

Russia's Strategy toward Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia (2008-2020)

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Abstract

The South Caucasus region is experiencing crises that have continued for many years. Russia's war with Georgia in 2008 and the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) changed the security order in the South Caucasus. Russia has interests as a global player in the South Caucasus region and Kremlin considers its near abroad as its backyard and exclusive sphere of influence. This article uses a descriptive-analytical method as well as the theory of regional security of Barry Buzan to answer the question of what is Russia's security strategy towards the South Caucasus region. The main hypothesis emphasizes that Russia's strategy in the South Caucasus region is to prevent securitization of the region against its economic and political interests, as well as prevent the influence and presence of NATO, in the region. The results show that in tensions with Georgia, Russia seeks to prevent Western interference and urges them to recognize the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. On the other hand, Russia's foreign policy in the face of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis is to maintain a balance between the two parties involved, Armenia and Azerbaijan, to cooperate with both countries, and to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by a political solution, not a military one. The purpose of this article is to examine Russia's security strategy in the South Caucasus,

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with a particular focus on Georgia and the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis from the beginning of the crisis until 2020. And then it offers specific reasons for the confrontation between Russia and the West, as well as Iran's role in regional security issues.

Keywords: Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia, Iran, security strategy, Copenhagen School

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Introduction

The South Caucasus region was part of the territory of the Soviet Union. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the formation of three states of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, it became particularly important in post-Cold War world geopolitics and the prospect of conflict to cooperation developed between the three Caucasus countries with regional and trans-regional actors. Due to its special geopolitical, political, historical, military conditions, the South Caucasus region is one of the most important parts of the world. Perhaps for that reason the prominent Russian researcher academician Yurii Zhdanov defines it as “the solar plexus of Eurasia”. The definition underscores the critical importance of the region for Russia and for the accomplishment of the Eurasian idea (Bekiarova, 2019: 1016).

The most important components of Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus are the exercise of greater control over the region, especially the energy transmission routes, as well as the maintenance of its monopoly on energy transfers to Europe. The existence of oil reserves in this region, on the one hand, has caused tensions between the countries of the region, and on the other, it has prepared the ground for the presence of foreign powers in this region. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia briefly turned its attention to South Caucasus issues due to its internal problems, and a power vacuum in these areas led to the activities of global actors such as NATO. The Russian leaders' definition of the South Caucasus as Near Abroad as well as the Russian Federation's political, economic and security ties with the new republics in the region have attracted serious attention.

Russia has played a more active role in foreign policy in recent years, especially in its periphery. After Putin came to power, the country's foreign policy became more active and Moscow considered these areas to be its sphere of influence.

Currently the interest in the region is mainly associated with its conflict potential, predetermined by the specific ethno-cultural and political diversity, disputed boundaries among the countries, frozen conflicts and the existing unrecognized and partially recognized states, as well as lack of constructive solutions to the conflicts. In addition, the importance and the role of the region are due to different conflicting interests and policies of the big geopolitical players, which after the beginning of the conflict in Syria have been making continuous efforts to assert their political influence on South Caucasus. The presence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq poses threats to countries such as Russia, Turkey and Iran. Due to the proximity of the three countries of the South Caucasus to these countries, the extremist influence of ISIS forces is evident and will pose threats to their national security. Around 22,000 Syrians have fled to Armenia since the war began in 2011 of which an estimated 14,000 remain (Hayrapetyan, 2020).

Some of these refugees have been resettled in Nagorno-Karabakh, which in turn has had an impact on the ethnic composition of this enclave. This could complicate conflict resolution efforts in the future by adding a new obstacle for any referendum on the political status of the Nagorno-Karabakh. Considering various aspects of the importance of this region for Russia, this article tries to address the importance of the South Caucasus and Russia's strategic and security interests in the region. It seems that due to the importance of energy resources and the existence of important ways of energy transportation, Russia wants to restore its former influence in the region, and accordingly tries to play a role in the conflicts between the countries of this region by different policies and maintain the balance between the countries of the region. As a result, it prevents the influence of the West, especially the United States, in

the region.

Regarding the nature of the research, the secondary references like books, articles, bulletins and the reports of active institutions and authors have been used. The research method in this paper is descriptive-analytical. The novelty of the article is that the author deals with the issue of Russia's security strategy in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgian crises with a different theoretical framework from other existing articles. The latest developments in Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia in 2020 are also examined, which distinguishes it from previous research.

