CHAPTER 12

Cooperation in the Black Sea Basin

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Throughout history, the Black Sea has served as a common bond among the people around its perimeter, bringing them together to interact through various means, from politics to trade. For centuries the cultural elements in the region have also played a catalyzing and unifying role for the countries in this zone. On the other hand, the Black Sea has also seen episodes of confrontation among the members of its basin. Therefore, it has long been discussed whether the countries in question constitute a “region” in the strict sense. It is clear that the area is one of the most heterogeneous and complex areas of greater Europe. The Black Sea basin is home to countries with different profiles in terms of size, political and economic development, military potential, geopolitical dynamics, and religious traditions. While many countries in the region follow the Orthodox tradition, Muslim populations are also long-standing members of this area (Pavliuk 2004).

Despite all the diversity in its history and fabric, by taking concrete steps, the region has managed to find common ground, especially toward the end of the twentieth century. As Klympush-Tsintsadze (2004) states, the end of the Cold War paved the way for a shift in the political and economic climate in the Black Sea region and the real breakthrough occurred in 1992, when the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) concept—initially a Turkish idea—developed progressively
into a common project among eleven states: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. Having established its headquarters in March, 1994, in Istanbul, the BSEC acquired international legal identity in 1999 and was transformed into a full-fledged regional economic organization. In 2004, the number of member states reached twelve with the accession of Serbia (MFA, n.d.-a). The BSEC era has seen the relations among member countries appreciably revived, and the strategic role of the long-neglected Black Sea basin in bridging continents has been considered increasingly important by Europe and the United States.

During the celebrations of the BSEC’s 25th anniversary in 2017, which was held in Istanbul, Turkey’s President Erdoğan emphasized the diversity in the region, while also drawing attention to the great potential that it creates for cooperation. He stated that the most important accomplishment of the BSEC is its ability to turn its diversity into a worldwide organization, based on common denominators, and further elaborated his personal perspective:

I am here today among you as a fellow countryman of yours hailing from the Black Sea province of Rize and who has spent most of his life in Istanbul, which is a city of the Black Sea as well. In this regard, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation is of special importance to me. The development of the Black Sea region in peace, stability and welfare should be a shared goal of the member states. (TCCB 2017)

The link between development and stability that President Erdoğan mentioned in his speech was in fact a basic understanding of the group. Accordingly, at the end of the summit the members agreed that, during the 25 years of its existence, BSEC has contributed to developing economic relations among its member states with the aim of enhancing peace, stability, dialogue, and mutual understanding in the Black Sea region. In this regard, the members reiterated their commitment to cooperation in various fields and restated their common goal of making BSEC an important partner in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on a regional scale (BSEC 2017).
**Development Cooperation and Moldova**

The economic development of the countries in the Black Sea basin, which bridges the Caucasus and the Balkans, gained impetus largely in the 2000s and onward (Fig. 12.1). However, there exist diverse dynamics in the growth stories of the members. For example, Turkey, Romania, and Russia performed remarkably well in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in this period, closing the large gap that they initially had with Greece. On the other hand, countries that declared independence from the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s experienced various growth patterns. As the graph shows, in the early postindependence period, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine exhibited lower income levels due to their transitional changes. In the beginning, it was not an easy job for them to switch from a centralized economy to a market economy and to build self-sustaining systems. And in the course of time the economies of this group tended to diverge.

![Graph showing income per capita in BSEC countries, PPP (current international $)](Source: World Bank 2019a)
among each other, based on varying domestic factors. Azerbaijan is a
good example of a positive divergence from the former Soviet Republics,
since it climbed the welfare curve relatively rapidly in the 2000s, notably
with the support of its energy resources.

