Russian-Turkish Relations in the Wider Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Competition

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Abstract

In the long historical perspective, Russian and Turkish foreign policies have been deeply affected by the shared neighborhood of the wider Black Sea region and the Caucasus, where both countries possess multifaceted security, political, economic and cultural ties. This paper highlights the complex nature of Russia-Turkey cooperative and competitive relations with a special focus on the wider Black Sea region and the Caucasus since the 1990s. It argues that while the general features of cooperation between Ankara and Moscow in the region are well known, competition is equally strong. Given the fragile nature of the strategic partnership between Russia and Turkey, this cooperation-competition nexus demands a more comprehensive and multi-level approach to the ways in which the two countries' competitive interests in the Black Sea region might be turned into a well-grounded cooperation.

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Key Words

Russian-Turkish Relations, Middle East, Black Sea Region, Caucasus, Regional Security, Energy Cooperation.

Introduction

This paper explores Russia-Turkey relations with regard to the wider Black Sea region, which includes the littoral states of Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this "shared geography," Russia and Turkey represent "the leading powers with significant resources" and deep "historical, cultural, and economic ties with parts of this geography," which give them "comparative advantages in the pursuit of resolving key issues in their neighborhood."[1] Both countries have numerous interests in this neighborhood, ranging from economic and energy cooperation to security interaction and cultural interrelations. After centuries-long rivalry between the Russian and Ottoman empires and afterwards during the Cold War

period, Ankara and Moscow became closer following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Russian and Turkish foreign policy has been deeply affected by the shared neighborhood of the wider Black Sea region and the Caucasus, where which both countries possess multifaceted security, political, economic and cultural ties.

This new environment opened up the shared neighborhood as a region of interrelation, interdependence and competition. In the early 2000s, driven by increasing trade volume, especially in the energy sector and tourism, Moscow and Ankara managed to develop a cooperative relationship. In 2010, then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gül laid the foundation of the High-Level Cooperation Council. At that time, Medvedev even characterized Russian-Turkish relations as "reaching the level of full-scale strategic partnership."[2] Russia indeed succeeded in becoming a strategic exporter of energy resources to Turkey. Both countries developed significant infrastructural and energy projects, such as the Turkish Stream pipeline and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant. Both countries are trying to enlarge their industrial and hi-tech cooperation, including in the sphere of hydro-electric engineering. Russian and Turkish elites seem to have similar views on the way they would like to see the functioning of the world system. Ideas of a polycentric world order, which theoretically should provide wider opportunities for global and regional interactions among countries with the ambitions to become new centers of this order, resonate well among decision- makers in both countries. Both Russia and Turkey regard the struggle against extremism and radicalism as one of their top international priorities.

However, by the middle of the 2010s, the cooperation pattern Moscow and Ankara had developed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, based on pragmatic economic interests, faced its limits of growth, while their dialogue on political issues did not move significantly forward. The conflict in Syria, which started in 2011 as an internal political struggle and later became an arena of confrontation involving many Middle Eastern powers, including Turkey, as well as extra-regional powers, including Russia and the U.S., revealed the vulnerability of the existing model of cooperation between Russia and Turkey. It also brought to the forefront the problem of a trust deficit between the political elites of the two countries.

The tragedy of the Russian Su-24 aircraft engaged in operations in Syria and shot down by the Turkish Air Force after crossing the border between Turkey and Syria in November 2015 initiated a seven-months-long Russia-Turkey "Cold War." These developments indicated the necessity of revising the previously established paradigm of bilateral relations. This necessity became even more obvious against the background of the extremely slow normalization of bilateral ties after the personal letter of President Erdogan to President Putin sent on June 27, 2016, despite the aspirations in both countries to look for alternative international partnerships beyond the U.S., the EU and NATO.

In the recent decade the dynamics of Russian-Turkish relations have become an issue of intense scholarly interest. Some experts debate whether this relationship could be qualified as a "strategic axis"[3] or an "Eurasian axis."[4] Others argue that Russia and Turkey "developed an economic interdependence with strategic significance,[5] highlighting the economic dimensions of these relations. Many argue that Moscow and Ankara have managed to transform "century-long geopolitical disputes into a geoeconomic partnership,"[6] or that they "opted for a depoliticized model of economic cooperation."[7] Before the Russian Su-24 incident in November 2015, most observers agreed that Russian-Turkish relations had reached an unprecedented level of cooperation in recent years.[8]

The phenomena of the Russian-Turkish "Cold War" hindered the economic determinism argument in the studies of the countries' bilateral relations and made observers of these relations look beyond the previous paradigm, which stipulated that economic interdependence in a globalized world would prevail over political and security contradictions. The 2015-2016 crisis between Moscow and Ankara may well serve as an illustration of conflict between pragmatic interest and economic benefits, on the one hand, and aspirations for an appropriate international status and value-oriented policy, on the other.