I- South Caucasus and Russian foreign Policy

Along with Central Asian countries, the republics in the South Caucasus region have received Moscow's most attentions. Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic tensions inside and outside these territories have been a source of concern for Russian leaders. In addition to this factor, the existence of energy reserves and the discussion of energy transfer have been factors in Russia's attention to this region. In fact, one of the most important components of Russia's new foreign policy in the South Caucasus is to exercise more control over the region, especially the energy transmission routes in the South Caucasus and consequently to maintain its monopoly on energy transfers to Europe.

While the Caucasus is often seen as a sub-project in Russian history, or as a gateway to Asia, the five-day war in Georgia, which flared into a major international crisis in 2008, proved that this is still a combustible region, whose inner dynamics and history deserve much more complex appreciation from the wider world (Thomas de Waal, 2010). The existence of oil reserves in this region has caused tensions between the countries of the region on the one hand, and on the other has provided the grounds for the presence of foreign powers in the region. Disagreements over the extraction of reserves have led to the adoption and implementation of policies by some countries in the region, and this has led to tensions between them. Russia has tried to prevent nationalist as

well as divergent tendencies in the West due to the existing crises (Balakishi, 2016: 1-25). The Caucasus region is important to Russia for at least five reasons:

First, Russia's weakness in the 1990s was that it could not coordinate with Western actors to prevent further tensions and instability in neighboring countries. This process shifted in the 2000s to compete against US influence, especially NATO. Eventually, the rivalry continued into Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis (Fischer, 2016: 6).

Second, Conflicts in the region, the crises of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have the potential to escalate. The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, for example, has been highlighted since 2014 and culminated in the April 2016 four-day war. The crisis that occurred again in July 2020 and turned into a full-scale war on September 27, 2020, in which, despite the ceasefire, it is still possible to start a conflict. Unresolved crises after the collapse of the Soviet Union guarantee Moscow's influence. This is evident in the case of Georgia. Although Russia's war with Georgia has strengthened its relations with the European Union, and NATO in particular, it has prevented it from joining the organization.

Third, as mentioned above, the important region of the South Caucasus is still perceived by Moscow as a competitive environment between Russia and the West. The three countries of the South Caucasus have different views on Russia and the West. Russia's threat to Georgia has strengthened its desire for closer ties with the West, especially NATO. Armenia has moved its economy and security closer to Russia. This means that it has a military base in Armenia and Russian forces protect from the Armenian-Turkish border. Azerbaijan is moderate and tries to communicate with both sides (Hedenskog and et.al, 2018:16).

Fourth, the proximity of the South Caucasus to the Middle East, as well as recent crises in Syria and Iraq, have a significant impact on the region. This means that Russia has been fighting extremist groups since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and since

ISIS's attention to the Caucasus region, as well as the presence of its citizens in this takfiri group, Russia's attention to the South Caucasus has increased.

Russia's foreign policy approach in the South Caucasus has been politico-security, aimed at its strategic self-sufficiency in the transition of the world from a unilateral American order. Russia's foreign policy, especially in the last decade under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, has been centered on security in relation to US unilateral actions in the world and NATO's expansion to the east, competition and strategic engagement with China, political-security-economic dominance abroad (Koolae & Abedi, 2018: 14).

II- Russia's Strategy in the South Caucasus Conflicts

The Caucasus, with its tumultuous history after the fall of the Soviet Union, remains of strategic importance to Russia. The strategic importance of the South Caucasus for Russia can be explained based on several parameters: the Caucasus plays a key role in Russia's future and its position of communication is very important for Russia. In addition, a significant proportion of people in the Caucasus region are of Russian descent, and Russia considers itself responsible for supporting them. Therefore, the role of ethnic and racial ties makes this region important for Russia. Of course, along with these issues, the strategic importance of waterways, especially the Black Sea for Russia should not be forgotten.

The geopolitical vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union created the conditions for the formation of the New Great Game in South Caucasus. In the light of European ideas, Russian Westerners, by accepting the sovereignty of all former members of the Soviet Union, put aside Russia's security sensitivities to the activities of various actors in the region.