There also exist several countries within the former Soviet group that
exhibited moderate performances in comparison. The same graph illus-
trates that Moldova is one of them. Once the country had restored
stability after the conflicts of the 1990s, it gradually raised its current GDP
and PPP (purchasing power parity)-adjusted GDP per capita to 3227
USD and 7272 USD, respectively, as of 2018 (World Bank 2019a, b).1
Achieving a continuing upward trend is important for Moldova to reach
the upper-middle income level and also converge with the other member
states of the BSEC. Based on the commitments of the BSEC, Moldova
deserves a closer development cooperation from member countries. In
this sense, understanding Moldova’s dynamics is of importance.

An overview of recent history sheds light on the challenges that the
people of Moldova experienced in the early 1990s. In the postcommunist
setting, as they suffered severe energy shortages, production disruptions,
and unpaid salaries, Moldovans struggled to procure food, and hence
were engaged primarily in agriculture.2 A significant part of the popu-
lation, on the other hand, left the country to seek jobs abroad. As a result
of the increasing labor outflow, workers’ remittances—almost nonexis-
tent in the mid-1990s—rose steeply, reaching 34.5 percent of GDP in
2006. Although this striking trend reversed after that point, in 2018 the
share of remittances equaled 16.1 percent, still representing a high figure.
The World Bank (2019c) statistics show that Moldova was the country
with the highest remittances-to-GDP ratio in the mid-2000s, but gradu-
ally declined to 12th place in the list. Despite the slowdown recorded in
the last decade, a sizable Moldovan labor force still works abroad. This
nationwide reality, in addition to its economic impact, has seriously influ-
enced sociological dynamics as well. In the face of an aging population
in the country, it is critical for Moldova to address both its shortage of
human resources and the adverse effects of emigration on its society.

In fact, the consequences of the emigration of labor for Moldova’s
social fabric and children, in particular, are not to be underestimated.

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1 Some updates might be seen within the upcoming datasets.

2 Details on countries and projects discussed without a specific reference in this chapter
were obtained directly from TİKA as well as author’s notes from field trips.
As witnessed in certain other developing economies, the social effects of migration on the sending countries are neglected but important. These effects, among others, consist of changes in family composition, family separations, and the abandonment of the elderly, as well as outcomes that affect children in terms of labor, health, and education (Markova 2007). This picture has been quite familiar in Moldova.

Despite the fact that some of the Moldovan emigrants, who were granted residence permits abroad, in time also transferred their children, the number and ratio of children left behind in the country have remained high. A study conducted by the National Centre of Public Health of the Ministry of Health of Moldova and UNICEF (2014) discovered that 21 percent of children aged 0–17 years in the country have at least one biological parent living abroad. The ratio in rural areas (23 percent) is higher than in urban areas (17 percent). Notwithstanding the fact that workers’ remittances have helped the Moldovan family members who were left behind survive and have better living standards, parental deprivation apparently has a profound dimension that extends beyond material concerns. The heartbreaking statements of children left behind in Moldova illustrate this reality:

Who says it is better to have money and expensive clothes, if in exchange you do not enjoy the presence of parents?

When they left me the first time, I felt lonely in this crazy world. (UNICEF 2006)

The harrowing world of the children left behind has been documented and analyzed in a number of international studies. The separation creates insecurity and fear. In this regard, in order to ensure a smooth adjustment period, so that children do not experience a psychological problem, close attention and professional support are deemed critical. Adjustment seems to be the most difficult period and it may last from a few days to a few months (UNICEF 2008). In fact, the Moldovan government’s recognition that children left behind are a vulnerable at-risk group is one of the first steps in raising awareness among professionals who deal with them and in developing policies to respond to their needs (Yanovich 2015).

