

DYNAMICS OF RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS AFTER THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR: NEW PRIORITIES OF NATIONAL INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF STRUGGLE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Abstract

The article analyzes the dynamics of Russian-Turkish relations after the Second Karabakh War of 2020. Particular attention is paid to the fact that the Second Karabakh War was an important military-political step for Türkiye, since, despite being in a bad economic situation and involved in various regional conflicts, Türkiye still managed to act as a new regional superpower and increase its role in the South Caucasus.

The article discusses the aggressive steps that led to the fact that Türkiye, having developed and implemented its strategy, without having the necessary natural resources, having many problems within the country, Türkiye can increase its role on several platforms and even show ambitions to be involved in the global governance system.

Türkiye opposed the established international relations at the strategic level, putting forward the point of view 'the world is bigger than five'. At the regional level, combining soft power with hard power for Azerbaijan, Türkiye violated the existing balance and, as a result, increased its share of presence. This is why Russian-Turkish relations are analyzed in the context of the tactical steps taken by Türkiye, as well as in the context of theories of offensive realism and strategic balancing. The article describes how Türkiye, pursuing a more active policy after 2016, managed to prevent the emergence of anti-Turkish coalitions, balance

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regional rivals, and, if necessary, enter into allied relations with them. In addition, the work used a political-ideological approach to analyze the ideologies and program goals that determine Türkiye's regional policy, as well as a resource-actor approach, which analyzes the resource base and the activities of states and non-state actors directly involved in the implementation of the foreign policy of the two countries.

Keywords: *Russian-Turkish cooperation, Türkiye, NATO, Second Karabakh War, Armenia, Azerbaijan, soft power, existing balance, offensive realism, South Caucasus.*

Introduction

The dynamics of Russian-Turkish relations are explained by the fact that, being neighbors on the Black Sea, Türkiye and Russia have always paid serious attention to their bilateral relations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, world politics underwent radical changes. Yesterday's enemies became partners and today strive for cooperation. In this regard, significant changes have occurred in the foreign policies of Russia and Türkiye.

There have been wars, mutual grievances, contradictions and conflicts of varying intensity between the two countries at different periods of history. At the same time, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) became the first state to officially recognize the Turkish Republic. Both the Turkish Republic and the RSFSR were successors to two empires, which were often characterized by a clash of interests. However, after the imperial era, starting in the 1920s, relations between the two countries were generally positive.

After the Second World War, they began to develop again in a less than favorable way. The bipolar world order and the membership of the Turkish Republic in NATO marked its belonging to the Socialist camp, opposite to the USSR: the two countries were moving further and further away from each other. Despite this, during the Cold War, there were no truly serious conflicts between the two states. Finally, since the early 1990s, immediately after the end of the Cold War and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian-Turkish interaction began to improve again. At the same time, with the destruction of the Russian geopolitical space, new independent states of the South Caucasus - Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia - appeared in international politics.

Türkiye's intervention in the situation in the South Caucasus has caused particular concern for the Russian Federation, since in Russia's eyes the Republic of Türkiye is, first of all, an ally of the United States and the southern flank of NATO in the North Atlantic defense system. Therefore, Russia constantly sees Türkiye as a potential threat to its security. Of course, the situation is not hopeless, but the previous history and mutual conflicts make both states treat each other with obvious caution (Karakoç and Ersoy 2024.).

After the Second Karabakh War of 2020, Russian-Turkish interaction is transformational and mutually beneficial and looks more sustainable and promising than ever before. However, the potential for developing relations is far from exhausted. That is why a comprehensive analysis of positive changes and identification of existing

problems and contradictions in the South Caucasus seems extremely relevant (Morozov 2023).