As the influence of Eurasianists in Russia's foreign policy, which emphasizes its geopolitics, gradually increased, sensitivities about the role and influence of foreign actors in the former Soviet republics intensified. This development took place at a time when

in the United States, the strategy of preventing the return of Russian power to "outsiders" under the new conditions became its strategy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia regarded the South Caucasus republics as a sphere of influence in which it had vital interests. Russian officials likened their presence abroad to the role and position of the United States in the Central American region, while the United States had clearly stated its policy of preventing Russia from regaining its influence in the region (Koolae, 2010: 79-80).

The South Caucasus region was unstable in the 1990s and still has an uncertain future. Of the eight-armed conflicts in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the Soviet era, four took place in the South Caucasus. An analysis of Russia's three decades of foreign policy in the region reveals two positions that explain Russia's actions. First, it can be defined as a revisionist stance. Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia between 2004 and 2008, followed by the August 2008 war with Georgia. Second, it follows the status quo and refuses to recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh region and establish contact with the region, except in cases within the scope of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This means that Russia has a strategic alliance with Armenia and recognizes the territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Markedonov and Suchkov, 2020: 8).

The Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis; Mediating Role of Russia:

The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis began in 1988 and led to military conflicts in 1991-1992. This crisis has regional and international dimensions and its outlook is unclear. This crisis has been a major challenge since the collapse of the Soviet Union between the two newly independent republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In fact, the dispute between the two countries has historical roots and dates back to the time of the Russian Tsars. The tsars changed the internal borders of their territory

to prevent any unity among the subjects of the empire. On June 13, 1988, the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament granted full separation of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan and accession to Armenia. This move was opposed by the Azerbaijani parliament. Subsequently, on June 15, 1988, the Armenian parliament recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as part of the Republic of Armenia (Gasanova, 2019). Since then, the two countries have had tensions in the Nagorno-Karabakh region that have led to direct clashes and the deaths of soldiers and civilians. The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis led to the loss of about 20% of the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the forced relocation of more than one million inhabitants (Amirahmadian, 2009: 94). In that time Baku officials considered the Nagorno-Karabakh region to be part of Azerbaijan. In addition, they were ready to grant it extensive autonomy if the region returned to Azerbaijan. On the other hand, the Armenian authorities believed that it is possible to return some areas of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in stages. In this way, the independence of this republic will be recognized and it will be given a strong security guarantee.

Since the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh, the UN Security Council has issued four resolutions. However, none has been able to help resolve the crisis. These resolutions are Resolutions 822, 853, 879 and 884. UN resolutions emphasize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the inviolability of international borders, and prohibit the use of force to seize the territory of other states. All efforts by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group to mediate the conflict have failed and thus, serves reason as to why it is termed the “frozen conflict” (Mitoyan, 2017: 1). After the G8 summit ended on July 10, 2009, a joint statement of the presidents of Russia, the USA and France was introduced, which was dedicated to the principles for resolving the Karabakh conflict. The text of this statement deals with updating the

previously recommended Madrid principles (Kulumbegova, 2020: 154-155). The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh remains relevant because of its incompleteness and the possibility of entering a dangerous stage of armed confrontation, which requires a continuous search for ways out of the situation (Kulumbegova, 2020).

Apart from its mediating efforts, Russia is also chief arms supplier to both Azerbaijan and Armenia. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Azerbaijan's defense budget for 2020 was 1854 US\$, equivalent to 4.0 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). Russia was the source of 80 percent of Azerbaijan's arms supply, although materiel had been procured from other countries as well, notably Israel. Yerevan's defense budget was considerably smaller, at 673 US\$ in 2020 (4.9% of GDP), (SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2020).

Russia, one of the world's largest exporters of military weapons, sells arms to two countries. Russia's arms exports accounted for 21 percent of total arms exports in 2015-19, but 18 percent less than in 2010-14. At the regional level, Asia-Pacific accounted for 57 percent, the Middle East 19 percent, Africa 17 percent, Europe 5.7 percent and the United States 0.8 percent of Russia's arms exports in 2015-19 (D. Wezeman and others, 2019: 4). However, Armenia is a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, and Azerbaijan has diversified allies such as Turkey and Israel.

According to the 2020 Azerbaijani draft budget, the defense expenses are 3 billion 853 Azerbaijani Manat (about 2 billion 267 million USD) which is more from the last year 3 billion 187 manat by 20,9%. Armenia 2019 budget envisaged 300 billion 437 million AMD (about 629, 5 million USD) and the 2020 budget envisages 301 billion 243 million (about 631 million USD) (Global security, 2020).

