

AZERBAIJAN-ARMENIAN CONFLICT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S NEAR ABROAD POLICY

RUSYA 'NIN YAKIN ÇEVRE POLİTİKASI BAĞLAMINDA AZERBEYCAN-ERMENİSTAN ÇATIŞMASI

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze Russia's near abroad policy with a focus on an interstate conflict between the Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh. South Caucasus region has increasingly attracted attention of the scholars in the Post-Cold War era. Particularly, interstate and interethnic conflicts have carried the region to a higher place within the agenda of International Relations discipline. External hegemonic powers have always continued their involvement in the region. For this reason, the study concentrates on Russia as the main external actor in the region and analyzes the policy of Russia particularly towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Throughout the history of South Caucasus, Russia has had its mark on all political and economic regional dynamics. Thus, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has occupied a central place in Russia's near abroad policy and thus has interfered in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict. Russia's everlasting interest in the region showed itself by not being neutral and problem-solving actors during the conflict. However, after the cease-fire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russia started to act as a mediator. In this regard, the paper will analyze Russia's policy with respect to political-military dynamics in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict..

Anahtar Kelimeler: Russia, Near-Abroad Policy, Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan-

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ÖZET

Bu makalenin amacı, Rusya'nın yakın çevre politikasının Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan arasında devam etmekte olan Dağlık-Karabağ çatışmasına odaklanarak değerlendirilmesidir. Güney Kafkasya bölgesi Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde uzmanların dikkatini daha fazla çekmektedir. Özellikle bölgede var olan devletlerarası ve etnik çatışmalar, bölgenin Uluslararası İlişkiler disiplininin gündeminde ön planda yer almasını sağlamaktadır. Dış hegemonik güçler geçmişten günümüze bölge üzerindeki etkilerini devam ettirmektedirler. Bu sebeple, makale bölgedeki temel dış aktör olarak Rusya üzerinde odaklanmış Rusya'nın özellikle Dağlık-Karabağ çatışmasına yönelik politikasını analiz etmektedir. Güney Kafkasya tarihi boyunca, Rusya bölgede oluşan tüm politik ve bölgesel dinamiklerin içerisinde yer aldı. Dağlık-Karabağ çatışması Rusya'nın yakın çevre politikası içinde merkezi bir yere sahiptir ve bu nedenle Rusya, Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan arasında olan bu çatışmaya müdahale etmiştir. Rusya'nın bölgeye yönelik süregelen ilgisi, kendini çatışma süresince tarafsız kalmayarak ve çözüm üreten aktör olmayarak ortaya koymuştur. Ancak, Azerbaycan ve Ermenistan arasında imzalanan barış anlaşmasından sonra Rusya arabulucu gibi davranmaya başladı. Bu bağlamda, makale Rusya'nın politikasını, Dağlık-Karabağ çatışmasındaki siyasi-askeri dinamikleri göz önünde bulundurarak analiz edecektir

Keywords: Rusya, Yakın Çevre Politikası, Dağlık Karabağ, Azerbaycan-Ermenistan,

1. INTRODUCTION

The South Caucasus region has constantly attracted great powers with its strategic location and significant natural sources. The region gained prominence particularly through inter-state and inter-ethnic conflicts with the ending of the Cold War.

After the broke away of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus republics gained their independence and established different political route: Azerbaijan established and successfully pursued balanced policy in the regard to external actors; Armenia has continued its old political path, meaning increased and tightened its strategic partnership with Russia to guarantee its security and economy; Georgia took pro-Western route which was sort of anti-Russian policy. Nevertheless, dissolution of the Soviet Union from one hand brought independence to the regional states, on the other hand put them in fire with the escalation of the interethnic and interstate conflicts. Although, the origin of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict coincided to 1988 dynamically, but both countries got involved in full-scale bloody war right after 1990, which broke all types of relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Russia stayed as a main player in the region and forced countries to agree on signing ceasefire agreement on 1994. However, after the August 2008 crisis in Georgia was turning point for Georgia to have full speed towards EU and NATO which was big political concern for Russia. Overall the regional picture formed as such: Georgia postponed its territorial integrity for the moment and focused on EU integration and NATO membership that released Georgia from Russia's pressure, however, Azerbaijan and Armenia still stuck on conflict settlement issue which serves Russia's regional interests and makes the South Caucasus's security dynamics quite complex. (Freire, 2012: 466-481). Therefore, Russia seeks to prevent other external players' (such as the EU and NATO) involvement in the region. Being the centralized power over the South Caucasus countries during the Soviet Union, Russia attempts to demonstrate its big brother role again in the region. Thus, Russia became an active partner during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Therefore, the EU and NATO have been more willing to get actively involved in the region through their partnership with Georgia. Unlike Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia keeps so-called 'good' relations with Russia. In this sense, both the EU and NATO are not willing to get into political confrontation with Russia (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000).

