



## Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

### Faith Tourism and “Possible” Faith Tourism Routes between Turkey and Georgia\*

#### İnanç Turizmi ve Türkiye İle Gürcistan Arasında “Muhtemel” İnanç Turizm Rotaları

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#### MAKALE BİLGİSİ

##### Makale Geçmişi:

Başvuru tarihi: 12 Eylül 2017

Düzeltilme tarihi: 26 Ocak 2018

Kabul tarihi: 11 Şubat 2018

##### Anahtar Kelimeler:

İnanç Turizmi

Sınır Ötesi Rotalar

Bölgesel Kalkınma

Türkiye ve Gürcistan

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article history:

Received 12 September 2017

Received in revised form 26 January 2018

Accepted 11 February 2018

##### Keywords:

Faith Tourism

Cross-Border Routes

Regional Development

Turkey and Georgia

#### ÖZ

Yerel yönetimler, turizmi ekonomik etkileri nedeniyle desteklemektedirler ancak, kültür ve inanç turizminin, kültürel mirasın korunması ve yerel kalkınmaya da önemli katkıları bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, kuzeydoğu Türkiye ile Gürcistan arasındaki inanç turizmi potansiyeli ortaya konulmuş ve farklı dinler arasındaki sınır ötesi işbirliği ve hoşgörüyü katkıda bulunulmasının ilk adımı olarak “inanç turizm rotaları” belirlenmiştir. Böylesi çalışma, Türkiye'nin az gelişmiş bölgelerinden birisi ile Gürcistan özelinde yapılan ilk çalışma olmasının ötesinde sonuçlar, turizm planlamacılarına ve karar alıcılara iki komşu ülke arasında ortak projeler üretmek için değerli bilgiler sağlamaktadır.

#### ABSTRACT

Local administrations support tourism because of its positive economic effects on local economy besides, culture and faith tourism is important through preservation of cultural heritage and local development. In this study, potential in faith tourism of North-eastern part of Turkey and Georgia are explicated and to contribute to cross-border collaboration and tolerance between different religions, a proposal religious tourism route is designed as basic step. Beyond being the first study done in the one of less developed regions of Turkey and Georgia, this paper provides valuable information to tourism planners and decision makers to build joint projects between two neighbouring countries.

## 1. Introduction

As in many other sectors, tourism policies and implementations reflect general policies (Belhassen and Ebel, 2009) and they are used to propagandize regimes (Richter, 1980; Hall, 1990; Ateljevic and Doorne, 2002; Cohen-Hattab, 2004; Kim et al., 2007).

Nowadays, the effects of globalization are felt intensely, and national policies are not adequate to solve problems and therefore, cross-border co-operations are proliferating.

Moreover, public policies aim at increasing liberalization of trade and international mobility. As a result, human mobility is becoming easier and international tourism is developing (Gelbman and Timothy, 2010).

The tourism sector is recognized as an important development tool, especially to revitalize rural areas which experience economic and social problems and where other options are very limited (Blackman et al., 2004; Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004).

\* This paper has been presented at the 8th International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference held in Konya, Turkey, June 1-4, 2016.

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Developments in world tourism and changes in tourist profile and expectations require diversification in tourism products. Tourists search for different tourism types and new countries, regions and places/destinations to go and thereby tourism destinations having new and alternative activities have become more preferable (Sarkim, 2007; Tapur, 2009; Güzel, 2010).

Religion, has important impacts on the culture and society, and so on our behavior as consumers (Wilkes et al., 1986; Zaichkowsky and Sood, 1989; Delener, 1990; McDaniel and Burnett, 1990; Shinde and Rizzelo, 2014). Also, in most of the religions visiting the sacred places is “advised” (Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Shinde and Rizzelo, 2014). These “advices” create the base for the faith tourism. Therefore, traditional definition of faith tourism consists of visiting holy places, and sanctuaries, participating or watching rituals and ceremonies, performing religious duties such as pilgrimage (Usta, 2001; Karaman and Usta, 2006; UNWTO, 2011; Shinde and Rizzelo, 2014).

However, after 90s, several researchers, such as Seaton (2002) and Digance (2003) have explored the secular aspects of religious travel, and the definition of faith tourism has been expanded to include profane and spiritual travels (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). For example, visits to battlefields/cemeteries, or graves/dwellings of the celebrities are considered within faith tourism (Reader and Walter, 1993; Alderman, 2002; Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

New management processes and improvements experienced in globalization have required creating new policies for regional development. Creating an inner growth by activating all the dynamics has become prominent (Durgun, 2006). Within this scope, cultural and faith tourism is of importance for tourism sustainability for many regions and local development (Gil and Curiel, 2008).

