

ISSN: 2687-220X

NOVUS ORBIS

Journal of Politics and International Relations
Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi

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Gence Koridoru'nun Stratejik Önemi

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Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi

Journal of Politics and International Relations

ISSN: 2687-220X

Cilt 5 | Sayı 1 | 2023
Volume 5 | Number 1 | 2023

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Volume 5 • Number 1 • 2023

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

**STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE GANJA
GAP IN THE NEW SECURITY SCENARIO**

Miguel Borja BERNABÉ-CRESPO*
Alejandro VALLINA RODRÍGUEZ**

Makalenin Geliş Tarihi // Received: 06.01.2023

Düzeltilme Tarihi // Revised: 02.05.2023

Yayın Kabul Tarihi // Accepted: 02.05.2023

Abstract

The Ganja gap is the border space comprised between Azerbaijan and Georgia. This connection between these two countries represents a strategic zone due to the proximity of another axis of allies: Armenia and Russia, which are separated by the Ganja gap. Moreover, Ganja is the strategic path from Europe and the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, which also entails not only commercial and military transits but also the connection of the Turkic world between Türkiye and Central Asia. The complex relations of the actors surrounding the Ganja gap warn this space of a potential conflict: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership of Türkiye, its close relations to Azerbaijan, the aspirations of Georgia to become a member of this alliance, opposed to Russia's intention to control its *near abroad*. Because of this, the control of this space represents a potential space of clash between military alliances. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has changed the conception of the European Security scenario, leading Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to apply for European Union (EU)

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membership, being the former two official candidates, changing EU relations with Türkiye and creating some grey zones in the post-Soviet space. These grey zones are blurry spaces where peace is not guaranteed though there is no war situation – but could potentially evolve as such, as it happened in Ukraine in recent years. This contribution analyses the Ganja gap: its territory, and geopolitical context and discusses the new security scenario and the *grey zone* concept. It finally delivers some conclusions aiming to provide security by emphasising the strategic location of Ganja Gap and its implications for the whole region.

Keywords: Caucasus, Geopolitics, Conflict, Ganja Gap, International Security, Gray Zone

Yeni Güvenlik Senaryosunda Gence Koridoru'nun Stratejik Önemi

Öz

Gence Koridoru, Azerbaycan ile Gürcistan arasında bulunan sınır bölgesidir. Bu iki ülke arasındaki bu bağlantı, Gence Koridoru'nun birinden ayırdığı ve bölgede başka bir müttefik eksenini oluşturan Ermenistan ve Rusya'nın coğrafi yakınlığı Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan'ı birbirine bağlayan Gence Koridoru'nu stratejik bir bölgeyi haline getirmektedir. Ayrıca Gence, Avrupa ve Karadeniz'den Hazar Denizi ve Orta Asya'ya uzanan stratejik bir yoldur ve bu yol sadece ticari ve askeri geçişleri değil, aynı zamanda Türk dünyasının Türkiye ile Orta Asya arasındaki bağlantısını sağlamaktadır. Türkiye'nin Kuzey Atlantik Antlaşması Örgütü (NATO) üyeliği, yine Türkiye'nin Azerbaycan'la yakın ilişkileri ve Rusya'nın yakın coğrafyasını kontrol etme hedeflerine karşı Gürcistan'ın NATO'ya üye olma isteği gibi Gence Koridoru'nu çevreleyen aktörlerin karmaşık ilişkileri, bu bölge üzerinde olası bir çatışma riskini barındırmaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu alanın kontrolü, askeri ittifaklar arasında potansiyel bir çatışma alanına dönüşmesini beraberinde getirmektedir. Rusya'nın Ukrayna'yı işgali, Avrupa Güvenlik anlayışını değiştirmiş ve resmi aday olan Ukrayna ve Moldova ile birlikte Gürcistan'ın Avrupa Birliği (AB) üyeliğine başvurmasına yol açmıştır. Bu işgal aynı zamanda Türkiye ile AB ilişkilerini değiştirmiş ve Sovyet sonrası coğrafyada bazı gri alanlar yaratmıştır. Bu gri bölgeler, savaş durumu olmamasına rağmen barışın garanti edilmediği yerlerdir. Ancak son yıllarda Ukrayna'da olduğu gibi potansiyel olarak çatışmaya dönüşebileceği bulanık alanlardır. Bu çalışma, Gence Koridoru'nu içerisinde yer aldığı bölge ve jeopolitik konumu içerisinde analiz etmekte ve yeni güvenlik senaryosu çerçevesinde *gri bölge* kavramını tartışmaktadır. Son olarak, çalışma, Gence Koridoru'nun stratejik konumu ve bunun tüm bölge üzerindeki

etkilerini vurgulanarak güvenlik anlayışını geliştirmeyi amaçlayan bazı sonuçlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kafkasya, Jeopolitik, Çatışma, Gence Koridoru, Uluslararası Güvenlik, Gri Bölge

