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## **Policy of the Russian Federation towards Kurds in the Syrian Conflict**

### **Abstract**

The main purpose of the article is to present the conditions and dependencies that characterize Russian-Kurdish relations from the beginning of the Syrian conflict. The author emphasizes the role of Kurds in the Arab world and in the global strategy of Russia. At the beginning, he follows the history of the relationship between Russia and Kurds from the Persian crisis in 1946 to 1991 and the moderate reaction of the Kremlin to the failed Kurdish uprising in Iraq in that year. He addresses the issue of Russia's return to the Middle East and its limited support for the Kurdish side in the fight against ISIS in Syria. He describes Moscow's position on the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, which also affects the events in Syria and contributes to the additional heating of tension. He also analyzes issues related to the latest offensive of Turkish forces in the Afrin region in Syria against Kurds. In the summary, the author signals forecasts for the future in mutual contacts and attempts to answer the question whether Moscow will want to strengthen Kurdish position in negotiations regarding the end of the Syrian conflict.

**Keywords:** *Russian Federation, Kurds, Turkey, Afrin*

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## Introduction

International events in the Middle East, especially the civil war in Syria, which has been ongoing since 2011, and the complicated interests of the great world powers in this area – the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, Iraq or Israel – they reminded the world about the position of the Kurdish people, for many years fighting for their independence and sovereignty and seeing every country that has conflicting interests with Turkey as a country favorable for their freedom aspirations.

One of such states is the Russian Federation, which has long been leading a complicated and ambiguous game to the Kurds community aimed at strengthening its position in the Middle East and weakening the position of Turkey and above all the United States, supporting Kurdish armed forces in the fight against the Islamic State.

In this article, we will look at the assumptions of Moscow's policy towards the Kurds in the ongoing Syrian war, paying particular attention to the Turkish president's offensive, Recep Erdogan, expressed in the regular armed operations of the Turkish army with Kurdish units in the territory of the Syrian state. The purpose of the text is stressing that the barometer of Russia's attitude towards the Kurds is in a way conditioned by its geopolitical interests and, above all, relations with Ankara, which have recently improved, but may deteriorate at any moment due to the many conflicting interests that divide these two countries.

The Russian position on the Turkish invasion of the city of Afrin in Syria, the main bastion of the Kurdish forces, will also be presented.

At the beginning, a few words about the history of mutual Russian-Kurdish relations dating back to the period of the USSR's existence.

## Russian-Kurdish relations during the Cold War

The beginning of modern Russian-Kurdish relations (Xalid 2016) should be assumed as World War II and events in Persia that followed it immediately<sup>1</sup>. For the USSR, the

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<sup>1</sup> Kurds as an ethnic minority were taken into account in the analyzes of Russian scientists even earlier. Russian researcher Vadim Makarenka stated that the Russians and Kurds are of the same origin, and the Muslim Kurdish leader Salahadin Ayyubi was a Russian, not a Kurd. According to the historian, the Russians and Kurds are "relatives", while "Russian Orientalism began with the Kurds first, while the representatives of the Kurdish authorities were elected from among the Russian community and always tried to return to their roots." Makarenka pointed out that there are many mutual similarities between the two

Kurds were a national minority, used to inflame the situation in this country, with the intention of obtaining oil concessions for themselves.

On the other hand, the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin sought to weaken the position of the United States and Great Britain in the Middle East, negatively shaped in previous decades due to the inept British colonial policy. Soviet leader and then head of diplomacy of this superpower, Vyacheslav Molotov, realized that the use of Kurds in the fight against Iran's *esta Reza Pahlavi* in the Persian region of Azerbaijan may contribute to the breakdown of Persia from within and lead to the creation of a better bargaining position in negotiations on oil concessions. In 1946, Moscow supported the establishment of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in Iranian Kurdistan, and after the failed insurrection, led by Mustafa Barani, the Kurds found refuge in the USSR.

In the era of the inability to conquer the armed Persia, the Kremlin saw that other options should be sought for using the Kurds against Western countries. Such an opportunity occurred after Stalin's death and reorientation by the new country leader, Nikita Khrushchev, of the USSR's foreign policy towards the Middle East. In 1955, Khrushchev noted the potential of national liberation movements, telling Molotov that the USSR must support them (Taubman 2012, p. 402). In implementing the above, the Kremlin, especially after the Iraqi coup in 1958, tried to play a more decisive role in the region and loudly protested against the brutal repression of the Iraqi authorities against the Kurds.