Main research questions of this study are:

- 1) Does Russia pursue its near-abroad policy towards the Azerbaijan-Armenian, so-called Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in pure impartiality?
- 2) What are the key expectations of Russia through involving in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?
- 3) How do conflicting parties; Azerbaijan and Armenia see Russia's role in the conflict?

This study argues Russia's particular role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict happened Azerbaijan and Armenia. Besides Russia's 'paternalistic' and 'mediator' position in the conflict resolution process, Russia has been the main military munitions provider for both countries. In addition, Russia has pursued its own political interests in the entire region rather than considering regional stability as a serious concern. Thus, there is a strong claim over Russia's 'doubtful impartiality' during and after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Russia is a historic neighbor for the South Caucasus countries and seems that it will continue to be an outspoken actor in regional political dynamics. However, Russia's political view towards the region was different during the Soviet Union and after its collapse. During the Soviet Union, the political implementation of the Kremlin was quite utilitarian; however, this approach had faded away with its collapse. Yet, Russia alone acted differently, by keeping its self-interest and constant intention to regain regional primacy.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE REGIONAL DYNAMICS

The political broke away of the Soviet Union was turning point for all the member states as well as the South Caucasus countries. In comparison to other, other member states the cost of independence for the South Caucasian republics was unexpected. The EU, NATO and Russia have been concerned about the particular structure of the regional political and security

relations, and how these elements are interrelated. Three regional features are essential to highlight: first, heterogeneity is a casual logic of social and regional foundation of the South Caucasus, which delays its development per se; second, nevertheless the regional richness of the South Caucasus increase the attractiveness of the foreign actors towards the region, that did not made a negative effect on their independent in their own boxes beside economic and political cooperation; third, the current situation and regional picture of the South Caucasus are based on mutual cooperation and interrelated competition which has never been fit on the common agenda, beside the sustaining the regional stability and peace settlement became main concern. Russia's old and following strategic partner, Armenia increased its political, military and economic attachment to Russia. On the contrary, the rich natural resources became an advantage for Azerbaijan to establish its independent political agenda apart from Russia's pressure (Averre, 2009: 1689-1713). However, Moscow did not satisfy with the limited power implication in the South Caucasus, but accelerated its deep political, military and cultural involvement with all means. Because of yearly increased third actors involvement in the region with various reasons shook the Russia with continuous worries. Therefore, Russia could not wait and implement indirect policy towards the region, rather decisively has exerted very precise and concentrated military oriented regional policy. In this political journey Armenia kept its cooperation with Russia based on substantial security-military and economic dependency. However, the occurrence and escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia increased the isolation of the Armenia from the regional economic and diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey (Laurent, 1999: 109).

3. SOVIET UNION'S POLICY TOWARDS AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA

In April 28, 1920, the establishment of the Azerbaijan Socialist Republic (Azerbaijan SSR) was announced. In the country, the control shifted to the Temporary Revolutionary Committee and Council of People's Commissars of the Azerbaijan SSR. Invaders acted very carefully by appointing only Azerbaijanis to both governing bodies. The Bolsheviks aimed to trigger separation and hostility among the people and exposed different layers of the population to undermine Azerbaijani's independent statehood traditions. Anyone who could resist the strengthening of the Bolshevik regime would immediately be victimized as 'people's enemy', 'terrorist', or 'provocative'. Bolshevik regime also attacked the morality of the people to break the tradition of independent statehood and spirit of national identity from the minds of the people. During the republic, the state language was suppressed. The training of national personnel was sharply restricted. However, one of the most important components of violent 'state-building' was the creation of poor committees. Poor committees had to become a pillar of the Bolsheviks (Guliyev, 2008).

The World War II with its end brought consistent repression against the people of north-south Azerbaijan continuingly. In 1948-1953, a new phase of a mass evacuation of Azerbaijani nations from their native lands was in western parts of Azerbaijan (the territory known as Armenian SSR) begun. During Stalin's rule (1928-1953), the number of civilians killed because of terrorism, repression, and artificial starvation, was equal to the number of Soviet Union's losses during World War II (Yilmaz, 2014).

Within the Soviet Union, Armenian people had better treatment in comparison to other nationalities. The systematic policy of *khorenizatsya* (*nativization*) has been applied to other national minorities in order to pacify any kind of developments, which was particularly attempted by Lenin. This policy indirectly gave an incentive to a group of nationalities to establish their local administrative republics together with their continuous loyalty towards the central government of Soviet Union. However, within this tightened and controlled political system, Armenian nationalism was strengthened and preserved in entire Soviet period. This particular treatment was not negatively affected by any action Moscow implemented (Papazian, 2005).

4. AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA WITHIN THE RUSSIAN NEAR ABROAD POLICY IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

Right after the fell down of the Soviet Union, the political approach towards the South Caucasus region has been changed. Russia individually has pictured the region based on its near abroad domain. The political approach had various and multi-angled dimensions: contradicting and coordinating the links between the South and North Caucasus (Dagestan and Chechnya particularly) within the context of religious and ethnic dynamics; demonstrating enormous political support to Abkhaz and South Ossetia minorities; in order to ban the all means of cooperation and relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia had received very systematic and consistent support. Moreover, during the Soviet period the South Caucasus was a location for Russia to keep its military bases, and undoubtedly region's economic resources had another importance in Moscow's agenda. Russia used those military bases to have an access to economic links, particularly in the energy section. Russia's active and persistent involvement in the region during the any political and economic exchange was eye-witnessed by the regional states (Vosogi, and Et.al, 2013: 469-471). In 1991, the South Caucasus's countries declared their independence before the Soviet Union fell down in December 1991, and all of a sudden they got into interstate and interethnic conflicts (Robinson, 2017: 3-5). Particularly, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict became one of the bloodiest conflicts in the post-Soviet space during the 1991 and 1994 period. That was political fortunate Russia acted persistently to gather conflicting parties to sign ceasefire agreement in May 5, 1994 based on Bishkek Protocol. Since that time the ceasefire protocol remains significantly important and only one that applies certain obligations over the conflicting parties. The ceasefire protocol terminated the armed conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh, but unpredictability of the conflicting parties unexpected actions still remained as fragile concern. The political relations boiled gently even before the broke away of the Soviet Union, but accelerated with real ethnic confrontation together with the collapse of the union and became more violent. From 1991 to 1994 both conflicting parties made most violent regional conflict happened. However, with the establishment of the ceasefire agreement since 1994 until January 20, 2014 conflicting parties relied on status quo and obligations of the ceasefire, beside rare border clashes. However, January 20 in 2014 everything has changed tremendously, meaning conflicting parties escalated border clashes along the front-line areas. Obviously, both sides started to blame each other as a first starter, and of course officials approached the situation with hostile rhetoric through the media (The Guardian, Aug 2014).

Going back to the starting period of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Russia's important role is undoubted reality. The conflict increasingly became regional problem rather than interstate concern. Yet, Russia did not activate its fully devoted policy towards the South Caucasus, but the slight attempt of Ukraine to Europe and NATO created a political deterioration between West and Russia, which altered Moscow's waited policy to the South Caucasus region and pursued very active policy. Presumably, Ukraine was not the only one in the post-Soviet region with an intention to be in the Western track, but Georgia also. Therefore, this became an alert for Russia to take a serious political implication. Moscow's, specifically Putin's fundamental policy was to prevent the involvement of the Western and other external powers in the peace settlement process over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Nevertheless, Russia is one of the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, but still Kremlin acted very articulately to marginalize its position by putting slight distance from the Minsk Group's initiatives. The political belief that Russia has adopted in regard to possible conflict resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia may be happened through compelling one of the conflicting parties for that. Russia's acceptable geopolitical and economic plans were implemented via its adopted Eurasian doctrine to bring the resolution over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict either in the favor of Azerbaijan or Armenia. Correlatively, active peace negotiations over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have direct connection with Russia's irrevocable goal to bring its military-political enlargement in the South Caucasus (The Guardian, Oct 2014).

Considering that, Russia is not only actor has a political-military and economic intention to get involved in the region for sustainable cooperation with regional countries, but USA plus NATO and EU as an ambassadors of the democracy and institutionalism. This intention worries Russia in many ways, and it became a political and diplomatic competition between Russia and West. Certainly, Russia considers that it has right to be in the region because of its historical ties, therefore, political jealousy towards West became increasingly intense. Moreover, Russia sees itself as a successor of the communism by being the central government of the Soviet Union, therefore, obtaining a right of averting the involvement of the other powers in the South Caucasus (Shafiee and Jahangardi, 2011: 50). Nevertheless, the Soviet Union fell down but Russia remained as militarily powerful, economically stable, mi, and politically successive country of the Soviet Union, therefore, that was quite obvious to observe Russia's role and active involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with many reasons, but mainly to preserve its position in the region. However, this involvement brought a radical change to Russia's relation with regional states and in further stages it became very complicated and threatened the regional stability and peace (Maysheva, 1998: 266). Thus, Russia is seen as the most proactive actor in the South Caucasus that has been observed in various ways, but mainly pursuing its own geopolitical interests via encouraging ethnic-cultural differences. Development of the ethnic conflicts in the region is serving for the Russia's political interests, and Russian officials act accordingly using this regional insecurity in order to preserve their authority. These actions became observable in the turbulences of Armenian region (Ismalizade, 2008: 68, 71).