Likewise many other countries, there are interregional imbalances in Turkey and Georgia and it is a known fact that each region cannot benefit from all the opportunities of the gross development equally. Tourism sector is significant to eliminate regional imbalances. Tourism is a sector that may reduce economic and social gaps as it enables income to spread within whole society, and provides tools for equal development (Durgun, 2006; Sevinç and Azgün, 2012). The purpose of this study is to emphasize the importance of cross-border tourism cooperation between Turkey and Georgia and to determine proposal routes between Northeastern Turkey and Georgia based on interviews held within the both sides of border and observations and experiences of the author.

## 2. Literature Review

Recent researches suggest that destinations should be determined convenient with changing tourist expectations rather than administrative boundaries (Zillinger, 2007; Dredge and Jamal, 2013; Blasco et al., 2014). This is particularly important for cross-border regions, where may offer different experiences for the traveler, and therefore it is extremely useful to consider and manage cross-border destinations as a whole (Ioannides et al., 2006; Prokkola, 2010; Blasco et al., 2014).

International borders are traditionally perceived as physical barriers formed to limiting and controlling mobility of people, goods and services between countries (Sofield, 2006). International borders, visa procedures, ease of passage are important factors in tourism planning and marketing besides affecting the preferences of tourists (Weidenfeld, 2013).

Since the 1990s, policies have been focusing on making national borders tools for the development of communication and co-operation (Weidenfeld, 2013). These efforts, by creating cross-border co-operations (Eskilsson and Hogdahl, 2009; Prokkola, 2010), aim to increase the competitiveness of border regions, especially in tourism sector (Weidenfeld, 2013).

The most salient example is the Schengen agreement in EU countries. For international tourists, it is sufficient to obtain a single visa to travel within Schengen countries without restriction. Controls have been removed at border gates and tourists have therefore been able to travel in many countries without any visa and transit procedures (Jerabek, 2012; Blasco et al., 2014). The policies of international organizations such as NAFTA and Shanghai Cooperation Organization have also been reflected in the policies of member countries and facilitated the mobility of people and goods (Newman, 2006; Gelbman and Timothy, 2010).

Since human beings were created, they have needed beliefs to explain natural events when their knowledge is not adequate. Therefore, there have been several different religions and faith groups throughout human history. And, with an eye to spiritual reasons, holy places have been visited by humans in masses (Güzel, 2010; Tarlow, 2010).

However, the interest of tourism researchers for faith travels has increased in the 1990s and 2000s, and its political, cultural, economic and geographical dimensions have been examined (Nolan and Nolan, 1992; Vukonic, 1992; Timothy and Olsen, 2006). The “old” paradigm rested on the assumption that religious issues were at the center of the journey, but in recent years researchers have pointed out that the differences between secular travel and pilgrimage has narrowed (Kong, 2001; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). The religious zones form the basic attractions not only for the pilgrims but also for those who travel for temporal purposes (Fernandes et al., 2012). As well as fulfilling religious duties, curiosity, desire to learn, sightseeing and holiday are among the reasons to visit religious sites (Fernandes et al., 2012). Santos (2002) revealed out that enjoying natural/historical beauties and interacting with local people and culture occupy first 2 ranks while religious purposes occupy only 3th rank. Therefore, religious tourism is very closely related to holiday and culture tourism. So much so that, on religious trips, a free day is organized to provide an opportunity to visit surroundings (Rinschede, 1992).

Besides satisfying the spiritual needs of people (Poria et al., 2003), “faith tourism” may contribute to development of local economy (Woodward, 2004). Within this scope, cultural and faith tourism is of importance for many regions and local development (Gil and Curiel, 2008).

The studies have shown that the religious tourists consist of all social classes, middle and over age individuals and they believe in that these visits will contribute in their inner journey and they are a part of this travel (Doney, 2013;

Sharma, 2013). They demand safe, clean, comfortable and peaceful environment rather than high quality of accommodation facilities, food and flight (Bar and Cohen-Hattab, 2003; Gil and Curiel, 2008; Triantafyllidou et al., 2010; Doney, 2013; Olsen, 2013). Thereby, faith tourism is significant for local people and economy as a sustained source of income.

