Turkey-Greece Confrontation and Georgia: Threats and Challenges

Relations between Turkey and Greece have never been easy but since the summer of 2020, tensions between them rose sharply. If during June and July of 2020 the parties were arguing over the conversion of the Hagia Sophia Museum into a mosque, in August-September the center of controversy shifted to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. Many unresolved issues have accumulated over the decades in this "space" - the problem of Cyprus, the problem of the separation of maritime economic zones (hence, the natural resources located there), the issue of 12 islands and airspace, the matter of ownership of uninhabited small islands and more. In addition, recently, one can observe increasingly aggressive rhetoric in both countries which creates the danger of small incidents escalating into a major military confrontation that, in turn, creates serious threats and challenges to regional security (including Georgia).

Escalation of the Situation

The stalemate over the conversion of turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque had not yet subsided when on August 10 official Ankara declared so-called NAVTEX (Warning for Ships) zones several times in the Eastern Mediterranean. The purpose was to conduct mineral (Natural Air) explorations in the maritime space that Greece considers its own domain.\(^1\) NAVTEX\(^2\) and the military exercises continued through September.\(^3\)

It is noteworthy that Turkey signed an agreement with Saraj’s Libyan government on November 27, 2019. By this agreement, the two countries have demarcated their special economic zones in the Mediterranean. According to Ankara, this agreement also allows Turkey to extract natural resources within its new maritime borders. However, Egypt, Greece and Cyprus consider this agreement illegal and a violation of their national interests.\(^4\) Official Athens is particularly active in this regard, stating that Turkey is trying to expand precisely at the expense of Greece’s special economic zone.\(^5\)

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3 “Turkey and Turkish Cypriot Forces to Start Military Drill,” https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-and-turkish-cypriot-forces-to-start-military-drill-157995
Turkey and Greece consider their own the same maritime space.

Official Athens has also been able to acquire the support of Paris in this conflict. Paris has already started to view the strengthening of Ankara's positions in the Mediterranean with suspicion. As a result, France has openly supported Greece and sent a serious military force to the region (Charles de Gaulle aircraft and military aviation), thereby changing the military balance which had previously been clearly on the side of Turkey.

It is noteworthy that the Western concerns are less problematic for Ankara and it continues to act according to its own agenda. The doctrine of the so-called Blue Homeland introduced by the former

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Admiral of the Navy, Cem Gurdeniz, has been elevated to the state level in Turkey. It aims to expand Turkish naval space, mainly at the expense of Greece.

A map depicting the doctrine of the "blue homeland" of Turkey, which also "swallows" the Greek islands.

In addition, it is noteworthy that on August 29c Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) which is in coalition with the ruling party in Turkey, said that the issue of 12 islands (the same Dodecanese archipelago consisting of 12 large and more than 150 small islands. Italy took these islands away from the Ottomans in 1912 and handed them over to Greece in 1947) is "an open wound for the Turkish nation." According to the same Bahçeli, these islands were given to Athens "illegally" and their status needs to be reconsidered.

For decades, the transfer of the islands to Greece has been seen by Turkish conservative and pro-Islamic forces as a violation of national interests and the surrender of positions. They never liked the Treaty of Lausanne (which established the Turkish-Greek border) which they consider to be the legacy of Ataturk (hence the Kemalists).

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8 United Nations Treaty Series 1956; No. 3297
Thus, Turkey has indirectly raised the issue of the Lausanne Treaty and, consequently, a revision of the borders of the neighboring country (which is at the same time its NATO ally and an EU member state).

The islands transferred to Greece by Italy in 1947 are marked in red. The matter of their ownership was questioned by Erdogan's coalition ally.

As in the case of turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque, many commentators have suggested that the ruling party may be preparing for the early parliamentary elections and trying to consolidate the conservative voters. It should also be noted that at this stage the issue of postponing the elections is not being considered and, therefore, we can assume that Erdogan acted not to gain occasional points but to bring another issue on the long-term agenda to the fore.

This policy of Turkey is a matter of concern in the European Union which naturally sided with the member state (Greece). In European capitals, the calls for the need to take decisive action against Ankara.

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are becoming increasingly frequent. An emergency EU summit is scheduled for September 24-25, 2020 where the issue of imposing sanctions on Turkey will be discussed. It should be noted that a consensus on sanctions has not yet been reached. France, Greece, Cyprus and Austria are in favor of the tougher measures while Germany, Spain and Italy are taking a more moderate position.

