

BIG SHOWDOWNS IN SMALL SCALE: GEORGIA, RUSSIA AND OTHERS

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(Received 28th February 2020; accepted 30th May 2020)

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ABSTRACT. Robert Strausz-Hupé defines the tragic aspect of international power struggle as “To be honest, small states has neither a geopolitical nor a geostrategic set; small states constitute a part of geopolitics of the greater ones”. In return, the great powers that desire to have impact on the world economy or politics through geographical factors need the meaningful geography and support of these small states. Georgia does not possess necessary means to become an influential actor in its region due to its population, surface area, natural resources, technological and economic power, and it would be challenging for Georgia to maintain its political existence without the support of geopolitical dynamics. “Being needed” comes first among these dynamics. The events that took place in Georgia in 2008 constituted a strategic turning point guiding the Crimea and Ukraine interventions of Russia in the near future. For Russia, it became the strategic “applicability” criterion of its “tough” policies in the new era. The “Others” did not become effective in the face of the military power of Russia and were not mentioned in the title of this article. This includes Turkey. The geopolitical dynamics affecting Georgia are discussed in the framework of historical development, and their impact on the near political geography, especially on Turkey, is analysed.

Keywords: *Russo-Georgian War, Turkey-Georgia Relations, Geopolitical Preference, Crimea, Ukraine, Putin Doctrine, Primakov Doctrine*

INTRODUCTION

Territory and ownership of territory are the main concepts of political geography. They shape political history. Ownership of territory is a spatial and social representation of power, and it has a story. The emergence of political borders, which are the spatial representation of ownership, in the 18th century made sovereignty and states “visible”. On the contrary to what is said, borders are changing, thus they have also been labelled as an instrument of power politics. Border is a political concept that culture produced. International power politics considers the political geography that is formed by political borders as a field of political struggle that consists of civilian administrations with identity, and borders that are identified clearly form the key element of modern state. While borders create identity, they are formed through identities.

The fact that the borders identifying a specific cultural group are spread to geography on different scales has ideological and economical constructs, and the dimensions of the geographical scale they surround have always been determinative in terms of geopolitical effect. Throughout the historical process, big fish has usually eaten little fish. Entering a new phase in its development after the World War II, International Law prevented “Borders” from transforming into “Frontiers” again for a long time under the roof of

United Nations as a guarantor organization for little fish. Violation of political borders and sovereign base area was considered criminal acts and banned. Georgia is particularly one of these small-scale states that drew advantage from the atmosphere following the dissolution of the USSR and got stuck in that geography. The national defense and development strategy has to take this humble scale into consideration.

After Georgia gained independence in 1991, it assumed the role of transit country delivering rich oil and natural gas resources of the Caucasus and Middle East countries to the developed Western countries. While it became a country which was needed, the military intervention it launched in South Ossetia, where independence had been proclaimed, on August 8, 2008 released the genie in the magic lamp. Russia troops entered Ossetia and overwhelmed Georgia. Turkey could not produce any effect in response and it would not have been practical for Georgia to make such demands from Turkey.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF GEORGIA AND ITS POTENTIAL OF POLITICAL IMPACT

Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia are important components of the geopolitics of the South Caucasus, and Georgia links the heart of the South Caucasus with Europe and beyond through the Black Sea. The region is geographically sheltered as it is surrounded by the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in the west and east, and by range of mountains in the north and south (Kantarci,2014:233).

Georgia is the only country in the Caucasus region that has access to a sea. Georgia, with its geopolitical location, is a lively crossroad and transient area in the Caucasus. It is one of the significant regions that the physical defense of weak spots of the Caucasus and Russia is based on. Georgia has always been a conflict zone for countries in the region and global powers due to its strategic location. Despite lack of rich natural resources, it attracts regional and extra-regional powers of the Caucasus because it is located on the route of energy resources available in the Caspian region and has a coast on the Black Sea (Kantarci,2014:232).