Although, with a progress for last 30 years, faith tourism occupies one of top ranks of growing tourism types, there are deficiencies of statistical data for faith tourism and numbers are usually based on observation, generalizations and estimates (Vukonic, 2002). Each year, more than two million Muslims travel to Mecca for Hajj (Woodward, 2004), nearly a quarter of international tourists visiting Israel come due to religious reasons (Collins-Kreiner, 2010) and circa 30 million Christian pilgrim visit Holy Land (Wright, 2007). Moreover, every year the five million Christian visit Lourdes in France and twenty-eight million Hindu pilgrims visit to the Ganges River in India (Singh, 2006). If the numbers of people travelling for religious-based social activities such as weddings, funerals or circumcisions/mitzvahs are counted, size of faith tourism market becomes larger (Wright, 2007). According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), more than 300 million people a year participate in religious tourism which is a market worth over 18 billion dollars (Shinde and Rizzelo, 2014).

Statistics on Santiago de Compostela (Portugal), which is one of the most popular faith tourism destination/route of today, emphasize that the number of visitors increase steadily. Also in the years which July 25th coincides with Sunday (1993, 1999, 2004 and 2010) extra increases are experienced (Table 1).

**Table 1:** The Number of Pilgrims Visiting the Compostela

Years	Number of Visitor	Years	Number of Visitor
1986	2.491	2002	68.952
1987	2.905	2003	74.614
1988	3.501	2004	179.944
1989	5.760	2005	93.924
1990	4.918	2006	100.377
1991	7.274	2007	114.026
1992	9.764	2008	125.141
1993	99.439	2009	145.877
1994	15.863	2010	272.135
1995	19.821	2011	183.366
1996	23.218	2012	192.499
1997	25.179	2013	215.880
1998	30.126	2014	237.886
1999	154.613	2015	262.459
2000	55.004	2016	277.915
2001	61.418		

Source: The Confraternity of Saint James (2017)

## 2.1. Cross – Border Faith Tourism Route

Despite borders are under the control of different states, they share many geographical, historical, economic and socio-cultural features (Weidenfeld, 2013). Additionally, mainly with the effect of being away from political and economic centers, the border zones have often been the least developed regions of the countries (Blackman et al., 2004). To allay these negative situations, cross-border cooperations in fields as trade, social welfare, environmental problems, economic development have increased (Blasco et al., 2014), and

tourism is frequently at the core of these collaborations (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004).

Routes connecting historical/natural areas, small towns, historic settlements/cities to each other, establish common heritage and form a strong marketing symbol (Murray and Graham, 1997) and so create opportunities for small places (Fernandes et al., 2012). Tourist activities are dispersed to different settlements instead of concentrating in certain areas. Routes therefore seem to be a good strategy (Murray and Graham, 1997) for local people to benefit more and to reduce adverse effects (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004).

Beyond attracting tourists, one of the main aims of the routes is to yield a greater impact via creating a unity and synergy by linking tourist spaces which individually are not so competitive (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Tourism routes, which combine different activities and locations under a common theme, contribute to the development of byproducts and services to fulfill the needs of travelers (Grefe, 1994; Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Fernandes et al., 2012; Weidenfeld, 2013). Beyond that, cross-border routes have the function of forming a unity spirit. Fernandes et al. (2012) notes that rebirth of Camino coincides with the renewal of the European spirit.

Arrangement of tours where both sides of the wall can be seen after the destruction of the Berlin Wall (Gelbman and Timothy, 2010), or the opening of cross-border parks, which symbolize the end of hostile times between Finland and Russia or Costa Rica and Panama (Weidenfeld, 2013), or The African Dream Project aiming at uniting many settlements on a route between North and South Africa (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004), or the Santiago de Compostela cross-border routes which were included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1993 may be propounded as examples. Camino de Santiago may be the most famous faith tourism route around Europe. This route has made it possible to generate the faith routes in Europe and other parts of the world.

