian scientists. Additionally, this protocol created an environment for the active sharing of scientific and technological knowledge between the two countries.

The signed document holds significant importance for further developing the cooperation activities aimed at the Central Asia and South Caucasus regions, which TÜBİTAK has been conducting within the framework of its active relations with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan (TÜBİTAK, 2016). Although TÜBİTAK has not engaged in scientific and technological projects with the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, during the COVID-19 pandemic, online meetings were held between scientists of the two countries within the framework of various events. An example of this is the online meeting on "Scientific and Technological Cooperation between the EU and Associated Countries in the Fight Against COVID-19," organized by the European Commission on May 26, 2020. The meeting was chaired by Jan-Erik Paket, the Director-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, and Signe Ratson, the Deputy Director-General. During this meeting, representatives of the associated countries discussed cooperation opportunities for coordinating the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting research, and ensuring synergy within the European scientific research community. During the meeting, Professor Hasan Mandal, the President of TÜBİTAK, provided detailed information about recent research and innovation activities in Turkey, particularly in the fields of vaccine and drug development, and highlighted the scientific research areas where Turkey could collaborate with the European Union in the fight against the pandemic. In addition to Turkey, high-level representatives from institutions responsible for research and innovation from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia, Faroe Islands, Georgia, Israel, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Tunisia, and Ukraine participated in the meeting (TÜBİTAK, 2022).

With these elements, the objective of this paper is to analyze the prospects for scientific and educational cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia in the context of Turkey's regional policy during the period 2002–2021, highlighting how Turkish institutions such as the Turkish Academy of Sciences (TAS), TÜBİTAK, and TKA have acted as instruments of scientific and educational diplomacy to strengthen Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus, foster technological and academic development, and promote regional stability through joint projects, expert exchanges, and support for human capital formation. To accomplish this, the article used comparative analysis and chronological analysis methods.

Development

Turkey has been supporting scientific research in the South Caucasus, particularly studies focused on global security issues. This support has made significant contributions to ensuring peace and establishing long-term security in the region. TÜBİTAK has also been involved in various scientific projects related to security and conflict resolution, implemented jointly with the South Caucasus countries (Cabbarlı, 2011). A review of TÜBİTAK's activity reports for the years 2002–2021 in the South Caucasus reveals the following supported projects:

- In 2002, under the support of NATO, the "Zeolite Catalysts Production" project was carried out, resulting in the development of a special FCC catalyst designed for use in the FCC (Fluid Catalytic Cracking) unit of the Azerbaijani oil refinery in Baku. This catalyst allowed the heavy product known as "mazut" (residue) to be processed when mixed with raw material ("heavy gas oil").
- In 2009, a contract was signed with the State Protection Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan, initiating the "Establishment of the Certification Center Project."
- In 2013, as part of a project agreement signed with the Azerbaijan Metrology Institute, consultancy services were provided to ensure the necessary support in terms of laboratory conditions and equipment before the construction of the new metrology institute building planned for Baku.

- In 2019, as part of NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Program, the "Advanced Cyber Defense Training Course for Azerbaijan" was implemented to enhance the technological and operational resilience of the countries against cyber threats. Additionally, "Advanced Cyber Defense" trainings were conducted in Azerbaijan and Jordan under the same program.
- From June 25 to July 4, 2019, the first summer school on "From Quantum to Cosmos: Ideas and Applications" was held, followed by the second summer school on "Gravitational Waves: New Challenges and Opportunities" from July 7 to 14, 2019. These summer schools, organized under the "Horizons of Science" series and based on the approach "Let's Unite Our Strength, Do It Like Me," aimed to inspire young researchers and students to pursue fundamental sciences, foster creativity, and build excitement and self-confidence. Out of 325 students who applied, 120 were given the opportunity to participate. Additionally, 20 students from the USA, Brazil, Italy, the UK, Iran, Poland, India, Algeria, and Azerbaijan attended these schools.
- To meet the needs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, work was conducted on the integration of a multi-channel EMI/GPR integrated sensor panel for a robot, and 1325 OzanMetal detectors and 31 ETMTS-3 mine detectors were delivered to the Azerbaijani Ground Forces (TÜBİTAK, 2022).