Given this broad social reality in Moldova, projects and cooperation that help children’s psychological states have become increasingly important. In this context, as a country with a strong supportive culture for the institution of family, Turkey has focused on cooperating with Moldova on this social issue. Taking into account that the principal dimensions of
the problem are quality accommodation, care, and education, Turkey has taken on a preschool project in the partner country. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) constructed and furnished the Nasreddin Hodja Preschool in Comrat, with the aim of providing the best care and education for children aged 3–7, whose families live abroad for economic reasons. Opened in 2018 by Turkey’s Minister of Education Ziya Selçuk, the boarding school comprises an area of 8000 square meters and aspires to meet the pressing need of many families in terms of better conditions for their children (TİKA 2018a). With its modern facilities, Nasreddin Hodja Preschool is considered one of the exemplary schools in the country today for young children.

The preschool in Comrat is just one example of the TİKA projects that have been designed for the youth of Moldova. As in the context of crises and problems lived in many parts of the world, the most vulnerable group subjected to the challenges of Moldova has been children. Because it is well aware of this fact, Turkey has paid special attention to the children and youth of Moldova within the scope of its development assistance efforts. For this reason, TİKA has carried out many projects in the field of education, with various modules, including building furnishing and equipping schools and other facilities for all ages. The main focus for these projects has been rural areas in particular, where income and living standards are generally low.

Within the scope of assisting the children of Moldova, Turkey has also embarked on projects that serve their health. Among these is a project that was planned at the request of the local administration of Tvarditsa, a town in southern Moldova that is home to a large population. The town’s call for assistance in renovating a 120-year-old rehabilitation center building, which was in bad repair, was answered by TİKA. In 2017, the Tvarditsa Children’s Rehabilitation and Social Support Center was opened, thoroughly modernized, and with additional units built for psychotherapy and physiotherapy. This much-needed center for the treatment of children with physical and mental disabilities has been praised by local officials, not only for the healthcare it provides, but also for its contribution to the social cohesion of this disadvantaged group (TİKA 2017).

Another project for Moldovan children, which was completed by TİKA in the same year, was the Chisinau Mother and Child Health Institute’s Rehabilitation Center. The clinic, which was repaired and also furnished with modern medical equipment, was inaugurated in 2017 by Binali
Yıldırım and Pavel Filip, the then prime ministers of the two countries. The Rehabilitation Center provides both inpatient and outpatient services and offers physiotherapy, kinesiotherapy, and acupuncture treatments to approximately 16,000 patients each year (TİKA 2018b). The center is an inspiring example for similar facilities needed in this field. A 15-year-old patient’s candid words express not only her satisfaction with the facility that TİKA renovated, but also the general need for more centers:

I wish Turkey could build a rehabilitation center like this in my region too, so I could receive treatment more frequently.

From this perspective, these kinds of cooperation projects are priceless, as they directly touch human life and lead to good outcomes that both satisfy doctors and raise hope for families. The joy of an 11-year-old girl, who has been undergoing treatment at the same center, shows officials that it is worth the effort:

When I first came here, I couldn’t get out of my wheelchair, but now I can walk, thanks to the exercises that I do with this equipment. Look at me! I can walk!

While children constitute a vulnerable group in Moldovan society, another social reality lies at the other end of the spectrum, drawing attention to the seniors. The massive out-migration, combined with a declining birth rate, has been gradually changing the demographic structure, resulting in an increasing percentage of the elderly in Moldova. The World Bank (2017) points out that Moldova is aging faster than most other countries in Eastern Europe, exposing it to challenges. It is striking that in 2019, the proportion of the 60+ age group was 18.4 percent, exceeding that of children aged 0–14 (16 percent) (Population Pyramid 2019). Accordingly, the age dependency ratio for the elderly has increased from 13.3 percent in 2014 to 15.8 percent in 2018 (World Bank 2019d).

While an aging society brings about serious financial burdens, it is also necessary to deal with the human side of the issue. Those seniors who have no relatives or whose children live abroad are especially concerned about being deprived of care and assistance. Grant et al. (2009) give ear to the old people of Moldova and report their feelings of reproach, pointing out the importance of social services for the elderly in the country:
Our children go (abroad) to look after other persons, but nobody can look after us! They pay money there! We raised them but we remain alone.