In this study, the tourism assets in North Eastern Anatolia and South Caucasus, especially in Georgia and by courtesy of these assets probability of faith – tourism routes in this area are examined

## 3. Study Field

### 3.1. Caucasus

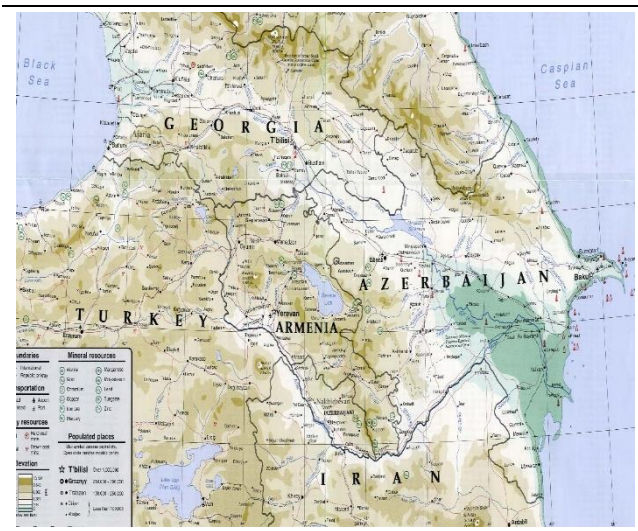
Even though there are many different ideas about origin of the word Caucasus, according to Coene (2010), it comes from the Greek word Kaukosos (In Greek mythology, the mountain where Zeus chained Prometheus). However, it is for sure, from historical, cultural or geopolitical aspects, Caucasus is one of the most important regions of the world. The region where total area is 440.700 km<sup>2</sup> is divided into two by mountains; Northern and Southern Caucasia (Guseynov, 1996). The northern part is known as Ciscaucasia (including south western Russia, Northern Georgia and northern Azerbaijan), southern is known as Transcaucasia (including whole Armenia, southern Azerbaijan and southern Georgia) (Cornell, 2005) (see, Figure 1).

Even though, there is no unanimity on geographical divisions, the Caucasus Mountains, incorporating Mount Elbrus (5,642 m), Europe's highest summit, are often perceived to divide Asia and Europe. The region is famous for its rich variety of flora and fauna, natural beauties, multi ethnic and cultural structure. These features create a good base for tourism development.

There have been always many different ethnic groups in the Caucasus (Kantarci, 2006; Sylven et al., 2008) and these ethnic groups constantly meet and mix with each other by migrations between the southern and northern Caucasus and other parts of the world. As a natural reflection of cultural diversity, different religions and sects have been living together for many years, and worships of these beliefs can be found throughout the region. These assets create a motivation for both religious and secular travellers and form the basis for planning the region as a holistic destination.

As an indirect effect of the correlation between the globalization and uniformity of cultures, tourists are looking for unique experiences and differences. In recent years, many regions and countries try to utilize their ethnic and cultural diversity to create a common image as a promotional strategy and to perforate into the market as a new destination (Sheikhi, 2015). Therefore, the geopolitical position, natural, historical and cultural assets, climate characteristics, flora and fauna of the Caucasus can be marketed as a single destination with a holistic approach (Weidenfeld, 2013). This current study deals with the faith tourism (and also cultural tourism) assets.

**Figure 1.** Map of South Caucasus



Source: US Bureau of Intelligence and Research (2011)

By enabling ethnic groups to pass on their culture to new generations and introduce it to the world, such strategies provide opportunities for ethnic groups to revive their traditions, languages and lifestyles (Cohen, 1988; Sheikhi, 2015). Moreover, beyond contributing to national solidarity and sense of unity among regions with different development level, it can contribute to strengthening neighborhood and relation between countries (Seferaj, 2014). However, it should not be forgotten that when developing strategies for ethnic groups, the problems of exclusion and differences in values and meaning between ethnic groups and tourists

(Murray and Graham, 1997) should be handled very carefully.

### 3.2. North Eastern (TRA2) Region in Turkey

Composed of Ağrı, Ardahan, Iğdır and Kars cities, TRA2 region is located in the north-eastern of Turkey and is one of the coldest regions due to its terrestrial climate. The industry is under-developed in the region and the residents generally depend on livestock. Population density is below the country average.

The region which was the witness of a continuous habitation since Paleolithic time has many memories from old civilisations and settlements such as, Ani City, Kars Castle, Ishakpasha Palace, Mount Ararat and remains from old Doğubayazıt (Ağrı). The region is located on a significant and strategic commercial route such as Silk Road that constituted a good platform to exchange not only goods but also beliefs, thoughts, civilisations.

Even if the economic situations of cities got worse, historical and cultural texture of the region grew as a result of population structure changing over time and traces of the invaders and the ones escaping from invasion have composed today's heritage. Ani Antique City, Kars city center, all of which was declared as an Ancient Archaeological Site due to the historical constructions, and Seljuk – Georgian – Armenian and Ottoman pieces give an ancient identity to the region. Also, TRA2 Region, the transition and meeting point of Caucasus cultures, is an area where religious believes merge and live together and where tolerance is developed due to its multicultural structure. Christian Molokanes who were deported by Czarist Russia lived with the Muslim people for years and both societies learned a lot from each other. Thus, there are religious places in the regions which are regarded as important by both Muslims and Christians.