The cooperation between the South Caucasus republics—Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia—created vast opportunities for joint projects in science and education, fostering the development of scientific research and student exchanges. This collaboration played a significant role not only in economic and political terms but also in social development, scientific progress, and ensuring regional security. From the perspective of the region's development, such cooperation was aimed at strengthening Turkey's leadership role in this geography, deepening interstate scientific exchange, and enhancing the contributions of achieved successes to socio-economic development.

Since 2002, various relevant connections have been established between universities, research centers, and scientific institutes in Turkey and the South Caucasus countries (Manchkhavili, 2022, p. 60). Turkey, particularly through university exchange programs, scientific conferences, and seminars, has made efforts to support specialists and young researchers from Azerbaijan and Georgia. One such initiative was the conference titled "Turkish-Georgian Relations: History and Modernity," organized by Samtskhe-Javakheti State University in the city of Akhalkalaki, Georgia, held from April 21-24, 2016. Following the decision to continue these thematic events, subsequent symposia were organized, including

the "International Turkish-Georgian Relations" symposium in Trabzon on November 23-24, 2017; the "Turkish-Georgian Relations in the Middle Ages" symposium at Gori State University from October 30 to November 1, 2018; the "Turkish-Georgian Relations in the Modern and Contemporary Period" symposium in Ankara from December 2-3, 2019; and the "IV International Turkish-Georgian Relations" symposium in Tbilisi from November 26-28, 2021. As a continuation of the relations developed between the academies of the two countries on the topic of International Turkish-Georgian Relations, it was decided to hold the "V International Turkish-Georgian Relations Symposium" in Ankara on May 9-10, 2024, with the participation of scholars from Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (Turkish Historical Society, 2024).

In Azerbaijan, numerous initiatives have also been implemented in this direction. Among them are the 2013 International Symposium on "Turkish Language and History Education in Eurasia," the 2021 conference on "The Path of Nasib Bey Yusifbeyli in the War of Liberation," co-organized by the Azerbaijan Theology Institute and the Azerbaijan Turkish Hearth, and the "Symposium of Turkic Republics on the 30th Anniversary of Independence," organized by the Istanbul Turkish Hearth and TURKSOY. In 2022, the Turkish Academy of Sciences (TAS) planned the "Forum of Azerbaijani Scholars Living Abroad". Such collaboration not only facilitated the exchange of scientific knowledge but also deepened the friendship and scientific cooperation between the countries. During this period, Turkey also implemented several programs to support scientific research projects in Azerbaijan. Institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency and the Turkish Red Crescent made various practical initiatives to support the development of the scientific environment in Azerbaijan, carrying out targeted activities. In addition, Azerbaijani scholars established close cooperation with Turkish universities and began participating in various scholarship programs to gain experience in education and research from Turkey.

Cooperation in Education

Since the early 2000s, the collaboration between universities in Turkey and Azerbaijan has strengthened significantly. In this process, particularly institutions like Baku State University, Azerbaijan Technical University, the current Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University, Khazar University, and other higher education institutions began productive cooperation with Turkish universities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Marmara, Middle East Technical, Istanbul Technical, and others. The dynamics of the process gradually increased. Both newly established public and private universities in Azerbaijan and new universities

in Turkey achieved significant successes in areas such as science, education, research, student exchanges, and staff transfers. During this period, numerous official visits and business trips were organized for Azerbaijani education officials to Turkey to benefit from the achievements of the Turkish education system. These visits facilitated the exchange of experiences, scientific collaboration, and the signing of various agreements in these areas. The implementation of progressive provisions of the Turkish education system was not limited to higher education. From the early 2000s, several aspects of the Turkish model were applied in Azerbaijan's secondary education system. New high schools were opened, and the curricula of these schools, except for some specific features, were almost identical to those in Turkey. Students who studied at Turkish model high schools (Turkish lyceums) operating in various cities and districts of Azerbaijan were able to pursue their higher education at universities around the world after completing their secondary education. Most of them returned to Azerbaijan and started serving the country as highly qualified professionals in various fields (Huseynova, 2007, p. 91).