Introduction

The Caucasus, a land bridge connecting Europe and Asia, is a key strategic region which is threatened by its geopolitical magnitude. Widely understanding of the region embraces the three South Caucasian states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – however, as German (2012) notes, delimiting the region depends on the vision of other neighbours that also claim to be a part of, or at least, to hold a strong influence: Russia, Türkiye, and Iran. Historically, this area constituted the northern territories of the Persian and Ottoman Empires before the conquest of the Russians. The breakup of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) led to the restored independence of three states in a new space considered strategic to these states themselves, to their neighbours, and to the whole region's security. As German (2012) states, even naming matters: the term South Caucasus involves an external perspective and overlapping geopolitical and geostrategic interests of various regional and global powers and has been preferred over *Transcaucasus* (Zakavkaz), which entails a sense of Russian imperial expansionism and absolute Russian influence. This thinking evidently shows the extent to which the Caucasus is contested. Not only frozen conflicts are present, as in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or the Karabakh (Broers, 2020), the latter showing recently that the so-called *frozen conflicts* are subject to revitalise and leave the freeze behind, but also competence for the control of the region may set up the conditions of a *grey zone*, where powers try to exert influence. The *grey zone* concept was first mentioned by the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) of the United States Department of Defense in 2010, stating that “The future strategic landscape will increasingly feature challenges in the ambiguous grey area that is neither fully war nor fully peace” (US Department of Defense, 2010). Several authors have developed this idea (Schadlow, 2014; Mazarr, 2015; Kapusta, 2015; Baqués, 2017; Wirtz, 2017; Jordán, 2018; Bernabé-Crespo, 2020; Englund, 2020) characterising primarily with a sense of intentioned ambiguity, referring to a terrain located between peace (white) and war (black) which nonetheless, it does not constitute a conventional war but peace is weakened and cannot be guaranteed. In other

words, there is a conflict but an absence of violence, although the objectives pursued in a grey zone are those of war solely by different means (Baqués, 2017). This situation may be either an alternative to hybrid warfare or a preparation for it, and its strategies are multidimensional, making it difficult to identify which of them are hostile (Jordán, 2018). Some of them may be referred to as military shows of force, violations of airspace, political propaganda, financial support of radical groups, disinformation, economic coercion measures, power cuts, and cyberattacks... aiming to create a sense of defenselessness and insecurity, often carried out gradually -known as sliced salami tactics-, which prevents a clear perception of the real scope of each action and awards strategic advantage (Baqués, 2017; Hoffman, 2018).

It could be argued whether the South Caucasus region is indeed a grey zone or not, but political tensions and ongoing conflicts – be they inner or surrounding this space- render this region of a potential clash of geopolitical powers. Not only regional powers trying to exert influence but also between two major military alliances such as NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and Russia (be it just Russia or the broader Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO] members). As it will be argued throughout this article, particularly the border area between Georgia and Azerbaijan, known as the Ganja Gap, is of highlighted interest as it represents a narrow chunk of soil connecting two countries focused on cooperation with three vectors: Western, NATO, and Turkic spheres, and separating the axis Russia – Armenia – Iran, often sharing position towards geopolitical affairs. Therefore, a *gap* could be defined as a key land crossing, strategic to the security of the opposite ends, where the control of this crossroad would enable the adversary the transit and continuity. Considering this, the most significant case is the Suwalki Gap, the border area between Poland and Lithuania (Figure 1), considered the most hazardous area on the NATO-Russia contact line (Veebel and Sliwa, 2019). Its strategic importance relies on the ability to connect two NATO members but separate the Russian oblast of Kaliningrad and Belarus, a close ally. Here, grey zone tactics have been common and increasing until the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and it is a space where policymakers and analysts definitely keep an eye on the nature of passage between Kaliningrad and Belarus among NATO countries renders it as a space of tension and potential confrontation (Bernabé-Crespo, 2021a).