It is stated that 3A (attractions, accessibility and accommodation) is necessity for tourism development (Özgen, 2010). In the case of TRA2 Region, attractions create competitive advantages and situation in accessibility and accommodation are enough to fulfill basic tourist expectations (Serka, 2014), however, tourism development of the region is at beginning stage. In this context, study field is preferred because it is a border region and it can be an example of tourism development with regional cooperation.

### 3.3. Tourism Assets in Study Field

Principal values located throughout potential faith tourism routes in TRA2 Region and Georgia are explained below;

**Ani Ancient City:** One of the oldest settlements in Anatolia, Ani is a common value for Persian, Ancient Greek, Armenian, Seljuk, Georgian, Arabic, Seddat and other cultures living in Anatolia and it is in UNESCO Heritage List. It became one of the main stops of commercial network reaching from Caucasus, Central Asia and China throughout Silk Road with its population of almost 100 thousands. In 732, Armenian Bagrat Kingdom era started, and the King III. Aşot declared Ani as capital of Bagrat Kingdom. In 1064, when Alparslan conquered Ani, the city met with Seljuk civilization. Then, it fell under Georgian and Mongol domination respectively in 1124 and 1239. These invasions

caused great devastation and the city started to lose its commercial significance. In 1534, Ottoman Empire was the only power in Ani, but Silk Road and Ani lost their commercial significance. The city which started to be abandoned in 15th century was dominated by Russia for 40 years and recovered from Russian domination in 1921. Influenced by different civilizations and cultures, the city has integrity with monumental structures such as mosques, churches, palaces, caravansaries and Turkish baths.

**Mount Ararat:** Mount Ararat is the highest point of Europe (if Caucasia is accepted out of Europe) and is known as the centre of several civilizations and religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Because of belief that Noah landed on the Mount Ararat, it is very important religious point.

**The Trace of Noah's Ark:** It's a natural monument between Telçeker and Meşar Villages located in the south of Mount Ararat and 3,5 km away from Turkey-Iran highway. This monument is in the shape of a ship. Because of the cultural feature of the ship mass, Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Culture and Tourism put here under protection as a natural site and outdoor museum in 1987. It is especially important for Christian world as it is mentioned in the Bible.

**Ahmed-i Hani Tomb:** It is the tomb of an Islamic senior known as "Hani Baba", the clerk of İshak Pasha Palace. It is one of the most visited tombs of the region by local people.

**Ebu'l Hasan Harakani Tomb:** Located in the garden of Evliya Mosque in Kars, the tomb belongs to Ebu'l Hasan Harakani who is one of the people who guided and influenced Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi spiritually, and his Sufi perception is dominated by a magnificent human love. He adapted serving to the human as the goal of his extinction. There is a mosque and madrasa next to his tomb.

**Akdamar Church:** Akdamar Island in Van Lake is famous for its Armenian Church with same name of island. The Church is important pilgrimage point for Gregorian Christians and today, Armenians have ceremony every year.

Also the Georgia has many important holy points, and these are also main stops of the possible routes.

**Anchiskhati:** Anchiskhati Church which bears the name Holy Mary at the beginning is one of the oldest churches in Tbilisi and built in 5th century.

**Metekhi:** The Metekhi Church was built in 1289 by King Demetra on the remains of another church from the 5th century.

**Mtatsminda:** Mtatsminda was built in 1879 on remains of Holy Father David's church which is accepted very holly by Georgians.

**Sioni Cathedral:** Construction of Sioni Cathedral was started in the 5th century and finished in 620. The Cathedral which is damaged and renovated many times in history is a symbol for Tbilisi and the Georgian nation.

**Kintsvisi Monastery:** Three churches whose construction times are not defined, forms the Kintsvisi Monastery complex. The central church is dedicated to Nicholas and the small chapel is dedicated to St George.

**Kutaisi - Bagrati Cathedral (UNESCO World Heritage Site):** Besides being a Cathedral, Kutaisi – Bagrati Cathedral was a cultural and academic center of old Georgia. Architectural styles, ornaments in and out of the building add a particular importance to the Cathedral.

**Mtskheta Svetitskhoveli and Djvari Churches (UNESCO World Heritage Site):** Mtskheta has many staring architectural samples from Caucasian medieval era. Mtskheta Churches exhibit cultural and artistic approaches of Kingdom of Georgia (UNESCO, 2017).