In addition, Turkey established schools, courses, and institutes to support the educational activities of Turkish citizens living abroad and meet their needs regarding language and culture. These initiatives enabled the continuation of strong ties with Turkey, the preservation of their language, culture, and values, and the ability to build bridges between communities. The MEB Batumi Multi-Program Anadolu High School in Batumi, Georgia, was also built with this purpose in mind, allowing many students to benefit from its services. The MEB Batumi Multi-Program Anadolu High School, also known as Batumi Turkish School, opened in 2016 and operates with 24 classrooms, including preschool education, providing educational services for Turkish citizens in Batumi. With around 250-300 students enrolled annually, the school offers classes in Turkish, and in addition to English as a foreign language, courses in Russian and Georgian are also taught (Abukan, 2021, p. 969).

Turkey's deep historical, cultural, and religious ties with the countries of the South Caucasus necessitated the establishment of strong relationships and the activation of alternative diplomatic tools. In addition to the significant role of humanitarian aid, education, research, and cultural activities in foreign policy, it became essential to create new institutions capable of carrying out these activities on behalf of Turkey. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı*, *TİKA*) is considered one of the key institutions established to support Turkey's efforts to build solid

relationships with countries where it has strong cultural, linguistic, religious, and historical ties. Founded in 1992, TİKA initially operated in countries with strong ties to Turkey in terms of language, ethnicity, religion, and culture. Following the rise of the Justice and Development Party to power in 2002, TİKA expanded its scope of activities and became a globally recognized institution. In Turkey's updated foreign policy approach, TİKA's activities stand as a significant example of the increasing importance of "soft power and public diplomacy" in diplomatic practice. In 2002, TİKA had only 12 Program Coordination Offices. By 2011, this number had increased to 25, and by 2012, it reached 33. By 2021, TİKA had more than 50 offices worldwide, and today, it operates 63 Program Coordination Offices in 61 countries. TİKA's activities span various sectors such as education, healthcare, production, agriculture, livestock, strengthening social and administrative infrastructure, employment, access to clean water, and contributing to cultural life. TİKA has implemented over 30,000 projects across more than 170 countries to date (TİKA, 2025).

In 1994, TİKA opened its Coordination Office in Azerbaijan. From that year until 2021, TİKA implemented numerous projects, contributing to various sectors and providing training programs for thousands of Azerbaijani professionals. These activities included training for 1,531 healthcare workers, 950 tourism sector employees, 783 information technology specialists, 274 judges and prosecutors, 380 security service personnel, 185 NGO representatives, 480 media professionals, and 991 experts in arts and crafts. Nearly 6,000 Azerbaijanis benefited from the training and experience-sharing programs organized by TİKA. By 2021, TİKA had completed 1,276 projects in Azerbaijan. Among these, the agency contributed to cultural life with 211 projects, education with 191 projects, administrative structure development with 187 projects, and agriculture, forestry, and livestock with 124 projects. Additionally, TİKA completed 109 healthcare-related projects, 51 projects in communication and NGOs, and 40 in the industrial sector. In addressing social needs, TİKA carried out 32 projects, while also completing 17 energy projects, 9 transport projects, and 8 water and sanitation projects.