By brokering the ceasefire on 5 April 2016, Moscow demonstrated that it has the will to settle the conflict on its own

terms – sidestepping the other co-chairs in the Minsk Group (Hedenskog and Korkmaz, 2016). Thus, Russia could both let the conflict happen and then stop it. This sent strong messages to both parties. For Armenia, the message was that Azerbaijan is strong and could, without Russia's support to Armenia, recapture Nagorno-Karabakh. To Azerbaijan, the message was that although Azerbaijan is stronger than Armenia, Russia would not allow Azerbaijan to use its military strength against Armenia without its own consent.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, some countries of the Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan, turned to the West and the United States in order to escape Russian influence, and a weaker country like Armenia established strong ties with Russia. However, in the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, contrary to popular belief, Russia's policy should not be considered unconditional support on the part of countries involved in the war.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the focus is on Russia's security strategy, as well as curbing Western influence in the South Caucasus. Controlling this infiltration requires preventing Russian domination of the South Caucasus, which is the main gateway to Russia's interaction with the world, and closing that gate would close Russia's economic, political, and strategic doors. Restraining Russia, therefore, requires infiltration into its privacy. From this point of view, the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis can be considered the biggest geopolitical-security problem in the privacy of the Russians, which, more than any other factor, has provided the ground for American influence in this area. In other words, the South Caucasus region can be considered the best strategic place in the United States to infiltrate the privacy of the Russians (Valigholizdeh, 2016: 103). At the same time, current events can hardly be described as coming unexpectedly. After the flare-up in July 2020, which unusually took place not at the line of contact but on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, there was a lingering feeling that the armed standoff had simply been put on

hold. The “Karabakh pendulum” — when military escalation swings back to rounds of negotiations—seems to have become stuck this time. Unlike the four-day war in April 2016, when the pendulum returned to the field of diplomacy on the fifth day, that didn’t happen in summer 2020 and October 2020.

The next Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh began on September 27, 2020. Both sides reported military and civilian casualties (Deutsche Welle, 2020). In response to the clashes, Armenia and Artsakh introduced martial law and total mobilization of their forces (Aljazeera, 2020) while Azerbaijan introduced martial law and put a curfew. (Reuters Staff, 2020a) On 28 September, partial mobilization was declared in Azerbaijan (Reuters Staff, 2020 b).

Numerous countries and the United Nations have strongly condemned the conflict and called on both sides to deescalate tensions and resume meaningful negotiations immediately, While Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and Turkey have expressed support for Azerbaijan. Turkey has provided military support to Azerbaijan, although the extent of its support is disputed (Kofman, 2020).

Turkey's support for Azerbaijan is thought to be an attempt to extend its sphere of influence both by increasing the standing of Azerbaijan in the conflict and by marginalizing Russia's influence over the region. By actively participating in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis within the framework of the Minsk Group, Russia seeks to ensure that the initiative is not given to the United States or its allies, thus preventing the development of a presence and influence other countries in the equations of the region.

If Azerbaijan’s leadership itself chooses to turn its back on Russia and pursue a path of Euro-Atlantic solidarity, then Moscow’s position will of course become far less cautious and nuanced. However, until that happens, Russia has strived to perform a balancing act between Yerevan and Baku. Moscow brokered a ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in May

1994, and put an end to the Four-Day War in April 2016. It is believed that this time, too, it is Russia that get the two sides back to the negotiating table (Маркедонов, 2020).

On November 9, 2020, officials from Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia reached a ceasefire agreement on the Nagorno-Karabakh region at a trilateral meeting initiated by Vladimir Putin, in which the two sides pledged to end their military strikes. Arayik Harutyunyan, the Nagorno-Karabakh leader who agreed to end the conflict, said: "If the fighting had continued, we would have lost the whole of Artsakh within a few days, and we would have had more victims" (Losh & Roth, 2020).