#### 4. Methodology

This research has been conducted using case study approach (Fernandes et al., 2012). Within the study, first the papers about tourism routes and cross-border tourism destinations were inspected and then interviews with local people and decision-makers on both sides of the border were held and opinions and recommendations about cross-border tourism route were compiled. The interviewees include representatives of public authorities, civil society, private sector and local people. Apart from the spontaneous interviews with local people, 6 Georgian and 8 Turkish representatives were interviewed, which is an adequate sample to elucidate the issues of research (Wesley and Pffor, 2010; Blasco et al., 2014)

Field work and interviews were held from June 2014 to April 2016. The interviews took between 20 minutes and 1 hour and were conducted in Turkish or in English. In Georgia, for the interviews especially with local people, a Georgian colleague who speaks English assisted. In order to make the interviewers feel comfortable, interviews were not recorded to any electronic recorders and participants were informed about it.

The researcher took notes during the interviews, afterwards the notes were grammatically corrected while the meanings and essence of the sentences were kept same. During the analysis, interview records were re-read so that the data can be viewed in a holistic way and analysed more deeply (Wang and Ap, 2013).

In the light of literature and statistics, interview data were subjected to content analysis (Blasco, et al., 2014) and interpreted. Firstly, in order to determine the necessary processes for the establishment of cross-border tourism structures, narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) was used during the interviews and review of the notes. Then, the content of the interview was divided into categories and content analysis was applied. As a result, the key elements of constitution and management of the cross-border routes have been identified (Blasco et al., 2014).

In general, it is revealed that the idea of increasing cooperation between the two countries in border regions and building common tourism corridors have been supported both sides. Details of the analysis results are given below.

#### 5. Findings

It is observed that even though they have not adequate knowledge about tourism, the majority of the local people consider tourism as "panacea" to improve their socio-economic conditions. This mainly stems from the mainstream image of the tourism and indicates that increase



of the local capacity is a priority for cross-border cooperation as it is recommended in the literature (Santos, 2002).

Majority of the interviewees, especially local people, emphasized the geographical, historical and cultural similarities of two countries and stated that the cooperation in tourism would be beneficial for both countries and they showed a positive attitude. They emphasize that the symbols / icons of common cultural and religious values on both sides of the border and the image of the Caucasus can (and should) be used as a new tourism product. This is in accordance with the general mainstream literature expressing that the border itself (Prokkola, 2010), geopolitical positions of the border regions, natural and cultural values (Weidenfeld, 2013; Blasco et al., 2014) constitute tourism attractiveness.

Moreover, it has been stated that the countries need to prepare a common physical/implementation plan for cooperation, but in the case of Turkey - Georgia cooperation, it is not easy because the management system of the two countries is different. While physical planning is a principal requirement for tourism development (Blackman et al., 2004) it is even more difficult in border regions. Though there is no direct reference in the expressions of the participants, it is more important that the physical plans are to be implemented and management is to be harmonized.

As a reflection of the central management system of Turkey and Georgia, participants expressed that central governments should have a more dominant role than local governments. In this regard, they especially mentioned Kars - Tbilisi - Baku railway, (which was under construction at the dates of the interviews) and expressed that the good relations between two countries are promising and therefore, cooperation can be carried out.

In this framework, it will be appropriate to examine the relations. Georgia declared its independence from USSR on April 9, 1991, Turkey recognized it soon. Diplomatic relations started in 1992 and embassies were opened mutually. The relationship between the two countries is favorable both in commercial and political terms. Turkey is the largest trading partner of Georgia since 2007 and High Level Strategic Cooperation Council has been formed between the governments (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011). The number of tourist visits between the countries is also important and citizens can visit each other with identification cards, without passport. Georgian citizens occupy a small proportion of the number of tourists visiting Turkey (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2017), but the numbers underline that a considerable portion of Georgian citizens (which is approximately 4,5 million according to UNDESA, 2017) visit Turkey. The number of Turkish tourist visiting Georgia have increased steadily especially since 2010 and exceeded 1.000.000 which constitutes 15 - 25 % of international tourists of Georgia (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2018). In terms of joint promotion and marketing activities, some NGO based formation is observed and Artvin (Hopa) and Batumi are cooperating to promote as a united destination in package programs (Akbas, 2016).