It was not hard for Russia to have full involvement in the region, because Armenia was a strong and trusted ally of Russia in the region, on the contrary Azerbaijan and Georgia continued their kind of anti-Russian policies as seen Russian aspiration, perpetuating regional ethnic conflicts to maintain its hegemony (Cornell, 1999: 53-54).

The South Caucasus region is a vital field for Russia to implement its leading near abroad policies independently. To do that, the following political-military and security influences over the region were fundamental objectives for Russia's policy. This policy has been implemented with double faces over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia's military station triggered the regional instability and continuation of the regional conflicts. Russia's presence in the region with all means also prevent the enlargement of the border clashes between two nations. More importantly, Putin's strategy did not represent the official image of Russia in the region that predominantly searches an opportunity to preserve the conflicts in the South Caucasus region. Although an intensive political hegemony over the region became consistent during the peace negotiation efforts over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through mediation group, however, regardless of all these concerns the conflict became a serious and frozen issue within the context of ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia (Moradi, 2006: 183-185).

5. RUSSIA'S INTERESTS OVER THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH AND ITS ENGAGEMENT FOR PEACE SETTLEMENT

Nevertheless, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict occurred between two regional countries; Azerbaijan and Armenia, however, Russia managed to preserve its military bases and security forces in the region. Russia's successive act served for the Armenia's interest, because Russia increased and became main support of Russia during the Karabakh war. However, the manipulative scenario was demonstrated by Kremlin to convince the conflicting parties that its presence in the region is serving for the urgent resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Actually, this presence reinforced and accelerated the scale of war, rather than put an end in an advance. Russia's very strategic and hidden maneuvers made it realize what actually aimed before, meaning keeping its strategic partnership was an incentive for Russia to continue its support even during the Karabakh war, at the same time it feared Azerbaijan indirectly to consider with whom it is going to fight. However, Russia shot two targets with one bullet; kept controlling Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, and threatened Armenia pulling of

its hands over its border security with Turkey and Azerbaijan. By this monopoly Russia actually showed up that it is only irreplaceable regional player and security could not be achieved without its agreement. Russia delicately implemented its balance of power between conflicting parties not letting any of them to dominate other, which was systematically serving Russia's objective. Moreover, Russia from one hand vanquishing the Nagorno-Karabakh movement for its own political objective, on the other hand implemented its adopted social-economic plans for the regional 'stability' to prevent the involvement of other external actors to bring their peace settlement instruments in the region (Rexane, 2000: 128 and The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000).

The fundamental intention of Russia was to maintain its influence and remain only powerful hegemon in the Caucasus. The dissolution of the Soviet Union left Russia aside with no regional influence which was big loss for Russia. Particularly, Azerbaijan's economic independence, and Georgia's persistent western policy was big alert for Russia. In this moment Armenia was the only country to help Russia to exert its irrevocable policy in the region. Another strategy was to keep the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict unsettled in order to limit the access of the Turkey's influence in neighborhood Caucasus and in mostly Turkic populated Central Asia. Because for Russia, Turkey has been historical counterpart and geostrategic danger by being only NATO member in the region, in addition, Turkey has 99% Muslim population had very substantial cultural and ethnic ties back then in history not only with Turkic nations in Caucasus but with other Turkic minorities within the Russian Federation. Therefore, Russia sees Armenia as a buffer zone between Azerbaijan and Turkey, and Armenia is only country in the region could cut the ties between these two countries. Most importantly, if Armenia could finalize its mission successfully, it will not only ban Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus, but also in the Central Asia. Russia planned this based on its very concrete geostrategic and geopolitical vision. However, besides all pressures Azerbaijan's natural resources made it economically independent, at the same time it had benefit to Georgia being a transportation route of natural gas and oil from Caspian Sea. This economy independence created another concern for Russia, meaning if Azerbaijan continually increases its energy partnership besides the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, and Nabucoo pipelines, it will help European market cut off their economic dependency from Russia but turn their face to the Caucasus. In this regard, Russia would never wanted to see economically strong and independent Azerbaijan next to it, therefore, kept going its military and economic partnership with Armenia in the Caucasus (Ebrahimi, Et.al. 2014: 246).