Proceeding from the scholarly debate outlined above, this paper aims at highlighting the principal avenues of cooperation and competition between Russia and Turkey with a special focus on the wider Black Sea region. While the general features of cooperation between Ankara and Moscow in the areas of energy and regional security are well known, this paper argues that the competition is equally strong and takes place in the same fields in which cooperation is most intense. This paper intends to contribute to an understanding of what drives the

current Russian-Turkish relations in the wider Black Sea region and what tendencies can determine their future development. In doing so, it first looks at the historical context and geopolitical significance of the Black Sea region for Russia and Turkey. It then explores the reasons for the convergence and divergence of Russian and Turkish interests in the wider Black Sea region, including the Caucasus, and shows the complexity of Russia-Turkey relations' projection in the region.

The seven-month-long Russian-Turkish "Cold War" demonstrated the vulnerability of the declared strategic partnership between Russia and Turkey.

Given the broader contemporary regional context, characterized by the armed conflicts in the Middle East, which either involve or strongly affect both Russia and Turkey, such analytical perspectives seem particularly relevant. The seven-month-long Russian-Turkish "Cold War" demonstrated the vulnerability of the declared strategic partnership between Russia and Turkey. It has also demonstrated how fast Moscow and Ankara managed to bring down their relations from the level of "strategic partnership" to the level of political and economic confrontation.

Historical Context and Geopolitical Significance of the Black Sea Region for Russia and Turkey

Since the early years of humankind, the Black Sea region, a historically and culturally rich area, has been at the crossroads of different civilizations. From a geopolitical point of view, it has witnessed the intersection of European and Asian great empires' interests to dominate the regions' maritime routes, and their ambitions to control this strategically important juncture. By the early 18th century, the Russian and the Ottoman empires had expanded geographically so that they directly collided with each other in this part of the world. Not surprisingly, they engaged in an intermittent struggle for dominance in the Black Sea region and for control over the straits nowadays known as the Turkish Straits (the Bosporus and the Dardanelles), which provide direct access from the Black Sea to the Aegean and Mediterranean.

The dissolution of both empires in 1917 and 1922 correspondingly did not completely bring an end to Russian and Turkish confrontation in the Black Sea. Even though the Montreux convention

of 1936 legally framed the status of the Bosporus and Dardanelles- giving full control over them to the new Turkish state, restricting the passage of non-Black sea countries' naval ships, and protecting the freedom of navigation of civilian vessels- international controversies over this maritime area persisted.[9] The Cold War situated Turkey and Russia, at that time the Soviet Union, in rival camps, thus projecting the bipolar confrontation to this already divided region. Turkey joined the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952 while the Soviet Union managed to gain control over the major part of the Black Sea's littoral zone due to the inclusion of Georgia (along with the present-day semi-recognized Republic of Abkhazia), Ukraine and Moldova into the USSR, and through cooperation with its Black Sea coastal satellites, Bulgaria and Romania. At the same time, however, the overall logic of relative strategic stability generated by the nuclear parity of both superpowers achieved in the 1960s resonated positively in the Black sea region as well.

The end of the bipolar confrontation generated several mutually contradictory trends in this region. Initially, in the 1990s, both Russia and Turkey hoped to turn the previously existing confrontation into a more cooperative relationship. In 1992, Turkey initiated the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) process, which resulted in the creation of a regional organization comprising such countries as Azerbaijan, Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Romania, Serbia, Turkey itself and Ukraine. However, quite soon Russia and Turkey found themselves competing for regional influence in a vast area stretching from the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean up to the Caucasus and Central Asia.[10] While Russia struggled through a period of serious political and economic turbulence after the Soviet Union's dissolution, Turkey took the opportunity to claim its regional ambitions in the areas culturally, ethnically and linguistically close to Turkey but previously impenetrable to the expansion of its influence.

