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The "New Great Game" Conflict and Cooperation Area South Caucasus: From Competition to Cooperation between Turkey and Russia

**"Yeni Büyük Oyun" Çatışma ve İşbirliği Alanı Güney Kafkasya: Türkiye ve Rusya
rekabetiden İşbirliğine**

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Abstract

Our research aims to compare and analyze the historical and contemporary arguments for the existence of the 'Great Game' in Central Asia with the 'new' Great Game theory in the South Caucasus and to evaluate the problems of using this theory. In addition, the "Great Game" in the process from the past to the present, the challenging issues in the South Caucasus, the rivalry between Turkey and Russia in the face of promising potential, and the effects of this competition on regional policies are discussed. In this sense, the geopolitical rivalry between Turkey and Russia in the region can be interpreted as a 'new' Great Game that shares similarities with the great power rivalries of the 21st century, but there are also some clear differences from the traditional Great Game. Çalışmanın ana argümanı, Güney Kafkasya devletleri ile Türkiye arasında yakın ilişkiler kurulmasında bölgesel durum ve Rus faktörünün olası etkileri, bölgedeki Türkiye-Rusya rekabeti, Ermenistan-Azerbaycan savaşının sonuçları analiz edilmiştir. Türkiye ve Rusya'nın bölgesel politikasında. In the study, it was tried to explain the dynamics and development of the region where there is serious competition, including global actors as well as the countries of the region. In the research, in order to support its main argument, comparative-political analysis, systematic approach to international relations, historical and expert analysis, examination of documents, cause-effect, analysis-synthesis methods from general logic and estimation methods have been widely used.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Turkey, Georgia, "New big game", geopolitics

Öz

Araştırmamız, Orta Asya'daki 'Büyük Oyun'un varlığına dair tarihsel ve çağdaş argümanları Güney Kafkasya'daki 'yeni' Büyük Oyun teorisi ile karşılaştırmayı, analiz etmeyi ve bu teorinin kullanmanın sorunlarını değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca geçmişten günümüze gelen süreçte "Büyük Oyun" ve onun oluşturduğu Güney

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Kafkasya'daki zorlu konular, gelecek vaat eden potansiyel karşısında Türkiye-Rusya rekabeti, bu rekabetin bölge politikalarına etkileri ele alınmaktadır. Bu anlamda bölgedeki Türkiye ve Rusya arasındaki jeopolitik rekabetin, 21. Yüzyıldaki büyük güçlerin rekabetiyle benzerlikler paylaşan 'yeni' bir Büyük Oyun olarak yorumlanabilir, ancak geleneksel Büyük Oyun'a göre bazı açık farklılıklar da vardır. Çalışmanın temel argümanı, Güney Kafkas devletleri ile Türkiye arasında yakın ilişkiler kurulmasında bölgesel durumu ve Rusya faktörünün olası etkileri, bölgedeki Türkiye-Rusya rekabeti, Ermenistan-Azerbaycan savaşının sonuçlarının Türkiye ve Rusya'nın bölgesel politikasında analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmada küresel aktörlerin yanı sıra bölge ülkeleri de dahil olmak üzere ciddi bir rekabetin olduğu bölgenin dinamiklerini ve gelişimini açıklamayı çalışılmıştır. Araştırmada ana argümanını desteklemek üzere karşılaştırmalı-politik analiz, uluslararası ilişkilere sistematik yaklaşım, tarihsel ve uzman analiz, belge inceleme, neden-sonuç, genel mantıktan analiz-sentez yöntemleri ve tahmin yöntemleri yaygın olarak kullanılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Güney Kafkasya, Türkiye, Gürcistan, "Yeni büyük oyun", jeopolitik

Introduction

One of the characteristics of the 90s of the 20th century was the realization of international relations at the level of states and the continued influence of power politics on these relations. According to the traditional realist approach, sovereign states are considered as the main actors at the center of international relations. From the point of view of the realist approach, the states that are considered as the main unit in international politics pursue their own interests selfishly, and the most important element they use to achieve these goals is material power. In the 90s of the last century, the collapse of US was a turning point for the South Caucasus region. During this period, the main focus of the world was on the safe transportation of Caspian Sea basin oil and gas resources to the European markets. States and transnational companies entered into a great competition in the region for the transportation of energy resources to the world market, and the regional states suffered the most damage in this competition. It seems that new shades are emerging in the background of the increased activity of big states that want to realize their geopolitical interests in the region, which is closely related to the foreign policy of the regional states. During this period, as a result of the West, especially the USA and Russia, becoming more active in the competition of interests in the region, a complex and risky picture emerged in the region. In particular, the diverse ethnic composition of the region played an important role in this competition. Though the South Caucasus occupies a small area on the world map, the scale of the interest in the region is much bigger than its geographical size. The collapse of the SSRU altered the geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus as each of the successor states sought to define their own national interests and policy priorities. Another effect of the collapse of the SU was that it permitted other powers to vie for influence in the former South Caucasus.

With the end of the Cold War, the South Caucasus suddenly became one of the main areas of regional and global power struggles. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, which are South Caucasian states, have never been ambitious players in global processes at any stage of history. Especially in the stages of the formation of the modern international relations system (mainly the stages after the 1st and 2nd World Wars), on the one hand, the "appetite" of Russia, and on the other hand, the lack of power to prevent this "appetite" of the regional and global conditions, made the South Caucasus republics even

independent states. did not even allow them to continue their existence. Thus, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia were able to take their places in the system of modern international relations only with the collapse of the USSR. On the other hand, the young states trying to protect independence without having the opportunity to fully understand what it really is, were faced with internal political-military processes and more importantly (in the case of Azerbaijan and Georgia) with the problem of territorial integrity.

