

# THE BALKAN CHALLENGE TO RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: AN ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENT OF RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS GREECE AND TURKEY

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## **Abstract**

*With the end of the Cold War and subsequent to the disintegration of the USSR, new geopolitical realities in the Balkan region have impressed themselves on Russia's foreign policy formulation. Greece and Turkey, in particular, have posed new challenges and proffered new opportunities. This paper examines those changes and challenges and Russia's response to them.*

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## **The Post-Cold War Realities**

Understanding the post-Cold War challenges to Russia is essential for comprehension of Russian foreign policy in the Black Sea-Balkan rim and the place of Greece and Turkey in this policy.

One of the most widespread opinions in the West is that Russia's Balkan policy is a logical continuation of the Balkan policy of the USSR. Another mistake is based on the opposite opinion that the end of bipolarity deprived Russia's policy in the region of the very *raison d'être*. Consequently, this approach refuses to recognize the Balkan policy of Russia as anything more than a simple "call of the wild" or "call of the blood" according to Huntington's paradigm.

In contrast with the Balkan policy of the USSR<sup>1</sup>, which was guided by the strategy of regional competition with the West on its southern flank and the goal of maintaining the "socialist camp" in spite of Yugoslav dissent, Russia's post-Cold War interest in the region has changed. As for the "call of the blood", it should be recognized that ethno-cultural and religious ties are very important, mostly as part of a foreign policy background, but they cannot be a substitute for real national interests. Russia's interests in the region stem from the new geopolitical situation which has

resulted from the disintegration of the Communist era and the end of the Cold War. The erosion of bipolarity followed by the withdrawal of the Mediterranean Eskadra of the former USSR and the dissolution of the Soviet and Yugoslav empires have drastically changed the security environment and the balance of power in the Black Sea-Balkan region.

First, the emergence of newly independent states (NIS) which are still in the process of forming their statehead and national consciousness brought about new problems and challenges. New actors like Ukraine, Georgia, Croatia, Bosnia, etc., entered the Black Sea -Balkan scene after the demise of the former USSR and Yugoslavia. The emergence of the Ukraine as an independent regional player has drastically changed the balance of power in the Black Sea region, which is characterized by the relationship in the triangle Russia-Ukraine-Turkey. The emergence of Azerbaijan with the richest oil fields on the Caspian seabed and its special relationship with Turkey, has bridged the Caspian and the Balkan areas. Thus, the interlacing and conflicting interests of the traditional and new actors have significantly reinforced the regional interdependence. The Balkan area, traditionally perceived as part of the Black Sea - Mediterranean region, became intertwined with the Black Sea-TransCaucasus. These complement and complicate Russia's foreign policy objectives.

Most of the post-Communist challenges may be explained by the fact that Communism was defeated not by democracy but by nationalism and corruption. The transition is producing a group of seminationalist, semidemocratic regimes. And even in the post-Communist Baltic area - Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where the democratic prospects are promising - there remain many points of contention. In contrast with the post-Communist Baltic area these points of contention and disputes have already developed into bloody conflicts - the Yugoslav conflict, the Trans-Dniester war, the military conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia, are the most illustrative examples of the new tensions in the Black Sea- Balkan rim.

So, Russia's major concern became to maintain its political stability and to contain conflicts across the post-Soviet space, as well as to extend this stability to the areas adjacent to it.

Second, the geopolitical vacuum in the regional balance of power after the end of the US-Soviet bipolarity was being filled by new regional "superpowers", which could expand their influence over the unstable zones of the former Soviet Union or challenge Russia's interest in the region. Long perceived as a peripheral country due to its remoteness from the epicenter of bipolarity, Turkey emerged as a major regional player with the collapse of the USSR. Thus the second foreign policy priority is to prevent or to minimize the negative outcome for Russia of this possible expansion. In this respect, after the dissolution of the USSR, Russia should have

defined who were its natural allies in the region and in parallel it should have elaborated her policy vis-a-vis countries which could challenge her interests.

Third, NATO's involvement in the Yugoslav crisis doubled with NATO's plans to expand eastwards, raised Moscow's concerns about the North-Atlantic alliance's principle of multilateral security organization and Russia's place in the post-Cold War security arrangements. The importance of this challenge goes beyond regional boundaries.