While the literature emphasizes the importance of relationships and links between entrepreneurs and the private sector in the development of cross-border co-operation (Blasco et al., 2014; Weidenfeld, 2013), a very small fraction

of the interviewees talked about the importance of private sector cooperation and emphasized that cross-border tourism can be achieved through public initiatives. However, the vast majority of participants (not only the local people but also the representatives of private and public sectors on both sides) imagined the cross-border tourism development as increasing the number of accommodation facilities, establishing customer exchanges and joint promotional campaigns. This risk should be handled carefully and cross-border tourism development should be built on structural co-operations and organizations. Otherwise, as Santos (2002) points out, tourism cannot be achieved on a sustainable base and it cannot provide the desired changes in the region.

Similar to what is expressed in the work of Briedenhann and Wickens (2004), interviewees frequently expressed that lack of capacity in local communities and governments, pessimist views of the locals about the future of region, and inadequate knowledge of local authorities about tourism constitute the main problems.

In addition, it was observed that private sector representatives believe that the cross-border visits create a friendly atmosphere between entrepreneurs from both sides and that they support to develop cooperations. As it is suggested in literature (Blackman et al., 2004; Blasco et al., 2014), private sector may have a ground role in bridging between societies and developing cross-border routes in study field.

The religions differ on sides of the border (Islam on Turkish side, Orthodox Christianity on Georgian side) but as a consequence of living together for centuries, there is a (albeit cautious and timid) tolerance to other beliefs. It was observed that though there are some insecurity and fear senses on both sides of border caused by the government politics of the Cold War period (at that time, Georgia was part of USSR), these negative attitudes toward the opposite side of the border can easily be overcome. Therefore cross-border route between Turkey and Georgia would give a "delectable" example of inter-religious and inter-ethnicity cooperation.

Similar to setting the cooperation and routes as mentioned above, the participants expressed the need to use public resources to ensure the cost and financial sustainability of cross-border co-operation. However, -probably as a natural consequence of the fact that such cooperation has not been experienced so far in the region- any opinion has not been expressed about organizational structure of the cooperation.

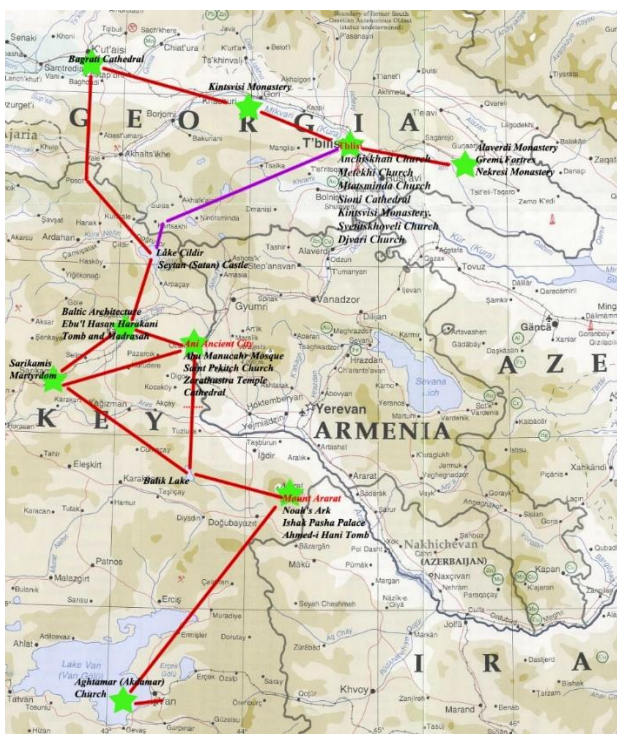
Since the results underline that joint tourism routes are suitable for the region, the "draft" routes designed by the author are indicated in Figure 2. In addition to religious/historical assets, the routes involve also natural beauties (such as Aktaş (in Georgian; Kartsakhi/Khozapini) Lake, Çıldır Lake, Van Lake, Maçahel valley, Mariamjvari Nature Reserve, Paravani Lake, Javakheti National Park etc.) for the spiritual and aesthetic satisfaction of both religious and profane tourists. While the duration may differ due to the purpose and expectation of the visitors, the routes are supposed to include 3 to 7 nightings. Overnights would spread to both sides and in different cities (as; Tbilisi, Akhaltsikhe, Kars, Ağrı, Van) and indicate that cross-border routes will create benefits to whole region.