This extensive network of projects reflects TİKA's strong commitment to supporting Azerbaijan's development, particularly in key sectors that improve the country's social and economic conditions (Yılmaz & Kılıç, 2025, p. 146). Turkey's cooperation in the field of education with the countries of the South Caucasus has had a significant impact on strengthening educational relations that are developing both regionally and internationally. Cooperation with the South Caucasus region, especially with Azerbaijan

and Georgia, has been enhanced through various educational programs, exchange initiatives, and scholarship opportunities. In this regard, the establishment of a legal framework for multilateral cooperation in the field of education between Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as between Turkey and Georgia, has been a key issue. Let us take a look at the documents signed with Azerbaijan in this context:

1. Agreement on cooperation between the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and the Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1992;
2. Agreement on comprehensive cooperation in the fields of science, technology, social, cultural, and economic development between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1994;
3. Protocol on cooperation in the fields of education and science between the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1997;
4. Protocol on cooperation in the fields of education and science between the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2000;
5. Agreement on cooperation in the field of education between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2017;
6. Protocol on cooperation in the field of vocational education between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2021.

Despite the establishment of the necessary legal framework for bilateral cooperation, a significant gap remains between Azerbaijan and Turkey in the field of education. Currently, although the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan have signed cooperation protocols that allow for collaboration in various areas of education, including mutual student exchange, the issue of recognition of qualifications and diplomas obtained at universities in both countries remains unresolved (Mammedov, 2013).

The framework of cooperation in the field of education between Turkey and Georgia was expanded through the following documents:

1. Agreement on Cooperation in the Fields of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the Republic of Georgia in 1992;

2. Protocol on Cooperation in the Field of Higher Education between the Council of Higher Education of the Republic of Turkey (YÖK) and the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia in 2011;
3. Protocol on Cooperation in the Field of Teaching Turkish Language and Culture between the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia in 2014.

These important documents signed between Turkey and Georgia in the field of education laid the foundation for the development of strong and sustainable cooperation between the two countries. As a logical result of these agreements, student and teacher exchanges increased, universities in both countries were given the opportunity to receive more international grants and scholarship programs, and Turkish language and culture teaching programs were established in various universities in Georgia (Momtselidze, 2020, p. 168).

It should be noted that, starting from the early 2000s, against the backdrop of the rapid development of the medical field and education in Turkey—and the transformation of the Turkish medical system into a modern and high-quality model globally—Azerbaijani and Georgian students flocked to Turkey's leading medical universities. After completing their education, most of them returned to their countries and took up positions safeguarding the health of their people. In this process, the medical faculties of universities operating in major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, along with their experimental clinics, played a significant role. In particular, universities such as Ankara, Hacettepe, and Dokuz Eylül in Turkey stood out for their more visible activity in this regard. Moreover, in the early 2000s, Turkey-Azerbaijan educational and student exchange programs were further developed.

The number of Azerbaijani students sent to study at the Gulhane Higher Military Medical Academy, located in Ankara, Turkey, increased, and these students returned to the country as highly qualified specialists from the Gulhane Academy, one of the most advanced and modern military-medical institutions in the world. It is the graduates of the Gulhane Higher Military Medical Academy who currently serve the Azerbaijani people in the management of the Azerbaijani Army, the protection of the health of military personnel, and the optimal organization of the military education system. As mentioned above, in 2000, a protocol was signed between the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan on cooperation in the fields of education and science. According to the protocol, it was decided that a Joint Commission consisting of specialists from the Ministry of Education of the

Republic of Azerbaijan and the Council of Higher Education of the Republic of Turkey would meet once a year in Baku and Ankara to address existing problems regarding the mutual recognition of educational diplomas.

According to Articles 1, 2, and 4 of the protocol, the Turkish state was to allocate a quota of 150 places annually until 2008 for young Azerbaijani citizens to study in Turkish higher education institutions through the state. Since 2008, this figure has been reduced to 125. A total of 91 people benefited from the quota of 125 places allocated for the 2009–2010 academic year. As a result of the fruitful educational relations established with Turkey, more than 2,500 Azerbaijani citizens had studied in Turkey by 2010, 600 of whom continued their education through the state. In addition, 4,500 Turkish citizens studied in Azerbaijani higher education institutions between 2003 and 2010. This indicates that Turkish citizens were represented in significant numbers in Azerbaijani higher education institutions (Isakhanli & Pashayeva, 2018). According to the agreement on cooperation in the field of education signed between the relevant institutions of the two countries, 48 places were allocated for Azerbaijani citizens to study at the bachelor's level in Turkish higher education institutions in the 2009–2010 academic year through the state. In accordance with the order of the Ministry of Education dated April 19, 2009, the Turkish side and the State Commission for Student Admission of the Republic of Azerbaijan allocated places in 12 prestigious universities in Turkey across 24 priority specialties (medicine, aviation engineering, computer engineering, international relations, tourism and hotel management, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, finance, molecular biology, genetics, etc.) for Azerbaijani citizens who participated in university entrance exams. Among these prestigious universities were Ankara University, Istanbul University, Boğaziçi University, Middle East Technical University, Hacettepe University, Gazi University, Istanbul Technical University, and Marmara University, all of which are well-known higher education institutions.