On the other hand, Moscow was not at all delighted with the Kurdish aspirations to establish closer cooperation with the United States, which resulted in Iraq's support in the war against Kurds in 1973. Without seeing the political potential in Iraqi Kurds calculated for the destabilization of the Middle East, Moscow then returned its particular attention to the situation in Turkey and transferred its support for independence efforts at the Kurds there. Being aware of the growing political chaos in Turkey and partly of permanent terror it supported, it considered them, namely the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), established in the 1970s, as organisation, which could lead to chaos and draw Turkey away from the Western world. In its assumptions, the PKK referred to the principles of Marxism-Leninism, while the works of Lenin and Stalin

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nations, including in folklore, and language. the claims of the analyst are denied by Khoshawi Mala Ibrahim, Kurdish researcher living in Russia, stating: "Some of his [Makarenko] opinions are controversial, especially the claim that Salahaddin Ayyubi is a Russian" (quotes for: Xalid 2016).

became its “main, if not the only, ideological sources of assumptions, beliefs and values” (Tol 2017).

However, after the coup in Turkey and the seizure of power by the military, the Kurds were broken up and forced to emigrate to Syria, in which the president of the country, Hafez Asad, provided them with shelter and the possibility of further party and terrorist activities in Turkey.

Over time, Moscow, busy with its internal problems and the arms race, imposed by US President Ronald Reagan has been paying less attention on the Kurdish issue, as it is shown by the support of the USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev for the US operation Desert Storm in 1991, and the failure to help the Kurds in the uprising against Saddam Hussein after the Iraqi invasion of the Kurds. The decision of the USSR to abandon the Kurds was met with a harsh reaction from this community.

After the collapse of the Soviet empire, the new Russian authorities led by Boris Yeltsin tried to re-use the Kurds as an element of pressure on Turkey in mutual relations, but because of the collapse of the state’s superpower, the war in Chechnya and economic problems, Moscow did not have any real pressure arguments, however, in spite of everything, it sought not to antagonize Turkey towards itself, as evidenced by the conclusion in 1995 of the protocol on the “prevention of terrorism”. As part of it, Russia agreed to ban the activities of the PKK in the Russian Federation, and Ankara declared that it would not support the fight for Chechen independence fighters.

The Kurdish issue in Russian policy re-emerged only after the new president, Vladimir Putin, took power in Russia in 2000 and after the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, headed by Recep Erdogan took power. Despite the initial distrust, both leaders in 2005 reached an agreement on Chechnya and Kurds (Tol 2017). It was only the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the civil war in Syria in 2011 that increased the interest of the Russian side in the Kurdish issue.

### **Russian-Kurdish relations from the beginning of the war in Syria**

The civil war in Syria, begun in March 2011, after the overthrow of Tunisia’s long-term president, Ben Ali in Egypt after the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, re-evaluated the geopolitical balance of power, present in the Middle East since the Second Gulf War in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. On the one hand, Arab

Spring meant a chance for possible democratization of the region, but on the other hand, it allowed the withdrawal from the power of pro-Western politicians referring with distrust to Moscow.

In the case of Syria, the case was quite different. Governing the country since his father's death in 2000. Bashar Asad, at the beginning of his office, being a hope for a greater democratization of Syria, but continued his predecessor's policy, focused on cooperation with Moscow against Western countries. Since the removal of power and the murder of the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the country has become virtually the only point of engagement in the Middle East for the Kremlin, which is why the priority was to keep Assad in power at all costs.

After the Syrian authorities used chemical weapons on the oppositionists in 2013, the Russians saved him from falling, forcing him to formally surrender possession of such a weapon. At the same time, they supported the "favorable" policy of the Syrian dictator towards the Kurds, who sought to use the conflict in the struggle to create an independent state.

The situation changed in 2014 by the creation of the Sunni organization – Islamic State, which took control over the part of Iraq and Syria, whose president was then forced to establish a limited cooperation with Kurdish in the fight against Islamic terrorists. He referred with decisive reluctance to the formation of Kurdish autonomous structures in territories controlled by government troops. Assad's position was supported by the Kremlin, who also saw in the Kurds a threat to the president's power.