This article seeks to engage in the discussion, through literature review and expert interviews, whether a “New Great Game” currently can be said to exist or not. In order to set the theoretical and conceptual scene, the first step is to understand what is meant by competition for power and influence. This article outlines the perspectives and engagement of Russia and Turkey – the primary foreign powers contesting for influence, the complexity of the current state of the interplay of the two countries that constitute the Georgia and the primary external actors of Russia and Turkey, before finally moving to the discussion whether a “New Great Game” actually exists. If it does, that also begs the question, what are the similarities and differences with the “Old Great Game”? We used the comparative analysis method to come up with more plausible outcomes for the region’s better future. Comparative analysis, synthesis, inductive and deductive methods have been used to come up with conclusive answers. The objects of study include influence, institutions, policy, interests and threats, effects and predictions. During the examination of the subject, the information obtained from the mass media published in Turkey-Russia and other countries, the documents signed bilaterally and multilaterally in the South Caucasus, the materials of the official meetings allowed the subject to be examined and the necessary results to be obtained.

Methodology

There are many different approaches and theoretical lenses to study international relations and make sense of events, trends and processes. While there are established theoretical lenses such as realism, constructivism, Marxism, feminism, and others, neo-liberalism has been chosen as the means of making sense of this case study. As well, this article the comparative-political analysis method was widely used in the research. Using this method, the materials of the mutual meetings of the heads of state and government of Turkey, Georgia and Russia were extensively analyzed. It is also based on a systematic approach to international relations, historical and expert analysis, examination of documents, causes - consequences, analysis-synthesis methods from general logic and prediction methods. This article seeks to critically engage in the popular and academic debates, past and present, on the existence of a Great Game. As such, the goal is to examine the what, how and why rhetoric of the geopolitical troupes in these texts and the interaction and any influence between academic and popular sources. The fact the Great Game is used in various different regions implies that the value is not found in a clear explanatory value, but rather in politically symbolic value that influences perceptions and expectations. The combination of these approaches is expected to yield results on the ontology (what exists) and epistemology (knowledge and how we ‘know’ things) of reactions to mediated textual depictions of the New Great Game event within the context of the Old Great Game.



South Caucasus as part of the "New Great Game".

The South Caucasus region, called the "Eurasian Balkans" (Xoştarnya, 2021), is a region of geostrategic importance, located between the Caspian and the Black Sea, the world's main transit trade route. This trade region, which has been the center of interest of England and Russia throughout history, became the area of interest of international organizations and states along with the three regional states with the collapse of the USSR. Due to its strategic importance, the region has been the focus of great powers throughout history. The crisis caused by the regional and international power struggle during the Cold War led to the collapse of USSR. Moscow, which experienced economic and political problems at the end of the 80s of the 20th century, brought up the lost power competition in the region at the beginning of the new century. Currently, Russia, which is trying to strengthen its influence mechanisms in the South Caucasus, is able to use the internal problems of the states in the region to shape their foreign policy. On the other hand, the states of the region are also fighting for leadership. Various theoretical approaches allow us to study international relations and make sense of events, trends, and processes. Weighing pros and cons, considerations such as the specifics of the case, i.e., the study of the influence of international institutions on international security politics and relations, provides the tools with which to delve into the roles played by Turkey versus Russia in the Georgia where the global political hegemony of liberal democracy prevails. Liberalism tends to expand its zone of influence, which, in the context of this article, is likely to bring it into competition or conflict as Russia views the region as a zone of its interests and influence (Iskandarov et al., 2019: 9).

While the South Caucasus was previously considered to be on the periphery of the international agenda, after the dissolution of the SU and the subsequent formation of newly independent states, it became much more important both to its neighbors and influential non-regional actors (Markedonov, 2012). The rivalry between Turkey, Iran and Russia, eager to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the USSR, was called the Great Game because it recalled the struggle between the British Empire and the Russian Tsar in the 19th century. Over time, when it was understood that first Iran, and then Turkey, could not play the intended big game, and their economic, political and social powers were insufficient, the sides of the Second Great Game were reshaped. What is the "New Big Game" and when did it appear? The concept of "big game" was first used by British explorer Arthur Connolly, who served in Central Asia in 1837-1840. This concept, which was used in Rudyard Kipling's novel "Who" in 1901, became widespread thanks to the Englishman Halford Mackinder. In fact, this concept was used in the 19th century in the Central Asian region to express the regional power struggle between the British Empire, the world power of that time, and the Russian Empire, the great power of Asia. Russia's invasion of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and then its desire to descend on the Indian Ocean, caused a conflict with England. In the mentioned period, Mackinder hypothesized that "Whoever rules Eurasia rules the world" (Bahadır, 2014: 16)

From the 18th century until the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was the dominant power in the region. This region constituted Russia's and later the SU's southern border and was considered part of its "strategic backyard" or "zone of privileged interest" as the then President Dmitry Medvedev

referred to it. In terms of politics, economics, and security, it is simply not feasible to separate the links and effects between Russia (especially the Northern Caucasus) and the South Caucasus.¹⁰ The disputes over the Soviet-era autonomous entities led to the wars in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, bringing economic instability and security problems to the South Caucasus. These ongoing conflicts weakened the South Caucasus states and provided an opening for the regional and global powers to restart their competition for influence over the region. Starting from 1998, the formation of regional alliances among Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan brought Iran into closer cooperation with Armenia and Russia (Gafarli et al., 2019) In the mid-2000s, the term “spheres of privileged interests” was used with the intention to signify a move away from ‘influence’ as it was much more specific and identifiable. In addition, policy moved away from an ideologically guided course to one that used pervasive pragmatism (Trenin, 2009: 3). Russia currently faces a number of different foreign actors and organizations seeking to expand their influence in the region, such as the USSR, Turkey, Iran, NATO, and the European Union. With a growing rift between Russia on the one hand and the US and the EU on the other in regard to Ukraine and Syria and an escalating conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh that might draw in regional powers, the South Caucasus may well become the third spot for employing the strategy of encircling Russia (Gafarli et al., 2019).

