

Bilateral Relations of Russia with Eastern Mediterranean Countries in Terms of Soft Balancing Concept

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Abstract: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia started to reverse the difficult experience it had in the international arena and domestically in the 2000s, and as a new foreign policy target, it sought to expand its sphere of influence, especially in certain regions. Within the framework of the multipolar world discourse, Russia has focused on the Eastern Mediterranean, whose strategic importance has increased with the discovery of new energy resources in recent years, to gain power in the international arena. Russia seized the opportunity to develop bilateral relations with the countries of the region effectively in 2011 with Russia’s intervention in the Syrian civil war. In conclusion, the aim of the study is to seek answers about the development of Russia’s bilateral relations with the Eastern Mediterranean countries and the extent of the soft balancing policies used by Russia with the regional countries that aim to establish its own sphere of influence in the region.

Keywords: Russian Federation, Eastern Mediterranean region, Bilateral relations, Energy policies, Military-technical cooperation

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Yumuşak Dengeleme Kavramı Açısından Rusya'nın Doğu Akdeniz Ülkeleriyle İkili İlişkileri

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Öz: Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasının ardından Rusya, 2000'li yıllardan itibaren hem uluslararası arenada hem de yurt içinde yaşadığı zorlu deneyimi tersine çevirmeye başlamıştır. Yeni bir dış politika hedefi olarak, özellikle belirli bölgelerde etki alanını genişletmeye çalışmıştır. Rusya, çok kutuplu dünya düzleminde, uluslararası arenada güç elde etmek için son yıllarda yeni enerji kaynaklarının keşfedilmesiyle stratejik önemi artan Doğu Akdeniz'e odaklanmıştır. 2011 yılında Suriye iç savaşına müdahalesi ile Rusya, bölge ülkeleriyle ikili ilişkilerini geliştirme fırsatını etkin bir şekilde değerlendirmiştir. Sonuç olarak çalışmanın amacı; Rusya'nın Doğu Akdeniz ülkeleriyle ikili ilişkilerinin gelişimi hakkında cevaplar aramaktır. Çalışma ayrıca bölgede kendi etki alanını oluşturmayı amaçlayan Rusya'nın bölge ülkeleriyle uyguladığı yumuşak denge politika boyutunu da ele alacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya Federasyonu, Doğu Akdeniz Bölgesi, İkili İlişkiler, Enerji Politikaları, Askerî-Teknik İş Birliği

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علاقات روسيا الثنائية مع دول شرق البحر المتوسط من حيث مفهوم التوازن الناعم

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الملخص

بعد انهيار الاتحاد السوفيتي، بدأت روسيا في عكس تجربتها الصعبة سواء في الساحة الدولية أو في الداخل منذ العقد الأول من القرن الحادي والعشرين. وكهدف جديد للسياسة الخارجية، سعت إلى توسيع مجال نفوذها، وخاصة في مناطق محددة. ركزت روسيا على شرق البحر الأبيض المتوسط، الذي زادت أهميته الاستراتيجية في السنوات الأخيرة مع اكتشاف مصادر جديدة للطاقة من أجل اكتساب القوة في الساحة الدولية على المستوى العالمي متعدد الأقطاب. مع تدخل روسيا في الحرب الأهلية السورية في عام 2011، انتهزت روسيا الفرصة بشكل فعال لتطوير العلاقات الثنائية مع دول المنطقة. في الختام، تهدف الدراسة إلى البحث عن إجابات حول تطور العلاقات الثنائية بين روسيا ودول شرق البحر الأبيض المتوسط. كما سنتناول الدراسة البعد السياسي للتوازن الناعم الذي تنفذه روسيا مع دول المنطقة، والذي يهدف إلى خلق مجال نفوذ خاص بها في المنطقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: روسيا الاتحادية، منطقة شرق المتوسط، العلاقات الثنائية، سياسات الطاقة، التعاون العسكري التقني

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, which experienced a collapse in economic and social areas, changed its domestic and foreign policies with the rise of oil prices in the early 2000s and the government of Vladimir Putin, and as a result, it started to follow an active foreign policy. NATO's enlargement policies to include Eastern European countries and the possibility of Georgia and Ukraine joining the organization worsened the strained relations between Russia and the West.

Although Russia occasionally gets involved in hot conflicts in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, it follows soft balancing policies in its policies regarding the Eastern Mediterranean region and tries to gain power in the international arena by strengthening its political and economic cooperation with different regional countries, especially in the energy and defense fields. The emphasis on the multipolar world, which is often spoken by Russia in its foreign policy, has formed the background of its intention to develop its sphere of influence in many parts of the world, and the Eastern Mediterranean, which has attracted attention, especially in recent years due to energy exploration and security problems, has gained an important place in Russian foreign policy.

Whereas hard-balancing means balancing the other side through military capacity building or military alliances, "soft-balancing" means states make secret, informal, or ad hoc agreements with a limited weapon against existing or potential threats and make regional and global agreements instead of formal alliances, including acting with organizations.¹ Soft-balancing policies always have the potential to switch to hard-balancing as the perceived threat of states increases. While military-economic power and formal alliances can be accepted as hard-balancing tools, we can count informal alliances, voting, and veto power in global organizations among soft-balancing tools.²

The Eastern Mediterranean region provides Russia with the opportunity to influence the balance of power and develop cooperation with the countries of the region by playing a role in solving the security problems brought about by the Arab Spring. In addition, the newly discovered hydrocarbon resources in the region, which offer Europe the opportunity to diversify its energy supply, have become a problem, threatening Russia's energy demand security.

European countries show interest in the Eastern Mediterranean region to reduce their energy dependence on Russia. Russia, on the other hand, seeks to

1 T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, "Balance of Power: Theory and Practise in the 21th Century", Stanford University Press, (2004). 2-3.