Georgia is among the most problematic countries of the South Caucasus. It goes through problems in its internal and external policies because of having ethnic and administrative difficulties. Georgian authorities officially claim that Ossetian and Abkhaz secessionists are favored by Russia. The fact that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are backed up by Russia (Aljazeera,2014) is a representation of the “tough” policies that are pursued in the “political formation” and controlling of countries. Nye argues that tough policies refer to external action that affects the internal affairs of a sovereign state. It constitutes an end of a spectrum of impact from an acute angle without force to high force (military invasion). Intervention might take place in the form of a statement as well as economic assistance and bribing dignitaries (Nye&Welch,2011:281-282). Making use of differences and contagion of cultural fault lines have taken the forms of “tough” today. The method of geostrategic containment includes sealing fields and strategic resources to other countries that grow stronger by destroying economic and social structures, and commissioning limited military power and “social powers” through terrorization of “cultural weapons” (Kurban&Ergün,2020:123).

Claiming that Russia should stand up for the Russian population and heritage in the former Soviet republics, Eurasianists have argued since 1993 that Russia should defend its interests in the former Soviet republics through more realistic approaches and take

responsibility in these countries. Entrusted with the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996, Yevgeny Primakov described the Russian foreign policy as “balancing resistance against the American hegemony with Eurasia and CIS axis”; and stated in his work “The World Without Russia” that the Caucasus are the red line and the lack of confidence between Russia and NATO caused this approach (Gaffarlı,2011).

Georgia became the guinea pig of the Eurasianist initiative and the indicator of where this initiative might reach (İsmailov,2013:92). The strategic foundation of realizing demands and aims lies in the Foreign Policy Doctrine announced in 1993. Russia declared the former Soviet geography as its own domain under the name “near abroad”, but it could not stabilize politically and economically, so it could not implement this policy as it aimed to. Özbay argues that Russia started to pursue a policy of controlled instability in a sense by triggering the conflicts in order to achieve dominance in the region it acknowledged as “near abroad” (Özbay,2009:21). The Primakov Doctrine maintained that Russia had to be considered a super power again in the international arena and to that end, it might organize military intervention in the geography it considered near abroad to solve problems if necessary.

Since the 16th century, Russia has been using the ethnic identities in the Caucasus region in line with its objectives. The geopolitical architecture that Russia embraced was developed in line with the perspective of “a unique culture gathering Orthodox Eastern Slavic and Muslim Turkic peoples under one roof”, which Duncan highlighted (Duncan,2005:287-288). It is observed that the foreign policy strategy of Russia has been structured to expand the “state in every direction” since the 16th century. Russia is a revisionist and hostile state that expanded 100.000 km² on average per year between 1552 and 1917. “Russia behaves with tyrannical determination of a superior power when it is powerful. When it is weak, it disguises its weakness by brooding” (Kissinger,2016). After accessing to power, Putin directed his attention towards the traditional living space of Russia, i.e. Eurasia, and desired to gain strength in the region, to tidy up its backyard, then to assume an advantageous role in the world stage by becoming the dominant power of Eurasia (Sapmaz,2008:124). Moscow considers minorities of Russian origin and heterogeneous populations as instruments to gain its power again. Thus, the ethnic problems in Georgia arouse attention in Russia (USAK:2008). As is known, “neighboring three different cultural areas (Europe, Asia and Islamic World)” and being home to population consisting of these three different groups, Russia has never become a nation-state as Europe perceives. Russian administrators had Russia annex territories of its neighbors, thus its borders constantly changed. Therefore, Russia became a huge empire incomparable to any European country. Besides, with each new conquest, it incorporated new, uneasy and non-Russian rebellious ethnic groups, so the structure of the state changed. This constitutes one of the reasons why Russia feels itself obliged to hold armies too huge to be associated with a possible threat to its foreign security” (Kissinger,2000:18).