Rethinking the Transformation of Russian-Turkish Interactions

Russian-Turkish relations have a history of more than 500 years. The Russian-Turkish contradictions formed in the 16th century turned into a direct conflict between these countries in the 17th century. The centuries-old dream of the Russian Empire was the capture of Constantinople (Tsargrad), as a result of which the area of the Black Sea would become an area of domination for Russia. The liberation of Constantinople, the center of Orthodoxy, would increase Russia's influence in the East, as well as give it the moral right to create a pan-Slavic union with the center in Tsargrad (Danilevsky 1888, 498-499).

Despite the fact that during the last two hundred years, the Russian and Ottoman empires waged an uncompromising struggle against each other, in terms of civilization they were anti-Western forces. According to P. Savitsky, Russia-Eurasia is a union of the European Forest (Slavic people) and the Asian Steppe (Turkic peoples) (Dugin 2000, 168; Basilov 2020). L. Gumilev called this type of civilization formed in Eurasia "Scythian-Siberian steppe", adding that "they are neither Slavic nor Turkic (although biologically their ancestors are the bearers of the same code), but they are Russians" (Gumilev 1981, 38-39; Titov 2014). If previously the political expansion of the Russian and Turkish empires were opposed to each other, in the 20th century new lines of contact were formed between them. The Russian Federation and the Republic of Türkiye were formed as a result of an uncompromising struggle against the West. In a certain sense, the two states are at the crossroads of Western and Eastern civilizations (Dugin 2022).

One of the successful examples of Russian-Turkish rapprochement in the 20th century is the Lenin-Ataturk cooperation. It will not be an exaggeration at all if we mention that Bolshevik Russia was one of the supporters of the establishment of the modern Republic of Türkiye, and the interstate borders in the South Caucasus were defined as a result of that cooperation. In 1921, under the Russian-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Brotherhood, Kars was handed over to Türkiye, and Nakhichevan became a part of Azerbaijan as an autonomous region. The archival materials prove that the Turkish factor was once again important when determining the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (Yemelianova 2023). In Moscow, they believed that meeting Azerbaijan's territorial demands would weaken its aspiration towards Türkiye, which is also Russia's 'closest ally' (Lambert 2021).

In the past, both Russia and Türkiye had developed powerful non-Western multinational civilizations. In our days, both Moscow and Ankara are taking steps to restore the former power of their states. The presidents of Russia and Türkiye agree that the world order created by the West should be changed and both are allies in the process of creating a multipolar world order. At the same time, being included in the global economic structures of the West, they sought to weaken these factors in order to realize their ambitions. Although NATO membership has no alternative for Türkiye from the security point of view, still Ankara strives to become the most independent and influential regional superpower in the region (Dalay and Isachenko 2022). From

this point of view, Erdogan emphasizes the conduct of mutually beneficial policy with Putin, the clarification of spheres of influence and the possibilities of diversifying Ankara's foreign policy (Sağlam 2025).

For its part, the Kremlin wants to restore Russia's role on the world stage and become one of the key actors in the emerging multipolar world order. For Moscow, the deepening of relations with Türkiye is also important from the point of view of the weakening of Western institutions. In fact, Türkiye is the only NATO member that has not joined the anti-Russian sanctions and undermines the unity of that organization. The Kremlin announces to the world that cooperation with the Russian side is beneficial for everyone and explains what dividends it can bring. Despite the fact that Russia and Türkiye have conflicts of interest in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, they still manage to overcome the contradictions. Both in 1920 and in the current situation in Russian-Turkish cooperation, the growing anti-Western position in Türkiye is vitally important for Russia, which is more important than the common Christian civilizational basis. Thus, for Russia, conservative and anti-Western Islam is preferable to Western and liberal Christianity.

Despite numerous existing contradictions, Russian-Turkish cooperation enables Moscow to maintain its presence in Syria and North Africa without wasting significant resources. However, the fact that their cooperation does not allow the West to become a serious player in the region and increase its presence is more important for both sides (Duan and Aydın 2024). For Moscow, the increasing influence of Türkiye in the former Soviet republics is of the greatest importance and a serious matter of concern. Türkiye has recorded serious success in this direction. By combining soft power with the military, Ankara provokes conflicts in regions of its interest and increases its presence and role in the region. Türkiye applied the same policy in the case of Azerbaijan when it used joint military exercises to deploy some of its armament in that country. Thus, Türkiye's steps made military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh more realistic for Baku, as a result of which Ankara's role not only increased, but also by defeating Russia's military-political ally in the South Caucasus, it strengthened its position in the context of competition with Moscow.