Who can help me, if everyone is old like me? We are all in the same situation.

Dealing with the infirmities of old age, which is experienced by a considerable population in Moldova, requires an increase in the number and quality of care facilities for seniors. Cognizant of this necessity, TİKA expanded, renovated and furnished the Comrat Nursing Home, offering the seniors in the region an enhanced care service. Opened in 2015 by Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the facility was highly praised by the families and officials of Comrat, so that the City Council changed its name to the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Nursing Home. Residents of the center are old people of various ages, whose children work abroad or cannot look after them. Some of the very old do not even have anyone remaining in their life. Among them, a 92-year-old Orthodox woman prays in Russian, offering gratitude. She appears to be grateful that she is able to stand and walk within the facility. Others are not as lucky as she. A 60-year old paralyzed woman is not able to get out of her bed on her own, yet she speaks with a smile on her face: “They take good care of me here, they feed me, and they carry and bathe me. I cannot find words to thank enough.” Run by a devoted and compassionate Moldovan staff, the nursing home turns gloom into hope for disadvantaged old people. The facility is recognized as having set a precedent in the country for modern standards of elderly care.

Within the scope of human-centered development cooperation in Moldova, Turkey also attaches importance to health projects. In addition to the aforementioned rehabilitation centers, an outstanding health project realized by TİKA is the Aziz Sancar Diagnosis and Treatment Center. Established in Gagauzia, the center aims to serve patients in Moldova as well as in all of Eastern Europe. The choice of location for such a comprehensive health facility depended, in fact, on the Turkish cooperation principle of reaching out to rural areas. Since the day it was opened by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Moldovan President Igor Dodon and Gagauzia Governor Irina Vlah in October, 2018, the center has regularly admitted patients from many regions. Health professionals working at the hospital note that the targeted annual capacity is
40,000, and underline the importance of the state-of-the-art devices and international standards used in patient care and treatment. For them, the experience sharing programs in medicine organized by TİKA at Turkish hospitals are also complementary and useful. The modern, welcoming features of the center, which are said to form a basis for future health projects in Moldova, are particularly appreciated by patients, some of whom commented with some humor: “I would rather stay here than go home.”

As seen with the above projects, the development assistance that Turkey offers to Moldova does not just focus on Chisinau, the capital city, but also extends to rural areas. Cooperation projects are shaped based on demands coming from administrators, as well as local people, and hence cover a variety of areas. Sizes of projects vary, and in addition to landmark projects, small-scale activities that make a difference by improving standards of living are also designed. Among these micro projects are water supply networks, water wells, and stream reclamations. Such projects touch the daily lives of rural people directly. Millns (2013) points out that rural infrastructure in the country remains in a dilapidated condition and most of the rural water supply systems are either in need of repair or reconstruction.

At the heart of Turkey’s development assistance to Moldova lies the goal of ensuring access to quality services for low-income Moldovan people. In this context, achieving a sustainable economic development is also very critical in order to overcome certain structural challenges. Thus Turkey is encouraging the Turkish private sector to develop projects in Moldova and supports the organization of associated events, such as the Gagauzia Investment Forum, which provide opportunities for bilateral gatherings. It is commonly agreed that despite its potential, Moldova has unfortunately been overlooked by the international community. However, this perspective needs to change for the country to write a sustainable development story that would also solve its sociological problems. That is why Turkey is committed to backing the development process in Moldova to the best of its ability. President Erdoğan clearly expressed this determination during his visit to Moldova in 2018:

TİKA has made significant investments across Moldova over the last 24 years. I want to point out that support will continue to be delivered to those in need without any discrimination as to persons or region.
In his speech, Erdoğan also said that both sides affirmed their commitment to elevating economic relations to a level that matches the bilateral political relations. He added that it is of great importance to Turkey that Moldova’s territorial integrity and sovereignty be protected, which is the only way to maintain the climate of peace and stability in the region. Within this context, he noted that Turkey will continue its support for the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict through peaceful means within the framework of these principles, and that Gagauzia holds a special place in Turkey’s relations with Moldova (TCCB 2018).