After becoming independent, Georgia experienced huge economic difficulties because it does not possess any significant economic resources, oil and natural gas, which could have attracted foreign investors. The economic and ethnic problems made conflicts unavoidable. As a result, in the late 1980s, when the USSR was nearly dissolved, the first conflict broke out between Abkhazia-South Ossetians and Georgia. In the 1990s, nationalist and secessionist ideas appeared in Georgia because there were ethnic issues, tension, economic issues, it was believed the Tbilisi administration was incapable and it was expected from local politicians to resolve the issue (Kantarçı,2014:235). Newly

established countries such as Azerbaijan and Georgia faced territorial integrity issues (Aslanlı,2013:14). Georgia was in need of foreign aid because of economic incapability, political upheavals, ethnic issues and instability. In this regard, Russia attempted to intervene and extra-regional actors sought the opportunity of establishing a zone of influence in the region (Öztürk,2013:201,242).

ROAD LEADING TO RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR

On May 24, 2000, the Security Council of Russia approved the Foreign Policy Doctrine of Russia, i.e. Putin Doctrine. The issues such as attending political, economic and military interests in 14 former Soviet republics and protecting rights of the ethnic Russian minority constitute the main items of the doctrine. The CIS geography forms the center of gravity of the power that Russia and Putin possess. Any weakness to be revealed in this geography will pose a power and survival problem for Russia. Putin desired to increase the Russian influence and to provide stability in the Caucasus, which Russia regards as its “backyard”. Russia decided to regain control in the post-USSR regions.

The Putin administration attempted to eliminate the risk factors threatening the Russian interests in the South Caucasus and pursued a strategy that could not stand tougher and new losses from the energy investments in the region to the political aspect of the regional policy (Dönmez,2011:97). Russia also focuses on the Georgian ports (İyikan,2011:258);(Yanar,2002:55-56).

While both the “Red Line” concept that Primakov introduced and brooding period doctrines stretching to Putin were present, the opportunist movements in the region only served for instability strategies.

Since Georgia became independent on April 28, 1991, it has gone through serious instability and depression because of various factors. In brief, from this date to the present, Georgia has experienced ethnic problems in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Rose Revolution, various issues because of Russian military stations, and accusations that it aids terrorists, all of which led to the war with Russia. The reason behind these events is that Georgia is of geopolitical significance and great powers, the US and Russia in particular, are interested in the country. Besides, the country became vulnerable and was dragged into a tight corner because of the domestic instabilities that it experienced as a result of ethnic and political problems (Karabulut, 2019:188).

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was an ethnic nationalist and inexperienced politician, became the first president of Georgia when it became independent again on April 28, 1991. During the Gamsakhurdia administration, ethnic conflicts peaked (Eyidoğan,2020).

Gamsakhurdia first aimed to reannex the regions having proclaimed sovereignty to Georgia. As a result, Georgia attacked South Ossetia. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Russia intervened and an agreement was signed in 1992 (Eyidoğan, 2020).

Eduard Shevardnadze, who was the former Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, succeeded Gamsakhurdia in March 1992 (Eyidoğan, 2020).

Shevardnadze was the president of Georgia, which used to be part of the USSR, between 1995 and 2003, when the Rose Revolution took place (Kavkaz-uzel, 2020).

Shevardnadze stepped down following the “Rose Revolution”, during which protestors entered the parliament holding red roses and claiming that the 2003 elections

were fraudulent (Vesti,2020). Carrying out pro-Western policies, Mikheil Saakashvili was chosen the president in the first elections (Войнаровский,2020).

Saakashvili primarily aimed to adject South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Georgia again. Therefore, the goal of obtaining NATO membership, which had also been on the table during the Shevardnadze period, came to a new state after Saakashvili, who had education in the USA after the Rose Revolution and had “support” of the USA and the West, acceded to power. Shevardnadze had tried to find a balance between the USA and Russia, but following the Rose Revolution, the foreign policy became mostly US- and West-oriented (Eyidoğan,2020).

In fact, the events began afterwards.