In order to properly analyze the Russian-Turkish relations, first of all, it is necessary to address the conceptual foundations of Türkiye's foreign policy.

Geopolitical strategies of regional powers in the South Caucasus

Türkiye's foreign policy underwent serious changes in the early 2010s. They are related to A. Davutoglu, one of the leaders of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), who first became the foreign minister of Türkiye, and later assumed the office of the prime minister. In the program "Strategic Depth. The International Situation of Turkey" published by him in 2001, he refers to the new role of Türkiye in the international arena after the end of the Cold War (Murinson 2006). He addressed the ongoing international processes from the perspective of geopolitics and post-imperial heritage, according to which the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Middle East are the core of the Pax Ottomanica, the 'Ottoman zone' (Kutlay and Öniş 2021; Erşen 2022). In the 2007 plan of the AKP, it was recorded that Türkiye should make a transition from a crisis approach to a strategic one, which assumed that Türkiye should conduct a

more dynamic, active foreign policy in the Middle East, Caspian region, Caucasus and Balkans (Erol 2024.). It was planned to create ‘security and stability’ zones in those regions. At the same time, the Turkic world was qualified as a zone of historical responsibility (Minasyan-Ostermann 2025; Kubicek 2022; Raudvere and Onur 2023).

The 2008 economic crisis, increasing stability in Türkiye’s neighboring countries, declining U.S. influence in the Middle East, and deepening internal problems in the EU have created new opportunities for Ankara. During this period in Türkiye, changes in foreign policy were intertwined with internal political processes (Cheterian 2018). Erdogan succeeded primarily in limiting the influence of the military and old bureaucratic elite. Large-scale legal proceedings against the representatives of the ‘Kemalist elite’ took place (Gürpınar 2013). Another important moment was the 2010 constitutional reforms, as a result of which the army was deprived of the opportunity to influence the political processes of Türkiye (Sørensen 2012; Aviv 2022).

So, after the Arab Spring, R. Erdogan, by making the transition to hard power, simultaneously strengthens his power by paying tribute to the nationalist segment of Turkish society (Cinar 2013). After dispersing the 2013 Taksim Square protests and failing to negotiate with the EU, Erdogan initiated a series of undemocratic reforms in Türkiye (Gokay 2015; Whitehead and Bozoğlu 2016). Having won the presidential elections in 2014, Erdogan limited the powers of the prime minister, and the constitutional amendments implemented in 2017 not only abolished the position of the prime minister, but also limited the powers of the legislative body. After these steps, the monopoly of foreign policy was practically concentrated in Erdogan’s hands (Erdoğan 2021). All decisions related to foreign policy began to be developed and formulated in the narrow circle of his advisers. Erdogan already preferred to solve all current issues through personal dialogue with the heads of different states. By Erdogan’s order, a number of bodies were created, which functioned parallel to the structures of the Foreign Ministry. For example, the Public Diplomacy Coordination Council, the Department for Turks and Compatriots Living Abroad, the “Enlightenment” Foundation, etc. A strange situation was created when, in the 2010s, the director of the Türkiye’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Hakan Fidan, had a more important role in foreign policy issues than the foreign minister.

Thus, A. Davutoglu’s ‘Strategic depth’ implied an emphasis on the Middle Eastern region and a policy mixed with populism, pan-Islamism, as well as neo-Ottomanism. When A. Davutoglu resigned from the post of Prime Minister in 2016, ‘Strategic depth’ was replaced by the concept of ‘moral realism’ (Davutoğlu 2020; Gümüş 2022).