Figure 1: Map of Suwalki Gap (The Geographic Information System of the Commission-GISCO activities-EUROSTAT EU, made with ArcGis 10.8.2.) (Authors' elaboration).

This article intends to shed light on a *gap* that is often unnoticed but of great importance for the stability of the Caucasus region and the economy and development not only of the region itself but with wider consequences for Europe. First, a review of the foreign policy of each regional actor is done, highlighting their interests and concerns. The article focuses then on the importance of the Ganja Gap and its implications for wider security. Lastly, some reflections are provided due to the new security scenario after 2022. Our hypothesis is that the escalation of the confrontation between Russia and the West may affect the stability of the Caucasus region, where the Ganja Gap plays a vital role, both in international security preventing conflict and in terms of economic development.

1) The Caucasus: A Mix of Interests and Influence

The Caucasus is a region with a high level of diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, languages, and also, foreign policies. One of the main conflicts shaping foreign policies in this region is that of Karabakh, which confronts Azerbaijan, seeking to restore its territorial integrity, and Armenia, supporting the autonomy of the self-proclaimed republic of Artsakh or Nagorno-Karabakh. Historically, relations with Türkiye have also been tense, and being locked between Azerbaijan and Türkiye makes Armenia isolated and dependent on external assistance. Isolation

and the need for allies' push Armenia to rely on Russia for military and economic issues, pledging to its orbit. In 2010, both countries signed the extension of the 1995 agreement on the 102nd Russian military base at Gyumri, prolonging the establishment until 2044. Armenia made clear that it would not seek to join the European Union (EU) nor NATO (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2007) and rather join the Eurasian Customs Union instead of a free trade deal with the EU (Gardner, 2013). Russia, as it will be discussed later, is bound and determined to exercise an influence throughout the former Soviet space, especially in the Caucasus. Although many reasons could be argued, such as economic, political and social, the most self-reiterated is the threat from NATO and restoring its sphere of influence.

Armenia also needs to get along with its other two bordering countries, Georgia and Iran. Especially with the former, as this country allowed the connection with Russia (suspended since the Ossetia War in 2008) and trade to other countries via the Black Sea to Europe. Connection to Western Europe, in Europe and the US, is of cultural significance and motivated by the large diaspora, but also with the purpose of consolidating democracy and European values. However, relations with the European Union are troubled, as the belonging of Russian-led organisations makes a future rapprochement unrealistic and is not taken as priorities. This balance between the West and Russia might resemble that of Serbia, unlike Armenia's economy and security depend more on Russia and has more ties to it – namely, the military base. Relations with Iran may seem contradictory: a fundamentalist State encouraging Muslims throughout the globe but supporting Orthodox Armenians and tense relations with their Azeri Turks Shia neighbours. This complicated relation has two meanings: one, an open border to the outside world; second, to provide mutual support facing the Azeris: both in Nagorno Karabakh, which matters for Armenia, and in Tabriz and the rest of Southern Azerbaijan, which Iran fears about their claims of independence.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is described as 'multidimensional and balanced' (German, 2012), anchored in their territorial integrity and independence. Azerbaijanis share a common heritage with Turkish, based on their language and Turkic roots. The motto *two states, one nation* sums up the shared broad vision and exemplifies their strategic partnership signed by a mutual assistance agreement. Cooperation in military terms is frequent, and Türkiye has helped the Azeri military forces to level up to NATO standards (German, 2012). Although not a NATO member, this bilateral relation makes Azerbaijan a

reliable partner for Türkiye and, potentially, for the whole of the organisation. Geography commands and Georgia is the cross point that links Türkiye and Azerbaijan, so it has been an essential ally, and bilateral relations need to be taken with care. It allows not only the linkage of these Turkic nations but also the path from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea.

Within its balanced policy, Azerbaijan has followed a neutrality policy stating that it would not join NATO or CSTO (Zee News, 2013). Nonetheless, its condition as a hydrocarbon supplier turns Azerbaijan into a strategic partner for the EU in its path to diversify its providers, as recently has been proven with the signing of the new Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy in 2022 by the European Union (EU) and Azerbaijan, which enhances their bilateral relations. Although the EU's foreign policy promotes democracy and European values in its search for partners, it evades confrontation towards a friendly authoritarian-considered regime linked to oil production (Guliyev, 2013). Nevertheless, Azerbaijan still avoids facing Russia, which plays a key role in the resolution of the Karabakh conflict and regional security (Valiyev, 2010).

