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**RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS IN GEORGIA
(South Caucasus and the Threats Coming From Moscow)**

This article analyzes geopolitical interests of Kremlin in Georgia and South Caucasus. It also describes Moscow's actions to dominate and control this strategically important region. The threats coming from Russia are analyzed in detail. South Caucasus is the region where the economic and strategic interests of the West and Russia collide with each other. Despite its small size, Caucasus is a very important region. It is an alternative energy corridor, which allows European Union and the West to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and gain access to energy rich regions of Caspian Basin and Central Asia. Kremlin's aim is to establish firm control over the South Caucasus energy corridor and become the only supplier of oil and gas for the West. Another geopolitical objective of Kremlin is to strengthen Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran axis and weaken Ankara-Tbilisi-Baku axis.

Key words: South Caucasus energy corridor, transport corridor, Geopolitical interests of the West, Geopolitical interests of Russia, threats coming from Russia.

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**Ресейдің Грузиядағы геосаяси қызығушылығы
(Оңтүстік Кавказ және Мәскеуден туындайтын қатерлер)**

Бұл мақала Грузия мен Оңтүстік Кавказдағы Кремльдің геосаяси мүдделері талданады. Ол сондай-ақ Мәскеудің осы стратегиялық маңызы бар аймаққа үстемдік ету және оны басқару жөніндегі әрекеттерін сипаттайды. Сондай-ақ мақалада Ресей тарапынан болған қатерлерге толығымен талдау жасалынады. Оңтүстік Кавказ Батыс пен Ресейдің экономикалық және стратегиялық мүдделері бір-бірімен соқтығысатын аймақ. Кішігірім көлеміне қарамастан, Кавказ өте маңызды аймақ. Бұл Еуропалық Одақ пен Батыстың Ресейге энергетикалық тәуелділігін төмендетуге және Каспий бассейні мен Орталық Азияның энергияға бай аймақтарына қол жеткізуге мүмкіндік беретін альтернативті энергетикалық жол. Кремльдің мақсаты Оңтүстік Кавказдың энергетикалық жолына берік бақылау жасау және Батыс үшін мұнай мен газды жалғыз жеткізуші аймақ болады. Кремльдің тағы бір геосаяси мақсаты – Мәскеу-Ереван-Тегеран осін нығайту және Анкара-Тбилиси-Баку осін әлсірету.

Түйін сөздер: Оңтүстік Кавказдың энергетикалық жолы, көлік жолы, Батыстың геосаяси мүдделері, Ресейдің геосаяси мүдделері, Ресейден туындайтын қатерлер.

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Геополитические интересы России в Грузии (Южный Кавказ и угрозы, исходящие из Москвы)

В этой статье анализируются геополитические интересы Кремля в Грузии и на Южном Кавказе. В нем также описываются действия Москвы по доминированию и контролю над этим стратегически важным регионом. Угрозы, исходящие из России, анализируются подробно. Южный Кавказ – регион, где экономические и стратегические интересы Запада и России сталкиваются друг с другом. Несмотря на небольшие размеры, Кавказ – очень важный регион. Это альтернативный энергетический коридор, который позволяет Европейскому союзу и Западу снизить свою энергетическую зависимость от России и получить доступ к богатым энергоресурсами регионам Каспийского бассейна и Центральной Азии. Цель Кремля – установить твердый контроль над энергетическим коридором Южного Кавказа и стать единственным поставщиком нефти и газа для Запада. Другой геополитической целью Кремля является укрепление оси Москва-Ереван-Тегеран и ослабление оси Анкара-Тбилиси-Баку.

Ключевые слова: энергетический коридор Южного Кавказа, транспортный коридор, геополитические интересы Запада, геополитические интересы России, угрозы, исходящие из России.

Why Georgia and Caucasus matters?

Caucasus is a strategically important region where the major powers of the world have contradictory geopolitical interests. Historically there was a permanent struggle between the great powers of the world to dominate this region, which is a bridge between Europe and Asia. There is still rivalry between big states to dominate Transcaucasia and control major trade routes between Europe and Asia. The Cold War, which ended in Europe in the 90s, is now raging in South Caucasus. The world's most powerful countries try to gain a foothold in this strategically important region in order to meet their geo-economic interests and gain access to oil and gas reserves. Kremlin wants to control this energy-rich region and vehemently opposes other powers in South Caucasus. Now, Caucasus is the region where the economic and strategic interests of the West and Russia collide with each other. (Valeri Modebadze, 2018)

Because of its favorable geographic location Caucasus is often described as the «corridor». Indeed, it is a corridor that connects Europe with oil rich countries of Central Asia, Caspian Basin and Middle East. Moscow's aim is to prevent other external powers to gain a foothold in Caucasus and opposes the West to dominate and control this strategically important «corridor». Kremlin's aim is to establish firm control over energy transportation routes and become the only supplier of oil and gas for the West.