2 Robert J. Art, Stephen G. Brooksand, William C. Wohlforth, Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander. "Correspondence: Striking the Balance", *International Security*, (2005): 183.

ensure the continuity of energy supply security to Europe and thus strengthen its role in the balance of power. In fact, it is known that, apart from Ukraine's desire to leave Russia's sphere of influence, Europe's intricate relationship with Russia in the field of energy lies at the root of the Russia-Ukraine war. Therefore, Russia's activities in the Eastern Mediterranean region, which have come to the fore with its energy resources, are gaining even more importance. In addition, Russia has maintained its title as the world's second-largest arms exporter in recent years and has used this power as a tool of "balance policy" in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

The Eastern Mediterranean is a strategically important region as it connects important trade routes. In the twentieth century, the importance of the region increased exponentially due to the energy resources discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is believed that there is a natural and close relationship between dominating the energy fields and being a global power. For this reason, the Eastern Mediterranean region has become the target point of the great powers. In addition, the region has become the focal point of the whole world due to the long-standing Cyprus problem, the Turkiye-Greece conflict, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the civil wars in Syria and Libya after the Arab Spring, and the tensions related to the EEZ. The aim of the study is to draw a general picture of Russia's ambitions in regional policies, as Russia's activities in the region are not limited to playing a role in the field of energy, why the region is important for Russia, and accordingly, its bilateral relations with the countries of the region are examined. It was concluded that it would be beneficial to focus on bilateral relations in order to analyze the balancing policies carried out by Russia in order to expand its sphere of influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. For this purpose, in this study, Russia's relations with the Eastern Mediterranean countries Syria, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkiye are discussed. Relations with Libya, one of the most prominent countries in the region, were examined in the context of Russia-Turkiye relations. Greece, on the other hand, deserves closer scrutiny due to its complex relations with Russia, the European Union, the USA, and Turkey. If Greece had been included in this analysis, this would not have been possible within the technical limits set for the authors. Therefore, in this paper, we excluded Greece from the analysis in favor of future studies.

The aim of the study is to examine the extent of Russia's cooperation with the Eastern Mediterranean countries and how the borders of its sphere of influence in the region have been affected by these relations and thus affect the country's foreign policy goals.

Russia-Israel Relations

With the discovery of energy in the Eastern Mediterranean, Israel transformed from an energy -importing country into an energy -exporting country and increased its regional influence. It is seen that Israel has multidimensional relations with Russia due to the fact that it has a population of 1.5 million immigrants from Russia. Especially considering that one of the most important elements of Russia's energy security is to increase or at least maintain its share in the European energy market, relations with Israel gain importance. In addition, the development of relations with Israel, which is among the most important actors in the Eastern Mediterranean, is important in terms of the relations that Russia is trying to establish with the Eastern Mediterranean countries within the framework of soft balancing policies and in terms of expanding its sphere of influence in the region. Although it seems difficult to transform the relations between Israel and Russia into a strategic dimension due to reasons such as the Iran, Palestine, and Syria issues and Israel being the closest ally of the USA, both countries want good relations to be maintained with a flexible alliance or soft balancing approach.

The development of economic relations between Russia and Israel is very important in terms of increasing Russia's influence in the region. However, although there is cooperation between the two countries on political issues, it is seen that the economic field remains in the background. In this case, it is seen that economic cooperation with Israel constitutes the weak link in Russia's goal of strengthening its position in the region.

In 2019, the trade volume between the two countries was 2,250 billion USD. This year, Russia's exports to Israel amounted to 1.416 billion dollars, while imports amounted to 833 million dollars.³ In this case, it can be said that Russia is in a disadvantageous position in terms of creating a competition or balance with the USA in economic cooperation with Israel. For example, in 2019, US exports to Israel are 14.7 billion dollars and imports are 19.6 billion dollars. The EU's imports from Israel amounted to 13.1 billion Euros, while its exports to Israel amounted to 20.1 billion Euros.⁴

It is seen that the soft balancing policies implemented by Russia towards Israel are effective. As a matter of fact, Israel has tried to be flexible on issues that Russia considers important so as not to alienate Russia. For example, after the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, Israel began to restrict military-

3 "Российско-израильские торговые отношения" (Russia-Israel Trade Relations), *Russian-Trade*, accessed June 01, 2021, <https://russian-trade.com/countries/israel/>.

4 "Countries and regions: Israel", *European Commission*, accessed September 18, 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/israel/>.

technical cooperation with Georgia in exchange for stopping the supply of Russian missiles to Iran.⁵ In 2014, Israel stopped arms sales to Ukraine and subsequently refused to participate in Western sanctions against Russia, demonstrating the importance of maintaining good relations with Russia.⁶ In fact, Israel was one of the few pro-Western countries that supported Russia in this process. However, in the crisis that emerged with Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, it was seen that Israel could not maintain its neutrality and stood against Russia; Russia responded in the same way, and the tension between the two sides increased. In this environment, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov made a statement that Hitler was Jewish, and this statement was later tried to be corrected by President Putin with an apology message. In the following period, statements were made that the Jewish Agency in Russia would be closed.⁷ This situation shows that when the tension between the poles increases, the parties cannot ignore the tendencies and demands of their main allies, and their ability to act flexibly decreases or disappears altogether. Therefore, the effect of soft -balancing policies is wholly or partially lost in a war or severe crisis environment.

For Russia, the Eastern Mediterranean region has become a rival region in realizing energy supply to Europe through energy discovery. For this reason, it is important for Russia to play an active role in the energy policies in the region and to turn the balance in its favor in terms of ensuring the security of Europe's energy supply. Due to the size of the discovered gas fields and the support of the West, the development of cooperation with Israel in the field of energy has gained particular importance.

Following the discovery of Energy on its high seas, Israel planned to develop its own energy sector by launching projects such as infrastructure and pipelines in this field. Gazprom Marketing & Trading Switzerland AG and Levant LNG Marketing Corporation, operating as a Swedish subsidiary of Gazprom, signed an agreement in February 2013 to purchase 4.2 billion cubic meters of LNG per year for 20 years in Israel's Tamar gas field, starting in 2017. Gazprom's acquisition of the right to sell Israeli gas to the Asian market is considered a new stage in the energy sector between Russia and Israel.⁸

5 Alec D. Epstein and Stanislav Kozhevov. "Россия и Израиль: трудный путь навстречу".

6 Stephen Blank, "Russia and Israel: Friends with benefits", *The Hill* (2018), accessed March 22, 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/388217-russia-and-israel-friends-with-benefits>.

7 "Putin, Lavrov'un Yahudilerle ilgili ifadeleri için İsrail Başbakanı'ndan özür diledi", (Putin apologized to the Israeli Prime Minister for Lavrov's statements about the Jews), *NTV*, accessed August 02,2022 <https://www.ntv.com.tr/dunya/putin-lavrovun-yahudilerle-ilgili-ifadeleri-icin-israil-basbakanindan-ozur-diledi,UjyWo7HniECEq5CqFZ95kQ>,

8 "Levant LNG signs Breakthrough Floating LNG Agreement with Gazprom Marketing", Cision PR Newswire, accessed 21 September 2022, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/levant-lng->

It is seen that the discourse of multipolarity in Russian foreign policy is based on anti-Westernism. As relations between Russia and the West deteriorate, this opposition has grown stronger. This process continues, especially due to the worsening of relations after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the sanctions imposed by the USA on the Nord Stream-2 project, and the European Union's reactions to human rights problems in Russia, and this opposition has become even more clear with the 2022 Ukraine crisis. The main factor that worries the USA and the EU is undoubtedly the active foreign policy pursued by Russia in recent years. For this reason, Russia, which is gradually moving away from the West, has difficulties developing cooperation with pro-Western countries in the strategic field of energy, as in the case of Israel. Although cooperation with Israel in some areas continues in the energy field, it is far from Russia's target.