The circumstances changed again after the Turks shot down the Russian aircraft in 2015. Due to the intransigent attitude of Ankara, the Russian authorities began to stress more strongly the need for self-determination of the Kurds. Still in February 2016, Moscow, unable to compel Assad to talk with representatives of Kurdish backgrounds, decided to initiate talks with them about their wider cooperation with the President of Syria.

It should be emphasized that Russian politicians, aiming to weaken Turkey's international position, make an instrumental use of the Kurdish issue for their own purposes.

At one point, the scenario was considered that support for Kurdish independence aspirations could in the future lead to even a forced American-Russian alliance, which assumed support for their cause. According to Russian analyst Alexei Khlebnikov, Russian air raids on the territory of Syria accepted by Kurdish representatives could

pave the way for a lasting agreement between Russia and America along with other Arab countries, an alliance that could contribute to the conclusion of political agreement in Syria (Khlebnikov 2015).

As the Moscow's support for the Kurdish groups we can assume the creation of the separatist Democratic Party of Unity (PYD) in Moscow - at the personal invitation of the President of Russia (Górzyński 2016). However, the improvement of relations between Moscow and Ankara has resulted in ceasefire between the authorities and part of the opposition in Damascus in December 2016. The above resulted in worsening conditions for the fight for Kurdish independence. This "agreement" did not concern PYD, which was perceived by the Kurdish community as an act of Moscow's abandonment of support for it.

The referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, during which the Kurds were to make the decision to independently declare independence of their country, should be considered an important aspect of the discussed issues. Interestingly, Russia was the only empire that counted in the Middle East, which did not support its cancellation despite the official position of the Kremlin, supporting the territorial integrity of Iraq, expressed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, calling on both sides to negotiate and respect the Kurds' national ambitions ( Foundation Warsaw Institute 2017).

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly stated – "We invariably support the independence, cohesion and territorial integrity of Iraq's fatherland and other Middle Eastern countries." In his opinion, "it is important to avoid anything that would entail the risk of additional complexity (situation) and destabilization of the Middle East, which is still full of conflicts" (kg/adso 2017).

This is in line with traditional Russian policy, assuming Moscow's support for all separatist movements and emphasizing their right to self-determination, which was evident even in the context of the referendum in Catalonia, where Russian television proclaimed the independence of the separatist republic (Stasiński 2017).

According to Yuri Barmin, the key reason why Russia refrained from explicitly supporting the referendum was the voting disadvantage for the Kremlin, as it was carried out at the moment of the ongoing discussion regarding the settlement of Kurds in Syria. In his opinion, the independence of Kurdistan is not beneficial for Moscow, because it may lead to involuntary associations with Chechen wars and bloody suppression of the Kremlin's independence efforts. In the conviction of the aforementioned

researcher, the attitude of the Russians towards the aspirations of independence well reflects their reluctance to prolong the agreement with Tatarstan about the division of power. In connection with the above, the author concludes that the Kremlin is extremely suspicious in the context of ensuring autonomous power for individual republics, and therefore the very idea of a referendum is unwelcome, and its consequences may be extremely uncomfortable for both Iraq and Syria (Barmin 2017).

He does not want to antagonize the parties of the Middle East dispute and takes an ambivalent attitude towards the Kurdish referendum. This is confirmed by Putin's words, which in December 2016 during one of the press conferences stated that in this case Russia would "act under international law. Ultimately, the rights of the Kurdish population will be secured, but how it will happen will depend on Iraq and the Kurdish people themselves. We do not intend to interfere in the processes taking place inside Iraq."

In turn, in July 2017, Minister Lavrov emphasized that "Russia is interested in allowing the Kurdish people, like other nations, to realize their hopes and aspirations under existing international legal norms" (Surdel 2017, p. 16). Such attitude of the Kremlin towards this referendum proves that it will not support Kurdish aspirations of independence, and the solution to the conflict has to be based on international multilateral agreements, taking into account the interests of all parties to the dispute, including the Kurdish side and the Iraqi authorities.

This tactic is well illustrated by the fact that Moscow was the only player in the Middle East region suggesting Kurds' participation in a conference under the auspices of the United Nations on the future of Syria (Podgórski 2017).