Despite of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has an ethnic threshold at the beginning; however, when the regional states regained their independence the form of the conflict became 'interstate'. During the Karabakh war, Russian military forces have integrated with the Armenian military forces and the war ended with the domination of the Armenian forces. As a result 30.000 people were killed during the war and left one million people out of their homes labeling them as Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs), and 20% of the territories of Azerbaijan were occupied by Armenian forces. The full-scale war between the conflicting parties ended up with political initiative of Russia, and Bishkek Protocol gathered conflicting parties to sign the ceasefire agreement on May 5, 1994, and since then frequent borders clashes occurred along the line of contact and running of Russian troops for Armenia's air and border defenses has been observed. Besides, controlling the Armenia's security, Russia made Armenia to have an economical and infrastructural dependency from Russia. Nevertheless, the ceasefire agreement pushed the conflicting parties to rely on the obligations of protocol and never violate the status quo, however, this silence was not beneficial for Russia, therefore, from time to time awakening of the conflicting parties to get involved in temporary but intensive border clashes have been served to Russia's regional interests. The volatility in the border line and military confrontations actually became as an excuse for Russia to get involved in the region in with an intention of coercing both sides. This attempt had a very deep strategic intention behind, meaning if Russia occurs in the region with its military forces, then regional countries would not dare to build up a further cooperation with West without fear of punishment from Moscow. The latest violence in the border line occurred before the Sochi meeting held on August 10, 2014, where Putin searched mutual agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia

to declare further deployment of its 'peacekeeping' forces in the region in order to tighten the security control. Nor surprisingly on July 31, 2014 Armenian forces started to attack in three locations. Nevertheless, the former president of Armenia, Serzh A.Sargasyan agreed to take part in the summit meeting, whereas, president of Azerbaijan, Ilham H.Aliyev did not agree on. That was quite strange the attacks of Armenian forces did not coordinate with Russia, but initiated very provocatively (Shaffer, 2014).

Intrinsically, Russia did not adopt one sided strategy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but two-sided policy has been applied by Moscow with various methods and tactics in order to demonstrate the trustworthy and friendly partnership with Azerbaijan. Russia illustrated a precise strategy to regain highest public and political trust from Azerbaijan in order to be seen as one and only mediator in the peace settlement process over the Nagorno-Karabakh. Arguably, another scenario was released in this regard to display the Russia's main intention to keep its close partnership with Azerbaijan just because of the Azerbaijan's natural gas and oil richness and strategic transportation routes. Putin would have desired, Azerbaijan has carried its oil and gas pipelines through Russia's territory to the European market rather than Georgia and Turkey. If this scenario might have happened, presumably, in political exchange, Azerbaijan would have received an expected support from Moscow in regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement; however, this was an assumption. Moreover, Russia has tried hard to convince Azerbaijan to join the Eurasia Union, strongly stating the importance of Azerbaijan is higher than Armenia. Azerbaijan being economically independent was an inevitable partner within Eurasia Economic Union, which was a huge incentive for Russia to maintain its tight partnership with Azerbaijan. With other word, the persistency of Russia in tightening its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan within the Eurasia Union or apart, to signal its willingness for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement, by pointing out the regional security in the South Caucasus is prerequisite for Moscow. Therefore, the current political picture that Russia draws based on Eurasian Union, demonstrating the high political readiness to bring peaceful resolution on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which requires zero mistake political maneuvers (Markov, 2014).

5.1. Russia's Engagement with the Nagorno-Karabakh War

Actually, finding out the strategic and articulate policy to get involved in the South Caucasus's military and political dynamics was not hard for Russian policymakers. During the last decades, Russia was consistently failed on being honest in relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Russia did not change its fundamental position towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, no matter how strong military and economic partnership Russia continues with Armenia, and also its intention to build up long-term mutually beneficial partnership with Azerbaijan. More importantly, Russia remains as a main arms supplier to both countries, but mostly to Armenia. During the 2007-2011, Azerbaijan's 55% and Armenia's 96% arms imports had been provided by Russia (Holtom, 2012:7-8).

Actually, Russia's direct military support to Armenia was another side of coin in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In this regard, Azerbaijan has publicized its strong claims, but neither Armenia nor Russia accepted those claims. Government officials in Azerbaijan stated publically that, in any time Azerbaijan restart its military operation towards Armenia, it will confront with Russian military forces rather than Armenian. The statement was referenced to the Russia's military bases in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. The deputy prime minister of Azerbaijan, Ali Hasanov delivered its statement to the Turkish reporters group in the press conference in Baku:

"President Ilham Aliyev has always promised a military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and he still has the issue on the agenda. The option of a military solution is always on the table, but the most important thing is how this kind of operation will be carried out. We need to become much stronger so that if we become involved in combat in Nagorno-Karabakh we can stand up to Russian troops because that

is who we will have to face. Did Armenia occupy our territories? Do you think Armenia's power is sufficient for that? ”

Ali Hasanov stated that his hometown is also among the occupied territories, which realized through Armenian forces by the tremendous support of Russian military troops, he added. A.Hasanov said “I saw Russian soldiers get out of tanks and celebrate their victory with champagne” (Minorities at Risk Project, 2014).