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At the same time, NATO's 1994 Partnership for Peace (PfP) program aimed at building stronger security cooperation ties with post-Soviet states, and the European ex-members

of the communist block seemed to be able to downplay the old military-strategic rivalry patterns in the Black Sea region.[11] The EU became yet another provider of technical assistance for the countries in question emphasizing, in its turn, support for their transition to democratic political regimes and market economies. In 2004, Bulgaria and Romania joined NATO and, in 2007, became members of the European Union. Multilaterally, in 2004, the EU initiated its European Neighborhood Policy, including in it, among others, such post-Soviet states as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. These six countries also became a part of the EU's Eastern Partnership program in 2008.

The Georgian war of 2008 and the political crisis of 2014 in Ukraine, followed by a referendum in Crimea have changed the pattern of post-Soviet states drifting toward EU and NATO influence and away from Russia. For Turkey, these developments signified a more assertive Russian presence in the Black Sea region. An important consequence of this assertiveness was a serious Russian military build-up in the Black Sea in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. Thus, before 2014, NATO naval forces, including Turkey's military capacities, significantly surpassed those of Russia's Black Sea Navy. While Turkey, a member of NATO, had 44 surface ships and 13 submersibles in the area, Russia's capabilities included 26 surface vessels, 26 submarines, 22 fixed-wing aircraft and 37 helicopters. By late 2015, Russia already had 41 surface vessels and 9 submarines headquartered in the Black Sea.[12]

The 2008-2014 developments in the wider Black Sea region brought it back to the military-strategic map of Russia-Turkey and Russia-NATO relations. However, the newly emerging Russian and Turkish interest in the Black Sea was not purely military and geopolitical in nature. The U.S. and EU sanctions imposed on Russia after 2014 and Russia's aggravated relations with Ukraine made Russia turn to Turkey in its search for wider international support and alternative transit routes for Russian oil and gas to Europe, bypassing Ukraine, thus adding a political-economy dimension to Russian-Turkish interaction in the Black Sea region.[13]

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These developments contrasted sharply with the diminished security dynamics in the Black Sea region that had taken place there throughout the 1990s and the first decade of this century. The common understanding then was that the rivalry between the world hegemon, the U.S., and its potential competitor, China, was shifting the high-intensity geopolitical struggle to the Asia-Pacific, the new world economic powerhouse. However, the security and geopolitical dynamics which accompanied, first, Russia's rising tensions with the EU and NATO over their "shared neighborhood" in the Caucasus and Ukraine, and, second, the unprecedented expansion of DAESH in the Middle East, reconfigured the geopolitical significance of the Black Sea region.

As Romanian professor Serban Filip Cioculescu aptly puts it, this region "allows NATO/EU countries to interact with the states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, with the Middle East area, and to prevent revisionist challenges from contesters of the status quo inherited from the end of the Cold War."[14] For Russia, this is a region of historical geopolitical significance and, more importantly, now an area which no longer has any meaningful buffer zone between Russian territory and NATO members. The current competition between the Russian-led integration project of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the EU, which are poorly reconcilable one with another, as the Ukrainian crisis demonstrated, merely added a geo-economic dividing line to the region. For Turkey, the Black Sea is also an area of traditional geopolitical and economic interests connecting it to the wider reaches of central Eurasia.

Thus, in terms of geopolitical dynamics, the Black Sea region today represents a "security complex" with a strong intersection of interests, often of a mutually contradictory nature, of a number of regional and great powers, but also of various non-state actors. In this setting, Russia-Turkey relations represent one of the core geopolitical "dyadic rivalries"[15] which overshadow the secondary lines of confrontation (Russia vs. NATO, Russia vs. Georgia, Azerbaijan vs. Armenia, Turkey vs. Armenia) and may well significantly shape the geopolitical dynamics in the Black Sea region in the days to come.

Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea Region: Convergence and Divergence

The overall progress of Russia-Turkey bilateral relations in the early 2000s and 2010s facilitated the formation of key spheres where Russian and Turkish

interests simultaneously converged and diverged – first of all, security and regional strategic balance, then economic cooperation and, finally, energy and infrastructural projects.