Russia imposed an economic embargo to cease selling energy to Georgia in 2006 and terminated its diplomatic relations (Tellal,2010).

Saakashvili pitched in to entitle Georgia a unitary structure. To this end, he first aimed to build a more powerful Georgia by annexing South Ossetia and Abkhazia because they had close ties with Russia. It seemed it was an issue to be resolved internally. However, as Russia was taking an eager interest in these regions and supporting them, Georgia needed assistance from the USA and the West to realize this goal, which could be regarded a foreign political move and would stop the problem being an internal issue of Georgia. NATO membership became their most significant priority of security and foreign policies to fulfil this objective and build up security of Georgia in the region (Öztürk,2009:7).

Saakashvili was assisted by the West, by the President of the USA, George Bush, in particular, gathered economic and political strength thanks to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. As a result, Georgia became inclined to implement anti-Russian policies. By the time Saakashvili came to power in 2003, the military budget was 50 million dollars and the total spending on defense to restructure the army was 30 million dollars. In 2007, these figures reached 600 million dollars and 490 million dollars respectively (Eyidoğan,2020).

The Ossetians held an independence plebiscite for the second time and 90% of them voted in favor (Юрѣва,2020). The Georgia was governed by a pro-Western leader, which presented a threat to Russia. Therefore, Russia aided the Ossetians underhandedly. That 90% of the citizens of the Republic of South Ossetia has a Russian passport proves it (Азар,2020).

Georgian army performed an operation on South Ossetia, which had proclaimed sovereignty, on August 8, 2008 (BBC,2020). In response, Russian army entered Ossetia, and began to fight against Georgia (Бушыев, 2020).

Following the declaration of independence by Georgia, Abkhazia declared independence as well in June 1992.

Shevardnadze came to Tbilisi in March 1992, which led to the expectation that thing might develop differently. Nevertheless, it came to naught. Shevardnadze made it clear that "the Abkhazia issue will be resolved in Tbilisi". As legislative and executive actions of Georgia disclosed, Tbilisi did not recognize the Abkhaz ASSR. Georgia abolished the 1978 Constitution and put the pre-Soviet 1921 Constitution into force in February 1992. The Abkhazians responded on July 23, 1992 by abolishing the 1978 Abkhaz ASSR constitution of the Supreme Soviet. They declared that the 1925 Constitution, which provided Abkhazia the status it held prior to autonomy, would remain in effect till the adoption of a new constitution (Zatulin&Ançabadze,1998:4). In August 1992, the war broke out when Georgian army entered Abkhazia (Güngör,2013:39).

TURKEY AND THE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA

There was not much conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia from 1992 to 2008. The refugees in Georgia could not go back to their homelands in South Ossetia and Georgia did not recognize the independence of South Ossetia. There was so much tension and conflict between Georgia and Russia in early 2008 that it was clear that a war would begin. In May of the same year, tension escalated when Georgia blamed Russia for the shoot-down of a drone (Meydan, 2017).

Russia declared that Georgia shot down 2 of their aircrafts in South Ossetia, where they were strafing Georgian soldiers, and the Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff Anatoly Nogovitsin stated Russia lost 2 aircrafts, but did not mention where (Dw, 2020). A representative of the Russian “peace-keeping” troops made a statement to Interfax that Georgia shot down a SU-25 and a TU-22 aircrafts of Russia (Агеев, 2020).

In the forthcoming days, the Abkhazians joined forces with South Ossetia and Russia. Then, Russia shelled significant Georgian cities by land, sea and air. As a result, Georgia was forced to withdraw its troops from Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Öztürk, 2009:9).

Turkey could not remain silent in the face of this attack on Georgia. Saakashvili appealed Turkey for help. The Prime Minister Erdoğan stated during the meeting with the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon that actions ought to be taken and cooperation ought to be established to bring the conflict to an end (Sabah 12 August 2008).