Under the agreement, Azerbaijan will retain areas of Nagorno-Karabakh it occupied during the conflict, and Armenia has pledged to withdraw from several other neighboring regions. In addition, about 2,000 Russian peacekeepers have been stationed in the area for five years, which can be extended. One of their tasks is to preserve the Lachin Corridor, which connects Armenia to the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

The deal announced was "absolutely momentous" in the more than a century-long modern history of the dispute, said Laurence Broers, the Caucasus programme director at Conciliation Resources, a peace-building group. "I personally made a very hard decision for myself and all of us," Pashinyan said in a statement posted online, describing the ceasefire terms as "unbelievably painful for me and our people". In a video address, Aliyev taunted Pashinyan, saying he had signed the agreement because of his "iron fist." The deal leaves a cloud of uncertainty over parts of Nagorno-Karabakh that will continue to be administered by local ethnic Armenian authorities including the enclave's main city Stepanakert, whose main road to Armenia will be in Azerbaijani control and overseen by Russian peacekeepers. "It could end up being a strange, highly securitised area," said Broers. Putin said in a statement that he hoped the deal "will set up necessary conditions for long-lasting and full-scale settlement of the crisis over Nagorno-Karabakh" (Losh & Roth, 2020).

Nagorno-Karabakh could become a special area for Russian-Western cooperation with all its dangers. For Armenia, which is actively involved in Russian-led integration processes such as the Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO; Russian mediation could prevent a resumption of hostilities. For Azerbaijan, cooperation with Russia could allow it to distance itself from the West because of domestic criticism. Thus, Moscow can balance the process of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Baku and Yerevan and serve the interests of both sides (For more information, see: Markedonov and Suchkov, 2020). The United States and the European Union view Russia's role in the conflict positively. In other words, for Moscow, one of the reasons for its effective presence in this armed war is to prevent the US and its allies from playing a role in the South Caucasus and to disrupt the status quo. However, Russia knows that in the end, it is Armenia and Azerbaijan that must end this conflict and those other regional and global actors will not make the final decision.

Russia's Full-Scale War in the Georgian Crisis: Georgia is a smaller model than the Caucasus. Except in the twelfth century, there was never a unified sovereignty in it and each part had its own structure of government and monarchy. Regarding the importance of Georgia, it should be said: this country is a gateway from the west to the east. Westerners see Georgia as the most suitable way to access the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The region's oil and gas transmission also depend on Georgia's stability because important energy lines pass through this country. On the other hand, Georgia is Russia's backyard. For Russia, the best route to access the south and Armenia is Georgia. In addition, Georgia's border with some of Russia's separatist provinces has added to its importance to Russia. Georgia's border with Turkey, as well as Turkish-Israeli military cooperation, have increased its importance (Koohkan, 2009: 216-217).

In 1992, the first step was taken in the conflict between Russia and Georgia, and this slowly continued in the form of military sabotage operations. Separatist movements in Abkhazia

and South Ossetia further complicated the situation. The Tbilisi government has sought independence from Russia and has always sought security ties with the United States (Alikier and et.al, 2003: 67). Russia in Georgia's new security doctrine has been mentioned as the main threat for Georgia (Sazmand and Bijan, 2017).

The war in August 2008 led to the expected military defeat of Georgia in an attempt to establish control over South Ossetia. As a result, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and Ossetia. Despite the fact that the world community did not support this decision, two large Russian military bases appeared in these new republics, and their own armed forces (especially in South Ossetia) gradually integrated with them. The 7th military base in Abkhazia was established based on the 131st separate motorized rifle brigade of the 58th combined army, which was the main force in August 2008 (Nersisyan, 2019).

Today, Russia-Georgia relations are economically stable. Despite deep ties between Georgia and NATO; the occurrence of conflict is somehow impossible. If we examine Georgia's military capability after its defeat in the 2008 war, we can see that there is no sign of readiness for war again.

The military budget decreased to 2% of GDP in 2017 from 8.8% and 9.1% in 2007 and 2008, respectively. Attack planes and helicopters were almost completely destroyed, while heavy equipment losses during the war were only partially restored due to severe foreign resource constraints. (Nersisyan, 2019).

Under Saakashvili's tenure, Russian-Georgian relations had reached their lowest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Georgia broke diplomatic relations with Russia, and the two countries lived through a five-day open military conflict in August 2008. Russia's recognition that month of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia created a precedent – the first since 1991– for revising borders between the two former Soviet republics. When President Saakashvili and his United National Movement left power, some changes occurred in the Russian-

Georgian relationship, but these were tactical and selective, and still are. The new Georgian authorities, representing the Georgian Dream party, have maintained their predecessor's strategic approaches of continuing and strengthening integration with NATO and the EU (Markedonov, 2017: 6). Russia sees the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) expansion eastward as a threat to its security. Russia also sees the Black Sea as its access point to the Mediterranean region, where Russia's role has been growing significantly in recent years (Kuimova and T. Wezeman, 2018).