Overall, Russia has continued its regional hegemony being the only dominant power over the South Caucasus, did not want to miss any political dynamics to preserve its influence over the regional states. Unsettled regional interethnic and interstate conflicts in the South Caucasus was an inevitable tool to conduct Russia's manipulative strategy over the regional states. Because everything was serving to the objectives of Russia's regional strategy, including the cut off diplomatic relationships of Armenia with Turkey and Azerbaijan, forced Armenia to get Russia behind its actions. To strengthen the mutual military cooperation Moscow and Yerevan signed a security agreement, by this Russia became only ally of Armenia in the region (Minasyan, 2013: 4).

5.1.Political Debate over Russia's Policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is known with its multi-sided dynamics; in addition, the involvement of several external actors increased its complexity. Russian Federation was old and most dominant external actor got involved in the conflict since the political confrontation emerged occasionally even before the fell down of the Soviet Union. In comparison to other external actors, Russia pursued its historical strategy towards the region to maintain its domination over the countries. Russia actually did not enter in to the region, but actually Armenia politically welcomed Russia by highlighting its importance for the country. Even before the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia considered Russia as a strong strategic partner to guarantee its security. This strategic partnership has been increased even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, particularly Armenia's disastrous economy portrayed Russia as serious supporter in many sectors. Continuingly, Russia settled its two military bases in Armenia, and provides military munitions and forces to securitize the Armenia's border with Turkey (Giragosian, 2017), (Boyajan, 2019).

The end of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was very costly for Armenia, that isolated the country from any regional energy and economic projects, including abolishing the diplomatic relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan made Armenia completely be dependent from Russia militarily and economically. By this dependency Russia own specific sectors in Armenia, particularly infrastructure in transportation and energy as well as telecommunications. Russian troops moved to the Armenia's Turkey border to take the control, right after Turkey's tanks were carried to the border to remain presumably until the both countries diplomatic relations to be established again. Armenia certainly needs Russia's military support until Turkey and Armenia normalize their relations. Therefore, Russia managed to convince Armenia to sustain its 102nd military base in the country until 2044. Armenia approved this political offer, and the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on this approval was an undeniable fact (Ben Piven, 2015). Both Armenia and Russia see each other an inevitable partner to realize their national interests in the region by pursuing mutual benefits. Interestingly, in the new and revised security treaty between Russia and Armenia, the new term was include as ‘all Armenian territories’, stated in the Armenian sources. The term means all the territories where the Armenians are populated including the Nagorno-Karabakh. This revision and added term signals that if the Nagorno-Karabakh war restarted, Russia will

likely shoulder an active role on the side of Armenia. Overall, the security treaty puts an obligation on Russia to stand next to Armenia in case of new war. This scenario should not be seen as a surprise, considering that Armenia had historical ties and pro-Russian orientation even before the fell down of the Soviet Union and the relations had been evolved even after the broke away of the union (Hopman and Zartman, 2013: 129-134).

On the contrary, Azerbaijan was constrained by Russia, because Azerbaijan prioritizes the Nagorno-Karabakh issue as its territorial integrity, therefore, Azerbaijan had two options: continue its independence without Nagorno-Karabakh and be free from Russia's pressure; or, accept the Russia's involvement into its internal and foreign policy orientation with the hope of earliest solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the favor of Azerbaijan. Obviously, Azerbaijan government would not accept any of these options. Azerbaijan did not surprise seeing the increasing political intention of Kremlin over the post-Soviet space. Azerbaijani government knew that the foundation of the Russia's foreign policy has been filled out with imperialistic intentions that in every wave of Russian history the political elites follow up the same route. It was also understandable that, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was an excuse for Russia to conduct its hegemonic foreign policy over the South Caucasus. This could be a one of the reason, Azerbaijani society determines Kremlin as 'pernicious' figure of the peace process, whereas, this social claim has never been approved in the governmental level of Azerbaijan no action has been done relatively to release the claimed fact. Considering the fact that Sergei Lavrov, the Foreign Minister of Russian Federation is an Armenian origin, which may create an assumption to confirm the reason of close partnership between Russia and Armenia. Excluding all the supplementary and influential reasons on the functioning of the Russia's government, but the truth is that Russia has fundamental political strategy to sustain its power over the South Caucasus. More importantly, the established near abroad policy towards the region is not simple political interest, but very national interests of Russia without regard to the ethnic composition of its government (Hopman and Zartman, 2013: 10).