During the same visit, the two presidents inaugurated another TİKA-assisted prestigious project that served as an indicator of the strong ties between the two countries. The Presidential Palace of Moldova, which had been damaged during the mass demonstrations in 2009, was repaired and modernized by TİKA. At the press conference held before the opening ceremony, President Dodon expressed his praises for the TİKA projects carried out in his country, pointing especially to the cooperation for the renovation of the Palace. Upon his counterpart’s kind remarks, the Turkish President stated:

This project will shine as a symbol of the friendship between Turkey and Moldova….It symbolizes the Turkish people’s love for the Moldovan people. Turkey will continue to stand with Moldova as was the case in the past. (TİKA 2018c)

Development Cooperation in Georgia

As the cooperation efforts that are dedicated to Moldova show, Turkey’s policy within the Black Sea region principally rests on contributing to development, stability and peace. During the visit that Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia of Georgia paid Ankara in October, 2019, Turkey’s President Erdoğan stressed this very priority, also announcing that bilateral efforts to maintain peace and stability in the Black Sea, the sea common to the two countries, would continue. Another associated issue mentioned by the President was the extreme importance of Georgia’s territorial integrity and stability to Turkey (TCCB 2019). In fact, Erdoğan is recognized to be a leader that has attached a specific importance to the neighboring country’s peace and security, since his tenure as prime minister. During his visit to Tbilisi in August, 2008, he put emphasis on the need for establishing an approach to regional stability and welfare,
also expressing Turkey’s strong support for Georgia’s territorial integrity (BBC 2008).

In August, 2008, as a result of escalating tensions with Russia regarding the so-called independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia found itself in the Five-Day War. In this chaotic atmosphere, where there were significant casualties and regional stability was shaken, Turkey took immediate diplomatic action. Ankara called on all sides to end clashes and military actions and to engage in direct talks for a peaceful solution (MFA 2008a). The humanitarian situation of the civilians was also heartrendingly tragic. Therefore, following these developments, Turkey’s government rapidly embarked on providing comprehensive humanitarian assistance to Georgia (MFA 2008b).

In this framework, the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay) played an active role in delivering basic humanitarian needs to the conflict-affected areas. Turkey’s rapid response to the humanitarian crisis of 2008 still remains in the memories of Georgian people. As Natia Loladze, the President of the Georgian Red Cross, states, the Turkish Red Crescent was, in fact, the first foreign institution that reached out to Georgia at the time (Kızılay 2019).

Turkey’s assistance to Georgia increased significantly after the developments of 2008. Beyond the emergency assistance provided immediately after the war, Turkey’s assistance efforts focused mainly on contributing to the development of the conflict-torn areas in the country. This endeavor was actually initiated as a response to a high-level request. During the visit of the Turkish Prime Minister to Tbilisi in 2008, the then President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, had pointed to the reconstruction needs that were the result of the Russian bombardments, and invited Turkey to help its neighbor with this issue (BBC 2008). Replying in the affirmative, the Turkish government ordered TİKA to undertake a comprehensive project in Gori, a Georgian city that had borne the full brunt of the attacks. The Gori Housing Project, which rebuilt the city infrastructure, as well as 100 buildings, was one of the most prominent results in the reconstruction of the damaged city. In line with the government’s policy to focus on relatively underdeveloped or ravaged regions in Georgia, TİKA has also carried out projects to construct roads and provide water in rural areas.

As part of its development cooperation, Turkey has implemented various projects in Georgia, not only in the area of infrastructure, but also in health and education. A health-related project is the Batumi Infectious Disease Hospital, which was renovated and equipped by TİKA to offer
high-quality healthcare to Georgian citizens, living in the western part of the country. The hospital has recently become renowned for being the epicenter of the fight against the new coronavirus in Georgia (Daily Sabah 2020). And acting on its demand-oriented policy, TİKA has also played a critical role in the construction and renovation of rehabilitation centers for the disabled in Georgia.

