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## Central Asia: Diplomatic Activities Hit High Gear near Russia's Soft Underbelly

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Since mid-December till mid-January presidents, prime ministers and foreign chiefs of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Turkmenistan held a record number of meetings, mainly in Ashgabat, some in Tbilisi and Baku.

A meeting of GUAM (the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development) held in Brussels got together the foreign chiefs of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. The chairmanship of the organization was transferred from Ukraine to Azerbaijan. Collective security and gas pipelines, as well as other transport routes going around Russia, topped the agenda.

The project to expand the South Caucasian gas pipeline (Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum) constitutes the backbone of growing cooperation between Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan. The plans include the construction of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) going through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) – a pipeline project to transport natural gas from the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan) starting from Greece via Albania and the Adriatic Sea to Italy, and further to Western Europe. The plans are supported by the European Union. Turkmenistan wants to join the Southern Gas Corridor, an initiative of the European Commission for the gas supply from Caspian and Middle Eastern regions to Europe. The talks are on the way between Brussels and Ashgabat. The Southern Gas Corridor is planned

to become operational in 2018-2019.



Turkey is behind these vigorous diplomatic activities. Turkey's trade turnover with Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan had grown over 50 percent. Turkish investments into these countries have increased by one third. Turkey is the main importer of oil and gas from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. The Southern Gas Corridor is destined to diminish the dependence of Turkey and Europe on Russian gas.

The Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railway is a regional rail link project to directly connect Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The project is built to create an energy corridor by rail mainly supplied by Azerbaijan. The construction of highway along the same route is also in the cards together with the plans to build ferry routes going through Georgia to Moldova and Ukraine and through Turkey to the Balkans. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route aimed to invigorate foreign trade and cargo transportation between China and Europe, via Central Asia and the South Caucasus region became operational last year. In early August the first container block train from China arrived at the Port of Baku in Azerbaijan.

Before the talks in Ashgabat, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmed Dovutoglu visited Baku to discuss the possibility of expediting the construction of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, part of the Southern Gas Pipeline to connect Azerbaijan and Georgia with the eastern part of Turkey. It could become operational in 2017. Mehmet Fatih Öztarsu, an expert on South Caucasus and vice-president of the *Turkish Strategic Outlook Institution* which is one of the most effective English based research portals on international relations in Turkey, believes the project will make Azerbaijan the key country in the implementation of the plans to expand transport links between the southern part of the former Soviet Union, Turkey and Europe.

In Ashgabat Georgian President Giorgi Margevlashvili told Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that the cooperation between Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and the European Union should be expanded. In his turn, Erdogan expressed support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. He condemned the treaties between Russia and Abkhazia, Russia and South Ossetia. The Turkish President also confirmed Turkey's support for Georgia's

integration with NATO.

During the talks in Ashgabat, Erdogan said that Turkey has always been paying special attention on the relationship with Turkmenistan since it became an independent state. According to him, Turkmenistan is the original homeland of Turkish people.