

POLICYBRIEF

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Whose Memory, Whose Corridor? Turkey's Narrative Diplomacy in Azerbaijan and What It Means for the EU's New South Caucasus Engagement

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Introduction: A Connected South Caucasus Is Also a Narrated South Caucasus

The South Caucasus is entering a new phase of geopolitical reconfiguration. Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and Azerbaijan's military victory, the regional balance has been subsequently transformed. While Armenia has started to diversify its external relations, the deterioration of Azerbaijan–Russia relations have altered the strategic environment. At the same time, external actors are increasingly connecting regional stability to transport, energy and digital connectivity.

The European Union (EU) has responded to these developments with a significantly more ambitious regional agenda. During President Ursula von der Leyen's visits to Azerbaijan and Armenia on 1–2 July 2026, the EU announced up to €200 million in Global Gateway grants for connectivity projects across the South Caucasus, with the potential to mobilise up to €2 billion in public and private investment. The package covers transport, energy and digital connectivity and is accompanied by a €20 million peace-fostering programme for communities in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EU also announced a new EU–Azerbaijan Connectivity Partnership and a High-Level Connectivity Dialogue. Although this development is strategically important, connectivity is never only physical.

Highlights

Since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Turkey–Azerbaijan relations have increasingly combined strategic cooperation with narratives of shared history, cultural affinity and Turkic solidarity.

The 2021 Shusha Declaration transformed these narratives within the bilateral relationship by linking political, security, cultural, educational and connectivity cooperation to a shared historical and spiritual heritage.

The widening distance between Baku and Moscow since late 2024 has created additional space for Turkey to consolidate its position as a central external partner of Azerbaijan, although this should not be understood as a simple replacement of Russian influence.

The European Union's expanding connectivity agenda in the South Caucasus provides an opportunity to complement infrastructure and investment with greater attention to narratives, public communication and local perceptions of regional integration.

Railways, roads, energy corridors and digital infrastructure acquire political meaning through the narratives surrounding them. Regional actors compete not only over who builds infrastructure, but also over how that infrastructure is interpreted: as a bridge between communities, a symbol of historical unity, an instrument of sovereignty, or evidence of geopolitical alignment. Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan illustrates this dynamic particularly clear. Ankara's influence has not rested exclusively on military cooperation, trade or infrastructure. It has also been sustained through a powerful narrative repertoire centred on shared history, language, culture, kinship and solidarity. Since the 2020 war, these narratives have become increasingly embedded in official diplomatic and commemorative practices.

This Policy Brief argues that the EU's growing engagement with the South Caucasus would benefit from treating narrative and memory as dimensions of connectivity rather than as secondary communication concerns. The objective is not for the EU to reproduce Turkey's identity-based model, but to recognise that regional infrastructure enters political environments already structured by historical narratives and competing understandings of belonging and regional order.

From “One Nation, Two States” to Strategic Narrative Diplomacy

Historical narratives have long played a central role in Turkish–Azerbaijani relations. Following Azerbaijan's independence, bilateral ties developed around political solidarity, energy cooperation, security interests and a common conception of cultural affinity. The post-2020 period, however, produced a further institutionalisation of these narratives. The clearest example is the Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations, signed by then Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and İlham Aliyev on 15 June 2021. The declaration elevated bilateral relations to an allied level and explicitly embedded cooperation in references to shared history, cultural ties, common values and the “one nation, two states” conception of Turkish–Azerbaijani identity. It also called for continued cooperation in culture, education, science, youth and other areas, while stressing joint efforts to promote Turkic cultural heritage internationally. This matters because the historical narrative is not simply communicated through speeches. It is reproduced through institutions and practices.

Official commemorations, diplomatic visits, cultural initiatives, educational cooperation and references to historical agreements all contribute to constructing a shared

interpretive framework in which Turkey and Azerbaijan appear not simply as neighbouring states with converging interests, but as members of a historically connected political community. The significance of Shusha itself illustrates this process. The declaration was deliberately signed in a city presented by Azerbaijani authorities as a major centre of Azerbaijani and Turkic cultural heritage and as a symbol of the 2020 military victory. The location therefore carried political meaning beyond the legal content of the declaration. President Aliyev explicitly connected the declaration to historical references including the 1921 Treaty of Kars and the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Heydar Aliyev.

Such practices illustrate what I term memory engineering: the deliberate selection, mobilisation and institutional reinforcement of particular representations of the past in support of contemporary political objectives. I use the concept narrowly here. It should not simply become another term for propaganda, public diplomacy or memory politics. Its analytical value lies in drawing attention to three interconnected features.