Since 2014, Moscow has clearly stepped up its influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This suits South Ossetia's desire for unification with Russia, which Moscow is currently unwilling to grant. In 2017, South Ossetia renamed itself the "Republic of South Ossetia (State of Alania)", a symbolic step towards reunification with the Russian republic North Ossetia-Alania (OC Media, 2017).

Moscow has also sought to cement its influence in Georgia's secessionist territories through formal agreements. In 2014, Moscow sought closer ties with Abkhazia through the Treaty of Alliance and Strategic Partnership and in 2015 with South Ossetia through the Treaty of Alliance and Integration. Taking Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's political, economic and military integration to a point just short of annexation was a symbolic response to Georgia's EU association process (Fischer, 2016: 60). The expansion of relations with the United States under Saakashvili cannot be attributed solely to the pro-Western approach of his administration. One of the main reasons for the expansion of relations with the United States is his efforts to gain US support for Georgia's membership in NATO. European countries such as Germany, France and Italy, because of their economic ties, especially with Russia, are reluctant to stand up to Russia over Georgia's membership in NATO. That is why Georgia hopes to use US influence in NATO.

By joining NATO, Saakashvili sought to ensure Georgia's

security. According to Georgian politicians, trying to join NATO will also increase strategic cooperation with the United States, which will reduce Russia's threat to Georgia. Saakashvili continued his policy toward Russia after the 2008 war and made greater efforts to join NATO. Despite the failure of Saakashvili's policy of balancing Russia and criticisms of him for losing part of Georgia's territory in the war with Russia, the policy of looking to NATO and to the West as a whole continued.

Contrary to Saakashvili's policies, Georgia's current leaders have avoided direct confrontation with Russia to join the European Union, as well as NATO, and have adopted a practical and interactive approach. To the extent that their policies led to these actions:

- Stop the confrontational rhetoric and use Russia for domestic political mobilization
- Announce readiness to cooperate with Russia in providing security during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics
- Direct talks between the representatives of Georgia and Russia (excluding the discussion of status debates on Abkhazia and South Ossetia)
- Tendency to invest in Russia in the Georgian economy (For more information, see: Markedonov, 2017).

Russia's 2016 foreign policy document states that Russia's previous relations include helping to establish the Republic of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent democracies, strengthening their international standing, ensuring security and improving their economic conditions. Even though document sealed Moscow's increasing military-political presence in both partly recognized republics (currently the South Ossetian army is integrated into Russian armed forces) they can hardly be regarded as new milestones. At the same time, Russia consistently avoids raising the issue of changing South Ossetia's status and expanding the state by incorporating a new entity amidst intensification of discussions in South Ossetia over a referendum on "unification with Russia" throughout 2014–2017. The leader of "United

Ossetia “party Anatoly Bibilov, former chairman of the parliament was consistently pushing forward the idea of the unification of the “two Ossetias” within Russia, Moscow did not support this idea. Multiplication of the “Crimea scenario “was seen as undesirable and Bibilov himself actually had to halt the “unification project”, since no support for it was forthcoming from the Russian leadership (For more information, see: Markedonov and Suchkov, 2020).

Because the security stakes for Russia are high, a successful initiative by one state is viewed as a defeat and a challenge for the other. Some European countries (Lithuania, Romania), the European Parliament, and NATO Parliament Assembly also recognized Russian occupation of Georgian territories. However, the Western countries are not united around the issue of Georgia’s membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. At the same time, the “locomotives” of European Integration Germany and France do not consider accession of a new member reasonable at least until the conflicts are resolved and all disputes between Tbilisi and Moscow are settled. In this context, the regional visit of German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in August 2018 was illuminating. During this visit, Berlin sent an unambiguous signal: Georgia cannot count on Germany’s support to join NATO. Meanwhile, Tbilisi’s accession into the Alliance is very unacceptable for Russia. For Moscow, such a move means the development of an extremely unfavorable strategic situation, especially in conflict zones (For more information, see: Markedonov and Suchkov, 2020: 11).

Therefore, the most important foreign variable affecting Georgia's non-membership in NATO is Russia's policy towards Georgia. Russia opposes Georgia joining NATO, because of Georgia's presence in Russia's backyard, which was once under Soviet control, and Georgia's desire to seize power in the region, Georgia sees the country as a threat. If Georgia becomes a member of NATO, Tbilisi, citing Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, considers NATO as its ally to defend Georgia in many

cases when Russia decides to attack the border areas, and therefore NATO cooperation with Georgia and in the case of Georgia's overall accession to NATO within the Atlantic Alliance is very important for the Russian foreign policy apparatus.