Relations are more strained with Iran, mainly because of the exploitation of Caspian reserves but, more importantly, the South Azerbaijan issue, the northwestern region of Iran whose main city is Tabriz. There, concerns of separatism are spread due to the ethnic Azeri majority (Winrow, 1995), which is often thought to gather in *Greater Azerbaijan* (Ali, 2000; Shaffer, 2002; Riaux, 2008). Claims for broader rights are witnessed in this region of 30 million Azeris¹, alleging oppression and demanding the use of their education in their mother tongue and its use in the media (Quluncu, 2022). In addition to this, Azerbaijan has developed an intense interaction with Iran's most adversary – Israel-, which benefits both countries in terms of technology, military equipment and energy suppliers. As a result, Iran's foreign policy towards the Caucasus is heavily focused on its problems with Azerbaijan, fearful of the separatism in the Southern Azerbaijan province, and also, due to the rapprochement of Azerbaijan to the Western countries, especially Israel and the United States, and the growing Turkish influence.

The 2003 Rose Revolution symbolised the desire of Georgia to break away from Russian influence and move towards the Western. Since then, it has expressed its desire to integrate into the EU and NATO – not to forget the Bucharest Summit in 2008, when it was welcomed and foreseeable. In response to this, Russia invaded Georgia occupying the Autonomous Republics of

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were then recognised by Russia as independent countries. Since then, Georgia claimed that 20% of its territory is under occupation and seeks to restore its territorial integrity, which has moved it more vividly to NATO aspiring membership, now considered a priority. Georgia is the most pro-Western state, which also formally applied for EU membership in 2022 and was given a potential candidacy status soon after. Georgia's European ambition is included in its Constitution, and it was an overwhelming public support of 83% approving joining the EU (European Commission, 2022).

Other key allies of Georgia are also NATO members Türkiye and the US, which support Georgia's territorial integrity and constitute its main trade partners and technology and military equipment. Its strategic position as a crossroads also serves as a bridge connecting Azerbaijan and Türkiye and a key route in the transit of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea to Central and Southern Europe. This condition motivated the desire of Türkiye to become an energy hub, a cornerstone in its domestic economy for consumption and also exporting further to Europe via the pipelines crossing Turkish territory while avoiding transiting Russia. These are the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipelines. Türkiye's paths to connect with Azerbaijan pass through Georgia and the exclave of Nakhchivan, the latter uncommunicated due to the still unresolved conflict of Nagorno Karabakh and the complicated establishment of the Zangezur corridor. Although Turks are Sunni and Azeris are Shia, both share Turkic roots and that motivated the Turkish foreign policy to reestablish relations that once were lost in the USSR times. Renewed ties to the Turkic world were adopted in the 1990s (Kaya, 2009) and fostered in 2009 with the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking Countries (CCTC), later renamed as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021.

Bearing all these approaches regarding foreign policies, the belonging to certain organisations divides the region as follows from Russian-led organisations: the Commonwealth of Independent States (Armenia and Azerbaijan) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (only Armenia). Facing those, NATO gathers Türkiye, but also Georgia is an aspiring member. Both countries are also candidates for EU enlargement (although not on the near agenda as Turkish negotiations are stuck and Georgians are not official candidates yet). But they do lean towards the West, as they belong to the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM) formed by Georgia and Azerbaijan, along with Ukraine and Moldova (the latter two official EU official candidates since 2022). Binding

together, the European Eastern Partnership (EaP), within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), groups the three Caucasian states and fosters relations with the EU. It is to mention, however, that the Turkish initiative, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Project (BSEC), had more success in putting together the three of them, plus Türkiye and Russia.

2) The Ganja Gap

The Ganja Gap is the narrow border space between Georgia and Azerbaijan, roughly 60 km wide, which allows land transit between Asia and Europe bypassing Russia and Iran (Figure 2). It takes its name after the city of Ganja, the second largest city in Azerbaijan, and close to this space and north of Nagorno Karabakh. Ganja Gap breaks the continuity of the axis Russia – Armenia – Iran and allows the transit between Georgia and Azerbaijan, further expanding to Türkiye, the Black Sea and Europe to the West, and to Central Asia and the verge to China to the East.