While the conflicts were continuing, it was realized that diplomacy collapsed. The ceasefire Georgia declared was turned down by Russia (BBC, 2020). Meanwhile, Russia and the USA blamed each other. Putin stated the USA was still of the Cold War mindset while Bush accused Russia of disproportionate use of force (Sabah 12 August 2008). On the other hand, the Russian Prosecutor’s Office Investigation Commission sued Georgia stating that Georgian army performed military campaign against South Ossetia. The representative of the commission said “Russia has officially filed a lawsuit against the Georgian troops attacking South Ossetia.” (Sabah 12 August 2008).

Due to its actions in this process, Turkey was criticized in that “considering the close relations between Turkey and Georgia and Turkey’s intense economic and political ties in the region, the reaction of the Turkish government to the conflict between Georgia and Russia was remarkably soft” (İkinci & Schwarz, 2020).

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan went to paid a visit to Moscow to meet Putin and to resolve the conflict between Russia and Georgia peacefully. In the meantime, there were some statements that Russia was interested in the “Caucasian Alliance”¹, which was put

¹ As it is known, Ankara, which closely follows the developments in Georgia, had given the signals that it would take action to establish a Caucasian Alliance similar to the Balkan Stability Pact in the Region in order to prevent such events from recurring. Source: <https://www.haberler.com/ankara-dan-kafkas-ittifaki-teklifi-haberi/>, Retrieved on 22.12.2019. Russian government showed the importance it gave to Turkey in resolving the crisis in the Caucasus with a unique protocol. Green light was given to Erdogan's proposal for a Caucasian Alliance at the dinner where Erdogan met with all executives including Medvedev, Putin and Lavrov. Moscow government, which was cool towards the Georgia-oriented policy of the WEST, showed how much importance it gave to Turkey's efforts as a mediator in the resolution of the Caucasus crisis with a unique diplomatic protocol. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan joined a business dinner as a "guest" where he met all senior managers including President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The business dinner was about the Georgia-Russia crisis. This has led to comments that French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who had previously come to Moscow for mediation was “overshadowed”.

After the meeting at Main Dorf Castle, the residence of former Soviet leaders Yuri Andropov, Erdogan gave a brief statement announcing that Turkey and Russia consented to work towards the establishment of

forward by Erdoğan on August 11, 2008 (Üçarol,2019). Having met the President Medvedev and the Prime Minister Putin, and having delivered his offer of Caucasus Alliance to its addressees, Erdoğan stated “If no step is taken to threaten peace, you may consider it done.” (Sabah 14 August 2008).

After he completed his talks in Moscow, Erdoğan arrived in Tbilisi. Following his meeting with Saakashvili, Erdoğan highlighted that he was in favor of protecting the territorial integrity of Georgia and said “We, as Turkey, support that Georgia's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity which is recognized by UN Security Council resolutions and international law be protected” (Sabah 15 August 2008).

That Poland approved the missile shield system aggravated the tension between Russia and the USA (Арбатов&Дворкин,2020), which had already been worsened by the war in the Caucasus. Russia uttered a threat by saying “This decision also allows us to use nuclear weapons for the threat from Poland”(Sabah 16 August 2008).

Although Georgia withdrew, Russia kept occupying Georgian lands until the Sarkozy Plan, which was approved on August 16 and drafted by France, i.e. the President of the Council of the European Union of the time (Öztürk,2009:9).

The ceasefire between the two countries began on August 17, 2008 (Dw,2020). Nevertheless, on the same dates, Russia took an unsettling decision and recognized the sovereignty of South Ossetia (Vesti,2020). Subsequently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey released a statement saying that it was worried about the events and in favor that the conflicts should be resolved peacefully. Some other countries reacted to Russia as follows: the U.S. “It is an irresponsible decision”; the UK “We will not admit that”; France “We condemn that strongly”; Germany “We absolutely cannot accept it”; Georgia “This is an annexation” (Sabah 27 August 2008). NATO stated, “We reject that” (Tass,2020).