Washington, which is not in favor of confrontation within NATO, has a relatively balanced position. That is why US President Donald Trump, despite being intensively involved in the election campaign and the fight against the coronavirus, held telephone talks with the Turkish and Greek leaders to ease the situation. On the other hand, Washington's decision to lift the arms embargo on the Republic of Cyprus indicates that in the current situation it is leaning more towards the Greek side.

Russia also called on the parties to negotiate. However, Moscow also announced plans to hold a naval exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean on September 8-22 and 17-25. The exercises will be held next to the Turkish Navtex zones (in some places, even with overlaps) which, in the context of Ankara's confrontation with the West, is perceived as a kind of support from Moscow.

Thus, many believe that despite the numerous disagreements between Moscow and Ankara, the situation will, at least somewhat, resemble that of 100 years ago when Bolshevik Russia greatly aided Kemalist Turkey in its fight against Western forces.
Turkey-Greece Tensions and Georgia

Official Tbilisi has not commented on the recent Turkish-Greek confrontation which is understandable - a conflict between its two allies is not in Georgia's interests. It seems that Tbilisi is leaning towards neutrality on this issue.

Nevertheless, there are a number of nuances due to which the current tension in the neighborhood still has a negative impact on our country.

After the European countries supported Greece, Ankara and Moscow showed signs of rapprochement, albeit cautious.

An interesting response in Ankara was provided on the announcement of a Russian shooting exercise in support of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. In an interview with the pro-government CNN Türk, the author of the Blue Homeland doctrine and former Admiral, Cem Gurdeniz, who is quite close to the Turkish government, advanced the idea that since, in his words, Russia and Turkey are “attacked” by the West, the sides should move closer to each other. And for this purpose, Moscow should recognize the
so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Ankara should return the favor by recognizing the so-called "independence" of Georgian occupied territories.\textsuperscript{20}

It should be noted that Dogu Perincek, the leader of the Homeland party which is friendly to the Turkish government, also made a similar call earlier and even visited Sokhumi.\textsuperscript{21}

Conclusions:

- The controversy between Ankara and Athens is not an isolated issue - it is part of a larger process that can be conditionally called the process of Turkey's return to its "own roots."
- Turkey, as a member of NATO, and Greece, as a member of NATO and the European Union, are important allies for Georgia. Therefore, the conflict between them is not in Tbilisi's interest.
- The confrontation within NATO is very favorable for the Kremlin which has been trying for years to create a rift in the ranks of the alliance. Thus, Moscow will try to increase the rift within NATO and continue to encourage the parties to this end.
- Escalated confrontation with the West will drive Ankara even closer to Moscow which is not in Georgia's interests.
- The confrontation between Turkey and Greece will not be resolved soon. The problems between them are of a fundamental nature. Consequently, if an agreement is reached between these two countries, it will be a positive, however, more of a temporary event.
- Unlike the previous tensions, Greece has been able to gain the support of European countries (especially France) which makes Athens more confident and courageous in its actions.
- There is also a danger of a military escalation between the parties. However, it is hard to imagine the West allowing the likelihood of a long-term military conflict between them. Hence, if a conflict occurs, it is likely to end soon which does not mean that the parties will be able to resolve the problems soon.
- In case the of the West evaluating Turkey's policy as an aggressive action, the imposition of certain sanctions cannot be ruled out. In such a scenario, Turkey, already in a difficult economic situation, will suffer greatly. Its economy had already shrunk by 9.9% in the second quarter of 2020, the devaluation of the Turkish lira is continuing, unemployment is rising, etc. All this, in turn, has a negative impact on the economy of Georgia for which Turkey is the number one trading partner.
- Georgia should be particularly attentive to the recent rapprochement process of Russia and Turkey and the views expressed in the circles close to the Turkish authorities on the recognition of the so-called "independence" of Georgian occupied territories. It is desirable for official Tbilisi to clearly underscore its "red lines" with Ankara, making it aware that a violation of those lines will precipitate serious retaliatory steps.

\textsuperscript{20} Yunanistan’la olası çatışmada neler olur? Cem Gürdeniz yorumladı - Hafta Sonu 05.09.2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9erqXu1flG0&fbclid=IwAR1uAWO2m0No80Pz-tv0dtfe4Czcl169wQg-Y2NZ8dTETNBg5fl2LL-BLo