With the collapse of the USSR in the South Caucasus region, some issues left over from the beginning of the last century began to be on the agenda, which made the region confused. The presence of the region in this situation also threatened the existence of new independent states here. Due to its geopolitical and strategic importance, the region has always been at the forefront of the foreign policy of world states, and has been at the center of political games throughout history by the powers that want to dominate the continent. Previously, the South Caucasus was on the periphery of the international agenda, but after the emergence of newly independent states, it became more important for both its neighbors and influential actors outside the region. On the other hand, the South Caucasus is a multifaceted geopolitical region that occupies a strategic place in the transportation of Caspian Sea oil and gas (Larenkov, 2017). On the one hand, after the collapse of the CIS, there were states that hoped that everything would change radically with the creation of the CIS under the leadership of Russia, which is considered its successor, on the other hand, these states faced their own internal problems - the formation of states, the creation of national economies, the fight against extremism, etc. were busy with One of the main problems of the region was the issue of safe and quick transportation of energy resources to the Western markets, which resulted in conflict with the states interested in the region, especially Turkey and Russia.

Why did the South Caucasus region become the field of competition of the great powers? Because the South Caucasus region is of great importance for the Western world, especially the USA, and for the region's neighbors - Russia, Turkey, and Iran - in terms of their strategic goals. In general, the South Caucasus region has several strategic importance for the West, especially the United States, in modern times:

- Encircle (encircle) Russia, which is perceived as a threat (and a source of danger);



- Surrounding Iran, which is perceived as a source of threat;
- Owning natural resources in the region, participating in contracts related to oil and gas fields (both strategic interests and economic/commercial reasons);
- To reliably ensure the export of natural resources in the region to the international markets (so as to be able to have alternative natural resources and to create a diversity of export routes for the states of the region - political interests);
- Use as an alternative market;
- Mainly in security ("anti-terrorist activities") and other global policies, and at the same time using Central Asia as a transit region in the direction of these goals (so that the Central Asian region is the West's rivals/enemies Russia from the south, Iran from the east, China from the north It is also important from the point of view of encirclement from the west. From another point of view, Central Asia is very important from the point of view of being a region located in the middle of nuclear powers representing four different faiths - Russia, China, India and Pakistan). (Aslanli, 2013)

One of the main players in the energy competition in the region, the basis of the regional strategy of the USA is the energy resources in the Caspian basin and their safe transportation. USA administration does not care who is in power in the regional states. Washington's main interest is the energy policy of the regional states of Azerbaijan and Georgia. In order to undermine Moscow's regional policy, the SU is trying to get ahead of Russia and Iran, which support it in regional politics, by replacing pro-Russian or pro-Russian regimes that tend to balance between the SU and Russia with regimes that shift power with Russia. Thus, Georgia's geopolitics has made it even more important in the changing conjuncture of international relations. In this sense, Russia and Georgia, living together and in peace in the SU, suddenly became "enemy" after the disintegration of the SU. Georgia, on the other hand, is a country that is of interest to Europe at the NATO and EU level, as well as the USA. This is actually a result of changing international balances. Georgia is a new phase in the conflict between the West and Russia, especially the USA, and Russia is making efforts to put Georgia back in its orbit. Because it is said that the separation of Russia and Georgia harmed the Russians more than the other territorial losses caused by the disintegration of the USSR (Arı, 2010: 110). Despite all the encouraging signs, it soon became clear that Turkey was neither able to take advantage of them nor was it alone trying to fill the power vacuum. It's a replica of the "Great Game" century, when the Russian Federation (RF), Turkey, Iran and the US (among others) imagine themselves as the main players. The rivalry between them gained economic, political, ideological and religious dimensions, thus creating various opportunities for widespread conflicts. In line with Tbilisi's policy of deepening its relations with the West at all levels for the last 8 years, it should be considered as the main elements of Georgia's foreign policy that it acts cautiously with Russia and avoids steps that will anger the official Moscow. However, according to some analysts, Russia's "separation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia reduced Moscow's geostrategic interests in Georgia. According to them, Russia strengthens its military-political presence

in the South Caucasus by taking control of the territory of Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which it recognizes as "independence", and by placing military bases in these regions, and the full integration of Georgia into the main structures of the West. For Turkey, the prospect of a military confrontation with Iran or Russia has caused enough concern. Turkey was concerned that Iran would try to influence the identity of the Muslim population in the Caucasus, and this was shared at the time by the RF and the West in general. Iran is concerned that Turkey's active role in the region may create pan-Turkish hegemony on its borders. Thus, there was a short-term competition between two opposing models of political development for the Turkish-Muslim peoples of Eurasia: the secular model of Turkey with its political pluralism and the Islamic model supported by Iran. But it soon became clear that neither country had enough political influence or economic power to support its ambitions.

As a result of the expansion in 2007, the South Caucasus became a border region with the EU (via the Black Sea), which naturally resulted in the organization's active approach to the internal problems of the region. However, the South Caucasus has different meanings in the EU's new neighborhood concept, the role of America in the Middle East, and the "role model" of Russia's integration into the CIS countries. It should be noted that the South Caucasus region is of special importance in all these models (AZƏRTAC, 2019). Some experts have formed the idea of creating a new union similar to the EU in the Caucasus by Turkey after the collapse of the SU. Turkey was more eager to create such a union in the Black Sea and Caucasus region. Turkey was trying to turn the region into a unique Schengen zone and a region of peace. But for this stage, it was necessary to quickly resolve the rotten conflicts in the South Caucasus. The Russian umbrella must be replaced, but not with a European umbrella from across the ocean or alien to Caucasian values. The presence of this umbrella neighboring Turkey would be very important for the states of the region. In this case, there would be no need to revise the borders and separatism would not find support among the different nationalities living in the region. The fact that Caspian energy resources play a major role in the competition of major states with interests in the region and the presence of important actors such as the EU, USA and China who want to share in the distribution of these resources makes the political situation in the region tense, which complicates the internal political situation of the states here. Therefore, it does not jeopardize Russian dominance in the region. Because its influence is not accompanied by a political and military presence unlike the West. However, regardless of how regional dynamics play out in the coming years, China's growing presence in the South Caucasus is a factor that can no longer be ignored. It may not receive the same level of consideration in the media or in policy circles that the traditional interplay between Russia and the West in the region (Rinna, 2015). According to Ishik Bora, even though China genuinely does not seek to be militarily present in the region and endeavours to improve commercial ties, it could come to a position where it might appear to be the strongest candidate to balance Russia in the South Caucasus (Bora, 2017).