In our view, Turkish moral realism includes military activity that combines hard power and humanitarian norms. It is characterized by ignoring the idealistic concept of zero problems with neighbors, creating friendly relations and strategic alliances with individual states, and selective activism (Askerov 2017). Observing the foreign policy developed by the AKP, we can state that neo-Ottomanism is considered in three dimensions: the Ottoman Empire as a cradle of civilization, the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic state, and the Ottoman State as a multicultural empire (Maessen 2014; Şahin and Candan 2018; Tokdoğan 2024).

Modern Russian-Turkish relations are a complex system of counterbalances, restraint and cooperation. Until the 44-Day War of Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 it is presented on two levels.

The first level includes cooperation between the two regional states mainly in the Black Sea basin and the Syrian conflict. It includes cooperation in the economic, military-technical fields, coordinated steps from the point of view of national interests, increasing the role of the two states in the processes of forming a multipolar world and a new world order (Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili 2021).

The second level includes the competition between Russia and Türkiye, which is carried out through partner countries and allies adjacent to both sides. The countries included in this platform are Iran, Greece, Armenia, Israel, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (Zengin and Topsakal 2021).

From the autumn of 2020, the third level of direct military-political power competition between Türkiye and Russia in the South Caucasus is being drawn, as a result of which Türkiye managed to break the balance created here after the First World War. After gradually strengthening its positions in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, the Near and Middle East, and in the Black Sea basin, and in order to establish a military-political and energy connection with Central Asia, Türkiye decided to strengthen itself in the South Caucasus as well (Coşkun et al. 2024; Aleksanyan 2025).

Encouraging Azerbaijan in 2020 to take military action, Türkiye announced from the beginning that it would provide large-scale assistance to ‘brotherly’ Azerbaijan, including in the military field. It was painful enough for Ankara that Moscow managed to bypass it at this stage, as Russia became the main guarantor of the ceasefire and truce. Even after the agreement to create a Russian-Turkish observation center in Aghdam, Ankara did not agree with the idea that the Turkish military would not participate in peacemaking operations. Ankara continued to deliberately spread the information that they had reached an agreement with Moscow on this issue. Despite the fact that the Kremlin denied this reality, on November 16, 2020, R. Erdogan issued his decree on sending military personnel to Azerbaijan for the approval of the Turkish parliament, which was approved the next day (Hovsepyan and Tonoyan 2024). During the Second Karabakh War in 2020, there was a belief among the Armenian political elite that “Turkey has returned to the South Caucasus to continue the Armenian genocide,”¹ and Russian-Turkish relations have had and continue to have a significant impact on the development of events both in individual regions and in the world as a whole. That fact once again proves how stubbornly and uncompromisingly Türkiye acts in strategically important directions. In this specific case, Ankara’s steps were aimed at keeping Baku in its sphere of influence.

Türkiye was consistently increasing its role in Central Asia before increasing its influence in the South Caucasus. At the summit of the Turkic Council held in Istanbul in November 2011, the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States was renamed

¹ The Office to the PM of the RA. 2020. ““Turkey has returned to the South Caucasus to continue the Armenian genocide” - Nikol Pashinyan’s Interview with The Globe and Mail.” *October 2, 2020*. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2020/10/02/Nikol-Pashinyan-interview-The-Globe-and-Mail/>.

into the Organization of Turkic States. In other words, the Turkic world entered a new stage of integration, creating a unified geopolitical, ideological and cultural Turkic space (Sari 2023). In the strategic document “Turkic World Vision 2040”² adopted at the summit, it is planned to use the Trans-Caspian corridor to export Turkmen gas through Azerbaijan and Türkiye to Europe, to create a common Turkic army, which will also include Russia’s allies in the CSTO Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It is not superfluous to mention that Crimea, Siberia, Povolzhie, Altai, Yakutia, Khakasia and a number of other Russian territories are included in the above-mentioned Turkic territory (Duan and Aydın 2024; Çetinkaya and Demirel 2023). It is no coincidence that this newly created Turkish organization announces and mentions its readiness to cooperate with dozens of international structures, and among them there is no integration organization created by the Russian side.