III- Iran and South Caucasus

Iran is another player in the South Caucasus besides the West and Russia. Of the three countries in the South Caucasus region, Iran shares borders with Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan. For this reason, the presence of other actors, especially Russia, the West and Israel in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgian crises, is crucial to Iran's national security.

As a major player in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis during the three decades of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran has sought to lead the two sides to peace. That is why it has made some peace proposals that have not been successful so far. What has made the Karabakh war important for Iran is the security concern over the presence of Israel and Turkey along its borders. Therefore, Iran has tried to prevent other actors from interfering in the region along with Russia. On the other hand, the weakness in the diplomatic process between Iran and the countries of Azerbaijan and Armenia should be sought in the relations between Tehran and Moscow. For this reason, Iran must first clarify its foreign policy interests and positions vis-à-vis the South Caucasus countries with Russia.

The independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with its support for Georgia's territorial integrity, is rather paradoxical from that of Nagorno-Karabakh. While Russia and the West demonstrate a willingness to cooperate, Iran is critical of the implementation of the updated "Madrid Principles." Tehran is uncomfortable with the resolution of the conflict in Karabakh, which would involve the deployment of international peacekeeping forces into the region (It does not matter under whose flag these forces are stationed). Representatives of Tehran have always stated that there should be no external players in the

region. Iran's position regarding the "basic principles" of the conflict settlement does not coincide with the Russian approaches, although, like Russia, the Islamic Republic unequivocally opposes a military solution. In a paradoxical way, it brings Iran's position closer to the opinion of the two "Western" co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group. (Markedonov, 2018: 40) Therefore, the shift in Georgia's foreign policy dates back to exactly the time of the 2008 crisis. The change in the foreign policy of Georgia and Iran is related to the change in the priorities of Russia's foreign policy goals and the adoption of a new strategy in foreign policy issues, especially in relation to the United States and NATO, which is a sign of expanding relations these two countries have followed.

Within the framework of Russia's security policies in these two crises and paying attention to the security complex of the region, Kremlin is trying to prevent Iran's maximum role in these conflicts and it does not allow Iran to intervene in the face of Russia's security strategy in the face of the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and the level of relations with Georgia.

Conclusions

Our studies show that Russia defines the South Caucasus regional security complex in its security policies. Maintaining military security alongside the economic-political spheres in the face of the Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh crises has been part of the Kremlin's security strategy since 2008. Russia defines the South Caucasus region as its backyard and considers the presence of foreign actors, including the West, a threat to its security and national interests. Russia believes that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict took place in a region within the Kremlin's sphere of influence in the structure of a multipolar international system; because of this crisis, there is an opportunity for Russia to allow the Kremlin to have a serious presence in the region. The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis could lead to insecurity and a decline in the credibility of the

Southern Energy Corridor, which seeks to transfer energy from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to world markets by excluding Russia. It also paves the way for the continuation of Russia's hegemony over European gas markets and supply routes. On the other hand, the conflict serves as a tool to use Russian influence and pursue its geopolitical goals not only in the South Caucasus but also in wider geographical areas.

Russia has, in the past, made efforts to play the role of a regional cooperative hegemon. In Nagorno-Karabakh crisis and tensions with Georgia, Russian attempts to implement cooperative hegemony were grounded in resources under Moscow's control that it wished to convert into concrete policy advantages. In Georgia, this resource was Abashidze's heavy dependence on Russia; in Azerbaijan, it was the Qabala station that Putin proposed transforming into a joint military venture; and for Armenia Russia's resource was its role as the country's key security provider in a situation of continual confrontation with Azerbaijan. Russia defines relations with Armenia in a dual framework of East-West confrontation; A dichotomy that allows Moscow to play a role in protecting its allies from pro-Western forces. In the case of the Republic of Azerbaijan, it is also trying to prevent Baku from moving away from Moscow due to Yerevan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union. Today, conflicts in the South Caucasus are influenced by external factors to a much greater degree. As a result, the issues in the South Caucasus become embedded in broader contexts and their regional format is increasingly complemented by geopolitical considerations, which reduces the possibilities for reaching compromises in the face of growing dominance of "zero-sum game" logics.

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