After the Breakdown of Soviet Union, the West gradually became aware of the strategic importance of Georgia and the Caucasus region. Georgia and the South Caucasus, which in the past was viewed as the backyard of Russia, is now a region of great strategic and geopolitical importance to the West. Caucasus region is rich in natural resources and connects the West to the Hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian Sea. According to BP estimates, the Caspian area contains as much as 48 billion barrels of oil and 449 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Caucasus is a very important energy corridor. Alternative oil and gas export routes pass through this region which reduces Europe's dependence on Russian hydrocarbons. (Nikolai Sokov, 2009) Therefore, the West is interested in strengthening its presence in this region. Although Georgia has no significant oil and gas reserves, it still plays very important role in exporting hydrocarbon resources to the West. Georgia is a necessary bridge connecting Europe with Central Asia and China. Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Georgia is a bridge connecting several important global economic regions. The shortest route from Europe to China goes through Georgia and «Silk Road» trade always passed through the Caucasus region. (Valeri Modebadze & Fatih Mehmet Sayin, 2014)

Georgia's importance as the key energy transit country became obvious after the breakdown of USSR. Over the last years the west began to construct new oil and gas pipelines in Caucasus in order to reduce its energy dependence on Middle East,

Arabic countries and diversify its energy supply routes. These oil and gas pipelines have considerably increased the strategic importance of Georgia. Georgia is the key transit route for the export of hydrocarbons from the landlocked Caspian Sea region. Through Georgia passes the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, which transports Caspian hydrocarbons to Turkish and European markets. Furthermore, Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline projects strengthens the status of Georgia as an energy transit zone and further emphasizes the key role that Georgia plays in the diversification of energy supply routes (Cecaiþ, 2012).

Threats Coming from Russia

Among the threats, risks and challenges facing Georgia, the most problematic issue is the Russian occupation of Georgian territories and creeping annexation. The 2008 August War and the occupation of South Ossetia have significantly worsened the security environment of Georgia. With this war Kremlin sent a message to the West that it still wants to establish firm control over Georgia.

For Moscow Georgia's pro-European, pro-Western political course is unacceptable and its goal is to draw Georgia back into Russia's orbit. As the former president of Russia Medvedev stated, the 2008 August War and the invasion of Georgia's breakaway regions thwarted NATO's plans to expand further on the post-Soviet space. «We have simply calmed some of our neighbors down by showing them that they should behave properly in respect of Russia and in respect of neighboring small states. And for some of our partners, including the North Atlantic Alliance, it was a signal that before taking a decision about expansion of the Alliance, one should at first think about the geopolitical stability. I deem these [issues] to be the major lessons of those developments in 2008,» Medvedev said (Civil Georgia, 2011)

The Russian government is trying to change the pro-Western orientation of the Georgian people through aggression. Russia does not want Georgia to become a stable, democratic, European state. The Russian-Georgian war and the military aggression carried out by the Russian Federation demonstrated that even in the 21st century, the Russian authorities did not abandon the neo-imperialist policy.

Nowadays, there is a widespread view in certain political circles of Georgia and Georgian Society, that Russia after the August War and after the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, does not have any leverage to exercise pressure on Georgia. This

view is certainly wrong. Unfortunately, Russia has a lot of leverage to make pressure on Georgia. What leverage does Russia have to put pressure on Georgia and what can be said about the dangers, risks and challenges facing Georgia and South Caucasus energy corridor?

While some Georgian politicians and political elites assert that there is no threat coming from Russia, Chair of the House Intelligence Committee and Congressman Mike Rogers fears that after the occupation of Ukraine, Russia will try to annex Georgia.

He drew attention to the fact that after annexation of Crimea, Russia started to move military forces into occupied territories of Georgia. Rogers explained the threats and risks facing Georgia and expressed his views about the possibility of renewal of Russian-Georgian confrontation on Fox News. He expressed his assumption that Russia needs to invade Georgia and Armenia in order to establish a land connection with Iran. In an appearance on Fox News, Rogers said: «They are moving some of their most advanced equipment into South Ossetia. There is no reason to do that. The Georgian army really poses no threat. That's certainly concerning... I would ask why is he moving the equipment that he is into South Ossetia up in Georgia, which makes really makes no sense other than they are contemplating maybe using those armor columns to drive through Georgia down to Armenia to create a land bridge to Iran.» (Rob Garver, 2014)

Putin believes that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the most tragic event of the twentieth century, so he aims to create a new Eurasian empire – Eurasian Union. Countries that do not want to join this new empire will face big problems. Russia will first try to punish those states which are trying to join NATO and integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. For Russia NATO enlargement, as well as the eastwards expansion of the European Union is unacceptable. Recent developments have shown us that those Eastern Partnership countries, which demonstrated firm willingness to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, are under heavy pressure from Russia. In 2013 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on Russian pressure on Eastern Partnership countries. This document describes in detail how Russia is making pressure on the Eastern Partnership countries. This resolution mentions also creeping annexation of Georgian territories and the pressure that Kremlin is making on Georgia: «Russia is still occupying the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, in violation of the fundamental norms and principles of international law; whereas ethnic cleansing and

forcible demographic changes have taken place in the areas under the effective control of the occupying force, which bears the responsibility for human rights violations in these areas. The process of 'borderisation' has increased rapidly, with the area of occupied territory expanding by several hundred meters at the expense of Georgian territory; whereas violations of Georgian airspace by Russian military aircraft have taken place at the same time» (European Parliament, 2014).