That step of Türkiye definitely contradicts the interests of Russia. Could Moscow counter Ankara by using, for example, the Kurdish or Armenian questions? However, Moscow chose a different strategy. This pan-Turkic and aggressive move by Ankara was followed by a mild response from official Moscow. The press secretary of the Russian president, D. Peskov, stated that he considers the idea of the unity of the Turkic world to be normal, and sarcastically noted that the center of the Turkic world is not in Türkiye, but in Altai, in Russia³.

What is more surprising is the position of the Russian expert community, which, noting the negative consequences of that move, suggests that in order to prevent the further deepening of Moscow-Ankara contradictions, Russia should be included in Turkic integration projects, so as not to allow some Turkic-speaking regions and subjects of Russia to be separately included in those structures (Purtaş 2025; Morgado and Varga 2025).

It turns out that Russia, which aspires to world leadership, opposes Erdogan’s plans in every possible way and is not so sure that its individual subjects will not be included in Turkish projects. We also have an example of that. For example, after the escalation of Turkish-Russian relations in 2015, the Ministry of Culture of the RF instructed its agencies to stop cooperation with the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY). In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that the republics of Altai, Bashkortostan, Tuva, Khakassia and Yakutia continue to participate in the organization as observers. Currently, the Yunus Emre Institute operates in Moscow, which holds pro-Turkish cultural events in various regions of Russia. On the other hand, Türkiye supports anti-Russian sentiments through various organizations of Caucasian and Crimean Tatars operating on its territory, which seek social and cultural integration with Turkish society. However, historically these relations have always been complex, and contradictions often led to wars. As a result, geopolitical competition and the desire to strengthen their influence in neighboring regions, with the exception of short periods, have become an integral part of the relationship between Russia and Türkiye (Erdoğan 2024). At the same time, the territories and regions where the clash of

² Organization of Turkic States. 2021. “Turkic World Vision 2040.” *November 13, 2021*. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://www.turkicstates.org/en/news/turkic-world-vision-2040>.

³ TASS. 2021. “Russia’s Altai should be marked as center of Turkic world on Erdogan’s map — Kremlin.” *November 21, 2021*. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://tass.com/russia/1364291>.

Russian-Turkish interests was most clearly expressed have changed. In the early history of bilateral relations, these were Ukraine, Crimea and Bessarabia, later the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, during the bipolar world, bilateral relations were mainly determined by Türkiye's participation in NATO.

This political ideology of Turkish President Erdogan fits perfectly into the doctrine of modern geopolitical imagination. From this perspective, Turkish political and media cartography also reflects the geopolitical imagination of the Turkish elite and society and is actually reflected in Turkish foreign policy (Ünlü Bilgiç 2025; Çaymaz 2019).

Türkiye implements its claims to the territory of other states and peoples with two forms of technology. The first is state institutions. For example, the Turkish world map stretching from the Adriatic seaside to China is regularly published in various mass media and Turkish textbooks. The second way is to use the potential of various nationalist and Islamist organizations, scientific and public circles, members of parliament. They are trying to strengthen their claims to the Turkic lands through the restoration and construction of architectural monuments, which is carried out under state sponsorship (Erol 2024.).

Back in 2008, a council was created by Erdogan's decree, whose main task was the restoration of Turkish heritage in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Crimea. With this, Ankara seeks to create the 'material foundations' of its ambitions. The same tactics are currently being used by Baku. With Turkish funds, many religious institutions were not only restored, but also new ones were built in a number of post-Soviet republics, also in Russia. For example, R. Erdogan also participated in the opening ceremony of the main mosque in Moscow in 2015.