On the other hand, the position of the deputy head of the Russian consulate in Erbil should be noted, who said that his country "will support the decision taken by the inhabitants of Kurdistan, because it is a referendum decision" (Barmin 2017). In the light of the Kremlin's policy of "supporting" independence movements, one can say that it wants to appease the Kurdish side and that his statements suggest that if Moscow's interests are to weaken Ankara and Tehran, it will not hesitate to use all available means to "support" Kurdish independence aspirations. Hence the certainty that support for Kurdish independence will be closely conditioned by the Kremlin's relations with Ankara and Tehran.

As Moscow's relations with both entities improve, an ambivalent standpoint on the Kurdish issue will be presented, and in case of deterioration of these relations, the matter of the ethnic minority concerned will be raised on the international arena. So the moderate attitude of Moscow in Iraqi Kurdistan is conditioned by several factors. On the one hand, the Kremlin is forced to maintain good relations with Iraq, dated back to the 1970s and the period of the Baath party rule, which in its rhetoric has repeatedly supported the USSR in the Cold War.

On the other hand, a longtime leader of Kurdish separatists, Barzani, was in exile in the USSR and for this reason the heads of the Kurdish political forces maintain their correct relations with Moscow to this day. The independence of Kurdistan would mean, however, the necessity of abandoning the current policy of balancing and equaling the influence. In addition, it should be remembered that possible active support for Kurds would complicate Russian relations with Turkey and Iran, which strongly negatively refer to the discussed issue of statehood for this community. Both Ankara and Tehran are needed by Moscow to actively return to the Middle East and maintain decisive influence in Syria (Warsaw Institute 2017 Foundation).

Joost Hiltermann, program director of MENA<sup>2</sup> at the International Crisis Group, expressed the view that Russia can mediate in the ongoing crisis, but it will not particularly support the independence of Kurdistan, because such independence is not needed to achieve the political and economic goals intended by Russia (Fenton-Harvey 2017).

Also Sergey Balsamov, analyst at the Moscow Institute of the Middle East, noted that Russia would strive for an active role in mediating in the continued a crisis because it has strong links with all parties involved in dispute. In his opinion, Moscow is striving for mediation and peace, above all to ensure that the foreground for economic transactions with Kurds (Barmin 2017). Through a referendum he wants to close American influence in Iraqi Kurdistan, the more that the Kurdish side is still counting on Washington's support in the struggle for independence in exchange for active participation in the fight against Islamic State. That is why the Kremlin, in the words of Deputy Prime Minister Rogozin that Russia wants to "completely" return to Iraq: politically, economically and militarily, wants to split both sides together, and to agree with Iran on the bilateral control over Kurdish factions – in the case of Tehran over the Patriotic

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<sup>2</sup> Initiative on management and development investments in the Middle East and North Africa.

Union of Kurdistan – and in the case of Moscow over the Kurdish Democratic Party (Stefanicki 2017b).

The introduction to this study mentions the Turkish aggression on the city of Afrin, which aptly describes the Russian-Kurdish relations. In analyzing the causes of this offensive against this city, two main issues are quoted. First of all, it is stressed that it could not take place without the consent of President Putin, because the Russians hold significant political, economic and military influence in Syria, only threatening the Turks to shoot down their planes, stopped Turkish bombings for several days. Only after the Kremlin's decision was changed, the Turks returned to continue the offensive.

Such a thesis is being made by the analyst of the Middle East, Witold Repetowicz. In his opinion, Putin's consent to Turkish intervention proves that it is in the Kremlin's interest to continue the protracted war in Syria and to prevent Assad from restoring control over the country, because “a weak vassal is more convenient to control.” Repetowicz claims that the Russian agreement enabled the implementation of the plan brutal ethnic cleansing by Ankara, expulsion of about 20,000 Kurds and settling of their abandoned areas with Arab refugees and immigrants on Turkish territory who will be grateful to Ankara for providing them with shelter (Karpowicz 2018).

The position of Russia was not welcomed by the Kurdish community. In a statement by PYD, they openly accused the Kremlin of allowing the Turkish operation, stressing: “We know that without the consent of global forces, and mainly Russia, whose troops are in Afrin, Turkey would not be able to attack civilians by using the airspace. Thus, we make Russia responsible, just like Turkey, and we stress that Russia is a criminal partner of Turkey in massacring civilians in the region” (Stefanicki 2017b).