5.2. Criticism of Russia's Policy

Russia has adopted two main interests in regard to Azerbaijan and Armenian conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh, which is irreconcilable approach with its lack of impartial approach. Russia managed to maintain the hostilities within the region which led regional instability in the South Caucasus. In addition, keeping the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as unresolved served for the national and geopolitical interests of Russia, particularly Russia's 'near abroad' policy. (Demoyan, 2003: 91-92). Presumably, without the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict Russia would not have much political hegemony over the Azerbaijan and Armenia. Some may claim that, Armenia is regional tool for Russia to sustain its political interests and in any regional circumstances Russia will continue its partnership with Armenia. Despite of having close strategic partnership between Russia and Armenia became mutually beneficial, but most likely this partnership would not be the long-term desire of the Armenia's state affairs in the globalized world. Nevertheless, Russia had signed several treaties and agreements with other post-Soviet countries, but Russia did not consider those agreements as part of its near abroad policy. As it is known that, Russia located its military base in the territory of Armenia, but is there any possibility that Armenia expel the Russia's military base from its territory? Mostly like not, because, Armenia needs Russian forces to remain in its territory, considering the broken diplomatic relations with Turkey and also being in a war condition with Azerbaijan. Russia put the Armenia in a trap to see it one and only ally in the region to guarantee Armenia's security from potential external risks. Thus, Russia also would not want to remove its base from the territory of Armenia, otherwise this movement would weaken the influence of Russia in the South Caucasus. Moreover, the risk would be even higher if the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has solved, and then Russia would be able to continue its political domination over Armenia and of course in the region. For this reason, Russia continues the Armenia's de facto independence from Kremlin. In order to guarantee that, Russia most likely needs the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains as unsettled. Therefore, Russia needed to guarantee the

sustainability of Armenia's security from the any unexpected military threats from Azerbaijan. Another scenario is that, Russia would agree the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict only the peace deals fits Russia's national interests in the region. Russia would not accept the peace deal, if the outcomes of the deal undermine the Russia's influence in the whole region. With other word, Russia's deal has to be a peace deal (De Waal, 2008: 4-9).

5.3. Russia's "paternalistic" approach?: Several initiatives to become a mediator for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

There are certain negative approaches towards the Russia's role on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process that because of the Russia's imperialistic and geopolitical policy towards the region. Very often, Kremlin has been portrayed as an ideological enemy of West, therefore, from other external actors' perspective the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is viewed as the resurgence of Russia's hegemony in the post-Soviet space (Shirinyan, 2013).

Russia started to take an active role on leading the peace process in 2008. Since that time, Russia acted differently, but sort of supporting the peace settlement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, by organizing series of interstate meetings between both countries' presidents to have an opportunity searching for regional peace. These were: November 2, 2008 meeting in Barvikha near Moscow; July 4, 2009 in Saint-Petersburg; July 18, 2009 in Moscow; October 9, 2009 in Chisinau (Moldova); January, 2010 in Sochi; June 17, 2010 in Saint-Petersburg; October 27, 2010 in Astrakhan; March 5, 2011 in Sochi; June, 2011 in Kazan; January 23, 2012 in Sochi (Kazimirov, 2014: 278-281). When the Vladimir Putin returned to power, Russia's series mediation efforts were terminated. However, the sudden intensified mediation efforts of Russia could be explained as softening process of the Russia's hegemonic policy over the region. Another explanation could be seen from the Azerbaijan and Armenia's view as an exceptional time period coincided to the incumbent presidency of Medvedev. President Medvedev conducted mediation meeting with his personal initiative, but obviously with the implicit consent of Putin. Actually, President Medvedev was determined as more rational and open-minded leader rather than Putin. When Putin came back to power, Medvedev lost its leadership to continue the mediation between presidents Ilham Aliyev and Serzh Sargysy (The New York Times, 2008).

The traditional realist thinking was occurred more likely as another explanation. The desire to bring the peaceful solution in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through Russian Federation's mediation has been seen as genuine and illusional attempt. This happened because of Russia's anti-soft power image in world history. Even after the August 2008 skirmishes between Russia and Georgia, the negative image of Russia became worse. Since then, Russia once again portrayed itself as a hegemonic power with no hesitation to use wide range of hard forces in order to achieve its objectives. In the view of West, Russia was seen as an aggressive state, particularly with the result of Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts. Interestingly, Russia's aggressive image was not publicly view during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Russia was a camouflaged actor. Presumably, the liberal attitude of Medvedev aimed to remove the negative image of Russia in the world, but demonstrate Russia's role from the friendly and peace supporter framework. From his movement we may certainly understand that, actually it was his personal initiative, but facilitated by the Putin's concession. However, with the Putin's incumbent presidency the conflict resolution attempt of Russia was disregarded. Most probably, it happened because of Putin's strategic view towards the region was peace settlement oriented and his reluctant initiative since the beginning made him remain as regional hegemon. From this perspective, the Medvedev's mediation efforts were seen as a 'naïve' personal initiative. In general, the South Caucasus is portrayed as the backyard of Russia. Presumably, the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict becoming one of the bloodiest wars in the post-Soviet space is viewed as either Russia could not take the control of volatility of conflict, or willingly let both parties stay in bloody cage which served Russia's