R. Erdogan uses two conceptual approaches to his policy. The first is the 'geography is destiny' approach, which is related to the Islamic concept of predestination. It involves the consolidation, or control, of vast former Ottoman territories. The second is the 'geography of the heart', according to which Türkiye should unite all Muslims in the world. Its essence lies in the fact that Erdogan portrays all Muslims outside Türkiye as an oppressed element that needs Türkiye's humanitarian aid (Başkan and Taşpınar 2021).

Uncertainty of maximum concessions in Russian-Turkish relations

Now let's try to understand how the Turkish president and political leadership manage to achieve maximum concessions from Russia in Russian-Turkish relations. It is obvious that the U.S. and the EU continue to move along the liberal model of the international world order, while China, Russia and Türkiye implement a policy characteristic of realism, using the format of balancing forces, competition and neutralization of potential opponents (Ünal 2023; Wang and Sun 2024). The main feature of Erdogan's policy is tough political pressure, accompanied by constant threats against world centers of power and key regional countries. It is noteworthy that the foreign policy of both Türkiye and Russia can be viewed from the standpoint of the theory of offensive realism developed by John Mearsheimer (Tabak 2025; Johnson and Thayer 2016).

The convergence of Russian-Turkish interests in the South Caucasus is taking place in conditions where these two states are seeking to regain their lost positions in other

regions. Türkiye is fighting for regional leadership in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire. This is facilitated by economic and demographic growth, as well as the ideological basis formulated in the concept of Strategic Depth. Russia, in turn, having significantly recovered from the collapse of the USSR, has begun to more actively protect its regional and global interests, especially in cases where this concerns such sensitive issues as ensuring the security of society and the state, as well as preserving the modern world order and international law. In this regard, it is Ukraine that is the source of challenges and threats for Russia. The presence of non-regional actors, for whom these regions are important, first of all, as a source of energy resources and a corridor for their transportation, adds particular complexity to Russian-Turkish relations in the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Yilmaz and Albayrak 2022).

With the start of the Russian-Ukrainian armed confrontation since 2013, and since 2022 already a full-scale invasion and war, Türkiye's position towards Russia has become even stronger (Jakupec 2024). If earlier Turkish President Erdogan was perceived as a figure of a regional power, than Russian President Putin, then the new reality has pushed him to the center of world politics (Joja 2024).

The Turkish Stream, the Akkuyu NPP, the Black Sea straits, and the Syrian issue have become mechanisms for putting pressure on Russian leadership. In economic and logistical terms, Türkiye's importance for Russia has increased dramatically, as Türkiye has become Russia's key window to Europe.

In 2024, sanctions pressure from the U.S. and EU increased on Russian-Turkish trade, and Turkish banks delayed or did not open accounts for payments to Russian companies⁴. However, this mainly concerned exports to Russia, which did indeed decrease significantly in 2024, rather than imports to Türkiye. Turkish exporters complained about reduced supplies in the summer of 2024, and Russian importers complained about difficulties with payments. Because of all this, in 2024, Russia lost its place as the main source of imports for Türkiye in terms of the total value of goods, which it occupied in 2022, and moved to second place, giving way to China.

In our opinion, significant factors in the reduction of imports to Türkiye are the sanctions pressure, the threat of secondary sanctions and the difficulties with settlements that follow from them. The Turkish authorities have periodically secretly ignored Western European sanctions until a certain point, since Türkiye and Russia will continue to make joint efforts to overcome the difficulties that arise in trade. It is obvious that the supply of energy resources will continue, as evidenced by the fact that the Turkish side managed to obtain an exception for conducting transactions through Gazprombank, which was included in the sanctions list.