Figure 2: Map of Ganja Gap (The Geographic Information System of the Commission-GISCO activities-EUROSTAT EU, made with ArcGis 10.8.2.) (Authors' elaboration).

This is a key strategic location, comprised of two seas, which links the Caspian area to Europe and brings Asia closer. More importantly, it is a transport and communications corridor, above everything of hydrocarbons – relevant as it connects a landlocked region rich in oil and gas to its sea access and, thus,

reaching global markets more easily. The whole of Central Asia could also be included in those who benefit from the Ganja Gap, as it constitutes its nearer seacoast.

Its geography consisting of a hilly area scored by valleys, made this area the natural path from Europe to Central Asia and also helped the development of transport corridors rather than the mountainous areas of Armenia and the highest heights of the Russian North Caucasus. It is of great interest the investment accomplished, especially in international export pipelines, that brought economic benefits to Azerbaijan, also helping Georgia (Table 1) as well as security assurance in terms of energy to Türkiye, as a consumer, and recently also Europe.

Country	GDP ² in 2001	GDP in 2021	Variation
Armenia	2.12	13.86	11.74
Azerbaijan	5.71	54.62	48.71
Georgia	3.22	18.63	15.41

Table 1: Variation of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the three Caucasian States (World Bank, 2023).

In particular, the BTC and BTE pipelines connected since 2006 Baku oil fields to the cities of Ceyhan, near the Mediterranean, and Erzurum, where other pipes could continue. For example, the intended Nabucco gas pipeline, which would link Erzurum's BTE to Austria, passes through Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary. This project failed due to political pressure from Russia, which favoured the South Stream instead, which would have connected Anapa, near Crimea, to Bulgaria and Serbia. This was also cancelled due to the sanctions on Russia after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The Southern Gas Corridor was finally completed with the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) connecting the BTC through Türkiye until it reaches Italy via Greece and Albania. In 2022 a new agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan took aim at doubling gas deliveries to achieve European energy diversification, also involving TANAP capacity to 32 billion cubic meters a year (Daily Sabah, 2022). Another interesting element is the Baku -Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway link, which after the success of BTC and BTE, was completed to connect the rail networks of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. This opens a window to broader connect Europe's rail network to China's, transiting Central Asia.

As noted, Central Asia plays a pivotal role in the Ganja Gap connections. Turkic-majority states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan

and Kyrgyzstan are members of the OTS, while Turkmenistan, the other Turkic state in Central Asia, is an observer of the organisation. All these countries constitute the path to China. The founding Nakhchivan agreement of 2009 expressed that the purpose is to i. strengthen mutual confidence and friendship among the Parties, ii. developing common positions on foreign policy issues, iii. promoting effective regional and bilateral cooperation in all areas of common interest, and iv. strengthening cooperation and integration between member states, among others (Nakhchivan Agreement on the Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States, 2009). Furthermore, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan signed in 2022 the Tashkent Declaration, which is expected to contribute to the further expansion of relations between the three countries. In this sense, it is important to point out the *Middle Corridor*, the connection from the Caucasus to Central Asia via the Caspian Sea. This Trans-Caspian International Transport Route starts from Southeast Asia and China, runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and further to European countries, whose main objectives are attracting investment and trade, developing transport infrastructure, promotion of competitiveness, optimisation of costs and the reduction of administrative barriers related to the border and customs procedures, among others (Middle Corridor, 2023). In this regard, the Ganja Gap also seizes great attention, as it permits the traffic of passengers and the continuity of Turkic countries. That is, it also entails a cultural significance. As former Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel stated, “We [Turkic peoples] share a common history, a common language, a common religion and a common culture. We are cousins cut off from each other for over a hundred years, first by the Russians under the Czars, and then by the Communist regime” (Aydın, 2007).