It is obvious to everyone that signing the Association Agreement with the EU as well as granting MAP to Georgia can become a pretext for the Kremlin's large-scale aggression against our country. According to the Georgian expert Mamuka Areshidze there is a «list of problems» which is activated by Russia according to how active Georgia's European aspirations are. For Georgia's annexation Russia might use its military bases stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (ვალერი მოლდუბაძე, 2014).

One of the main problems and main challenges that Georgia is facing is the creeping annexation and the so called the «borderisation» process. Russian government is expanding the so-called «borders» of the de facto republic of South Ossetia at the expense of Georgian lands. Thousands of hectares of Georgian land are being lost every year and the area of occupied territory is expanding at the expense of Georgian territories. As a result of this creeping annexation, the population of Inner Kartli constantly loses vital agricultural lands. Russian troops are gradually advancing the occupation line inside Georgia to enlarge the Russian-held territory. As a result, the so called «South Ossetian boundary markers» appeared in about 300 meters from the central motorway. The Russian border guards started the installation of barbed wires fences in the villages of Orchosani and Khurvaleti. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline passes close to the occupation line, and if the creeping annexation of Georgian territories continues, it soon will be controlled by Russian border guards (ვალერი მოლდუბაძე, 2014).

Since the August 2008 War, the Russian border troops have constantly increased the size of occupied territories and have moved the so-called «state border» deeper into the Georgian-controlled territory near the villages of Ditsi and Dvani. Russian soldiers have begun moving the occupation line at places where it cuts through populated areas. They have installed barbed wires through people's gardens and grazing lands, resulting in villages losing cultivated plots of land, an irrigation water canal and cemeteries. Many Georgian families have lost their

source of income because their farmlands, apple orchards and ancestral homes are now beyond this new demarcation line. The United States, the European Union, and NATO all voiced concern over Russia's creeping annexation of Georgian territories and condemned the actions of Russian government to seal South Ossetia off from the rest of Georgia (Valeri Modebadze & Fatih Mehmet Sayin, 2014)

If the Tskhinvali puppet regime continues to fence the boundary line with the maps from Soviet-era, not only a small section of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, but also a 1600-meter-long section of the Baku-Supsa pipeline will be in the Ossetian-controlled territory. Thus, if the creeping annexation continues, Georgia may lose its transit function and will no longer be considered an alternative transit corridor for Europe. Russia's strategic interest is to be the sole supplier of energy for the West. Therefore, Kremlin will do its best to establish firm control over the South Caucasus corridor and control alternative energy routes to Europe.

Russia's actions in South Ossetia and the creeping annexation of Georgian territories should be analyzed from the geopolitical point of view. Russia's geopolitical goal is to create a land corridor from Tskhinvali to Yerevan, because it is in Kremlin's interests to have a common border with its strategic ally – Armenia. Kremlin's main objective is to consolidate the Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran axis. Thus, Russia tries to capture Georgia's territories and create a land corridor from South Ossetia to Armenia in order to consolidate the Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran axis. Russia is struggling to gain the title of superpower today and therefore, will not spare power to create the aforementioned axis. In order to achieve this goal, Moscow might start a military confrontation with Georgia as soon as a favorable moment arises for military intervention. This is the reason why Russia is strengthening its military bases on occupied territories of Georgia (ვალერი მოლდუბაძე, 2014).

Conclusion

As we have seen above, the West and Russia have contradictory geopolitical and geo-economic interests in South Caucasus and Georgia. Moscow's main objective is to maintain Russia's dominant position on the European market and become the main supplier of natural resources for Europe, while Western countries want to reduce energy dependence on Russia because Kremlin often uses oil and gas as a political weapon. One of the reasons why the West started to construct oil and gas pipelines

in South Caucasus bypassing Russian territories and began to develop the alternative energy corridor, was to diversify energy supply routes.

Kremlin does not like the fact that large-scale energy projects in the South Caucasus region are being implemented bypassing Russian territories. It is in Kremlin's interest to control all major energy routes in post-Soviet space and therefore, it does not spare effort to occupy Georgian lands and establish firm control over the South Caucasus energy corri-

dor. Moscow wants to achieve monopoly over the energy supply and become the only supplier of oil and gas to the West. This is the reason why it is trying so hard to dominate the South Caucasian states and bring them back to Russia's orbit.

It is in the interests of Russia to strengthen Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran axis and weaken Ankara-Tbilisi-Baku axis. In order to achieve this goal, it has to control Georgia, which is the main obstacle in consolidating the above mentioned axis.

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