Beyond these efforts, a key component of Turkish cooperation in the neighboring country has been education projects, undertaken especially in rural areas, with the purpose of contributing to equality in education. Within this framework, TİKA completed the repair, renovation, and modern furnishing of a number of schools that was struggling to survive in poor conditions. In doing so, the agency helped Georgian students of various ages attend modern schools located around their settlements. A majority of these projects were designed based on needs and demands that were shared by local people, and hence led to concrete and effective outcomes.

Turkey’s support of the neighboring nation in education is not limited to facilities and equipment, but also includes training programs. A noteworthy one is the Atatürk Leadership Program, which was started in 2013 and continues to the present. Organized by TİKA in close coordination with the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) and the Georgian Strategic Analysis Center (GSAC), the program has accommodated 171 public officials and media members thus far for its twelve-month training programs. This kind of program has also been designed for health professionals, as well as for low-income groups. As an example, TİKA carried out a vocational training project for the disadvantaged people of Abkhazia. In the town of Vaziani, where internally displaced people live, TİKA established a fully equipped workshop, in which locals are able to produce shoes and clothes and thereby generate income. In terms of creating income, Turkey has also promoted the development of agricultural areas, which provide an important source of income for the rural population. A segment that has benefited from TİKA’s agricultural projects in recent years are the Meskhetian (Ahıska) Turks, whose ancestors were forced into exile and death in the early twentieth century by Stalin. In accordance with sustainable development targets, Turkey offers this disadvantaged group agricultural projects, including green housing. Households that benefit from this assistance have stated that they are able to make ends meet, thanks to the income they generate from agricultural production.
Furthering Economic Cooperation

Like many other post-Soviet states, Georgia faced severe economic problems after its declaration of independence. Following a sharp decline, the nation’s GDP per capita remained in a band of 500–700 USD in the post-independent 1990s. In addition, the country struggled with serious political tensions, which peaked in 2008. Despite all these challenges, Georgia’s economy started to gain impetus in the 2000s, gradually increasing its current and PPP-adjusted GDP per capita to 4717 USD and 12,005 USD, respectively, as of 2018 (World Bank 2019a, b). Behind this rise lies the strong economic reform processes that the government implemented.

Having reached the upper-middle income category in the 2010s, Georgia has the potential to go further. Given that, Turkey has also attached importance to strengthening bilateral economic relations based on the common geographical advantage, and has become a prominent trade and investment partner for Georgia within the last decade. This win-win approach was explained by then Prime Minister Erdo˘gan of Turkey at the 62nd Session of the UN General Assembly in 2007:

> In order to realize our vision of peace, stability and economic prosperity for the region, we not only seek to contribute to the resolution of frozen conflicts, but at the same time continue to invest in the infrastructure of regional cooperation through significant energy and transportation projects, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) oil and natural gas pipelines and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railroad. (UN 2007)

As discussed in detail in Chapter 11, these prestigious trilateral projects triggered a rapprochement among the partners by interconnecting them. These giant investments also aim to promote the overall economic activity and stability of the region. From a political perspective, the mechanisms of Turkey–Georgia–Azerbaijan and Turkey–Georgia–Azerbaijan–Iran contribute to regional stability, peace and prosperity, as well (MFA, n.d.-b).

To conclude, Georgia is a country in the Black Sea basin, with whom Turkey has developed dynamic and multidimensional relations, including development cooperation. With regard to all its relations and activities in
the region, Turkey’s main policy is one of boosting solidarity and collaboration among member countries to enhance the stability of the Black Sea basin. Ankara’s extensive development cooperation activities in the region for the past two decades serve as testimonial to this.

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