In the 20th century, the countries of the South Caucasus gained their independence for the second time - Georgia and Azerbaijan, with the exception of Armenia, turned their faces to the West, but this process was not very clear. There are experts who still see the South Caucasus as a post-Soviet space. Because



Russia did not give up its interests in this region with the power it got from being the successor of the SU. However, it is a mistake to analyze the recent turbulent events only as part of the Russian periphery. Although these states in the region are trying to integrate into the EU, they cannot get away from Russia. At the same time, the South Caucasus is one of the regions ready to explode in the Eurasian continent with its ethnic diversity. This allows Russia, which defends separatism, to interfere in the internal affairs of regional states. It should be recalled that after the collapse of the USSR there were 9 armed clashes, 6 of which took place in the Caucasus region (Shukurova, 2021).

In this competition, Russia tried to gather the states included in the former Soviet geography within the framework of an institution like the CIS and supported leaders close to Moscow's politics. Turkey's South Caucasus policy is based on the establishment of permanent peace and security in the region. We should also note that Ankara, which previously had only a marginal influence in the region, became one of the important players in the regions (South Caucasus and Central Asia regions) in which it was not actively involved with the collapse of SU. Although it is unlikely that the economic and political conditions in the region will stabilize in the short term, they will undoubtedly continue their efforts to create new interdependence networks between Ankara and the regional states. Undoubtedly, other regional players, especially Russia and Iran, will continue to view these policies with suspicion and create regional problems. Even if Turkey's initial position on Eurasia was somewhat unrealistic, the effects it created set the tone for Ankara's policy. Although Turkey has not necessarily become the model that the new states in the region aspire to, its developing market relations, secular, pluralistic approach to Islam, and democracy continue to have their appeal in the region. Meanwhile, Turkey learned two important lessons from its relations with Russia: Russia is an important economic partner for Turkey, and to take into account the risk of a direct confrontation with Moscow, which pursues an overly aggressive foreign policy in the region, and to prioritize cooperation with a sensitive policy towards Russia.

Azerbaijan, which gained its independence for the second time in the 20th century in the South Caucasus, used to export oil to European countries through the Black Sea, Georgia has maintained its importance in the transit route, as it did in the SU era. According to the Concept of Europe-South Caucasus relations, Azerbaijan and Georgia, which are the current participants of the integration into the Central Europe, are an important condition for their economic development to enter the Western markets. According to another periphery approach, the South Caucasus is of great transit importance between other regions from a functional point of view, accordingly, the trade relations of the EU with the South Caucasus are peripheral and the region as a consumer market is important for the EU countries. This is primarily related to the safe transportation of Caspian basin energy resources. Because the safe transportation of Caspian basin energy resources can reduce the EU's dependence on the Persian Gulf and Russia. This is the basis of the security and stability policy in the region, and to achieve this, the EU must first resolve the conflicts in the South Caucasus. However, this does not mean that the South Caucasus does not interfere with the economic and security interests of Europe. Because Caspian Sea energy resources have already attracted the interest of European oil companies and occupy

a certain place in the EU's energy security system. The Armenia-Azerbaijan and Russia-Georgia disagreements could indeed destabilize the EU's southern borders, making them relevant to Europe's core interests, particularly the EU's South Caucasus policy. For this purpose, the EU tries not to strain relations with Russia in the South Caucasus policy. However, Russia's attack on Ukraine and aggressive policy may lead the EU to change its cooperation policy with Russia, which may result in both sides facing an economic crisis.

In modern times, the energy factor plays a key role in shaping international relations. Inequitable distribution of energy resources on earth leads to merciless struggle between great powers in international relations, which leads to weakening of regional states. Russia, which is one of the most important actors of energy policy, continues its policy of control over the production, export and transportation of energy resources against the countries of the South Caucasus in order to maintain this monopoly structure it has built to a large extent. Therefore, it is important to study the development, content and goals of this policy of Russia. Turkey is not only an important power, but also one of the most active geostrategic actors in the region, trying to create a free trade zone by reducing the Russian "pressure" on the South Caucasus, which has a rapidly changing and multipolar structure, and the rising feeling of foreign "power centers".

Turkey-Russia regional cooperation in the region after the Armenian-Azerbaijani war: problems and future perspectives

Among the factors that play a key role in the formation of the foreign policy of each state, including the defense strategy, the country's geographical position, geopolitical location, territorial capacity, population, economic, military, scientific and technical potential occupy an important place. Foreign policy in general is a mixed phenomenon. In modern times, the determination of foreign policy depended on a number of factors. It includes economic, ethnic, geographical and other factors. Foreign policy is realized when all these factors interact with each other. When the genius Bonaparte asked Napoleon who are the neighbors, he answered; Neighbours! I choose the neighbors (Napolyon, 1862: 3). However, B.Napoleon forgot the first of the factors determining the state's foreign policy. Because in his time, war was the main tool in determining international relations. Before analyzing the decisions of small states regarding foreign policy and defense strategies in modern times, the question of which countries should be defined as small states should be answered.

There have been different academic arguments both for and against the proposition that there is currently a New Great Game underway in the South Caucasus. First, let us summarise the changes to the environment that potentially could support a "New Great Game". Trenin states that Russia's North and South Caucasus policy centred upon the goal of suppressing the insurgency in Chechnya, which was considered as being largely fulfilled in 2004. All other issues were treated as being of secondary or tertiary importance (Iskandarov et al, 2019). There was a shift in goals after Chechnya was largely pacified, which centred on resisting the spread of Western and US influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States. "From this perspective, Armenia featured as Russia's regional



bulwark and security base; Georgia, a pro-US implantation within Russia's sphere; and Azerbaijan, a nominally neutral battleground in Russian-US competition". This situation sets the scene for continued competition for influence in the region based especially on energy issues and geopolitical spheres. The Old Great Game involved the attempt to limit the territorial expansion and influence of one Empire, which was seen as a direct threat to the other Empire (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2020: 26-27).