Security

In the early 1990s, cooperation between Russia and Turkey on security in the Black Sea region was determined by the significant changes in the strategic balance after the end of the "Cold War." The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 made Turkey, for two and a half decades, a state with the most powerful military resources in the Black Sea. In the 1990s, both Russia and Ukraine were unable to come to a sound agreement on the future development of the Black Sea Fleet. Serious economic problems impeded the technical and strategic development of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, while other post-Soviet states (Georgia) and members of the Warsaw Pact (Bulgaria, Romania) never had any significant marine power or ambitions. All this provided Turkey with quantitative military and strategic dominance in the Black Sea, which lasted until 2016 when Russia regained its military supremacy.[16]

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Turkey tried to convert these advantages into a strategy of creating a collective security complex with all the littoral states, including Russia, which, given Turkey's long-lasting membership in NATO, could have potentially reinforced the influence of this alliance in the region. The first step in this direction was the establishment of the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (Blackseafor) in 2001 for coordinating and carrying out search-and-rescue operations, anti-mine and humanitarian missions, ecological projects and goodwill visits to Black Sea harbors.[17] The next step, intended to integrate Russia into Turkey's Black Sea initiatives, was "Black Sea Harmony", initiated in 2004 in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolutions aimed at deterring terrorism, drug trafficking and asymmetric threats in the Black Sea.[18] All of these initiatives shifted the political-military balance in the Black Sea further in favor of NATO[19] without altering the existing international regime of the Black Sea established by the Montreux Convention; it consequently led to rising tensions between Russia and Turkey, and Russia and NATO, in the Black Sea region.

Moscow regarded NATO's policy, embodied in the rise of Turkish capabilities in the region, as an intended economic, political and cultural expansion in the Black Sea region, not without justification. As noted above, Romania and Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004. The U.S. created military bases in Georgia and started to train its

military personnel according to NATO standards. In 2008, the EU adopted a regional economic and political strategy named "Black Sea Synergy." The U.S., in its turn, voiced the idea of creating an anti-missile system in the Black sea region.

Russia's Black Sea fleet, headquartered in Crimea, became a focus for NATO containment efforts, as it emblematized the advancement of Russia's influence in the region. After 2014, the fleet received new elements of strategic aviation, namely strategic bombers Tu-22M3 and a modern guided-missile system, "Iskander-M". The overall geopolitical transformation made the Black Sea region key to Russia's strategic presence in the area stretching from the Mediterranean and the Balkans up to the Caucasus.

Divergences in the security strategies of Turkey and Russia in respect to the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and NATO's European missile defense system constituted another reason for the clash of interests. The retention of the Russian military forces in parts of Moldova and Georgia, contravening the declarations of the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit and the suspension of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, aroused Turkey's concerns and suspicions regarding Russia's security strategy in the region.

Economic Partnership

Another important juncture in the cooperation-contradiction nexus, affecting Russia-Turkey relations in the Black Sea region, is economic partnership. In the 2000s Russia became one of Turkey's main trade partners, while Turkey became Russia's fifth largest trade partner. Turkey's decade-long foreign trade deficit with respect to its trade with Russia reflected the structural features of their bilateral trade. Russia's main exports to Turkey included natural gas, petrol and other energy resources (more than 65%),[20] which made it very difficult for Turkey to increase the trade volume of its exports to Russia. The latter mainly included textiles, food and consumer commodities.

In the early 2000s and 2010s, Turkish construction companies began to actively participate in numerous large-scale construction projects from Sochi to Saint Petersburg. In the same period, Russian companies increased their direct investments in the Turkish economy, mainly in the sphere of energy. On the regional scale, however, the obvious progress in the Russian-Turkish bilateral economic relations did not facilitate the emergence of an institutionalized framework for promoting regional economic cooperation. BSEC, which Turkey had initiated in 1992, remained more of a

framework for diplomatic dialogue than a tool for strategic decision-making. The countries involved in BSEC lacked complementarity in the economic domain.[21] They did not enjoy free trade regimes or strong transnational links. As Serban Cioculescu explains, "for small states like Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan, the main players in the region- NATO, the EU and Russia are simply too big and too strong to deal with... they cannot freely choose their allies, they are not allowed to change their preferences by deciding between NATO and Russia, or between the EU and EEU."[22] Moreover, the decision-making procedure within BSEC, which necessitates unanimity for all important decisions, makes BSEC a very uncomfortable format for regional cooperation, given the disagreements and rivalries among the BSEC member states.[23]

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Large-scale energy projects constituted yet another very important sphere of Russia-Turkey cooperation in the Black Sea region throughout the 2000s and early 2010s. The history of Russian-Turkish cooperation in the energy sphere goes back to 1984, when the Soviet and Turkish governments signed the Natural Gas Agreement that constituted a turning point in bilateral relations.[24] Interestingly, in 1984 Turkey considered the agreement on natural gas supply from Soviet Russia as an important political development and measure enabling Turkey to diversify its energy sources. The implementation of the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline project opened a new chapter in Russian-Turkish cooperation in the field of energy, providing Turkey with Russian natural gas through a pipeline constructed under the Black Sea. However, the Blue Stream project remarkably increased Turkey's dependence on Russian natural gas. At the same time, Russia's natural gas monopoly Gazprom demonstrated rising interest in enlarging its share in the natural gas distribution networks inside Turkey.[25] Russia also managed to become one of the main suppliers of raw oil to Turkey. In 2008 Lukoil, Russia's second largest oil producer, penetrated Turkey's energy market by reaching an agreement to buy the Turkish fuel distributor Akpet for US$500 million, securing 5% of Turkey's oil product retail market.[26]