CONCLUSION

The Georgia events are a large-scale political awareness that was produced by a small-scale geography, which caused the genie in the magic lamp to wake or Russian decision-makers to realize that the “brooding” period, in Kissinger’s terms, came to an end. Using hard power to control and shape countries or states, and having it embraced in terms of international law and developing norms are challenging attitudes. The expectation to eliminate these violations through sanctions that are pertinent to the scale is the most significant foundation of deterrent policy. It can be readily stated that the desultory and ineffective sanctions that fell short of the scale during and after the Georgia events caused new expectations to grow for Russia.

While the USSR was dissolving, the Caucasus were left with ethnical problems, just like the Middle East after the UK. Being the successor of the USSR, Russia aims to become the only power of this region benefiting from these problems (Haksözhaber,2020).

It was thought that the Moscow hegemony over Transcaucasia ended after the Soviets dissolved and the Cold War ended. After Russia withdrew from this region, a power gap appeared and since then global and regional powers have been fighting to fill in. Transcaucasia became the primary objective of "The New Great Game", which is a many-

a Caucasus Stability Pact. Prime Minister Erdogan told, “These studies between Russia and Turkey will be held by the foreign ministers of the two countries”.. Source: <https://www.haberler.com/kafkas-ittifakini-kremlin-onayladi-haberi/>, Retrieved on 22.12.2019.

sided power struggle and in which regional and global powers aim to derive geopolitical, geo-economic and strategic interests. The new belt and road projects that China began to develop in the region will increase the number of actors in the region.

For Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have always been huge problems, and the steady conflict and the ceasefire led to the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. Georgia was defeated in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which had military and political aids by Russia. After the Russian peace-keeping troops were deployed in the region, the separatist regions got out of the control of Georgia (Gafarlı,2015:26). The conflict gained a different perspective after the war in August 2008, when Georgia did not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but Russia did (Kasım,2009:12).

Having occurred in Georgia thanks to the USA, the Revolution of Roses constitutes an important part in the Russia-Georgia relations. Following the government changeover in Georgia, the anti-Russians held all the power (Yılmaz,2010:23). Saakashvili became the president after this revolution in 2003. He adopted policies tending towards Transatlantic foreign relations and anti-Russian approach, which led to tension between Georgia and Russia after 2006 and then to a short-term war between them in August 2008. Finally, in the post-war period, Russia recognized the independence of the secessionist regions in Georgia, namely Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Has,2013:4). Saakashvili came to power after the revolution and he was backed by the West, which worsened the relations between the countries and the Georgian people who were working in Russia were deported as a result (Gafarlı, 2015:10).

Abkhazia and South Ossetia were not the only problems that Georgia had. It experiences other issues related to ethnicity. For instance, the Armenians that live in Jevahatya, and the Autonomous Republic of Adzharistan ask for independence (Kantarçı, 2011:234).

Georgia and the Ossetians seem to be the parties in the South Ossetia conflict, but it became multilateral when the USA and Russia intervened. These two countries became opponents as Russia aids the Ossetian – though it rejects that – and the USA aids Georgia. Besides, the Western countries desire to gain more influence in this region via the OSCE and the EU (Yapıcı, 2020).

Turkey could not manage to become effective on the events that took place in the region, which made it obvious that it should reconsider its capacity of geopolitical impact. Additionally, that NATO and the EU were not able to place sanctions against Russia after the war became clear. It is also possible that this attitude of the western countries towards Russia will provide a basis for it to develop military options against Ukraine.

There is a Russian fact in the Eurasian geography and it is a dynamic mentioned in geopolitical analyses that countries can never underestimate. Producing national strategic concepts based on peace and cooperation and acting taking the principles of international law into consideration should constitute the primary method of action. Not having a geopolitical and geostrategic set does not eliminate the option of preference. If these preferences are made parallel to the ones of trans-ocean playmakers, no countries can blame either Turkey or the other actors that they have enmeshed in security dilemma because of what has happened to them.

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