The emergence of new independent states in the South Caucasus, which began with the collapse of the SU, was accompanied by a number of important political-geographical and socio-economic processes. Among them, as a result of the transformation of the system of economic, political and humanitarian relations, the transition to the multi-vector political model of the three South Caucasus countries was first observed. The end of two years of Russian slavery opened a window for the development of the region. However, Russia intended to continue the policy of "divide and rule" by establishing new alliances (for Armenia, which is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the above-mentioned closeness with Russia is presented as a form of formality) (İbrahimov, 2021: 7). Especially at the beginning of the 21st century, Moscow's usurping policy began to manifest itself in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

One of the newly independent states in the South Caucasus was Georgia, which has been at the center of the game in the region since its first independence. However, despite this, there was no serious change in Georgia's foreign policy strategy, which was due to the recession in the country. In our opinion, one of the main factors influencing the foreign policy of Georgia at this time was Russia's usurpation policy. Georgia is part of the South Caucasus region, called the "Balkans of Eurasia", which has become the focus of the world's attention since the collapse of the SU. Located on the Ukraine-Black Sea-Azerbaijan-Caspian-Central Asia line, Turkey-Russia line, Russia-Iran line and Turkey-Azerbaijan-Caspian Sea-Central Asia line, Georgia is in a "transit" geographical position. The Black Sea ports, which are in the interests of Russia, are mainly geographical areas (Ari, 2010: 107-108).

In our opinion, in order to understand Turkey and Russia the regional politics of in this context, it is important to study the cooperation with Azerbaijan, the leading state of the region, especially the political relations after the 44-day war. This development has greatly weakened USA-Turkey joint activities in various directions. In particular, the activation of one of these two states in the South Caucasus does not mean the activation of the other. However, considering that Turkey and Iran are the big states of the region, it is possible to estimate that such a situation may bring out certain risks, taking into account the existence of serious influence here. At the same time, another factor should not be forgotten. On the other hand, Turkey is currently cooperating with Russia in the geopolitical aspect in the South Caucasus. After the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the two states achieved serious results in the resolution of the conflict in the true sense of the word. Even to the extent that a number of big states with geopolitical proximity to Turkey-Russia regional cooperation are jealous of this relationship. After the recent events, in our opinion, Turkey is changing its geopolitical course. The main reason for this is that the Great Powers have not yet given up their interests and are working to secure

them. For now, the USA and Russia seem to be more active. Recently, France and Germany are also making some efforts. Against their background, the two big states of the region, Iran and Turkey, have taken a somewhat passive position. In such a situation, can the "3+2" formula, i.e. the geopolitical configuration of "USA, Russia, EU plus Turkey and Iran" be created for the sake of peace in the region? The answer to this question is unknown. However, the situation in the region can change dramatically at any moment, and the initiative will now be in the hands of states that are not active on the field. This scenario is not excluded either (AZERTAC, 2019)

Georgia is the only South Caucasian state that has direct access to the Black Sea. This has a direct impact on the regional geopolitics of Georgia. Thus, the Caspian Sea basin needs a stable Georgia to transport its safe energy resources to the European markets. According to modern geopolitical theories, the Black Sea, which constitutes one of the main globalizations of world trade, is an important region where the interests of great powers intersect. Because according to Mackinder's "land dominance theory", the Black Sea, which provides the easiest access to the "central" region, connects Europe with the Middle East and Asia according to Spykman's "peripheral belt theory". According to Mahan's "theory of maritime dominance", a power that dominates the Black Sea would have the geographical position to control the region. According to Schaklian's "air dominance theory", the Black Sea is geographically positioned to dominate the central region and the world island (Karadeniz Ekonomik İşbirliği ve Türkiye, 1995: 2). In Tbilisi's foreign policy strategy, the deepening of relations with 3 important actors of international relations (NATO, EU, USA) is considered a priority, and a lot of work has been done in this direction. Despite this, Georgia has still not been able to achieve its main goals in its relations with all three power centers. Thus, the country's NATO and EU membership seems uncertain in the near future, and the United States does not seem eager to provide security guarantees to Georgia outside of NATO. All these factors periodically increase the security risks around Georgia (Mammadli, 2020: 5).

In Georgia's foreign policy, it attaches special importance to relations with other regional "players" such as Iran. The factors that official Tbilisi considers a priority in relations with Turkey are related to the country's regional economic and security interests. In recent years, Georgia has greatly expanded cooperation with Turkey in the economic - trade, energy, security - defense fields. We can note that the serious foundations of not only bilateral, but also tripartite (Azerbaijan – Georgia – Turkey) partnership relations have been formed, especially regarding energy and security. As a result of this cooperation, large energy and transport projects (BTC, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, Southern Gas Corridor, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, etc.) were implemented in the region. In June 2012, the Trabzon Declaration signed jointly by the foreign ministers of the three countries defined the general contours of Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkey relations in the region. From a conceptual point of view, Georgia is primarily interested in Turkey's active participation in the processes taking place in the South Caucasus due to the Russian factor. Despite the strategic partnership between the two countries, it would not be right to ignore some problems that have appeared in Georgia-Turkey relations in recent years. The increasing influence of Turkey in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire, Azerbaijan and Abkhazia, is one of the main points of concern for official Tbilisi. In particular, Turkey's establishment



of unofficial political, economic, and cultural relations with the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia creates tension in Tbilisi-Ankara relations from time to time (İbrahimov, 2021: 7).