1. First, **intentionality**. Political actors selectively invoke particular historical references and connect them to present political projects.
2. Second, **institutionalisation**. Historical narratives are reproduced not only through speeches but also through diplomatic agreements, commemorative practices, cultural organisations, educational initiatives and other infrastructures through which representations of the past circulate.
3. Third, **strategic orientation**. Narratives of shared history are connected to contemporary objectives such as alliance formation, regional influence, legitimacy and political alignment.

This understanding builds on established work showing that collective memory can shape international strategy and state behaviour. Bachleitner, for example, demonstrates how memory can operate as a political strategy and shape foreign-policy behaviour, while Gustafsson and Mälksoo show how memory can acquire direct significance for security and deterrence. At the same time, the concept overlaps with the literature on strategic narratives. Strategic narrative analysis examines how political actors make sense of the past, present and future and how these narratives circulate through communication environments. Recent work further emphasises that strategic narratives matter because they shape the conditions under which policies are legitimised, contested and understood. Memory engineering therefore

should not replace these concepts. Rather, I use it to identify a more specific process: the strategic organisation of selected historical meanings through institutions and communicative infrastructures in order to support contemporary political projects.

The Changing Regional Context: Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey

The evolving relationship between Baku and Moscow provides an important backdrop to Turkey's growing regional salience. Azerbaijan and Russia maintained substantial political, economic and security relations for decades. Yet these relations deteriorated considerably after the December 2024 Azerbaijan Airlines crash, which Azerbaijani authorities attributed to Russian actions, and deteriorated further following the deaths of Azerbaijani citizens during police operations in Yekaterinburg in June 2025. Baku subsequently cancelled Russian cultural events, suspended official visits and raided the Baku office of the Russian state-funded Sputnik outlet. President Aliyev also declined to attend Russia's Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in May 2025. These developments should not be interpreted as evidence that Russian influence has simply disappeared. Russia remains an important regional actor, and the South Caucasus cannot be reduced to a binary competition between Moscow and Ankara. Nevertheless, the deterioration of Azerbaijan–Russia relations has altered the environment in which Turkey operates.

Turkey's relationship with Azerbaijan combines security cooperation, economic ties and connectivity with a historically grounded narrative of fraternity and shared identity. The Shusha Declaration formalised this relationship precisely at the moment when the post-2020 regional order was being reconstructed. The narrative dimension is therefore strategically significant because it can connect material projects to a broader political interpretation. Roads and railways can be presented not simply as infrastructure but as the material expression of an already existing historical and cultural relationship. This dynamic becomes particularly relevant as regional connectivity itself becomes geopolitically contested.

The 2025 US-mediated Armenia–Azerbaijan process and subsequent development of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP) have placed transport connectivity at the centre of the emerging regional order. The August 2025 Washington declaration established

a framework for advancing connectivity between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan through Armenia, while US officials in 2026 continued to describe the route as an important element of regional integration. For Turkey, this emerging connectivity environment intersects naturally with an existing narrative of shared Turkic geography and political solidarity. For the EU, however, the challenge is different.

Corridors Are Not Politically Neutral

Connectivity has become one of the principal languages through which the post-conflict regional order is being negotiated. The August 2025 Washington Declaration between Armenia and Azerbaijan, witnessed by the United States, explicitly committed the parties to developing the “Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity” (TRIPP) connectivity project through Armenian territory. The same declaration presented the emerging post-conflict environment in terms of overcoming the legacy of confrontation and moving toward a future not bound by the conflict of the past. This matters for Turkey because transport connectivity in the South Caucasus intersects with an already established narrative of regional interconnection between Turkey, Azerbaijan and the wider Turkic world.

The EU is now developing its own connectivity agenda. Its July 2026 package explicitly identifies the South Caucasus as a crossroads linking Europe, the Caspian and Central Asia and highlights potential support for projects including the Nakhchivan railway and the Port of Baku. The EU's approach combines infrastructure with energy cooperation and community-level peacebuilding. The question is therefore not simply which actor builds which road or railway. It is which political meaning becomes attached to regional connectivity.

For Turkey, infrastructure can be incorporated into a narrative of historical and cultural proximity. For the United States, TRIPP is framed primarily around peace, prosperity and international connectivity. For the EU, Global Gateway offers a vocabulary of investment, regional integration, sustainability and peace. These narratives need not be mutually exclusive. But they do shape how external engagement is perceived.

The EU therefore faces a challenge that cannot be addressed through infrastructure financing alone. A connectivity initiative that is economically attractive may nevertheless acquire political meanings that the EU did not anticipate. Conversely, a project that is framed by the EU as a contribution to peace and regional integration may be interpreted locally through

pre-existing ideas about sovereignty, national identity or geopolitical alignment. This is where attention to memory becomes policy-relevant.