On the other hand, although Israel gives priority to Western companies in the field of energy, it has given Russia the right to transport Israeli natural gas to Asian markets. This can be interpreted as Israel's unwillingness to exclude Russia, which is increasingly gaining influence in Syria and regional security issues despite Russia's close relations with Iran and Russia's different approach to the Palestinian issue. By using Israel's regional security concerns and economic goals, Russia is trying to make room for itself in the region and to limit the US's regional activities with the logic of soft balancing. On the other hand, the historical, economic, and cultural depth of Israel's relations with the USA and other Western countries prevents the deepening of Russia-Israel relations. Therefore, the course of Russia-Israel relations clearly reveals the effects and limits of soft-balancing policies.

Russia-Greek Cypriot Administration Relations

The Eastern Mediterranean countries, especially since 2015, have accepted Russia, which has increased its activities in Syria, as an important actor and have seen it as a counterbalance to the Western powers. However, it is seen that the cooperation of each state with Russia develops according to the degree of commitment to the West. For example, the Greek Cypriot Administration, which has deeper economic relations with Russia compared to Israel, is one of the most important elements of the Russia-West rivalry.

The Greek Cypriot administration is a member of the EU and maintains good relations with the USA. On the other hand, it has important political

[signs-breakthrough-floating-lng-agreement-with-gazprom-marketing-and-trading-switzerland-ag-a-landmark-deal-that-will-propel-natural-gas-distribution-worldwide-193275391.html](https://www.ortadoğu.com.tr/signs-breakthrough-floating-lng-agreement-with-gazprom-marketing-and-trading-switzerland-ag-a-landmark-deal-that-will-propel-natural-gas-distribution-worldwide-193275391.html)

and, especially, economic relations with Russia. Tensions continue in relations with Russia and the West, and this pushes the Greek Cypriot administration to pursue a balanced policy between the EU, UK, USA, and Russia. Undoubtedly, in the period when the world became multipolar, balance policies came to the fore in foreign policy. This situation also affected relations between the Greek Cypriot administration and Russia. By means of soft balancing policies, the Greek Cypriot administration and Russia carry out balancing policies against the Western powers.

The importance of the region has increased since the discovery of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the possibility of an alternative natural gas supply to the EU has drawn attention to the Eastern Mediterranean region and thus to the Cyprus region. In fact, some researchers believe that the EU membership of the Greek Cypriot administration is related to the presence of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean in recent years. The EU's dependence on Russia in the field of energy means that Russia gets stronger in its foreign policy. At the same time, it is undesirable for the USA to increase the effectiveness of Russia, with which it competes in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. As a result, the Greek Cypriot administration is the representative of the West but aims to maintain good relations with Russia and pursue a balanced policy between the poles. Benefiting from this situation, Russia seeks to expand its field of activity in the region, thanks to the development of cooperation with the Southern Mediterranean, one of the important actors in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The signing of the "Moscow-Nicosia Military Conformity Agreement" on February 26, 2014, can be given as an example of these balance policies. According to the agreement, the "Andreas Papandreu Air Base" of the Greek Cypriot administration and the "Evangelos Florakis Naval Base" near Limassol were allowed to be used by Russia.⁹ The Greek Cypriot Administration provided the same military facilities to Russia as it provided France and Germany.¹⁰ As agreed in the February 2013 meeting between Putin and Greek Cypriot leader Anastasiades, Russian warships will be able to use the Greek Cypriot ports without any special conditions.

The economic crisis experienced in Greece in 2011 also affected the Greek Cypriot Administration badly. To overcome the crisis, Russia provided a loan of 2.5 billion Euros to the Greek Cypriot administration in December of the

9 Abdullah Aydın, "Rusya'nın Enerji ve Güney Kıbrıs Politikası", (Russia's Energy and Southern Cyprus Policy), *Stratejik Analiz Dergisi*, 10(89), (2019):33

10 Emete Gözügüzelli, "Rusya-GKRY İlişkileri ve Türkiyesiz Bir Kıbrıs", (Russian-Greek Cypriot Relations and a Cyprus Without Turkey), *Star- Kıbrıs*, (2015) accessed April 19, 2021, <http://www.starkibris.net/index.asp?haberID=199167>

same year. The loan term given by Russia was 4.5 years, and the interest rate was 4.5%. It should be noted that the interest rates of other countries, to which the Greek Cypriots applied for loan assistance, were 15%¹¹.

80% of the foreign investments in the Greek Cypriot administration belong to Russia.¹² According to the Russian Ministry of Economy, the total investment volume of Greek Cypriots in Russia in 2015 was 99 billion dollars. In the same year, the total investment volume of Russia in the Greek Cypriot was 103 billion dollars. For comparison, the current volume of Russian investment in the German economy is \$8.5 billion, while the total amount of German investment in Russia is \$16 billion.¹³ According to the Central Bank of Russia, the investments of the Greek Cypriots in Russia reached 164 billion dollars in 2018. In the same period, the amount of investments Russia accumulated in the Greek Cypriot Administration was 166.1 billion dollars. The Greek Cypriot investments are in manufacturing, financial and insurance services, trade, professional and scientific activities, mining, and real estate. Russia's investment areas in Cyprus are the tourism, hotel management, manufacturing, agriculture, real estate, and construction sectors.¹⁴

Cooperation between the Greek Cypriot administration and the USA and Israel in the field of energy is important. In 2008, Greek Cypriots signed a contract with Nobel Energy (70%), Israel's Delek Drilling (15%) and Delek Group's Avner Exploration (15%) regarding production and sharing works in the 12th block in the open sea off Cyprus. The same group of energy companies reached an agreement in June 2013 for the construction of LNG terminals at the Aphrodite field.¹⁵ The EastMed project, which they developed jointly with Israel, Greece, and Italy, is an indicator of the importance of the Greek Cypriot partnership in the field of energy for the European Union.