Some of the problems facing Georgia recently seem to have deep historical roots. Some of them seem to have emerged in the process of national identity building, especially after independence. The reason for experiencing such serious negative or opposite effects in this process is that national identity is built on terms of assimilation and marginalization (or alienation, alienation) rather than inclusive elements in a fragile geography in terms of both religion and ethnicity. This national identity established in Georgia had a deep impact on its foreign policy, especially in the first years of independence. In the early years, the establishment of internal peace and the preservation of relations with Russia, a harsh attitude and/or policy led to a biased and marginalized attitude towards ex-Soviet workers at home, and a hostile attitude towards Russia in foreign policy. If we take into account the problem of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, nationalist politics stands out as the most important reason why these two regional problems cannot be solved peacefully. In the post-independence period, this policy of ethnic-religious nationalism and religious separatism, implemented in Georgia's internal policy, causes unrest within the country, which slows down its foreign policy.

In Russia, especially after V. Putin came to power, his close circle, towards Georgia, the South Caucasian state, remained the same as during the Soviet era within the framework of rational policy. Official Moscow tried to have a say in the production, transportation and distribution of energy resources in the region. This policy continues to be successfully implemented over Armenia, and especially after the 2008 war with Georgia, Moscow's control over Yerevan has strengthened. Georgia was looking for allies in the region in order to get rid of Russian pressure, especially developing relations with Azerbaijan was in the interest of Tbilisi. The North-South natural gas pipeline and a number of energy cooperations continue to exist between the two countries in the field of energy. And Russia tries not to strain relations with Azerbaijan, especially since Moscow's energy policy history is intertwined with Baku's energy history, it never wants to lose this country. In this direction, it wants to continue its presence in this market by developing energy-based projects with Azerbaijan. The rigid structure of the Russian state power is especially evident in the processes taking place in the energy field in the countries of the South Caucasus. So much so that official Moscow constantly emphasizes its desire to have a say in energy production and transport lines. This situation causes South Caucasus countries to constantly face problems in cooperating with other countries and attracting foreign capital to the region.

After the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, it is difficult to assess the regional policy of Turkey and Russia. Some experts, considering the cooperation of Ankara and Moscow in the region after the 44-day fair war of Azerbaijan, emphasize the role that the activity of the center of both states in Agdam will play in strengthening peace in the South Caucasus, especially in the development of partnership relations between Moscow and Ankara. "Moscow-Baku" agency writes: "It is difficult to overestimate the role of both Russia and Turkey in achieving a solution to the Karabakh conflict. A Russia-Turkey monitoring center has been opened, whose specialists monitor compliance with the ceasefire regime and deal with conflict prevention. In turn, their security is ensured by Azerbaijani

troops. This indicates the perfect interaction between the three countries - Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan. We see how the Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan axis, which experts have been talking about for many years, has become a reality. In my opinion, based on the example of the work of the Russian-Turkish joint monitoring center, Moscow and Ankara can create an algorithm for similar interaction in other regions where their interests collide in the future. We have often heard about certain conflicts in Libya and Syria, but Russia and Turkey still managed to negotiate and resolve all issues. I believe that if such joint centers are created, all issues will be resolved faster"(Young, 2020).

Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkey have taken steps that encourage each of the states to cooperate and solve the problem that has arisen. In recent years, Azerbaijan has been able to convey its position to Russia. Azerbaijan expressed its support for peace in the region through its diplomatic course. With the 44-day Patriotic War, Azerbaijan was able to convey not only to the Russian elite, but also to the great powers of the world, that it is possible to resolve ethnic and territorial conflicts in the region soon within the territorial integrity of the regional states. It is the main guarantee that there will be no eternal fears about the presence of Turkey, which is trying to create a pan-Turkist space around itself by participating in the settlement of the conflict between Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. To prevent this, Russia was obliged to actively participate in the process related to Karabakh. When evaluating the mutual activity of Russia and Turkey on the settlement of the conflict, it is important to understand the background of the formation of such a format. Russia's extremely tense relations with the West forced it to strengthen its geopolitical positions in the region after the 44-day war. Both Moscow and Ankara should consider the "American factor" when taking any political steps in the region. However, Russia's attack on Ukraine has slowed down the South Caucasus policy of the official Washington. Russia-Turkey cooperation in the South Caucasus will not be easy, but both countries have the opportunity to skillfully solve their national tasks without interfering with each other, on the contrary, by strengthening mutual activity.

Ankara's successful diplomatic move has boosted its image as a strong player capable of securing military victories for its partners in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia. At the same time, Turkey's role in settling the conflict, which is one of the main obstacles for peace and stability in the region, is undeniable, even though the Kremlin peace agreement is with the participation of Russia. However, the situation in the region is still very fragile. Despite the rapid arrival of Russian peacekeepers, some key aspects of the agreement, including the withdrawal of Armenian troops from Nagorno-Karabakh, have not yet been implemented. The time bomb in the agreement sealed by Moscow on November 10 is that this document does not mention the future status of "Nagorno-Karabakh". In five years, Baku will have legal grounds to demand the withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping troops from its territory and will be able to restore full control of Karabakh by military force. This would create an unpleasant dilemma for the Kremlin. Russia's withdrawal probably meant Azerbaijan's success in regional geopolitics. The stay of the Russian peacekeepers would harm their relations with Azerbaijan and cause a lot of international criticism. Therefore, Russia is likely to use this narrow window of opportunity to maintain its presence in the region through diplomacy. For now, it appears that the mission is impossible. Having gained significant leverage on the battlefield, Baku has improved its



position in negotiations and is unlikely to accept much autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, Armenian society is unlikely to become more flexible even after the initial emotional shock is over, and Yerevan is forced to face the grim reality. When Russia's relations with the United States deteriorate, it is difficult to imagine international diplomatic efforts to find a compromise. In particular, Russia's attack on Ukraine brought the relations with the USA and the EU to a peak, which makes the South Caucasus region very dangerous and there are many risks ahead.