According to Antoni Rybczyński, such an attitude of the Russians could have been a revenge for the Kurds' reluctance to make concessions - at least to give to Asad Afrin and some of the rich in hydrocarbons areas around in Deir Ezzor, which is confirmed by the Kurdish side (Rybczyński 2018). For the Kurds, Russian permission for Turkish aggression in Afrin is more outrageous than in February 2017, the “all-Western” congress was held in Russia, after which Moscow established a center in Afrina, intended to support the Kurds and an informal place where Russia would maintain its influence in the region.

However, as previously stated, the improvement of Russian-Turkish relations caused a decline in the importance of this community in global Russian policy (Surdel 2017, p.

15). The launch of the Turkish operation in Afrin was the Russian plan B as an element of pressure on the Syrian Kurds to submit the city to Assad's control, which is confirmed by the statement of the representation of the Russian airbase in Hmeimim, in which we read that the "permanent" Turkish threat will urge them to look for their place in Syria, and only Damascus and Moscow can offer security guarantees. In turn, even the independence of Kurdistan and its independence will not protect the Kurds from "anti-terrorist operations" conducted by Ankara. According to the issuer, the Kurdish authorities should hand over the region of the Syrian army and avoid confrontation with the Turkish army.

In the face of such a scenario, however, skepticism was expressed, because in the Kurdish opinion, Afrin is a particularly difficult area for Turkey, which will make the fight long and expensive for all parties. It was mentioned that the city is afforested, partly mountainous and densely populated, as well as connected with other areas, controlled by the Kurds and used to transport meals to its zone (Haid 2018). According to the author, allowing Moscow to eliminate Kurds in Afrin will further strengthen the "transactional" relationship between Moscow and Ankara. The Russian goal is a long-lasting war between Ankara and the Kurds, because in its process both parties to the dispute are weakening and they are attracted to it by powers that have conflicting geopolitical interests with Moscow in the Middle East.

The author also predicts that the Turkish offensive may lead to clashes in other areas inhabited by Kurds, as well as to sent to the Afrina region additional Kurdish sub-units, provoking an unspecified consequences (*Ibidem*).

In spite of all this, according to Leonid Issaev, cooperation between Russians and Turks on Afrin is much more beneficial to them than confrontation, because relations with Kurds have never been based on long-term strategic cooperation, and Moscow used the "Kurdish card" only when the Kremlin's relations with the Arab world deteriorated and when it needed to reach a definite compromise with the countries of the Middle East, especially Turkey (Issaev 2018).

The Turkish military operation allowed Russia to achieve three goals: to weaken US influence in Syria, to push Kurds to negotiate with Damascus and to increase cooperation in Russia-Turkey relations. The first means the deterioration of Turkish-American relations, because the Kurds were one of the most important forces fighting the Islamic State. However, it should be remembered that while in Afghanistan the US troops have

not been stationed, in the case of further possible strikes by Ankara, they may already concern areas in which the Americans have directly or indirectly controlled since 2014, when they started financing and training the Kurds in order to defeat the Islamic State.

Despite defeating the Sunni organization, Washington realizes that the possible quick withdrawal of the US will not only contribute to the highly probable resurgence of ISIS, but also to strengthen the position of Russia and Iran in the region and may plunge Syria in the next Kurdish war with the Assad regime. In addition, the administration is seeking to improve relations with Baghdad, as it sees a counterbalance in Iraq to Iran's growing influence in the Middle East. It is no secret that the US did not accept the Kurdish referendum, warning the Kurdish side that in the event of a possible confrontation with Iraq they will not come to their rescue. According to Robert Stefanicki, the United States primarily wants stability in Iraq and maintaining the government there (Stefanicki 2017a).

On the other hand, it may not be possible for the US to support Kurds, among others through the delivery of 100 Humvee cars, despite official statements by President Trump about the suspension of military aid for Kurdish groups (Szyszko 2017). In spite of everything, the cooperation between the two entities seems to be the most likely, which may lead to bringing the Kurds closer to Moscow and negotiating with the Assad regime (Strachota 2018).

We have to agree with Rafal Rudnicki that reducing cooperation does not mean a complete break of cooperation between the Americans and Kurds, because the latter are in the Syrian conflict an important player, necessary to limit Tehran's influence in the region (Kulbaczewska-Figat 2018).