Since February 2022, in the context of a full-scale war between Ukraine and Russia, there has been a reduction in oil production by Russia, expensive gas, an increase in the cost of coal as the only available replacement for oil and gas for power generation, and a corresponding restructuring of markets. But gradually this extreme situation was resolved, and the markets adapted, prices began to return to normal and to long-term average values. If before the Second Karabay War of 2020, Russia was a strong competitor for Türkiye and could single-handedly resolve regional issues, including the

⁴ TUIK. 2024. "Foreign Trade Statistics, January 2024." February 28, 2024. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-January-2024-53534&dil=2>

status quo of Nagorno-Karabakh, then after 2020, and later 2022, a completely different situation has developed. The de facto Turkish President Erdogan has become a moderator between the West and Russia, and both sides feel the need for this. Unlike President Putin, Erdogan currently has the opportunity to pursue a balanced policy with both Russia and the U.S., since he has his own backup option, which Russia, which is under severe sanctions, is deprived of. In this case, Türkiye can receive Russia's support in the event of a deepening conflict with the U.S., and U.S. support in the event of an aggravation of relations with Russia. Türkiye has extensive experience in the field of balancing foreign policy and regional diplomacy, so the current Russian-Turkish relations can be characterized as competitive cooperation (Park 2022; Şen 2024).

As for the South Caucasus, Russia has failed to maintain a regional balance between its allies Armenia and partner Azerbaijan and is now trying to maintain its influence at least within its new borders at the cost of some losses. Türkiye, while deepening relations with Ukraine and Central Asia, is trying to remain a valuable partner for the West as a counterweight to Russia, China and Iran in the region (Vardazaryan 2024).

The strange policy of Türkiye is placed in this framework, the Russian-Turkish and Turkish-Ukrainian relations being two of the prominent examples. Back in 2014, Türkiye voted in the UN in favor of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, that is, it does not recognize Crimea as Russian territory. According to the 2020 Ukrainian National Security Strategy⁵, Türkiye is considered a strategic partner, and Türkiye has also declared Ukraine its strategic partner⁶.

Violating the agreements with the Russian Federation, Ankara returned the Azov commanders to Ukraine and then also announced that Ukraine deserves NATO membership and is developing military-strategic cooperation with Kiev. With this cooperation, Ankara makes it clear to the West, that despite the Russian-Turkish rapprochement, Ankara does not ignore the interests of NATO. In parallel, Ankara not only did not join the anti-Russian sanctions and maintained air communication, but also deepened economic cooperation (Poghosyan 2022; Elamiryan 2024). By developing relations with Ukraine, Erdogan aims to strengthen the position of Türkiye in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region. As for geopolitical calculations, Ukraine is not observed as a valuable ally in Ankara, but rather as a buffer state, with the help of which Ankara will try to limit Russian influence in the region (Köstem 2022; Yilmaz and Morieson 2025). In this sense, Russia is a more valuable partner for Türkiye from the economic and security point of view. It is within the framework of the balancing policy that Türkiye, moving with its national interests, does not take into consideration the interests of its allies, and in Kiev they are not completely sure if the position of

⁵ Polish Institute of International Affairs. 2020. "Ukraine's New National Security Strategy." October 30, 2020. Accessed March 1, 2025. https://pism.pl/publications/Ukraines_New_National_Security_Strategy.

⁶ The Presidential Office of Ukraine. 2025. "Ukraine's Reconstruction and the Development of Bilateral Relations: Volodymyr Zelenskyy Meets with Turkish Government and Business Representatives." March 13, 2025. Accessed March 15, 2025. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vidbudova-ukrayini-ta-rozvitok-dvostoronnih-vidnosin-volodim-96577>.

Ankara can be stable at decisive moments. The same trend was manifested in the issue of NATO membership of Sweden.

In February 2022, Turkish President Erdogan stated that Türkiye was not going to sever relations with either Russia or Ukraine over the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as Türkiye had close economic, military and political ties with these countries. His statement in September 2023 that he trusted Russia as much as he trusted the West fits into the same logic.