After the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the number of Georgian students enrolling in Russian universities declined sharply, creating a gap that Turkish universities initially filled due to their growing attractiveness. This upward trend in Georgian student mobility toward Turkey was evident between 2008 and 2014; for instance, in 2011, the number of Georgian citizens studying in Turkey reached 380 (Hosner, 2016). However, this trend began to decline significantly after 2014, following the signing of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the European Union. As a result of this agreement, Georgia implemented European-oriented reforms, and EU universities became increasingly appealing to Georgian students. Contributing factors included expanded access to Erasmus+ and other EU scholarship programs, the easing of visa restrictions for Georgian students, and the simplified recognition of diplomas. Collectively, these developments led many Georgian students to favor studying in EU countries over Turkey. Some statistics data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of citizens of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia receiving state education in 2015-2021.

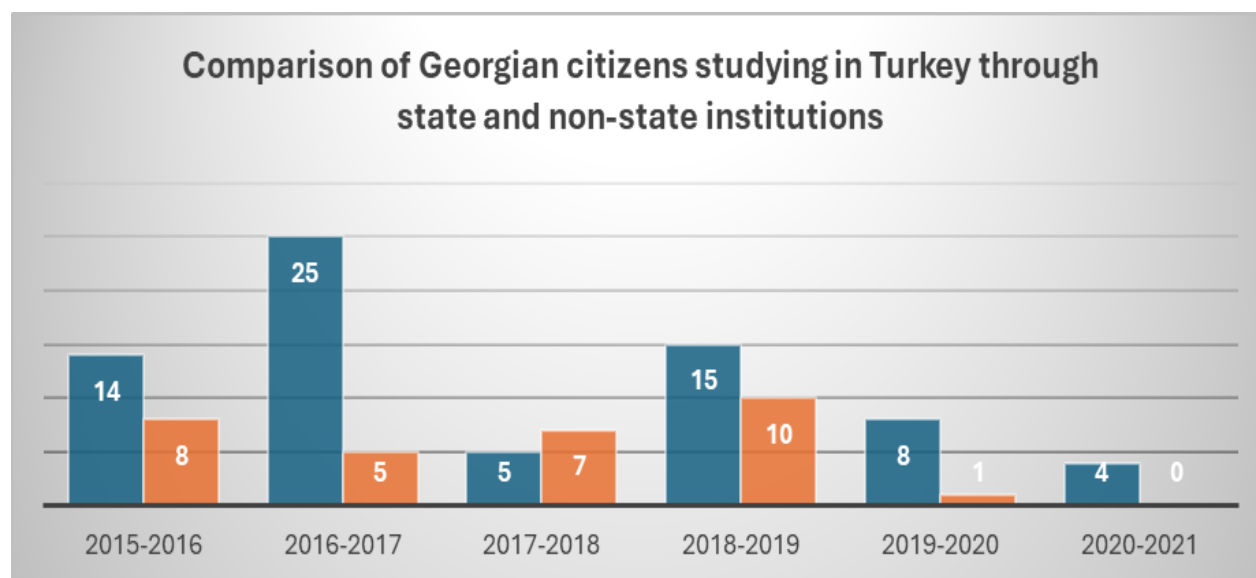
Statistical data on Azerbaijani and Georgian citizens studying in higher education institutions of the Republic of Turkey under state-sponsored programs							
Academic years		2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Number of students	Azerbaijan	907	603	569	243	237	260
	Georgia	14	25	5	15	8	4
Statistical information about Turkish citizens studying in higher education institutions of the Republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia under the state system							
Azerbaijan		1817	1604	1531	1665	1927	2270
Georgia		203	143	81	60	44	32

Source: Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan; State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan; Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Georgia; National Statistical Office of the Republic of Georgia.

