Two years ago, former Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze, during the August 12, 2019 celebration of the Georgian holiday of Didgoroba, thundered to all in attendance that “the Battle of Didgoroba continues for every one of the Georgians.” To make these words clear to everyone, we recall 1121, when the King David IV of Georgia defeated the Seljuk Turks’ winning the Battle of Didgori, which led to the subsequent liberation of the future capital Tbilisi, as well as the general unification of Georgia. This year marks the 900th anniversary of the Didgori victory. The ultranationalist movement “Georgian March” has already sent a letter to the government demanding to establish a public holiday on August 12. The preparation of nationalists, frankly anti-Turkish actions can not be excluded.

Two years ago, the above-mentioned words of Mamuka Bakhtadze were perceived by the majority of the Georgian population as a response to the problem of Turkey’s ongoing expansion throughout the South Caucasus. The fact that Georgian lands are in Turkey’s sphere of particular interests was very clearly stated by the current Turkish President Recep Erdoğan on October 15, 2016, speaking at the University in Rize, Turkey. According to him, the Turkish state considers those territories located near the current “illegitimate” borders of Turkey as its own. “Our areas of interest include Iraq, Syria, Libya, Crimea, Karabakh, Azerbaijan, Bosnia, and other brotherly regions. Many historians believe that Turkey’s borders should include Cyprus, Aleppo, Mosul, Erbil, Kirkuk, Batumi, Thessaloniki, Varna, Western Thrace, and the Aegean islands,” the Turkish president said.

As for the Georgian regions of Adjara, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kvemo Kartli, and Kakheti, they face Turkish expansion more than others, primarily due to their actions Ankara’s “soft power,” trying to be discreet and not expecting an immediate return on investment. Turkey’s main emphasis is on the religious, economic, and educational components of its influence. In addition, Ankara makes extensive use of the assistance of “brotherly Azerbaijan” in the regions of...
Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti, where the Azerbaijani community is concentrated. As a result, we can see today that the entire network of pro-Turkish civil society organizations and humanitarian projects operates under the auspices of the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency TİKA, often acting as a front for MIT, Turkey's National Intelligence Organization.

In 2002, with Turkish financial support, an Islamic madrasa was opened in the village of Meore-Kesalo in the Marneuli district, on the border with Azerbaijan, in Kvemo Kartli, a significant number of local youth who soon began pro-Turkish propaganda outside the walls of the school. Turkey hosted the most active trainees for further training.

With a $17.5 million grant from Turkey, Georgia has begun modernizing the Marneuli military airfield 40 km southwest of Tbilisi, which was destroyed during the Georgian aggression against Russia in 2008. Georgia has already received 47 military transport vehicles from Turkey under this grant. According to Georgian media, the strengthening of the Turkish presence in the region after the war in Nagorno-Karabakh could also mean that Turkey would use the airstrip as an alternate one.

Today, Turkey is Georgia’s largest trade partner. Foreign trade turnover in the first quarter of 2021 increased by 3.7% compared to the same period last year and amounted to about 419 million dollars - 15.1% of the total foreign trade turnover of Georgia. Last year, the volume of trade between Georgia and Turkey amounted to about $1.6 billion.

Ankara has already practically seized the Georgian domestic market. Turkey accounts for 80 percent of foreign investment in Georgia, which, as a result, is increasingly tied to the Turkish economic complex as part of transnational projects. Tbilisi is also tied to Ankara in geopolitical terms by such vital projects as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and gas pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Akhaltsikhe-Kars railway. In addition, dozens of other small projects are underway. The very close economic ties between the two countries show that 75% of imports to Georgia are Turkish products. Georgia’s current financial and political elites are linked to representatives of the Turkish capital, which is highly criticized in Georgian society.

Thus, the protests against the Turkish expansion have not subsided in Kutaisi. In particular, over the past two months, several rallies and demonstrations have been conducted to stop constructing a cascade of hydroelectric power plants on the Rioni River, which was attended by tens of thousands of people with a population of only 135 thousand in Kutaisi. The Save Rioni Gorge movement has been continuously protesting against the construction of the 433 MW Namakhvani HPP Cascade for more than six months, despite the declared importance of the project for the country’s energy sector by the Georgian and Turkish authorities. However, the protest movement does not subside; its participants talk about the environmental problems associated with the project. The protesters say that if the future dam is breached, the entire Imereti region will be flooded.

A severe factor in this protest movement is the dissatisfaction of the local population. With the fact that the hydroelectric power plant is being built by the Turkish company ENKA, which under the project can get the use of the largest river in western Georgia - Rioni - with its valley of 320 km for 90 years. The Turkish management company will also be able to exploit the 13.4 thousand square kilometers of the river basin, all flora, and fauna, at its discretion. The border zone between Georgia and the Russian Federation, the Edena glacier in the Greater Caucasus Mountains, where the Rioni River has its source, is allegedly being transferred to Turkey.

The protesters demanded that the Georgian government cancel the contract with the Turkish company ENKA, calling this investment project of Ankara a synthesis of Turkish economic expansion in the Caucasus region and a corruption scheme of the Georgian political and financial elites jointly with the Erdogan administration. As follows from several reports in the Georgian media, the financial elite of Turkey, Erdogan’s inner circle, and representatives of the American elite, together with Georgian politicians, are accused of owning several large, in fact, illegal bitcoin farms on the territory of Georgia. To get solid dividends and a fully functioning bitcoin industry needs cheap and high-quality electricity. This is allegedly why Washington, Ankara, and the current Georgian authorities insist on building the Namakhvani HPP Cascade as soon as possible.

Against the background of large-scale protests, the Georgian government declared a one-year moratorium on hydropower plant construction on April 24. The dam construction project will be re-examined and confirmed by ecologists, geologists, and seismologists.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili paid a state visit to Turkey on June 1 to settle the problems with Ankara and discuss areas for future cooperation. The Georgian delegation included Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of
Foreign Affairs of Georgia David Zalkaliani, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava, Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture Levan Davitashvili, Chairman of the Adjara Government Tornike Rizhvadze, and Head of Government Administration Ilia Darchiashvili. This visit to Ankara was of particular importance. During a joint press conference with Prime Minister Ilham Garibashvili, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan even said that Turkey sees Georgia as a key to regional cooperation. “Turkey has been Georgia’s number one trading partner for 14 years. We aim to increase the volume to $3 billion as soon as possible. Negotiations and consultations are also underway to expand the free trade agreement,” Erdogan said, confirming that in the energy sector, as in all other areas, there are Turkish investments in Georgia, which amount to $214 million.

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