In the aftermath of the political crisis in Ukraine in December 2014 Putin and Erdogan declared that Russia and Turkey started to work on a joint

project, the so-called "Turkish Stream", which aims at reducing Russia's dependence on Ukraine as a transit country for Russian energy resources to Europe. Turkey is a state with a rapidly developing economy. Its energy consumption is constantly rising, but it does not possess any meaningful energy resources of its own. Almost all of the gas processed by Turkish thermal-power stations comes from abroad. This situation makes Turkey constantly seek to diversify its sources of energy supply and to optimize the costs of imported gas. Russia remains the main gas supplier to Turkey and controls 56% of its gas market, Azerbaijan and Iran being the two chief alternative suppliers. Azerbaijan's share in the Turkish gas market is just 8%, while Iranian gas costs much more than Russian gas, the latter being subject to discounts provided by Gazprom. All of these circumstances made the Turkish Stream project highly relevant to Ankara geopolitically and geostrategically.

Turkey has strived for a long time to transform itself into an international energy hub. Despite the complete lack of its own energy resources, Turkey wanted to compensate for this deficit with its geostrategic abilities to build enduring connections between the key energy producers (Russia and the Caspian states) and their European consumers. The Turkish Stream project would add value to the "energy corridor" which will connect the Caspian states with Greece and Italy via the Transanatolian (TANAP) and Transadriatic (TAP) gas pipelines, while the Turkish Stream itself would ensure the flow of Russia natural gas supplies from Turkey to Hungary and other Central European states.[27]

The current situation in Russian-Turkish energy cooperation is not new. In the middle of the first decade of this century, Turkey was in a very similar position in terms of the prospects which were opening up for Ankara to enlarge its influence on the international energy market. The actively debated Blue Stream-2, which was to become a channel for Russian gas supplies to cross Turkish territory en route to Israel (in the Southern direction) and to Europe (in the Western direction), was never implemented. In 2005, Turkey entered the official EU accession negotiations, a milestone in Ankara's 40-year long ambition. The Blue Stream-2 project could have become a challenge for Turkey's European partners in their efforts to diversify their sources and suppliers of natural gas. The EU member states wanted to solve this diversification problem via the construction of the gas pipeline "Nabucco" from Turkmenistan via Azerbaijan and Turkey to the EU. In order to avoid controversies with the EU, Ankara had to abandon the

Blue Stream-2 project and switch to Nabucco. In 2007, Moscow began construction of a new gas pipeline, now called the "South Stream," bypassing Turkey.

Turkey's relations with its Western allies and partners may have an impact on the implementation of the Turkish Stream as well. Turkey may wish to balance between its partners in the East and in the West without taking the final decision up to the very last moment. The way the Turkish Stream project has moved forward since the normalization of Russian-Turkish relations in 2016 confirms this observation: initially, the now frozen South Stream project and its successor, the Turkish Stream, called for the construction of four threads with a general capacity of 63 billion cubic meters. One of these threads was to provide gas to Turkish consumers while three others were to transport gas to Europe, bypassing Ukraine. According to the intergovernmental agreement signed on 10 October 2016, Turkey guaranteed the construction of only one pipeline thread while the construction of the second one was preconditioned by the attainment of agreements between Russia and the EU.[28] This twofold reduction of the pipeline capacity to 15,75 billion cubic meters did not correspond to the political and economic interests of the Kremlin or of Gazprom. In this new context, Gazprom's investments in the land and underwater infrastructure, as well as the discount on gas consumption Gazprom had to provide to the Turkish state company Botaş, significantly raised the price of implementing the project. Russian-Turkish disagreement over the amount of this discount was one of the factors which had slowed down the project in 2015; its cancellation after the tragedy with the Russian Su-24 led Turkey to seek international arbitration.