### **The Turkish Challenge**

Russo-Turkish cooperation is essential for stability in the Black Sea-Balkan region and the end of the Cold War unblocked ways to achieve this goal. This cooperation may be important also to cope with non-traditional problems like that of the Caspian Sea whose body of water is growing and threatening to flood thousands of square kilometers of land including the capital of the Russian republic of Dagestan and some of Azerbaijan's oil-drilling sites. To cope with this problem more money and more cooperation are needed.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time it should be recognized that the Russia-Turkey partnership is limited, because the post-Cold War regional strategies of both states are guided by opposite goals. Ankara is interested in undercutting Russia's position in the Black Sea-Balkan region and to expand its influence to the Muslim republics and communities in Central Asia, the Trans-Caucasus region and even in the Russian Federation - the Northern Caucasus area and Tatarstan. Russia's objective is to prevent this expansion.

If Turkey became a real vehicle of integration between the Muslims of the Caucasus, Russia may be confronted with the emergence of the hostile coalition of states with a strong anti-Russian bias. If Turkey became a vehicle of integration between the Muslims of the Russian Federation, Russia may be faced with the problem of its territorial integrity.

It goes without saying that it depends also on Russia to avoid the rebirth of an anti-Moscow coalition of states on an expanded scale. Democratic reforms at home, good neighborly relations with the adjoining and more distant foreign states, suppression of Russian neo-imperialistic ambitions, consistent defense of reasonably formulated interests - that is all that Russian foreign policy has to do. But at the same time it should be taken into account that the collapse of Sovietism reinforced anti-Russian moods in the FSU republics prone to put the bulk of responsibility for the past grievances on Russians. So, these republics may become an easy prey for the external actors.

The process of Islamicization of Tatarstan and other autonomous republics of the

RF encouraged by Turkey is a normal process per se if it is not transformed into aggressive Islam with an anti-Russian bias. The negative evolution of the domestic situation in Turkey - the repetition of the Algerian scenario or a more self-assertive course of the present leadership under the pressure of religious nationalists - may have an impact on Tatarstan and confront Russia with the problem of new Chechnya but on an expanded scale.

There exist different, if not opposite, opinions on the efficiency of the Turkish policy in the post-Soviet era. One opinion is based on the assumption that Turkey's capabilities are spread too thin because of Ankara's numerous vocations. The opposite view is embodied in the alarmist approach "The Turks are coming!" The truth lies between these two extremities. In some areas (in Central Asia for example), Turkish penetration failed, in others (the Trans-Caucasus, the Northern Caucasus, Tatarstan) it became *very* efficient.

Two issues - the Azerbaijani-Armenian dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh and the optimum export route for Azerbaijan's Caspian oil put Turkey on a collision course with Russia's geostrategic, military, and economic interests in the Trans-Caucasus. Of the Trans-Caucasus states, Turkey initially placed disproportionate emphasis on Azerbaijan, due to ethno-linguistic and religious ties regardless of the need to appear non-threatening toward Armenia.<sup>3</sup> Later, Turkey tried to correct this mistake, but its desire not to be perceived by the international community as siding with Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh and to bridge over difficulties with Armenia was resisted by Baku. The latter couldn't accept this policy of balancing between two sides and hindered Turkey's every step towards Armenia. In March 1996, Ankara promised to open a border-crossing point with Armenia as soon as Azerbaijan and Armenia agree on the Declaration of Principles on the settlement of the Karabakh conflict. The Armenian leadership argued that bilateral ties shouldn't be linked to the third party. Apart from Azerbaijan's position, Turkey's attempts to improve its relations with Armenia were discouraged by the comprehension that Armenia's interests in the region were inseparable from those of Russia.

Georgia, involved in domestic turmoil, initially was not a priority for Turkey, even though the two countries share a border and Georgia could *have* been the key to the viability of Turkey's larger strategy. However, rekindled rivalry between Turkey and Russia highlighted Georgia's strategic importance and encouraged a re-crafting of Turkey's policy towards the TransCaucasus as an organic whole.<sup>4</sup> In January 1994, Shevardnadze and Demirel signed a declaration affirming their shared commitment to promoting independence, peace, stability and democracy, plus a package of trade and economic agreements. Despite the presence in Turkey of a large immigrant community of Abkhaz and other North Caucasian peoples that support the Abkhaz leadership, the Turkish government consistently expressed its support for Georgia's territorial integrity. The signing in February 1994 of a major Russian-Georgian friendship and cooperation treaty and several other agreements, includ-

ing one giving Russia the right to maintain military bases in Georgia for a period of 25 years, was perceived by Ankara as a diplomatic loss. But Ankara was revenged last year when the Parliament of Georgia under the pressure of criminal structures decided to get rid of Russian border troops. Thus, 6,000 Russian border guards are to be replaced with 1,500 Georgian border guards, which means that the border between Georgia and Turkey will be open to business for smugglers and drug trafficking. If implemented, this decision will heavily affect Russia's interests.