geopolitical calculations. Thus, Russia's active mediation attempts proved fiasco at the end with the particular example of Kazan meeting in 2011, the reality was revealed that peace process is in the deep stalemate. Some may argue that, beside Russia's intention on being regional dominant power, but its diplomatic activity has been guided with the motivation to describe itself as a cooperative and well founded driven partner for the Western powers, portraying that regional stability and peaceful security is in Russia's agenda also and this issue is shared concern with them (Markedonov, 2017). Incumbent President of Russia, Vladimir Putin demonstrates cooler posture and limited eagerness towards the Nagorno-Karabakh peace settlement process, is probably because of Moscow's repeated situation, meaning whenever Russia recognized its strong influence in the region, then the conflicting parties' unpredictable movement challenge Russia's inability to secure the deal among them (Abrahamyan, 2014).

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is very hard to claim that Russia acts out of its self-interest. This study has put forward political approach during the Soviet Union and argued that Russia could not keep up that approach after the collapse of the Soviet Union towards the South Caucasus, in particular. The Soviet Union had one approach within the union that was all equal and everything is for the benefit of the great union. Particularly, this image was clearly stated after WWI and WWII with the help of countries. Russian government assumed that victory was gained not only by Russia itself but by other members' unlimited support. Unanimity was an intrinsic part of a union and had a conventional story in this regard.

Accordingly, unanimity was part of Russian political culture during the Soviet Union, meaning Kremlin was using all the ways. Kremlin's main purpose was to oppress the nationalist ideology in the entire union, but only Russian culture and together with language must be popularized. Suppression of the national movements or any revolutionary act to change anything internally might have been faced with military defeat. By this, Russia's political orientation was serving the utilitarian statement: 'The ends justify means'. For Russia, the result was much more important than the means it uses to maintain the union under the Kremlin's control. Kremlin was ready to continue repression of the scientists, writers, thinkers, political activists, etc. Siberia was a sort of concentration camp for those people, and their families were also exiled. In short, Soviet Union's political approach demonstrated its two faces within the union: one was political thankfulness of Kremlin to all the members that without the World War II victory wouldn't have been celebrated in Moscow, and the second one was another side of coin, meaning hidden policy of Kremlin in order to suppress national ideologies in the entire union and to spread out Russian values.

However, everything has changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia could not handle to lose huge power and to see an independent country that was not controlled by Russia any longer. That was an unacceptable reality for Russia. The first attempt started with aggression rather than interest (20 January 1990 Azerbaijan civilians 'massacre-Black January). Lately, Kremlin diplomacy occurred with new steps on what to do and how to do to calm down the society and to continue its pending policy. Having historical ties with Armenia was the only instrument to start a new conflict in the region with Azerbaijan. Some may call this self-interest on the way to regain its lost hegemonic position, but this is a direct aggressive invasion and stands opposite of morality. Russia pursues its interest in the region by being a victim of the Khojaly massacre which was not ethical absolutely. Lately, Russia's volatile attempt to become mediator nevertheless has proved futile. According to Russia's self-interest, its later policy was to establish stability in the region, but at the same time to stay as irreplaceable big brother that without Russia, security and regional peace may have been under danger. Moreover, that act brought an alienation of the Russia's support. Russia's act and new attempt towards the conflict are very much egoistic. No matter how hard Russia tries to build up trustworthy relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan by having military, economic and cultural cooperation, still all these demonstrate Russia's irrevocable hegemonic interest. Azerbaijan and Armenia don't attempt to sit on a round table alone without Russia to start a new negotiation. Even Russia is one of the co-chairs in the Minsk Group which is dealing with

resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. From this scenario, we may see that Russia's main attitude is not letting Azerbaijan and Armenia act alone, which is a very egoistic political movement. In a globalized world, Russia must accept the real meaning of mediation in terms of resolving disputes. Russia cannot accept to see another strong economic and military power next to it, which means cooperation of regional countries with the West. Therefore, it challenges regional states with an ongoing conflict.

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