3) The Ganja Gap After the 2022 Russian War in Ukraine

Russia’s strong will to keep its *near abroad* under its sphere of influence has been constant since the 2000s, when revolutions began to occur in former Soviet republics, such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia or the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. The Georgian invasion in 2008 marked a turning point for a more offensive Russia, followed by the Euromaidan crisis of 2013-2014, resulting in the annexation of Crimea and destabilising the Donbas after combining grey zone tactics, a conventional followed in 2022 when Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Whether it is, a response to NATO

enlargement or the imperialistic realm of Russia would require another article. What this sequence proves, and what matters to our hypothesis, is the escalation of the confrontation between Russia and the West, which may affect the stability of the Caucasus region, being the Ganja Gap, a crucial crossroad. As Trenin (2016) spotted, Russia definitely lost Ukraine and Moldova; it *accepted* the growing Chinese leadership in Central Asia, American in Georgia, and Turkish in the Caucasus. However, he also stated that “Russia’s sphere of influence is more likely to shrink further than to expand” (Trenin, 2016, p. 45), although that did not prevent Russia from attacking Ukraine in order to regain its sphere of influence and threats other ex-Soviet countries (Bernabé-Crespo, 2021b). In the current situation, the transit of goods and communication in the northern route has been stopped, as the EU ceased to import gas and other hydrocarbons from Russia, or at least reduced its consumption to a large extent. Instead, it prioritised the imports of liquefied natural gas via the Atlantic Ocean and enhanced its partnership with other suppliers.

As explained above, what renders the gap hugely relevant is the only land corridor connecting Europe to Central Asia, via Türkiye and the Caspian Sea, without the need to transit Russian territory. This area is the fundamental stone, the *raison d’être*, of the Middle Corridor, the thinnest border space between the partner states of this association, and the only option which allows their land contact. In the new geopolitical situation, this alliance gathers an increasing geopolitical and geoeconomic importance, thus, also the space known as the Ganja Gap. This is strategic not only for this connection but also because it separates an axis formed by Russia – Armenia – Iran. The 2022 war showed geopolitical movements and changing alliances. For one part, Russia’s isolation from the rest of Europe was unprecedentedly united in its support of Ukraine. Central Asia also experienced turmoil, with clashes in Kazakhstan and between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In this region, Kazakhstan began to distance itself from Russia, opening a window of opportunity to cooperate closely with the Turkic world and the West. In the Caucasus, a busy Russia only maintained its *peacekeeping* position in the Nagorno-Karabakh renewed war, diminishing its role of safeguarding stability.

Western sanctions on Russia’s imports made the European Union turn to more diversified suppliers and enhanced cooperation and investment in the Caucasus, especially Azerbaijan. Not only were the Azerbaijani reserves strategic to the EU but also potential transfers from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. In fact, even Kazakhstan began to send oil via Azeri

pipelines bypassing Russia (Reuters, 2022) and, according to KazTag (2022), preparing an agreement on a transport corridor to bypass Russia within the TRACECA partnership, the European-Caucasus-Asia initiative. In a context where Russia could have exploited its influence, these facts unveil the rapprochement of the region to the West. But Türkiye needs the Ganja Gap to keep on functioning if it wishes to be an energy hub. Surrounded by frozen or ongoing conflicts in Europe, Caucasus and the Middle East, Türkiye aims to achieve stability in the region, which benefits its economic development, as well as the desire to gain influence in its proximity: playing a leading role in developing the *Strategic Depth* (Stratejik Derinlik) concept, understood as multiple identities, which serve as bridges, being Türkiye at the centre of many geopolitical areas of influence (Davutoğlu, 2001).

Türkiye emerged as a regional power capable of mediating between Russia and Ukraine and also a reliable partner for the EU and NATO despite disagreements in the past. However, the new security scenario in Eurasia is still riddled with challenges and uncertainties. What we can draw from this escalation is that conflict is more likely, and positions regarding foreign policy alignments indicate the appearance of two opposing blocks. On one side, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have a strategic partnership, bearing in mind the Turkish membership of NATO. Georgia would fit in this group as it is strategically keen on joining the alliance, assuming that is the way to preserve its independence and protection against a Russian invasion. Moreover, it is placed between Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and its foreign policy depends on its condition as a nexus allowing transport and energy flows, which anchors both countries within a European perspective (Starr and Cornell, 2005). Even Turkic countries from OTS could be included, due to economic investments, cultural roots, and their drifting from Russian influence, despite some being members of the CSTO. In this regard, Kazakhstan and Türkiye began exchanging intelligence information, including regional development, military analysis, and terrorism threats (Haidar, 2022).