The trump card in Turkey's regional game became Caspian Sea oil. The September 1994 "Deal of the Century" - between the Azerbaijani government and a consortium of Western, Russian and Turkish oil companies, plus the Azerbaijani state oil company - to develop three offshore Caspian oil fields provided a chance to undermine Russia's influence in the TransCaucasus to the benefit of Turkey. In November 1994, Demirel proposed to Shevardnadze that the new pipeline for exporting Azerbaijan's Caspian oil should be routed westward, via Georgia to Turkey rather than through Armenia, as originally envisaged. The compromise was found in the agreement signed in October 1995 whereby Azerbaijan's early oil would be exported by two pipelines - one northward running through the Russian Federation to Novorossiysk and the second running to Supsa on Georgia's Black Sea coast.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey's strategic goal, however, was the construction of a major new pipeline from Supsa through eastern Anatolia to link up with an existing pipeline from Iraq to Turkey's eastern Mediterranean terminal of Ceyhan. The rationale for the Supsa-Ceyhan project was to reduce Russia's leverage on Azerbaijan and to decrease Russian tanker traffic through the Black Sea straits.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, this project was resisted by Russia.

The growing importance of Turkey for Russia confronted Russian leadership with the necessity to work out a well-thought policy vis-a-vis Turkey that would differ from either primitive anti-Turkish stance or from an unrealistic wish to be friends with all nations of the world. Unfortunately, Russian leadership failed to formulate such a policy. Moreover, having relied on the West's lead in the post-Cold war international affairs, Russia accepted the Western approach to Turkey which were at odds with Russian national interests.

Turkey's role was perceived by the West as the bulwark against the re-emergence of anti-Western powers in the Middle East as well as the vehicle through which the Central Asian republics would be integrated into the Western world, blocking Iranian influence in this region. In one word, Turkey was supposed to be "a secular democratic model for all Muslim people. Having abandoned its traditional neutrality in Middle East conflicts and having applied itself with the Western coalition in the Gulf war, Turkey has become a country of great importance for the West".<sup>7</sup> Being interested in spreading Ankara's influence in the region, the West

blessed any Turkish policy and encouraged Turkey's involvement in the conflict resolution process in the TransCaucases and in the Balkans. In contrast to the West, Russia was interested in counterbalancing Turkish presence in the Trans-Caucasus region by her cooperation with Iran and by promoting cooperation between Iran and Armenia. In central Asia, Russia was interested to counterbalance Iran's presence by its competition with Turkey. But in any case Russia was not interested in a dominance of one regional "superpower" in the post-Soviet era.

Taking into account all considerations from the need to maintain stability in the post-Soviet era to the so-called Turkish challenge, Russia's natural allies in the Black Sea-Balkan region are Ukraine, Georgia, Greece and Bulgaria and in the Black Sea-TransCaucasus region, Georgia and Armenia. But of all the mentioned states there exist two key countries for Russia in respect with the Turkish challenge. One is, no doubt, Armenia, sandwiched between Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey and the Muslim republics of the North Caucasus. In the far side of the sphere, it is Greece.

### **A Natural Ally**

The role of Greece for the Black Sea-Balkan policy of Russia stems from the fact that their interests in the region completely coincide. Like Russia, Greece is interested in regional stability. Like Russia, Greece is not pleased that the geopolitical vacuum is being filled by new regional superpowers. Like Russia, Greece is faced with the Turkish challenge. Moreover, the Greek perception of the Turkish threat is more pronounced and traditional than that of Russia. It is widely recognized that there are no direct territorial threats perceived by any of the countries of Western Europe with the exception of Greece. As Yiannis Valinakis has described it, the use of Turkey's new military potential against Greece could manifest itself in Cyprus (extension of the occupation southwards), in the Aegean Sea (attack on Greece's easternmost islands), in Greek Thrace (invasion "to protect" the Moslem minority) or even simultaneously in all three theatres. Balkan instability, possibly involving conflict in Kosovo, could create another front for Greek-Turkish confrontation.<sup>8</sup>