The historical analysis of the processes taken place in the South Caucasus after the demise of the USSR proves that "New Great Game" has already started and continues today, with different actors, however, with the same purpose. The South Caucasus is one of the primary regions where the external actors flex their muscles, sap each other's strength. Regional and global actors like Russia, Turkey, Iran, China and the US, leading organizations like EU, NATO, EEU and CSTO are the actors involved in this struggle. Russia is the most assertive one amongst all players, which has a capacity to meddle in domestic affairs of the countries in the region. The US/EU approach of trying to change the values and norms of the region is perceived as provocative by Moscow. China has economically engaged, refraining itself from associating with political issues. Nonetheless, its potential for future processes can not be ignored. Iran is enthusiastic to be represented in regional processes and tries to exclude other external actors, highlighting 3+3 model. Turkey does not have as strong clouts as Russia has, however, its presence offsets Iran's dominance. The only way for the South Caucasus countries to eradicate their existing problems is to strike the right balance between external (global and regional) actors, of course based on the principle of reciprocity. Multipolarity is a key to this kind of foreign policy. This strategy will reduce the on-going tension between Russia and the West regarding the region. It will appease the growing hysteria in Iran. Europe is vulnerable to energy coercion and Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey tandem offers it the best option to withstand this coercion and have an access to the natural resources of the Central Asian countries. Maintaining security in the region is in the interest of energy-importing, transit and energy-exporting countries, which need to ensure the security of their industry and pipeline infrastructure. This in its turn necessitates the close cooperation between the West and South Caucasus countries (Iskandarov & Gawliczek, 2019: 26). NATO provides the best tools to enable the regional countries to boost their security and an option of multipolarity does not rule out close cooperation with the Alliance (Gawliczek, 2019: 112). The "New Great Game" seems to be inexorable, and its negative impact is inevitable, however it is possible to get through the ongoing rivalry with minor political damage in case the proposed strategy is adopted.

The South Caucasus is a new area where Turkey can increase its influence with its political, economic and cultural relations. In such conditions, the events taking place in Central Asia are changing depending on the international situation in the Caucasus. The "Great Game" idea, which started in the 19th century, was later included in the Caucasus region, and this game, which was going on historically between the two empires, later caused tension between the peoples of the region. At the end of the last century, the USA and the EU, which had political interests in the region, tried to use Turkey, which historically had political and kinship ties with the region. Their main desire was to reduce the pressure

of Russia, the successor of SU, in the region and to transport Caspian energy resources to free and safe Western markets. One of the main goals was to build an alternative "southern energy corridor" to Russia, which has become a problem, especially after V. Putin came to power in Russia. Although the Western countries trying to bring Ankara against Moscow succeeded to some extent, the recent events in the region, especially after the 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the cooperation between Turkey and Russia with the aim of creating peace and stability in the region frustrated the plan of the West. On the other hand, Turkey, which has political, economic and cultural relations with the region, has some issues that need to be resolved soon in order to realize these goals. However, the geopolitical situation in the region and the interests of the big powers do not mean that these issues, especially the "frozen" territorial disputes, will be resolved in the future. However, although Turkey cannot solve most of these problems in the region, it can help in solving some issues. Turkey in order to maintain peace and stability in the region for its own benefit

- established high-level relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan, which are the leading states of the region, and should be a reliable ally for both countries in the region;
- In the foreign policy of Azerbaijan and Georgia, they should help solve their problems with their regional neighbors and support them in every field;
- After peace is established in the South Caucasus, defense-oriented security relations should be established with these countries;
- To assist in all aspects of the implementation of economic system exchange and cooperation and to encourage all kinds of private initiatives;
- Turkey should prevent Iran from falling under the religious and economic influence of Russia by creating conditions for cultural, economic and social rapprochement with the region.

Conclusion

Turkey, which built its foreign and security strategy after the Second World War on the background of burying the aggressive position of the SU and integrating its policy with the West, welcomed the collapse of the USSR with the end of the Cold War. However, it was impossible for a NATO member state to intervene in the political processes in the South Caucasus and Central Asia at that time. Although the emergence of liberal democracies in Eastern Europe has created a buffer zone between Western Europe and Russia, Turkey still feels threatened by ongoing uncertainties regarding its immediate neighborhood. Armenia is the only ally of Russia in the South Caucasus (Georgia is under the sphere of influence of the USA, and Azerbaijan is a part of Turkey's Eurasian project with all economic and human relations with Russia). After Armenia leaves Russia's sphere of influence, the South Caucasus will become a huge Turkey-West belt. And Turkey will cut Russia's eyebrows in the Middle East, and will also be an obstacle for all forces trying to disrupt the political situation and stability in the South Caucasus region. Turkey is still participating as a spectator in the Great Game between the great powers in the region. US efforts are at the point of self-harm in the short term. In this context, the situation of



Azerbaijan, especially after the 44-day war, is of great importance. In addition to the possibility that any tension in Azerbaijan could reverberate in Turkey, there is also a sense of responsibility that it supports and gives.

Turkey should be cautious in its political relations with Georgia, the most pro-Western state of the South Caucasus. Thus, the orientation of Tbilisi towards the West, especially the coming to power of M. Saakashvili after the color revolution, the increase of anti-Russian tendencies in Georgia resulted in the more sensitive behavior of Turkey with Russia, the main trade partner, in the region. On the other hand, the transfer of Caspian Sea energy resources to the Western markets via safe Georgia, which enables Turkey to transform from an energy importer to an exporter, is the common interest of Ankara and Tbilisi. Georgia is the most important regional country to implement regional geopolitics in the short term for the security of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, which has become one of the important expansions of Turkey's foreign policy, and Turkey's access to the region. Turkey intends to achieve some goals by removing Russian and Western influence in the region:

- To create a convenient transition zone for transport routes with Russia, Turkey's main trade partner, by ensuring security in the region;
- Turning this region into a buffer zone against the possibility of a revival of Russian expansionism:
- To benefit from the economic potential of the region under the condition of maintaining the principle of mutual interest in order to strengthen the economy of Turkey:

Thus, despite Russia and Turkey's longstanding political rivalry in the South Caucasus, Moscow is now more open to cooperation with Ankara in the region, according to the study. As a result of Russia's failure to fulfill its expectations, Georgia turned its face from Russia to the West and the United States. This situation also became a turning point in the development of bilateral relations between Georgia and Turkey. Georgia tends to resolve ethnic and territorial conflicts within the country not with Russia, but through the United States and international organizations, NATO and the UN. For this reason, first of all, relations with the border neighbor Turkey, which is the best ally of the United States and NATO, should be at a good level. In addition, Turkey is the country that provides the most support for Georgia's efforts to join NATO.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no financial conflict of interest with any institution, organization, person related to our article titled "The "New Great Game" Conflict and Cooperation Area South Caucasus: From Competition to Cooperation between Turkey and Russia" and there is no conflict of interest between the authors. If there is a conflict of interest, please explain the scope of the conflict of interest in the field below.