Serious conflicting interests in different spheres of bilateral relations obviously limit the scope of Russian-Turkish cooperation in the wider Black Sea region. The diverging energy and security strategies that Russia and Turkey have been openly demonstrating, and their opposing attitudes towards the protracted conflicts and democratization processes in the post-Soviet space, constitute the limitations of Russian-Turkish cooperation in the wider Black Sea region.

Despite the fact that throughout the last two decades Russia and Turkey managed to reach consensus on several joint energy projects and even started their realization, Russian and Turkish energy strategies are highly competitive and openly rival to each other. In its energy strategy, Ankara is focused on the establishment of an "East-West energy corridor" aimed at connecting

the energy-producing states of the Caspian Sea region with European energy consumers. This East-West energy corridor is labelled the "Southern Energy Corridor" by the EU, which sees the project as a vital alternative to its dependence on the Russia-controlled "Eastern Energy Corridor". The latter is considered highly unreliable by Western observers, due to Moscow's use of energy as leverage in its foreign policy since the early 2000s.[29] The "Southern Energy Corridor" would offer EU consumers an opportunity to diversify their channels of energy supply and minimize their already high dependence on Russia as a key hydrocarbon energy supplier.

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As many observers note, Turkey has been partly successful in its task of "weakening Russia's monopoly over the export routes of the Caspian hydrocarbon resources".[30] With the support of the U.S. and in close collaboration with Azerbaijan and Georgia, Turkey installed the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan raw oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline projects, enabling Ankara to bring Azerbaijan's raw oil and natural gas directly to Turkey. The successful realization of these projects has had a twofold effect: reducing Turkey's dependence on Russia by diversifying its energy sources and decreasing Russia's influence over Azerbaijan's energy resources by providing Baku with direct access to international energy markets, bypassing Russia.

The limits of the interaction between Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea region is in some respects a consequence of "diverging visions" for the Black Sea region and sometimes even the "lack of a common vision" in both countries.[31] Indeed in the 1990s and early 2000s, both Turkey and Russia showed very pragmatic attitudes towards regional developments. But their diverging attitudes towards a number of the regional issues analyzed above reflect the differences in their foreign policy priorities vis-à-vis the Black Sea region. The lack of an effective regional organization capable of mitigating regional controversies only reinforces these problematic relationships. While the BSEC is weak and mainly oriented toward economics,[32] OSCE is not particularly effective in conflict resolution, the Eurasian Economic Union is perceived as "Russian instrument," while the EU and NATO

are unacceptable for Russia for political reasons.

Russian-Turkish Interaction in the Caucasus

The Caucasian republics, which geographically form part of the wider Black Sea region, represent an interesting case of an area where the "competitive conflict and cooperation" pattern of Russian-Turkish relations has become more visible over the past two decades.

Historically, Russian and Turkish interests in the Southern Caucasus have seriously diverged. In the post-Soviet period, marked by protracted conflicts in this region, Moscow and Ankara often stood on opposing grounds.[33] Formally, Moscow became the key ally of post-Soviet Armenia, guaranteeing its existence within the present day borders and keeping a military base on its territory. Ankara engaged in a comparable alliance with Azerbaijan, which claims to be Turkey's chief counterpart in the Caucasus in terms of the intensity of its economic, administrative and military ties.[34] At the same time, despite its strong connections with Turkey and conflicts with Armenia, Azerbaijan nevertheless managed to build constructive and mutually beneficial relations with Moscow. Thus, in the case of Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey enjoy the compatibility of regional interactions.

Armenia, on the contrary, stands on the opposite side of the cooperation-competition spectrum between Russia and Turkey. The most troublesome aspect of the uneasy relations between Yerevan and Ankara is the unresolved problem of the 1915 events. In the beginning of this century Turkey agreed to create a special parliamentary commission which announced its report in 2005, the year of the 90th anniversary of the tragic events of 1915. Despite its well-balanced assessments, it lacked the statements Yerevan persistently wanted to find there. The report did not recognize the Armenian claims about the 1915 events.[35] Thus, Turkey and Armenia still remain very far away from a consensus on this issue. However, in the case of Russian-Armenian relations Turkey tends to perceive Russian military presence in Armenia more as a factor of stability rather than a factor generating regional tensions.

Georgia represents a point of Russian-Turkish divergence. Since the Russia-Georgia conflict of 2008, Moscow's relations with Tbilisi have remained strained and diplomatic relations have not returned to full normalcy. Turkey, on the contrary, enjoys intense economic connections with Georgia. After the 2008 Georgian war Turkey

did not recognize the independent status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but at the same time readily started to advance its economic interests in Abkhazia.[36] This paradoxical situation made Ankara Moscow's most obvious competitor for influence in this semi-recognized Caucasian state. For Abkhazia, which strives to diversify its external partnerships and reduce its level of dependence on Russia, relations with Turkey bring new channels for enhancing its economic and political potential and strengthening its *de facto* sovereignty.