Russia, which aims to maximize its activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in the field of energy, does not operate in the energy fields determined by the Greek Cypriot administration because of the Cyprus issue and the problems experienced between the Greek Cypriot administration and Türkiye regarding the EEZ areas in recent years. Developing relations between Russia and Türkiye, partnerships in the field of energy, such as the

11 "Российско-кипрские отношения. Досье", (Russian-Cypriot relations. Dossier), *Tass*, accessed June 02, 2021, <https://tass.ru/info/1787551>

12 Fatih Özbay, "Güney Kıbrıs Rusya için neden önemli?"

13 "Российско-кипрские отношения. Досье"

14 "Межгосударственные отношения России и Кипра", (Interstate relations between Russia and Cyprus), *Ria Novosti*, accessed March, 14, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20190426/1553040261.html>

15 Igor Matveev, "Россия и Ближний Восток: Энергетическое Сотрудничество", (Russia and the Middle East: Energy Cooperation), *Газета Энергетика и промышленность России*, 19 (231), accessed March 07, 2020, <https://www.eprussia.ru/epr/231/15424.htm>,

TurkStream project, complicate cooperation in the field of energy, which has strategic importance in Greek Cypriot -Russian relations. In addition, Russia does not want to be a party in the disputed regions as it prioritizes pursuing balanced policies in the Eastern Mediterranean. Since the energy activities in the Greek Cypriot Administration will disrupt relations with Türkiye, this will harm the balance policies. Russia prefers to be a mediator rather than a party to the problems in the region. In addition, EU and US pressure is critical for the Greek Cypriots. The Greek Cypriot administration is a member of the EU and had to participate in the economic sanctions of the EU and the USA against Russia, especially after the Ukraine crisis. In addition, the USA is putting pressure on reducing cooperation with Russia to completely eliminate the arms embargo against the Greek Cypriots. Undoubtedly, this situation has affected the political and economic relations between Russia and the Greek Cypriots. It can be said that another reason why Russia is not in the Greek Cypriot energy fields is because of projects like EastMed. The EastMed project, already shelved, included an alternative supply route to reduce the EU's dependence on Russia. Although it is not in a position to compete with Russia's Nord Stream project, the project has the potential to affect EU-Russia energy relations. At the same time, Russia's anti-western policies within the framework of multipolar discourse make it difficult to cooperate with pro-western countries in the strategic field. It can be said that this situation negatively affected Russia's goal of strengthening its sphere of influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. As can be seen, the Western representative, the Greek Cypriot Administration, gives priority to EU and US companies in the field of energy, although it has good relations with Russia. Although the Greek Cypriot government tries to implement balanced policies in foreign policy, EU membership causes the weight of these balanced policies to be on the EU side. This situation contains important clues about the level of effectiveness of the EU and the USA in the Eastern Mediterranean, and reveals the limits of Russia's power, which is trying to increase its regional influence with its soft balancing policy in the post-Cold War period. It is understood once again that countries are trying to implement the soft -balancing policy with relatively low costs to compensate for their inadequacies in hard balancing. However, in times of crisis, soft balancing policies cannot compete with hard balancing policies, and the adage "hardness breaks the game" is confirmed.

Russia-Syria Relations

With its role in the Syrian civil war, Russia strengthened its position in the Eastern Mediterranean and started to develop cooperation with the countries of

the region in various fields of politics and economy. Although Russia focuses on improving its relations with the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean region in various fields of economy, especially energy and defense, it is clear that it has gained its position in the region by being a party in hot conflicts, such as the role it has undertaken in the protection of the Assad administration and in the civil war. The policy it has followed in Syria since 2015 shows that Russia does not consider soft balancing instruments sufficient; on the contrary, it tries to support it with hard power instruments. Therefore, countries try to support it with hard power tools when they deem it necessary to increase the effect of low-cost soft balancing policies.

After the annexation of Crimea to Russia in 2014, Russia's support for the Assad regime in the war in Syria constituted a second strategic benchmark between Russia and the West. On the one hand, there is Russia, which has been cautious about the uprisings in the Middle East since the beginning of the Arab Spring; and on the other hand, there are Western powers that support democratic movements, albeit at the level of discourse, and therefore stand against Assad. The main feature of Russia's Eastern Mediterranean policies is the search for a balance against the West. One of the main reasons for this is that Russia and Western powers are on different sides in the war in Syria.

Having air force bases in Egypt, Albania, and Syria, the USSR managed to maintain its presence in the Mediterranean until 1991, after the Second World War, but the political and economic problems of the successor Russian Federation weakened the Russian presence in the region. The USA, on the other hand, has maintained its character as the only powerful actor in the region for about 20 years. When Russia gained stability, it started to expand its relations with the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean countries in the political, economic, and military fields, claiming to be one of the great powers of the multipolar world.¹⁶ Moscow, which supports Assad and the Baath regime in the Syrian civil war, has significantly increased its influence in the region with its role in the civil war.

The Syrian government's request for official assistance in the "fight against terrorism" was considered by Russia as an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence as a regional security provider. The protection of the Assad administration and the Baath regime, which is its closest ally in the region, will enable Russia to be an effective and decisive actor in Syria and the region. As a matter of fact, since 2015, Russia has deployed more than ten warships it brought from the Baltic Sea to Syria and strengthened the military naval base

16 Olga A. Timakova, "Новая Расстановка Сил В Средиземноморье", (The New Balance Of Forces In The Mediterranean), Вестник Дипломатической Академии Мид России, 2020:74

in the port of Tartus and the airbase in Latakia.¹⁷

In addition, Russia, which has been collaborating with Libya for many years, lost 4 billion dollars from the arms contract with the fall of the Gaddafi administration, and is worried that the same situation would occur in Syria if Bashar al-Assad is overthrown.¹⁸ According to SIPRI, 78% of the weapons purchased by the Syrian government between 2007 and 2011 were supplied by Russia.¹⁹ According to Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Russian Center for Strategies and Technologies Analysis, Russia's operations in Syria have had a positive impact on arms sales. Pukhov commented, "because people don't buy weapons from losers". Russia's military operations in Syria have earned Russia 6-7 billion dollars in contracts.²⁰

According to some experts, another reason behind Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war is the concern that if the government collapses, new equations will be established in the region because of the groups sponsored by Qatar and Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the energy pipeline from Qatar to Turkiye via Syria poses a threat to Russia. This pipeline would reduce the cost of energy supply, provide access to the European market for regional producers such as Qatar, and cause a decrease in the demand for Russian gas in Europe, Russia's most important energy market.²¹

With its role in the Syrian civil war, Russia has managed to gain a reputation as a reliable partner and a kind of legitimacy guarantor, and in this respect, it has improved its relations with the Eastern Mediterranean countries. Thus, Khalifa Haftar, who tried to take control of the western part of the country in Libya and needed military support in the war with the Government of National Accord, started to establish contacts with Russia. In addition, Russia's contacts with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, which are among the regional countries involved in the Syrian civil war, have intensified.²² Russia's carrying out the Astana and Sochi processes regarding the solution of the problem with Turkey and Iran, taking an active role in the negotiations regarding the Syria and Iran crises, setting the agenda, and acting