The most important similarity between Russian and Greek interests is related to NATO's propensity to perform the role of the main security institution, which might envelop new relationships and address new international agenda. As it is seen from Moscow, NATO is not suited for this role by definition. If Russia doesn't have any serious influence over NATO decisions and operations, a too active a NATO role and engagement in the post-Cold War conflict resolution in Europe would cause negative Russian reaction and greatly strengthen the hand of hard-liners in Moscow. As for Greece, its traumatic experience proved that NATO is badly suited to resolve conflicts among its members, to punish one of the parties for violating the rules of permitted political behavior. Still, it is less capable of intervening in domestic controversies, stopping violence, peace-keeping among warring parties. And

those lacking qualities are precisely the ones that will be needed from the multilateral security system in the post-Cold War Europe.

It goes without saying that Russian-Greek cooperation is badly needed in the region to minimize the negative trends and to enhance all the positive aspects resulted from the end of the Cold War. At the same time, this cooperation is limited by the absence of the appropriate international framework. Apart from this major reason it should be recognized that Russia is responsible for many foreign policy mistakes which came to be at odds not only with her national interests but also with the interests of regional stability and security.

### **Russia's Foreign Policy Mistakes**

It follows from the above that after 1991 the new Russian leadership was confronted with the necessity to formulate its own foreign policy interests and objectives based on the specifics of its geopolitical positions and transitional domestic situation. Unfortunately, the course of the Yeltsin administration and Foreign Ministry headed by Andrei Kozyrev in 1992-1993 had several serious and interrelated deficiencies. Having relied only on the post-Cold War euphoria, Russian leadership failed to formulate distinctive foreign policy objectives for Russia and its security priorities. Worse still, the utopian goal of the rapid integration with the West substituted for a well-thought foreign policy strategy which would differ either from nee-imperialist version of hard-nosed traditional Soviet ambitions or from new versions of utopian slogans of new political thinking (like Kozyrev's SDI - strategic democratic initiative", striving "to have no enemies and being friends with all nations in the world"). On most issues Russia just followed the West's lead having produced a widespread impression of a never-ending sequence of unilateral concessions which discredited the very idea of cooperation with the West and resulted in a more self-assertive course for Russia.

Another serious mistake was stemmed from the first one. Russian leadership failed to recognize that the highest priority of Russian foreign policy after the dissolution of the USSR, should be relations with the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia and other republics of the former USSR. These relations were essential not only for protection of Russian economic, political and security interests abroad, but also for Moscow's relations with the West and neighboring states in Asia, and what is more important for the positive evolution of democratic reforms at home. Unfortunately, the Yeltsin-Gaidar-Kozyrev group came to be completely indifferent and disinterested in Russia's relations with the so-called *near abroad*. The very fact of the CIS' existence was envisaged by them as a sufficient means for future cloudless relations and integration with the former USSR republics. This negligence created a kind of a vacuum which was quickly filled by other political forces - interest groups from other governmental agencies, field military commanders, political par-

ties and parliamentary factions acting on their own and openly challenging Russian leadership.

The third serious mistake of Russian leadership was that after the demise of the USSR, Russia completely ignored the necessity to establish new relations with its former allies in Central and Eastern Europe. Moscow was guilty of the uncertainty and fear, which it was inducing in the neighboring states. It is responsible for mis-managing its economic, military reforms and conversion. And it has nobody but itself to blame for the lack of a new Russian realistic concept of European security. Finally, all these deficiencies reinforced fears of East Europeans and their desire to join NATO as soon as possible. Although in any case these mishaps cannot justify NATO's decision to expand eastwards, it should be recognized that Russia didn't do all possible to prevent this negative trend. Unfortunately, Russia's policy vis-a-vis her natural allies was inconsistent and even counterproductive. Instead of establishing good relations with Ukraine after the dissolution of the USSR, Moscow became engaged in never ending disputes on the problem of Crimea and the discord between the Russian and Ukrainian military over the partition of the Black Sea Fleet and the base of Sebastopol ("the city of Russian glory"). Russian and Ukrainian nationalists were fueling each other by playing the card of Russian minorities in Crimea and other parts of the Ukraine. With respect to the Black Sea region Russian-Ukrainian differences made the biggest disservice to Russia's national interests, having weakened its position in the triangle Russia-Turkey-Ukraine and facilitated Ankara's maneuvers in the post-Soviet era.