Thus, Türkiye, by pursuing a balancing policy, was able to significantly strengthen its position, despite the fact that it does not have enough resources to fulfill its current role. The relatively balanced relations implemented by Türkiye do not imply either complete subordination or openly confrontational tactics towards the most significant partner (Tarasiuk 2025). Erdogan's success in foreign policy is explained by a balanced policy, when success is achieved by balancing the interests of competing partners (Köstem 2022). By balancing opposing interests, Türkiye not only neutralizes the danger, but also achieves a new balance through an active policy and receives maximum concessions from different parties. In this scenario, Türkiye can influence the balance of power established in different regions, indirectly using the potential of other countries and trusted groups (Tekin 2024). Another advantage of this behavior model for Türkiye is the limitation of the influence of extra-regional forces.

Conclusion and discussion

The role of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War of 2020 in the foreign policy of Russia and Türkiye in the context of relations between these countries is a topic that has attracted increased attention from many researchers. This is explained by the fact that the South Caucasus, having been an arena of Russian-Turkish political and economic rivalry for many centuries, remains to a large extent an object of vital interests of major powers.

What is happening in the South Caucasus has not only a regional but also a global dimension, including the problem of maintaining peace, which makes the region a subject of increased concern for Russia and Türkiye. The states of the South Caucasus are experiencing serious political and economic difficulties, complicated by violent interethnic clashes. The future of peace or war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as the problems of exploitation and transportation of Caspian energy resources are a source of contradictions on a wider international scale, since they directly affect the national interests of regional and extra-regional powers.

We saw the main goal in determining the place and significance of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War of 2020 in the foreign policy strategies of Russia and Türkiye in the following contexts:

- Russian-Turkish cooperation is primarily important for both sides in terms of strategic autonomy, but Türkiye is capable of using cooperation with Russia more fully to diversify its foreign policy.
- The economic factor has always played a significant role in relations between Russia and Türkiye, but with the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian military confrontation it has become even more important. Türkiye has become Russia's only window to the West, and in the context of tough sanctions against Russia,

Türkiye has made the most of its advantageous geographical position to solve economic problems, turning into an important logistics center for energy exports.

- In the short and medium term, Türkiye and Russia have developed similar approaches to world politics, which has created a favorable basis for cooperation. However, there are also significant differences between them, which are noticeable, especially in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The prospects for Russian-Turkish cooperation will also depend on the nature of Russia-West and Türkiye-West relations. However, we believe that in order to enhance its role in the multipolar world order, Türkiye will not turn towards the West or the East, but will continue a balanced foreign policy.
- The resilience of the South Caucasus depends and will depend significantly on how well the elements of cooperation and competition in the bilateral relations between Russia and Türkiye will be combined. However, it is obvious that Türkiye has become the most difficult and unpredictable partner for Russia in the South Caucasus, since after each success Türkiye strengthens elements of nationalism in its domestic and foreign policy. Türkiye is step by step violating the red line declared to Russia, and the Russian ruling elite must know that a sharp turn of Türkiye is possible, and not only towards the West.

Thus, the topic seems especially relevant in connection with the instability in the region, and the region in this work is understood as the South Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as the territories that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, which has a negative impact on countries that had previously developed stably. The threat posed by the unresolved Kurdish issue, Türkiye's desire to become a regional leader, as well as the influx of refugees have a destabilizing effect on many states in the region. In these conditions, it is quite difficult to build pragmatic Russian-Turkish relations, which are already of a decently complex nature due to the difference in positions on many international issues. At the same time, relations between Russia and Türkiye are complex, multi-level and are not limited to regional issues. Over the five-hundred-year history of bilateral contacts, fairly close cultural, humanitarian, trade and economic relations have developed, with energy occupying a special place. In this sense, energy is one of the promising areas of Russian-Turkish relations, given Russia's large reserves of hydrocarbon resources and Türkiye's advantageous geographical position for their transportation to consumers, as well as Russian nuclear technologies, which Türkiye is interested in. It should be noted that in the energy sector, in particular, in transit projects, there is a clash of Russian-Turkish interests, especially in cases where Türkiye is a participant in projects to transport energy resources bypassing Russia.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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