Russia and Turkey converge in their positions vis-à-vis the Minsk process in Nagorno-Karabakh, yet another *de facto* state in the Caucasus and a disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan. They regard this process as an important international platform, which includes the U.S., the EU member states and other key stakeholders for the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through negotiation.[37] Building a stable and secure South Caucasus represents an important avenue for both Moscow's and Ankara's policy in the region. Thus, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh constitute two areas where a more intense Russian-Turkish cooperation is possible.

In the present day context, the Caucasian region retains its strategic significance for both Russia and Turkey. For Russia, the South Caucasus is an area of geopolitical competition with the West. The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 temporarily overshadowed this competition but did not remove it from the agenda of Russia's relations with NATO and the EU. Indeed, the political crisis in Ukraine intensified the competition between the European and Eurasian integration projects in the region. Several post-Soviet states, Georgia (2016) and Ukraine (2017) among them, opted for Association agreements with the EU, others, for example- Armenia, joined the EEU (2015) while Azerbaijan opted for a balancing strategy between the EU and Russia.

For the West, this region is important in terms of "energy pluralism", meaning an alternative source of oil and gas for Europe and a point of leverage for curbing Teheran's and Moscow's ambitions. For Russia, home to seven North Caucasian republics, the situation on the other side of the Caucasian mountain chain is a continuation of Moscow's domestic security agenda. In the 1990s and in the early 2000s, some Turkish groups' support for the Chechen separatists negatively influenced Moscow's efforts to comprehensively solve the problem of separatism in Chechnya.[38] Despite the formal end of the Russian federal government's military campaign in

Chechnya, the republics of North Caucasus still remain an area of high military risk and socio-political instability. The Middle Eastern jihadist structures of the previous generation, for example, Al-Qaeda, never referred to the North Caucasus as a geographical priority for their expansion. DAESH, however, has different tactics, and is more actively recruiting people from the Caucasus.[39] Thus, the important focus for Moscow and Ankara cooperation there concerns joint efforts to curb the flow of financial assistance to the Islamic radicals of the North Caucasus.

Turkey has multifaceted and multilevel interests in the Caucasus. It cooperates with Azerbaijan in developing various energy projects (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, Transanatolian and Transadriatic pipelines) to create alternative energy transportation routes to the EU. Turkey also cooperates with Azerbaijan and Georgia in joint infrastructure programs such as the Baku-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Kars railroad.[40] Turkey and Georgia are involved in intensive cooperation. Georgia has a long-lasting ambition of becoming a NATO member (pending resolution of its ethno-territorial disputes with Abkhazia and South Ossetia), or at least enhancing its military cooperation with the Alliance. For Ankara it is important to mobilize NATO's support for Turkey's regional ambitions.

According to various estimates, about 10% of the Turkish population has close connections with the North and South Caucasian population via diasporic ties. Turkey is now home to approximately 3-5 million people from the North Caucasus, and to 3 million Azeri and 2-3 million Georgians.[41] Many of them are active in public life, forming various lobby groups, serving in the army, and standing for the parliamentary elections. Some of them work in the Turkish mass media and consequently represent an important electoral resource.

The Russian-Turkish "Cold War" of 2015-2016 provoked expectations of rising bilateral tensions in the Caucasus as well. Thus, since late 2015, Turkey has started to intensify its economic and military-strategic cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan, while Russia has expanded its military interaction with Armenia. However, despite the fact that Ankara, Baku and Tbilisi have very close international positions, these positions are not identical. Azerbaijan has very uneasy relations with the West. Recently the U.S. and EU have hardened their critique of Baku's political regime. It is no surprise that Azerbaijan perceives Russia as a counterweight to the West and an additional source of its political regime's international legitimation. Baku is interested in closer economic cooperation with Russia as well as joint struggle against