17 Ece Göksedef, "Rusya, Doğu Akdeniz'de nasıl bir politika izliyor?", (What kind of policy does Russia follow in the Eastern Mediterranean?), BBC Türkçe 2021, accessed May 30, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-56910325>,

18 Dina Malysheva, "Russia in the Mediterranean: geopolitics and modern interests".

19 Paul Holtom, Mark Bromley, Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T. Wezeman. "Trends In International Arms Transfers, 2011", SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2012, accessed September 21, 2021 <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/FS/SIPRIFS1203.pdf>

20 "Russia's campaign in Syria leads to arms sale windfall". *The Guardian*, accessed September 21, 2022 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/29/russias-campaign-in-syria-leads-to-arms-sale-windfall?CMP=share_btn_tw

21 Andrey Latyshev, "Российская Военная Операция В Сирии".

22 Andrey Latyshev, "Российская Военная Операция В Сирии".

as an intermediary are important factors that enable it to produce policy in the region.

Although the Syrian government, with Russian help, has regained control of most of the country, it is estimated that the operations will not end soon, as many problems remain that require Russian participation for a solution. According to its official statements, Russia aims to reduce its military presence in the country and restore Syrian state institutions that can guarantee stability. For this reason, Moscow tries to achieve reconciliation with regional powers and the West, which Iran opposes, as well as various reforms to keep the change of power in Syria under its control. Syria has suffered more than 400 billion in damage from the war, so Russia will not be able to take on the problems of its economic recovery alone. However, due to the Iranian military presence in Syria, cooperation between Russia and regional and global powers seems impossible.

It is of great importance for Russia to dominate the energy market in Syria in order to play a role in the Eastern Mediterranean's energy policies and strengthen its position in the region. Syria could not play an active role in the Eastern Mediterranean energy policies due to the weakening of the central government due to the civil war. With the strengthening of the Assad administration with the support of Russia, Russian companies took over Syria's energy research and development activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. According to the agreement signed between the two states in 2013, the Russian company Soyuzneftegaz has the right to explore and produce off the coast of Syria for 25 years. It is estimated that the energy agreement signed with the Damascus regime is among the reasons for Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war.²³ According to the agreement, the sea area in which Russia will carry out the exploration work is 850 square kilometers.²⁴ In March 2021, a seismic exploration agreement in the country's territorial waters was signed between the two Russian energy companies Capital Limited and East Med Amrit and the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Resources. The agreement is an update of the agreement signed in 2013, which could not be implemented due to the civil war.²⁵

It is worth noting that the Russian-US tension in northeastern Syria escalated in August 2020, when the US energy company Delta Crescent Energy reached an agreement with the Syrian Kurds to develop oil fields. Therefore, Russia's

23 Seth Cropsey and Eric Brown, "Energy: The West's strategic opportunity in the Eastern Mediterranean". *Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute*, (2014):10

24 Alexey Y. Noskov, "Интересы российских, турецких", 109.

25 Ece Göksedef, "Rusya, Doğu Akdeniz'de nasıl bir politika izliyor?"

competition with the USA continues despite the agreement it has made with the central government in the field of energy.²⁶

It can be said that Russia's main success in Syria is the stabilization of the country and the role it will play in the development of the country afterwards. Currently, Russia needs the cooperation of Western countries and regional countries, but if Russia discovers energy off the Syrian coast, it will be able to further strengthen its position in Syria. Considering the energy potential in the Eastern Mediterranean, this seems likely.

Although Russia is far behind the USA in terms of economic power, it is seen as the country that has made the most effort to increase its military capacity during the Syrian civil war. Aiming to expand its field of activity in various regions of the world within the framework of a multipolar discourse, Russia has strengthened its position in the Eastern Mediterranean with its intervention in the Syrian civil war and has begun to be perceived as an important factor in the region. In addition, although Russia gained easier access to the Mediterranean with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, it was isolated in the international arena after the 2014 Ukraine crisis and aimed to have a say in the international arena by intervening in the war to get rid of this situation. Therefore, it can be said that the most important factor in expanding Russia's sphere of influence in the Eastern Mediterranean is its Syria policies. This has been possible thanks to hard power capacity transfer and construction rather than soft-balancing policies. However, Russia started its soft-balancing policies in the Eastern Mediterranean region long before the Syrian civil war, in the 2000s, and then increasingly continued its policies in this direction to support the hard power capacity it built in Syria.

Russia preferred to build military and economic capacity in Syria rather than using soft-balancing instruments. Inherited engagements from the USSR and the Assad regime's need for Russia were decisive at this point. Russia is attempting to balance the United States' regional presence with the hard power capacity it has built in Syria. However, Russia's efforts to build hard power in Syria do not mean that it completely ignores soft balancing instruments. As a matter of fact, Russia's effective use of its veto power in the UNSC to protect its interests in Syria and the Assad regime, its efforts to establish a balance between Iran, Türkiye, and Israel's policies/demands in the Syria issue through negotiations and temporary agreements, its relations

26 Ksenia Svetlova, "Американская нефтяная сделка в Сирии разозлила Кремль", (US oil deal in Syria angered the Kremlin), Институт Современной России 2020, accessed August 02, 2021, <https://imrussia.org/ru/%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0/3154->

with non-state actors in the field, and its activities through private security companies show that hard power policies are supported as much as possible by soft balancing instruments.

Russia-Egypt Relations

The coming to power of Abdelfattah el-Sisi in May 2014 adversely affected Egypt-US relations. For Russia, which wants to increase its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, the cooling in Egypt-US relations creates a suitable atmosphere for Russia's soft balancing policies. Egypt has long-standing economic and political ties with the United States. However, in recent years, due to Russia's active foreign policy and its presence in Syria, it can be said that the regional states have begun to see Russia as a counterbalance to the USA.²⁷ In this case, Egypt-Russia relations are seen as a balancing element that will reduce Egypt's dependence on the USA and the EU, while for Russia, developing relations with Egypt, one of the important countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, means expanding its sphere of influence in the region.