Considering terrestrial climate of the Caucasus (ENVSEC; 2011) and the winter conditions (Turkish State Meteorological Service, 2018) and the religious days (for example; Easter on April 11, Remembrance Day of Mother Mary (Mariamoba) on August 28, Saint George Day (Giorgoba) on November 23, and Mtshete prays, on October, 14) to which Orthodox Christians (especially Georgians) give importance, the spring and summer would be more appropriate to visit the routes. However, secular / cultural tourists may visit the routes all year round with improvement of the tourism infrastructure.

As other tourism products to be developed, the joint faith tourism routes require basic infrastructure needs to be fulfilled, renovation/restoration to be completed, walking tracks to be formed, information and direction boards/labels to be placed, facilities for daily needs to be prepared and promotional activities to be carried out.

But most importantly, local awareness and reconcile between the communities has to be provided. As shown by Figure 2 below, many probable secular tourism routes as (such as Silk Road, Castles Road, Winter Tourism Corridor) or faith route may be formed.

**Figure 2.** ‘Proposal’ Faith Tourism Routes between North Eastern Anatolia and Georgia



Source: Routes were designed by author

**6. Conclusion**

All universal religions emphasize basic creeds as fraternity, solidarity, peace and humanism. Tourism can create bridges of understanding between cultures, religions and nations, and therefore numerous projects related to tourism and religion/faith may be maintained (UNWTO, 2011). As “pilgrimage routes and religious itineraries require well-coordinated partnerships among the communities along the way, host communities, tourism professionals and territorial development authorities” (UNWTO, 2011) with the

cooperation of both countries’ authorized organizations and bodies, formation of the proposal cross border routes mentioned above or others, can contribute not only to local development but also give a peace and cooperation message between different religions and cultures in Caucasus geography, one of the problematical regions in the world.

In order to unite the potentials of border regions and to provide both awareness and hope to the people of the region, cross-border tourism cooperation between the Caucasus countries, especially between Turkey and Georgia, is emerging as favorable a viable alternative. The cross-border tourism routes may also be functional in terms of fusing together Caucasian societies and animating common pasts.

Planning, organizing, directing and controlling processes need to be carried out much more carefully (Blackman et al., 2004), since the identification and development of cross-border tourism routes involve different countries and societies.

In this context, to maintain tourism development in both sides of borders, revising and coalescence of physical and implementation plans are crucial (Woodward, 2004). Moreover, the first step, planning, should include all stakeholders of communities on both sides.

This is especially important for the study field because the both societies are not very familiar with participatory planning and they need to be informed that the holistic use of common values is beneficial to both parties. To raise the socio-economic benefits of these routes, local people and the personnel working in tourism establishments should be trained in order to improve service quality.

Blackman et al. (2004) argues that successful international cooperation programs usually have local leaders. These leaders motivate stakeholders, and give direction to the development. These champions are generally private sector representatives in the examples throughout the world, but in the study area, local and national public institutions should lead development.

The initiative of public institutions in our field will lead the private sector to establish sustainable relations too. With the cross-border cooperations in study field, mutual dependencies should be established not only in order to realize existing services but also in the process of designing and presenting new products together.

To create such routes, central and local governments should work together. In the study area, the first steps to set a common management organization would be to organize meetings / forums which the governors / public authorities of both sides would participate actively. Then NGOs and private sector should include into the groups.

In addition, strengthening and diversifying intra-regional transport links (e.g., more holistic and systematic public transport system) is necessary to ensure that guests are able to travel easier.

As a result, the countries and destinations should develop an integrated infrastructure and improve connectivity to religious circuits and promote them together for faith tourism development. It is important to supply the proposed routes and others by guide books, photographs, maps, GPS coordinates. The cross border cooperation and the routes

should be broadcasted to the public. In this frame, to get realistic knowledge and feedbacks, it is necessary to create a website where commercial advertising is not possible (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004). Moreover, common promotional materials should be prepared in addition to raise the awareness of local people about the common values and the contributions of these routes to their lives.

Creating the above mentioned cross border routes will ensure to take steps to enhance the places which are considered as sacred by other religions or sects in Georgia and Turkey together. Besides, the truths that Turkey has many other values apart from sea-sun-sand trio and Caucasus is a region where different cultures had lived and have been living in peace and coherence throughout the history can be pointed out.

As mentioned above briefly, Northeast Turkey and Georgia have several important assets for religious visits. If common routes like the basic ones which have been given as sample above in Figure 2 are determined, both the relationships between two countries (hopefully, all Caucasus) will improve and the tourism income will increase. It may be denoted that the multiculturalism is not always a reason for conflicts it is also the richness of our world.

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