the jihadist threat.[42] Antiterrorist cooperation is equally important for Georgia, where since the 2000s, the Pankisi gorge has become a hotbed for terrorist activities. Russia, having lost much of its leverage on Georgia after the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, cannot now afford any escalation of tensions with Azerbaijan. Thus, Moscow is trying to balance between Armenia, its strategic ally, and Azerbaijan, its strategic partner, in search for an appropriate strategy to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The South Caucasus, where Russia and Turkey are not engaged in any serious conflict represents a potential area of cooperation on security and regional conflict management. Both countries obviously converge in their wish to see the Caucasus secure, politically stable and free of extra-regional powers' involvement.[43] The existing, divergent visions of Moscow and Ankara regarding certain political issues cannot seriously hamper Russian-Turkish cooperation in this area. In this regard, it is worth mentioning Turkey's "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" initiated in 2008 and supported by Russia. Ankara envisioned the platform as a means of building cooperation ties among the South Caucasus republics with the engagement of only regional powers. This platform might well have become a framework for intergovernmental institutional cooperation for solving regional conflicts.

Conclusion

Throughout the past two decades, every time Russia faced a cold spell in its relations with the West, Turkey was ready to enhance its interaction with Russia. Both sides considered such interaction as geopolitically advantageous and economically profitable. In 2008, after the escalation of the conflict in South Ossetia and the deterioration of Russian- Georgian relations, together with the harsh reaction of the West, Turkey decided to further expand its relations with Russia. In 2009-2010, Russia and Turkey managed to reach several breakthrough agreements on the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline, the visa free regime and the High-Level Cooperation Council. These agreements allowed the leaders of both countries to declare that Russian-Turkish relations had reached the level of "strategic partnership." The "breakthrough" and "game-changing" agreements, as different news media outlets called them, turned out to be much more beneficial for Turkey than for Russia, which considered these large-scale projects in Turkey more as a political investment.

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In 2014, after the crisis in Ukraine and the rise of confrontation between Russia and the West, Ankara once again demonstrated that Turkey prioritizes its economic interests over ideological solidarity with its NATO allies. Turkey did not join the EU and U.S. anti-Russian sanctions. Rather, Ankara supported the Turkish Stream project and managed to receive a discount on imported Russian natural gas. However, at the same time, Turkey continued its work on alternative routes for petroleum and natural gas from Central Asia, bypassing Russian territory.

By 2015, the mechanism of the "game-changing" agreements compensating for the divergence of Russian and Turkish stances on key-issues of world politics was virtually exhausted. The difficulties of normalization and slow thawing of Russian-Turkish relations since the summer of 2016 have proven this.

The analysis of Russian-Turkish relations in the wider Black Sea region and the Caucasus in the last two decades demonstrates a multi-dimensional competition-cooperation nexus. One can trace its elements of equal intensity in several spheres, including security, economic interaction, and energy infrastructure.

Security issues remain the top priority of Russia-Turkey relations in the Black Sea region. Existing ethno-religious and socio-political cleavages within and among the Black Sea states, as well as their positioning in relation to competing security and integration projects make the regional dynamics highly complex and hinder the Black Sea states' ability to perform as a bloc. Russia faces numerous challenges in its North Caucasus neighborhood and is deeply involved in the struggle against DAESH, both there and in the Middle East. Ankara is fighting the PKK and YPG, while the terrorist attacks of DAESH extremists against Turkey have significantly risen in number since 2014. Other Black Sea littoral states, such as Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, are mired in internal ethno-territorial conflicts.

These complicated regional dynamics make the wider Black Sea region, including the Caucasus, an arena of competition for power and security, with Russia and Turkey as the key actors. Both countries are unanimous in their wish to preserve a relative

status-quo in this region. However, an evident arms race between Russia and Turkey and between Russia and NATO in the region reflects a lack of trust among regional actors. Given the absence of an effective pan-regional international organization capable of conflict resolution, regional security risks retain a high potential to disturb the positive dynamics of the fragile relations between Russia and Turkey.

These complicated regional dynamics make the wider Black Sea region, including the Caucasus, an arena of competition for power and security, with Russia and Turkey as the key actors.

The large-scale energy and infrastructure projects in the Black Sea region represent another dimension of cooperation and competition between Russia and Turkey. Despite their truly regional scale and ambitious design, their ups and downs visibly demonstrate the vulnerability of the declared strategic partnership between Moscow and Ankara. In short, cooperation and competition go hand in hand in Russia-Turkish relations and demand a more comprehensive and multi-level approach to the ways in which the competitive interests of Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea region might be turned into a well-grounded cooperation.

Endnotes

* The paper is based on a research project implemented with the financial support of the Russian Science Foundation Project No 17-18-01614 "Issues and Prospects for Political Transformation of the Middle East vis-à-vis Regional and Global Threats".

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