Russia had the opportunity to balance against the USA and the European Union by developing economic and political partnerships with Egypt. As a result of Vladimir Putin's official visit to Egypt on February 9-10, 2015, an agreement was reached for the construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant. With Putin's visit on December 11, 2017, political, economic, commercial, and energy cooperation opportunities and the situation in Syria were discussed. As a result of the negotiations, a contract was signed for the construction of the Dabaa nuclear power plant and the supply of nuclear fuel in Egypt. On October 16-17, 2018, Russian and Egyptian leaders met in Sochi, and the leaders, aiming to further develop bilateral relations, signed a comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation agreement.²⁸

Between 2016 and 2020, Egypt's main arms suppliers are Russia (41%), France (28%) and the USA (8.7%). The 430% increase in Russia's arms sales to Egypt in this period shows the state of cooperation in the military-technical field between the countries. Thus, although the USA continues to be an important ally of Egypt, it is obvious that Russia plays an important role in balancing the power of the USA.²⁹

27 Muhammed H. Ahmed, "Россия и Египет: курс на сближение", 162

28 "Справка: Межгосударственные Отношения Между Россией И Египтом.", (Reference: Interstate Relations Between Russia and Egypt), accessed April 05, 2021, <https://1prime.ru/News/20191023/830441656.html>

29 Mikhail Khodarenok, "Ближний Восток вооружается: куда Россия и США продают оружие", (The Middle East is arming: where Russia and the United States are selling weapons), Gazeta.ru (2021), ac-

The most important element of Russian-Egyptian economic cooperation is the project of establishing a Russian industrial zone in the Suez region of Egypt.³⁰ The aim of the project, which started in May 2018 and is planned to be completed in 2035, is to facilitate the tax regime and promote exports to Africa. The project aims to place large Russian companies in the region.³¹

Russia-Egypt foreign trade volume, which was 834 million dollars in 2004, increased to 5.5 billion dollars in 2014. Although the trade between the two countries decreased by 4 billion dollars in 2015 due to the depreciation of the ruble, an increase in physical trade was observed.³² The foreign trade volume between the two countries was 6.7 billion dollars in 2018. In the same year, Russia's exports were 6.2 billion dollars, and its imports were 506 million dollars.³³ This figure is the highest bilateral trade figure ever.³⁴

Today, more than a sixth of Egypt's oil production is provided by Russian companies. Also, in 2015, a 5-year agreement was signed with Gazprom and Egypt Natural Gas Holding Company for the supply of 35 LNG cargoes to Egypt. 30% of the shares in the operation of the Zohr field, discovered by the Italian company ENI, were purchased by the Russian company Rosneft. Rosneft paid \$1.125 billion to ENI for the shares. As a result, ENI has 60%, Rosneft 30%, and BP 10% stakes in the Zohr field.³⁵ Production activities started in the field in 2017, and as a result of the development of the field in 2019, the annual production was 27.7 billion cubic meters.³⁶ In addition, on December 7, 2016, Rosneft's board of directors purchased the shares of the Shukur block on the Zohr site for \$ 2.8 billion through an agreement with the ENI company.³⁷ Undoubtedly, Russia's share in Egypt's Eastern Mediterranean region is an important step in terms of its role in energy policies in the region.

Russia-Egypt relations are also a striking example of Russia's soft balancing policies. Egypt, which constantly cooled its relations with the USSR after

cessed June 19, 2021. <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2021/03/15/13512284.shtml>,

30 "Presentation of the Russian Industrial Zone in Egypt", Export Center, accessed February 18, 2021, <https://www.exportcenter.ru/en/news/presentation-of-the-russian-industrial-zonein-egypt/>,

31 Yuri I. Vtorushin and Ruslan P. Koshkin, "Российско-Египетские Отношения", 24

32 "Алексей Улюкаев: торговля России с Египтом растет", (Aleksey Ulyukaev: Russia's trade with Egypt is growing), accessed June 17, 2021, *Ministerstvo Ekonomicheskogo Razvitiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, <http://old.economy.gov.ru/minec/about/structure/depAsiaAfrica/20160616>

33 Yuri I. Vtorushin and Ruslan P. Koshkin, "Российско-Египетские Отношения", 24

34 Справка: Межгосударственные Отношения Между Россией И Египтом.",

35 Murat Temizer, "Mısır'daki Zohr gaz sahasının yüzde 30'unu Rus Rosneft aldı", (Russian Rosneft bought 30 percent of the Zohr gas field in Egypt), *Anadolu Ajans* 2016, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/misirdaki-zohr-gasahasinin-yuzde-30unu-rus-rosneft-aldi/704449>

36 "В Стране Пирамид и Сфинксов".

37 "Сечин прибыл в Каир для обсуждения энергетического сотрудничества с Египтом", (Sechin arrived in Cairo to discuss energy cooperation with Egypt), Tass, accessed March 11, 2021 <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/3863682>

the 1967 Arab Israeli War, established alliance relations with the USA with the 1978 Camp David Agreement. Russia, under Putin's rule, sought ways to develop the minimally established relations in the fields of trade, defense, and energy, regardless of Egypt's existing alliance relations, and succeeded to some extent. The capacity that the USA and the West in general have built in the region for a long time also determines the limits of Russia's soft -balancing policies towards Egypt.

Russia-Turkiye Relations

After the Cold War, Russia and Turkiye's interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia after the Cold War hampered the development of relations. Turkiye's foreign policy discourses regarding the establishment of a giant Turkish world "*from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China*" in 1992 and its aim to be a model for the newly independent former SCCB states worried Russia. In addition, the different approaches of the two countries to the Kurdish and Chechen problems in these years also prevented the development of relations.³⁸

Developments in the relations between the two countries in the 2000s have progressed towards regional cooperation. After the events of September 11, the USA's practices in the Middle East region, which ignore international law and the interests of the countries in the region, deepened the security concerns of Russia and Turkiye, and this situation led to the rapprochement of the two countries.³⁹ Although Russia and Turkiye have different approaches to regional issues such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, security threats in the Black Sea basin and the Middle East region have forced the two countries to get closer.

Although Turkiye is on the same side as the USA in the Syrian issue, since it perceives the YPG autonomy that the USA is trying to establish in the region as a threat to its sovereignty and thinks that it will not be successful in the fight against the PKK by opposing Russia, it has made changes in its foreign policy, and has tried to approach the alliance of Russia and Iran in the Syria issue. The three countries in question took a stand against the US's Syria policies during the resolution process of the Syria problem, which started with the "Sochi Agreement" and continued with the Astana Talks.⁴⁰ It is possible to evaluate this stance developed against the regional policies of the USA, which

38 Fatih Özbay, "Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri: 1992-2010", 37

39 Erkan Yılmaz, "Uluslararası Güç Dengeleri Bağlamında Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri", TURANSAM, Uluslararası Bilimsel Hakemli Dergisi: (2020): 208.

40 Erkan Yılmaz, "Uluslararası Güç Dengeleri Bağlamında Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri", 209

claims to global hegemony, as a search for soft balancing for both Russia and Türkiye.