We can not forget about the most important goal of the Russians in the context of Kurdish policy, clearly visible in the military operation in question. Being aware of the good US-Kurdish relations, they will seek to weaken the position of the United States in the region, and to leave Washington in the Middle East and, more broadly for example in Ukraine, give a free hand for the free actions on the Russian side, and aim at a conflict between the US and Turkey, especially due to the fact that both these countries belong to the North Atlantic Treaty.

The Kremlin realizes that the existence of NATO from 1949, blocks the possibility of conquering Western Europe, and that the American-Turkish conflict may be an ideal way to weaken the Alliance, not so much in the military dimension as in the political

dimension. Besides, as Jarosław Kociszewski rightly points out, Washington provides arms to the Kurdish side, which is why Russian politicians and military officials always express contentment when “the American rocket burns the NATO tank” (Kociszewski 2018).

The desire to weaken the American position in Kurdistan is also visible in the way Russian analysts express their opinions in assessing international relations. According to Timur Akhmetov from the Russian Council for International Affairs, Russia is increasingly criticizing American activities in territories belonging to the Kurds, due to their refusal to the Syrian regime regarding access to oil deposits.

Also Leonid M. Issaev, a professor at the Department of Political Science at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow, said that the Kurds were US ally and part of the American coalition fighting the Islamic State, that is why Moscow wanted to show the world that the defense of Kurds is in the interests of the United States and abandoning them weakens Washington’s position in the region (Issaev 2018).

In turn, Ceng Sagnic, coordinator of the Kurdish Study at the Moshe Dayan Center in Israel, said that Moscow’s accusations against Kurds should be seen as attacks on the United States (after Wilgenburg 2018).

However, Heva Arabo presented the most accurate analysis of the Russian-American rivalry in Kurdistan. In his opinion, the Kurds became a direct victim of rivalry between Washington and Moscow in Syria. The analyst believes that Russia has too few arguments to oppose the United States and therefore is looking for a “substitute confrontation” such as in Deir Ezzor (Ibidem) and aims to undermine the American-Kurdish alliance, for example through the publication of Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem who emphasized that American aid for Kurds will not last long and that it is not given forever.

Such rhetoric, according to Alexander Schinis, serves as a formal justification for the future violence directed against Kurds by Ankara and encourages “reasonable” Kurdish forces to abandon the Americans and join the Russian geopolitical strategy while showing that Russia is the only “guarantor” of independence for Kurdistan (Schinis 2017). That is why the Russians changed their policy towards Kurds in Syria over time. While in earlier media reports they treated them as allies in the fight against radical Islamists, they eventually began to accuse of working with opponents of President Assad. Earlier,

the Russian mass media were extremely sympathetic to the Kurds, an example of which is, among others, Lavrov's appeal to involve this community in the Geneva negotiations on the future of Syria (Ibid).

In all likelihood, Moscow is seeking to abolish Western sanctions introduced after the annexation of Crimea and initiation of the war in eastern Ukraine, sharpened after the recent attack on the former Russian spy, Sergey Skripal and his daughter in the UK. The fact that suggested directly by the Sputnik portal that the Syrian Democratic Forces are branches created by the US with the task of cutting off Syria from its neighbors, that they conduct the same policy as Islamic State and are recognized by the citizens of Syria as "terrorists".

The change of Russian rhetoric towards the Kurds, according to the author of one of the analyzes, serves to abolish the anti-Russian sanctions, which can be proved by the fact that the above-mentioned content coincided with another vote in the US Congress on tightening these sanctions. The author indicates that the Kremlin, apart from the propaganda attack, did not make any additional restrictions on the Kurds - including it did not close their representative office in Moscow (Repetowicz 2017).

## **Economic relations between Russia and Kurdistan**

In this study, do not overlook the economic relations between Russia and Kurdistan, which is aware of the strategic importance of the areas occupied by Kurds, especially in Syria and Iraq – it invested four billion dollars in the oil, gas and uranium sector in 2016, becoming the most important foreign investor in northern Iraq. An increasing role is played by Rosneft in this region, which announced that it will finance a two-year contract for the purchase of Kurdish oil, and soon both parties have signed another agreement under which the Russian oil company will continue to buy Kurdish crude oil. She also announced the willingness to finance the gas pipeline, which would reach by 2020 as much as 30 billion m<sup>3</sup> annually (Warsaw Institute 2017 Foundation).

It should be stated that Rosneft's support came for Kurdistan at a decisive moment. The region desperately needed cash. The years of struggle against ISIS have caused that the Kurds lost almost 20 billion dollars, which meant that the government paid only 25% of salaries to its own officials (Walters 2017).