Russian leadership couldn't present itself as a reliable mediator from the very beginning of its involvement in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and that between Georgia and Abkhazia, having disappointed all the parties. Moscow failed to take the lead in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed enclave of Nagorny Karabakh. This vacuum was immediately filled by Turkey who declared herself as a main mediator. Russia's half-hearted support of Georgian leadership in its conflict with Abkhazian secessionists (guided by ambiguous feelings towards Georgian president Edward Shevardnadze, the main architect of Gorbachev New Political Thinking) weakened Georgia's positions in the Black Sea-Caucasus region. This policy was, no doubt, at odds with Russian interests in this area: it became clear when Russia was confronted with the similar problem in Chechnya. Now Georgia is a weak ally for Russia involved in its own numerous domestic problems.

Russian leadership ignored the necessity to establish new relations with the former members of WTO and COMECON after the demise of the USSR, having provided its former allies like Bulgaria and Romania with the impression that they could rely only on the West and its institutions. It shaded its relations with Serbia, by the hasty recognition of "the Republic of Macedonia", while Washington recognized this country under the name of FYROM (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).<sup>9</sup>



### Looking into the Future

In 1997 and most probably 1998 and further into the future Russia's foreign policy, including that on the Balkan region, will evolve as a compromise between the leading political forces. It will be adjusted to new realities including the need for pragmatic cooperation with the West.

Domestic and foreign policy challenges for Russian leadership are really enormous. The first and most urgent problem will be the ending of the war in Chechnya without its escalation to the whole region of the Northern Caucasus and at the same time without provoking disintegration of the rest of Russia by defeat and withdrawal. Other issues would be re-organization of Russia's relations with the *near abroad* to promote integration without inducing neo-imperial fears. Finally, it will be necessary to change the very foundation of Moscow's relations with the West providing for more equal and fairer interactions without reviving hostilities and isolationism. The problems of NATO's extension and Russian cooperation with the West on peace-keeping in the Balkans, will also be of utmost importance.

The major problem facing Russia and the West in Europe including her northern and southern regions, is that there are still no new security systems, which might envelop new relationships and address new international agenda. If not resolved, it could lead to new tensions and revival of old hostilities and dangers. Being a partner of many Western institutions but a member of none, Russia will always be seeking out its own security arrangements. If NATO really intends to become the major post-Cold war security institution in Europe, it should unequivocally invite Russia to join the alliance under the terms and a time-frame to be determined by negotiation. Naturally, Russia's adjustment will take much time and much effort. The West has nothing to be concerned about: if Russia doesn't meet the standards of NATO, the very questions of Russia's membership in NATO will become irrelevant. But the very fact of such negotiations would deprive Russian nationalists and hard-liners of any possibility to fuel anti-Western hysteria under the pretext of "NATO's crusade" against Russia.

Naturally, this idea will be opposed by the NATO bureaucracy, Western and Russian conservatives, smaller European states. But it would be, no doubt, a better alternative than that of a new confrontation.

### Notes

1. The USSR policy in the Balkans was part of its Mediterranean policy, which had long historical traditions. Imperial Russia and the then Soviet Union both took an understandable interest in the nearest warm water.
2. Victor Gomez, "Caspian Sea: A Growing Problem", *Transition*, Open Media

Research Institute, Vol. 2, No. 15, 26 July, Prague, 1996, p.2.

3. Elizabeth Fuller, "The Tussle for Influence in Central Asia and the TransCaucuses", *Transition*, Open Media Research Institute, Vol. 2, No. 12, 14 June 1996, Prague, pp. 11-15.

4. Ibid., p.11

5. Ibid., p. 15,

6. Ibid.

7. *Fueling Balkan Fires. The West's arming of Greece and Turkey*, Basic report 93.3, British American Security Information Council, p.7.

8. Yiannis Valinakis, *Greece's Security in the Post-Cold War Era*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Ebenhausen/Isartal, SWP-S 394, April 1994, p. 29.

9. Gabriel Munuera, *Preventing Armed Conflict in Europe: Lessons from recent experience*, ISS WEU, Chaillot Papers 15/16 June, 1994, p.50.