After the July 15 coup attempt, the importance of relations with Russia has increased for Türkiye due to the tension in relations between Türkiye and the West. The indifferent attitude of the US-led NATO security organization towards Türkiye's security has pushed Türkiye to expand its cooperation with other countries. Türkiye has decided to meet its urgent need against the missile threat by purchasing the S-400 missile defense system from Russia, as the appropriate conditions for the Patriot system, which is planned to be purchased from the USA, are not provided and the paid military equipment is not delivered.⁴¹ This initiative, which contributes to the elimination of Türkiye's security concerns, is a step towards developing soft balancing policies between the Western bloc and Russia.

The Russian jet crisis on November 24, 2015, revealed the separation of Türkiye and Russia in regional politics. The shooting down of the Russian SU-24 fighter jet by Türkiye's F16 aircraft caused tension in relations between the two countries. In the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and the Middle East, the situation of implicit rivalry arising from the conflict of interests between the two countries began to become evident with the crisis. During the civil war in Syria, Türkiye's opposition to the Assad administration and Russia's support for the administration was one of the most obvious examples of the rivalry between the two countries.⁴² In addition, it is thought that Russia's overreaction to the aircraft crisis and the sanctions it imposes on Türkiye give a message to Türkiye and the countries in the region. Russia has shown Türkiye, the USA, and NATO that it will never compromise on protecting its closest allies in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Strengthening energy cooperation with NATO member Türkiye is extremely important for Russia to balance Western power in the region. Moreover, energy cooperation with Türkiye has gained importance for Russia in terms of being an alternative energy transit route for the transportation of Russian gas to Europe due to the problems with Ukraine.

In 2019, Russia ranked first in the list of oil exporting countries with a share of 35.4%. In 2020, Russia ranked second after Iraq with 21.2%. While Russia ranked first in natural gas exports to Türkiye with a share of 33.6% in

41 "S-400 ve F-35: ABD ile Türkiye arasındaki kriz hakkında bilinmesi gerekenler", (S-400 and F-35: What to know about the crisis between the USA and Turkey), *BBC Türkçe*, accessed August 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-47809807>

42 Salih Yılmaz and Abdullah Yakşi, "Osmanlı Devleti'nden Günümüze Türk-Rus İlişkileri", (Turkish-Russian Relations from the Ottoman State to the Present), *TYB Akademi*, Issue:17, May (2016): 41-42.

2019, this rate increased to 35.2% in 2020.⁴³ The development of natural gas trade between Russia and Türkiye is based on the USSR. In 1984, the two countries signed a 25-year natural gas purchase and sale agreement.⁴⁴

With the commissioning of the Blue Stream pipeline in 2005, Türkiye started to supply 66% of its natural gas imports from Russia. This rate was 52% in 2017.⁴⁵ The Blue Stream pipeline is an important project in terms of softening the competition between the two countries arising from the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and establishing cooperation. The Blue Stream natural gas pipeline project is also Russia's largest investment in the Turkish economy so far. The pipeline has made the two countries important energy partners.⁴⁶

An agreement was signed between the two countries on October 10, 2016 for the construction of the Turkish Stream pipeline project.⁴⁷ The Turk Stream project, which has an extremely important place in bilateral relations, includes two pipelines, one starting in Russia and extending to Türkiye via the Black Sea. Each of the pipelines has a capacity of 15.73 billion cubic meters. The Turkish Stream project is aimed at supplying Russian gas to European countries as well as to supply energy to Türkiye.⁴⁸

The Turk Stream project is planned to be connected to Bulgaria after Türkiye. Russian gas will reach Central Europe, namely Austria, via Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary. The importance of the project for Russia is that it excludes Ukraine. Since the long-term gas purchase and sale contract between Russia and Ukraine was terminated in 2019, the completion of the Turkish Stream project in 2020 gained importance. With the implementation of the Turkish Stream and Nord Stream projects, Russia has minimized the need for Ukraine in energy transmission. After Türkiye, it is planned to supply Russian gas to Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina via the Turkish Stream pipeline. Gas is planned to be

43 "Doğal Gaz Piyasası 2019 Yılı Sektör Raporu", (Natural Gas Market 2019 Sector Report): "Doğal Gaz Piyasası 2020 Yılı Sektör Raporu", (Natural Gas Market 2020 Sector Report), T.C. EPDK, Ankara, 2020, 2021, accessed September 20, 2021, <https://www.epdk.gov.tr/Detay/Icerik/3-0-94/dogal-gazyilik-sektor-raporu>

44 Recep Yorulmaz, "Doğu Akdeniz'de Türkiye-Rusya İş birliği ve Libya Krizinin Ekonomi Politikliği", (Turkey-Russia Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Political Economy of the Libyan Crisis), Orta Doğu Araştırma Merkezi 2020, accessed June 02, 2021, <https://orsam.org.tr/tr/dogu-akdenizdeturkiye-rusya-is-birligi-ve-libya-krizinin-ekonomi-politigi/>

45 "2017 Yılı Doğalgaz Piyasası Sektör Raporu", (2017 Natural Gas Market Sector Report), Ankara: EPDK, 2018, <http://www.epdk.org.tr/TR/Dokumanlar/Petrol/YayinlarRaporlar/Yillik>

46 Fatih Özbay, "Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri: 1992-2010", 41

47 "Türkiye ile Rusya arasında Türk Akımı projesi için anlaşma imzalandı", (Agreement signed between Turkey and Russia for the Turkish Stream Project), Anadolu Ajansı, accessed June 05, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/turkiye-ile-rusya-arasinda-turkakimi-projesi-icin-anlasma-imzalandi/662282>,

48 Recep Yorulmaz, "Doğu Akdeniz'de Türkiye-Rusya İş birliği.

transported to Hungary and Austria via Serbia. In April 2021, media in Bosnia and Herzegovina announced for the first time that Russian gas was purchased from the Balkan line of the Turk Stream pipeline.⁴⁹ Russia supplied 41% of the European Union's natural gas needs in 2019.⁵⁰

One of the areas of energy cooperation between Russia and Türkiye is nuclear energy. In 2010, the “*Cooperation Agreement on the Establishment and Development of Nuclear Power Plant in Akkuyu Field*” was signed between the two countries on nuclear energy. The agreement includes the construction of a \$22 billion nuclear power plant in Mersin province.⁵¹ According to the agreement signed during the visit of the President of Russia to Türkiye on May 12, 2010, the construction and operation rights of the power plant belong entirely to Russia. Later, the facility will be opened to partnerships, provided that most of the facility will be owned by Russian companies. Once the nuclear power plant becomes operational at full capacity, it is expected to meet 10% of Türkiye's electricity needs.⁵²

Worsening relations with Ukraine create difficulties in ensuring the energy transition from Russia to Europe. For this reason, energy cooperation such as Turk Stream, developed with Türkiye is important. In addition, Russia's support of Türkiye in the balance of policies it has developed against the USA and the EU, or at least not against it, will increase Russia's power in the international arena and in the Eastern Mediterranean. Today, we are witnessing the development of relations between Russia and Türkiye at an unprecedented level in history. Cooperation in the energy, military-technological, and economic fields and partnerships in the second Karabakh War deepen bilateral relations. However, one should not be fooled into thinking that the partnerships that have strengthened in recent years have turned the eternal competition into a strategic partnership. The two countries continue to compete to increase their activities in different regions such as the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Black Sea. For example, the two countries defend different arguments on issues related to Crimea, South Ossetia, Karabakh, Syria, and Libya.