It is worth remembering that the Kremlin sells both arms and tanks to Iraq at the same time, which proves that it only seeks economic benefits coming from both countries, hoping that maintaining good relations with both entities, will retain influence in the Middle East and have an undefined influence on the community of Iraqi and Turkish Kurds, while not deteriorating political and economic relations with Baghdad, Ankara and Teheran (Surdel 2017, p. 17).

A special manifestation of economic competition for influence in Kurdistan is the pursuit of all parties to the Syrian conflict to take over the province in Deir Ezzor, which is rich in oil and other natural resources, including Syrian Koniko gas field, which has been under Kurdish control since September 2017 (*Ibidem*, p. 15). Russia in Kurdistan began to pursue more intensified interests primarily because the important Iraqi city of Kirkuk came under Kurdish control in 2014, which resulted in the transfer of Russian energy interests from Iran to Iraq, all the more that oil transport to seaports is carried out by Iraq or Turkey. Both Russian Gazprom Neft, which is developing oil-fields, and Rosneft, which sells Kurdish crude oil, must leave an open transport link in these countries. Therefore, the highly controversial opinion of the Barmin expert is the view that Russian investments in Kurdistan support the Kremlin's independence of the region, all the more so that it may mean that Ankara closes the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, which will inevitably lead to a decline in Russian investments in the region.

On the other hand, the representatives of the Moscow ruling team are aware of the attractiveness of investing in Kurdish oil, because it is cheap to extract (Barmin 2017). In turn, Eugene Kogan, an expert in defense and security, stressed that Russia has **probably** suggested Turkey to refrain from closing oil exports from northern Iraq. Kogan claims that the Turkish president must take into account Putin's opinion. The possibility of buying Kurdish oil by Russia stops Erdogan from potentially closing the pipeline (Fenton-Harvey, 2017).

However, according to Albert Akopyan, Russia strives to develop economic relations with Kurdistan and Iraq, and therefore it is in its interest to guarantee a "peace" between both sides. Such tactics of the Kremlin, according to the analyst, bring success, because not only Baghdad and Ebril accept his position, considering them to be more honest than the western, but also causes that Western countries fear of political risk and are

holding back investments in Kurdistan. Moscow uses this bypassing Kurdistan and begins the development of economic contacts with Kurds and Iraq, while the US and Turkey are lagging behind (Akopyan 2017).

## Conclusion

What will be the further Russian policy towards the Kurds? Currently, the answer to the above question is ambiguous and uncertain. It seems that the key derivative of the relationship of Russia will be relations of Moscow with Tehran and Ankara. Both Iran and primarily Turkey, due to their reluctance to this community, constitute a decisive problem for Russia in the context of a possible wider cooperation between Russia and the Kurds. In addition, much will depend on the latter's contacts with Washington.

In the event of intensification of their mutual ties, Russia may use unambiguous blackmail against the Kurdish side, consisting of suggestions to leave them to the grace and disfavor of Turkey. With the collapse of such an alliance, Moscow may suggest strengthening relations, which, however, would be conditioned by Kurdish concessions in favor of President Assad and the admission of Russian companies to operate in Kurdistan.

This last solution in the long-term would, however, lead to a gradual curbing of the Kurds by Moscow and Damascus, which would be unfavorable for them, because the two countries, especially Russia, not willing to exacerbate the relations with Turkey, Iran and Iraq in the Kurdish interest, will not actively support independence Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan.

There is no doubt that the Kurds are in an extremely difficult geopolitical situation, because all the powers involved in the Syrian conflict lead to complicated and ambiguous games, based on one hand on the coquetry of a given opponent, and on the other, on undefined political and economic blackmail. Iraqi and Turkish Kurds can not afford to infuse relations with both Moscow and Washington.

On the other hand, in the era of not fully defined policy of Donald Trump and his administration in the Middle East, the increase of Moscow, Tehran and Ankara role seems likely, which may be proved by the recent joint conference of these three countries in Astana devoted to the future of Syria. There are many indications that they are these states, not the US, that will play a decisive role in the post-war perspective of Syria

and Iraq. Therefore, we should consider the future of Kurdish independence aspirations in not very clear colors, and the Kurdish side should not count on the wider support of Russia.

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