The other block would be formed by the alliance between Russia, Armenia and Iran – the latter two proved to be supporters of Russia amidst the war in Ukraine. It is necessary to point out the current Russian military presence not only in the two regions recognised by Russia of Abkhazia and South Ossetia but also the peacekeeping forces along Nagorno Karabakh and the extensive military deployment in Armenia –with the base at Gyumri and the rumours of a new base at Aygepar, just in the edge of the Ganja Gap–. Moreover, according to Iran’s security

concerns, it needs to pull out of American influence in the Caucasus, which would serve as a platform for launching operations in Iran itself, besides resolving the Azerbaijani issue in its own territory. Protests have been arising in recent years, condemning discrimination (Collin, 2006) and racism (Bezhan, 2015) and also noting the environmental issues of Lake Urmia (Adilgizi, 2018). Azerbaijan has been aware of this situation; even in the 9th Summit of the Leaders of the Organization of Turkic Countries in Samarkand, President Ilham Aliyev contemplated the lack of education in their mother tongue. Türkiye–Iran confrontation also helps in the rhetoric of regional power competing, Sunni and Shia, boldened with the restoring of full diplomatic ties between Israel and Türkiye.

Although stability and peace are pursued in the region, it is unavoidable to mention the potential confrontation that the Ganja Gap pose, which may spark under the deployment of grey zone tactics.

Conclusion

In the context of the growing confrontation between Russia and NATO, specialists focus on preventing conflicts and identifying potential areas of clash. Due to the ongoing grey zone actions that operate in the Baltic Sea, including threats and simulation of invasions, much attention is paid to Suwalki Gap, the territory bridging the Baltic States and Poland, which means an isolated Russian Kaliningrad cut off its ally Lukashenko's Belarus. However, other areas also share similar characteristics and need to be surveilled with special care by decision-makers in their task of avoiding conflict and securing stability. In this regard, the area known as Ganja Gap also represents a key strategic site. Located in the Caucasus, it consists of the junction that connects Georgia and Azerbaijan but pulls apart Russia from Armenia. Its importance is beyond the regional transit of goods, as it unites the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea, that is, Asia to Europe. And more importantly: bypassing Russian and Iranian soil.

Foreign policies of the Caucasian states tend to be divergent. Georgia is the most pro-Western, a potential EU candidate and seeking NATO membership, feeling threatened by Russia, which occupied two of its regions. Due to its lack of regional allies and the active Karabakh conflict, Armenia needs to turn to Russia as its major partner. Azerbaijan's great development is based on hydrocarbon export, being an emerging partner for the EU but trying to avoid confrontation with Russia.

However, the competence of the Caucasus involves not only the three states themselves but also regional powers such as Türkiye, Russia, and Iran – and even adding the influence of NATO and the EU. Russia has a desire to control its near abroad and resists losing influence in the Caucasus. Due to its unique geographical situation and its roots in Central Asia, Türkiye plays an increasing role, especially holding a strategic alliance with Azerbaijan, both considering Georgia a key transit nexus. Iran seeks to help Armenia and Russia against its perceived threat both from the US and Azerbaijan, the latter of which may stir its northwestern province, as well as confronting its rivals Türkiye and Israel. These considerations portray the formation of two blocks in the Caucasus, where the Ganja Gap could be a contested place to assure geographical continuity if grey zone tactics are applied. Beyond this security approach, Ganja Gap also gathers greater relevance as the path to Central Asia, which due to Turkic common heritage, is drifting from Russian influence to a closer operation with the OTS. In this sense, recent agreements driven by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the need for the EU to diversify its suppliers make this space strategic for the energetic security of Europe. Ganja Gap is the transit location of these routes, and if Türkiye intends to become an energy hub, stability is needed. Further discussing, the Ganja Gap represents not only a security or economic issue but a cultural significance: both the tie of Azerbaijan and Georgia to Europe influence and the link of connection of the Turkic states.

Geopolitical changing panorama affects security concerns. In a context of uncertainty, renewed clashes, and arising tensions, it is a duty to avert conflict by promoting stability, respect for international law, enhancing international cooperation and aiming to achieve peace.

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¹ Claims of independence led by the South Azerbaijan National Awakening Movement (Güney Azerbaycan Millî Özgürlük Hareketi GAMÖH), which defends a federal structure and more cultural rights (Koknar, 2006).

²GDP, current US\$ billion.

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Aday gösterilme için son başvuru tarihi: **01 Ağustos 2023**

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