In Russia-Türkiye relations, as in all Eastern Mediterranean countries,

49 “TürkAkım'dan Bosna'ya ilk doğalgaz teslimatı nisan ayında”, (First natural gas delivery from TurkStream to Bosnia in April), Sputnik accessed April 02, 2021, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/avrupa/202103091043983398-turkakimdan-bosnayailk-dogalgaz-teslimati-nisan-ayinda/>

50 “Quarterly Report Energy on European Gas Markets”, 4

51 “Анкара договорилась с Москвой о помощи в сооружении первой АЭС”, (Ankara agreed with Moscow on assistance in the construction of the first nuclear power plant), *Izvestia*, accessed April 16, 2021, <http://izvestia.ru/news/464610>,

52 “Bakan Varank: Akkuyu 2023'te elektrik üretmeye başlayacak”, (Minister Varank: Akkuyu will start generating electricity in 2023), *NTV*, accessed February 18, 2021, https://www.ntv.com.tr/ekonomi/bakan-varank-akkuyu-2023te-elektrik-uretmeyebaslayacak,B9QicBTwA0-Cp_DzQWNdRw,

Western countries' regional influence is attempted to be balanced to some extent with soft balancing instruments. Although it is not possible to develop long-term strategic relations due to serious differences of interests between the parties, ad hoc cooperation can be specific to areas where interests are considered compatible, such as natural gas trade and transfer, nuclear energy, limited cooperation in Syria with mutual concessions, and the 2020 Karabakh War. It is seen that steps can be taken effectively, and the West can be balanced, albeit partially. It can be argued that the soft balancing policies pursued by Türkiye and Russia came to fruition during the 2022 Ukraine crisis. Thanks to soft balancing policies, it has been seen that Türkiye has gained a mediatory position between the West/Ukraine and Russia. Thanks to its soft balancing policy, Russia was able to meet the pressures from the West to some extent during this crisis. In addition to the effective continuation of Russia's cooperation with Türkiye, the soft balancing policies that have been followed for a long time play an important role in bringing the grains waiting in the Ukrainian and Russian silos to the global markets. However, the effect and continuity of soft balancing policies in Türkiye-Russia relations are limited by the capacity that Western countries have built in Türkiye and in the Eastern Mediterranean countries in general. As a matter of fact, Türkiye's relations with Russia remained within the limits allowed by its position in the NATO alliance, that is, tolerable by the allies. Despite all the critical discourses it has developed against some NATO member countries, Türkiye continues to state that it remains committed to the future of the alliance and to the basic principles, and to its allies find Türkiye's policies in this direction acceptable, except for negligible problems.

Conclusion

In order to balance the presence of Western powers in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia aims to develop cooperation with the countries of the region, especially in the energy and military-technical fields. Russia has become an important actor in the region with its intervention in the Syrian civil war, but it tries to compete with the USA and the EU by establishing relations based on political and economic cooperation within the framework of "soft-balancing" policies, that is, without establishing military alliances.

Russia's relations with Egypt can be shown as the most obvious example of soft balancing policies in the region. Due to the deteriorating relations between Egypt and the USA and EU after the Sisi rule, the need for cooperation, especially in the energy and military-technical fields, led Egypt to Russia. Although Lebanon's relations with Russia remain limited due to the historical

influence of Western powers in Lebanon, Russia's presence in Syria has the potential to reverse this situation soon. The agreements between Russia and Türkiye, which has been following a pro-Western foreign policy for many years, in strategic areas such as the S-400, Turkish Stream, Blue Stream, and Akkuyu power plant can be considered as Russia's soft power strategy in the region. The biggest obstacle for Russia to take its relations with regional countries other than Syria one step further is the hard and soft power capacity that Western countries have built over many years. At this point, Russia is trying to compensate for its shortcomings with the hard power capacity it has created in Syria and thus balance the West.

On the other hand, in July 2021, the USA lifted the sanction decision on the Nord Stream-2 energy pipeline projects between Russia and Germany after many years. This decision was thought to be aimed at preventing Russia's rapprochement with China. With this, Russia guaranteed the energy flow to Europe with the Nord Stream and Turk Stream projects. However, it started to threaten the energy demand of Russia to Europe as a result of the solidarity between European countries due to the war with Ukraine.

Although the Ukraine war threatens Russia's energy policies, they continue to gain power thanks to Russia's energy policies at the international level. For this reason, Russia is an alternative to states such as Egypt, Türkiye, and Lebanon that want to balance Western power. However, Russia, which has reached the breaking point due to the Ukraine war, prevents countries such as the Greek Cypriot administration and Israel, which have closer ties with the West, from cooperating with Russia in the field of energy. As a result, the bloc between Russia and the West in the process that started with the Crimean war and continued with the Ukraine War also affected the behavior of the Eastern Mediterranean countries.

As it is known, Russia's economic power is weak at a level incomparable to that of the USA. Therefore, Russia's active foreign policy and multipolar discourse should not be interpreted as positioning itself as an "equal power" with the USA or other powerful giants. On the contrary, Russia emphasizes that these policies are an inevitable duty to protect the state. Russia, under the influence of its experiences after the collapse of the Soviet Union and due to the preferences of the current political elite, instead of developing industrialization and technology capacity in the long term, provides its existing energy and defense power to achieve foreign policy goals and, therefore, internal and external security. Russia's multipolar world discourse and its demand to exist in the Eastern Mediterranean can be read from this framework. Russia, within the framework of soft balancing policies, emphasizes the need to act

in accordance with international law and UNSC resolutions instead of being a party to the resolution of problems such as the Cyprus problem, the Palestine-Israel conflict, and the Turkiye-Greece conflict, or offers mediation.

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