As can be seen from the table, the number of Georgian citizens studying in higher education institutions of the Republic of Turkey through the state system was 14 in 2015-2016, 25 in 2016-2017, 5 in 2017-2018, 15 in 2018-2019, 8 in 2019-2020, and 4 in 2020-2021, respectively. Although these figures are statistical indicators of Georgian citizens studying through the state system only, a sharp decrease was also observed in the number of students studying in Turkey through non-state systems compared to previous years. Despite all this, the number of Georgian students studying in

Turkey through non-state systems in the relevant years did not differ much from the number of those studying through the state system. This can be observed from the dynamics in Figure 1.

Fig 1. Number of Georgian citizens studying in state and non-state institutions in Turkey in 2015-2021.



Blue color - number of students studying through the state line.

Yellow color - number of students studying through non-state lines.

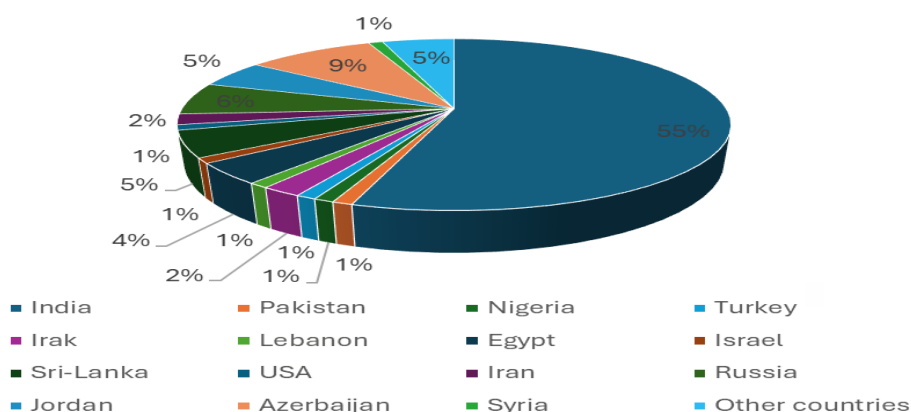
Source: National Statistical Office of the Republic of Georgia.

In general, looking at Table 1, it is clear that the number of Turkish citizens studying in Georgia through the state has also been decreasing significantly in recent years. Such a decrease can be attributed to various reasons:

1. Increased educational opportunities in Turkey. The developments and expansion of the higher education system in Turkey in 2015-2021, especially the increase in the number of state universities and scholarship programs offered to foreign students, have led Turkish citizens to study in their own country, which may reduce their interest in studying in Georgia;
2. Changes in the quality of education in Georgia. The decrease in the number of Turkish citizens studying in Georgia may be related to changes in the quality of education in Georgia. For example, changes in the requirements of educational programs at universities, the quality of teaching, and support services for foreign students may reduce their attractiveness for Turkish students;
3. Changes in the economic and social conditions of Georgia. This factor may affect the number of students coming to this country to study. For example, factors such as Georgia's job opportunities and living costs may drive Turkish citizens to other countries, especially Europe or larger education markets;
4. Alternative education programs and international education opportunities. The trend of Turkish students to study in other countries may also be linked to the increasing availability of international education opportunities. High-quality education programs and international scholarships offered in Europe and other countries may be more attractive than in Georgia;
5. Impact of the Pandemic (COVID-19). The COVID-19 pandemic that has been occurring worldwide since 2019 has made it difficult to study abroad. For this reason, a decrease in the number of Turkish students studying in Georgia may be observed (Figure 2). Online education opportunities have significantly reduced the number of foreign students during the pandemic.