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Genişlendirilmiş Özet

Güney Kafkasya, dünya haritasında küçük bir yer kaplasa da bölgeye olan ilgi coğrafi boyutundan çok daha büyük. SB'nin çöküşü, Güney Kafkasya'nın jeopolitik dinamiklerini temelden değiştirdi. SB'nin çöküşünün bir başka etkisi, diğer güçlerin bölgeye nüfuz için rekabet etmelerine izin vermesiydi. Jeopolitik ve stratejik önemi açısından bölge, küresel güçlerin dış politikasının her zaman ön saflarında yer almıştır. Hegemonik güçler, tarih boyunca komşu bölgelere nüfuz etmek için bunu kullanmışlardır. Güney Kafkasya daha önce uluslararası gündemin çeperinde kabul edilirken, SB'nin dağılması ve ardından yeni bağımsız devletlerin kurulmasından sonra hem komşuları hem de bölgesel olmayan etkili aktörler için çok daha önemli hale geldi. Bununla birlikte Güney Kafkasya, Hazar petrol ve gazının taşınmasında stratejik bir noktayı işgal eden çeşitli jeopolitik bir bölgedir.

Türkiye, Güney Kafkasya'nın en Batı yanlısı devleti olan Gürcistan ile siyasi ilişkilerinde dikkatli olmalıdır. Böylece Tiflis'in Batı'ya yönelmesi, özellikle renk devrimi sonrası M. Saakashvili'nin iktidara gelmesi, Gürcistan'da Rus karşıtı eğilimlerin artması, Türkiye'nin ana ticaret ortağı olan Rusya'ya karşı daha duyarlı davranmasına neden olmuştur. bölge. Öte yandan Türkiye'nin enerji ithalatçısı konumundan ihracatçı konumuna geçmesini sağlayan Hazar Denizi enerji kaynaklarının güvenli Gürcistan üzerinden Batı pazarlarına aktarılması Ankara ve Tiflis'in ortak çıkarıdır. Gürcistan, Türkiye'nin dış politikasının önemli açılımlarından biri haline gelen Güney Kafkasya ve Orta Asya'nın güvenliği ve Türkiye'nin bölgeye erişimi için kısa vadede bölgesel jeopolitiği uygulayan en önemli bölge ülkesidir. Türkiye, bölgedeki Rus ve Batı etkisini ortadan kaldırarak bazı hedeflere ulaşmak istiyor:

- Bölgede güvenliği sağlayarak Türkiye'nin ana ticaret ortağı olan Rusya ile ulaşım yolları için uygun bir geçiş bölgesi oluşturmak;
- Rusya yayılmacılığının canlanma ihtimaline karşı bu bölgeyi tampon bölge haline getirmek;
- Türkiye ekonomisini güçlendirmek için karşılıklı çıkar ilkesini sürdürmek kaydıyla bölgenin ekonomik potansiyelinden yararlanmak:

Rusya ve Türkiye'nin politika ve etkisinin görünür değerinde önemli bir fark varken, Güney Kafkasya Rusya'nın çıkarları ve güvenliği için kritik olarak görülüyor. 2008'de Gürcistan'da yaşanan beş gün savaşı ve 2014'te Kırım'ın ilhakı, Rusya'nın sahaya bir amaç duygusuyla döndüğünü ve iddiallığını eylemleriyle kanıtladığını gösterdi. Rusya, "Yakın Yurtdışı"nda etkisini göstermek için tüm durakları geri çekecek ve Sovyet sonrası alanda başka yerlerde olduğu gibi kendisini baskın bir güç olarak yeniden ortaya koyacaktır. Rusya'ya yakınlığı ile Güney Kafkasya bu "yakın yurt dışı" içinde ilk sırada yer alıyor. Güney Kafkasya ülkelerinin (Gürcistan ve Azerbaycan) donmuş çatışmalarla ilgili sorunlarını ortadan kaldırmasının tek yolu, Türkiye Rusya ile arasında

doğru dengeyi kurmalı, çünkü Rusya bölgedeki siyasi emellerinden vazgeçmiyor. Ancak Türkiye ile işbirliği her üç ülke için de son derece önemlidir.

Araştırmada karşılaştırmalı-politik analiz yöntemi yaygın olarak kullanılmıştır. Bu yöntem kullanılarak, Türkiye, Gürcistan ve Azerbaycan devlet ve hükümet başkanlarının karşılıklı toplantılarının materyalleri geniş bir şekilde analiz edilmirmi. Ayrıca uluslararası ilişkilere sistematik bir yaklaşım, tarihsel ve uzman analizi, belgelerin incelenmesi, nedenleri - sonuçları, genel mantık ve tahmin yöntemlerinden analiz-sentez yöntemlerine dayanmaktadır.

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Azerbaycan, Gürcistan ve Türkiye üçgeni arasında 1990'lı yıllarda başlayan ikili ilişkilerin neden ve nasıl üçlü stratejik ilişkilere dönüştüğünü ve bu üç devlet arasındaki savunma ve güvenlik alanındaki işbirliği boyutları araştırılmış, bu işbirliğinin bölge için mevcut beklentileri ve riskleri ortaya konulmuştur. Ayrıca, Ermenistan – Azerbaycan savaşından sonra bölgedeki durum, Türkiyenin bölge politikası, bölgeselleşme sürecinde Türkiye-Rusya ilişkileri incelenmiş ve aynı zamanda bu konuda ortaya çıkan zorlukların nedenlerini çözmek için bazı tavsiyelere yer verilmiştir.