What Does This Mean for the European Union?

The EU is now becoming a more visible geopolitical actor in the South Caucasus. Its approach combines peacebuilding, economic integration, energy diversification and connectivity. The July 2026 initiatives are particularly significant because they frame connectivity explicitly as a mechanism for peace and regional cooperation. The EU has presented transport, energy and digital infrastructure as instruments for linking the South Caucasus with Europe, the Caspian and Central Asia. Yet this agenda risks being understood primarily through a technocratic vocabulary includes terms like investment, corridors, trade, infrastructure and resilience. This vocabulary is necessary, but insufficient.

Regional populations do not encounter connectivity exclusively as an economic process. They interpret it through existing identities, historical experiences and expectations about external actors. The strategic question for the EU is consequently not whether it should compete with Turkey over historical narratives. It should not attempt to reproduce the “one nation, two states” model or construct an artificial European identity for the region. Rather, the EU should recognise that connectivity projects enter pre-existing mnemonic and political environments.

A railway connecting Azerbaijan to its neighbours, for example, may simultaneously be understood as an economic opportunity, an expression of national sovereignty, a symbol of post-war territorial transformation, or part of a broader Turkish–Azerbaijani vision of regional integration. Ignoring these interpretive dimensions could leave the EU communicating the material benefits of connectivity without sufficiently understanding the political meanings attached to them.

This is particularly relevant because the EU is now investing not only in infrastructure but also in people-to-people links and peace-building. Its €20 million programme for border communities explicitly seeks to make the benefits of peace visible in everyday life. In other words, the EU is already moving beyond infrastructure. The next step is to understand how those interventions are interpreted.

Such initiatives provide precisely the kind of environment in which narrative analysis can become useful to policy. The EU could therefore treat narrative monitoring not as a form of political messaging, but as an early-warning and policy-learning instrument, and such monitoring would not require the EU to intervene directly in historical memory. It would instead enable policymakers to understand the political environments into which EU initiatives are introduced.

Policy Recommendations

1. Add a narrative dimension to EU connectivity assessments

EU institutions and delegations should complement conventional political-economy assessments of connectivity projects with systematic monitoring of the narratives attached to them. This could include tracking how governments, media, civil-society organisations and local communities frame major infrastructure initiatives.

2. Link connectivity investment to local communication ecosystems

Major infrastructure projects should be accompanied by locally grounded communication strategies that explain their social and economic implications through trusted regional actors. Partnerships with local media, civil society and educational institutions can make EU initiatives more visible without imposing a Brussels-centred narrative.

3. Treat memory and commemoration as part of conflict-sensitive engagement

EU policymakers should monitor how commemorations, historical anniversaries, museums, cultural diplomacy and symbolic political events affect perceptions of regional cooperation. This would help identify moments when historical narratives reinforce reconciliation—and moments when they deepen polarisation.

4. Avoid competing with Turkey on identity; compete on institutional credibility

The EU does not need an alternative version of Turkic solidarity. Its comparative advantage lies elsewhere: predictable institutions, cross-border cooperation, economic opportunity, mobility and inclusive regional governance. The objective should therefore be to make European connectivity

meaningful through its practical benefits rather than through an attempt to manufacture competing historical identities.

Conclusion

The emerging South Caucasus order is being constructed not only through agreements, infrastructure and financial commitments, but also through competing interpretations of history and regional belonging. Turkey's post-2020 relationship with Azerbaijan demonstrates how strategic cooperation can be reinforced through narratives of shared history, cultural affinity and Turkic solidarity. The Shusha Declaration provides a particularly clear example of how such narratives can become embedded within formal political, security and cultural cooperation.

At the same time, the changing relationship between Azerbaijan and Russia and the growing involvement of the United States and European Union are creating a more complex environment of competing regional projects. The 2025 Washington process and the emergence of TRIPP have placed connectivity at the centre of this transformation, while the EU's 2026 Global Gateway initiatives represent a substantial expansion of European engagement. The key implication is that connectivity is simultaneously material, political and symbolic. Roads and railways can move goods and people, but they can also carry political meanings.

For the European Union, recognising this does not mean replacing its connectivity agenda with a politics of memory. It means understanding that infrastructure is introduced into societies with pre-existing identities, historical grievances and geopolitical narratives. A more narrative-aware EU strategy would therefore not seek to engineer memory itself. It would seek to understand how others are doing so, how local actors respond, and how European policies can contribute to connectivity and peace without unintentionally reinforcing competing dynamics of exclusion and polarisation.

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