Fig 2. Indicators (in %) of foreign students studying in Georgia in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Statistics of foreign citizens studying in Georgia in the 2020-2021 academic year

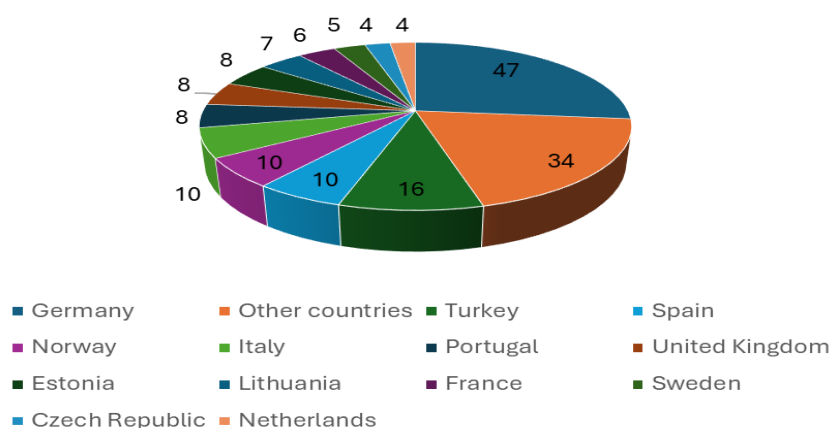


Source: National Statistical Office of the Republic of Georgia

Figure 2 illustrates that Turkish students represented only 1% of all international students in Georgia during the 2020–2021 academic year, a stark contrast to students from India and Azerbaijan, who accounted for 55% and 9%, respectively. This marginal representation of Turkish students coincides with a rise in the number of Russian students—6% during the same academic year—reflecting the broader stabilization of Russian-Georgian relations. In Figure 3, the data shows that only four Georgian citizens studied in Turkey through the state system in 2020–2021, a surprisingly low figure considering the geographical proximity and deep-rooted historical, political, and cultural ties between the two countries. By contrast, higher numbers of Georgian students studied in EU countries through state mechanisms—47 in Germany, 10 in both France and Italy, 8 in the UK, and 7 in Estonia—highlighting Georgia's clear educational orientation toward Europe and its perception of European universities as more attractive or prestigious. Meanwhile, the number of Turkish citizens studying in Azerbaijan increased steadily from 1,817 in 2015–2016 to 2,270 in 2020–2021, indicating a strengthening of Turkish-Azerbaijani educational ties despite broader regional trends.

Fig 3. Number of Georgian citizens studying abroad under state funding in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Statistics of Georgian citizens studying abroad under state funding in the 2020-2021 academic year



Source: National Statistical Office of the Republic of Georgia.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the beginning of the 21st century, scientific cooperation has emerged as a pivotal instrument in strengthening Turkey's political and economic engagement with the South Caucasus region. The strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, especially in the energy sector, has been reinforced through joint scientific and technological initiatives, reflecting Turkey's broader commitment to regional development and humanitarian objectives. These collaborative efforts have contributed not only to economic and political stability but also to regional security by fostering scientific and cultural exchange. Turkey's increased activity in scientific research after 2003, particularly through the establishment of joint research centers with Azerbaijan and Georgia, has significantly deepened bilateral and multilateral ties. These centers, focused on areas such as energy, technology, agriculture, and environmental protection, have enhanced regional integration and bolstered Turkey's leadership role. Moreover, the prioritization of science, education, and cultural cooperation within Turkey's foreign policy underscores its evolving approach to regional diplomacy. While robust cooperation has been achieved with Azerbaijan and Georgia, the absence of diplomatic relations with Armenia continues to pose a barrier to broader scientific and educational collaboration in the region. Overall, scientific cooperation has not only served as a channel for technological progress but also as a mechanism for peacebuilding and regional stability in the South Caucasus.

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