

VIEWING PRESENT AS HISTORY: THE STATE AND FUTURE OF TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS

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Introduction

Bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia have been dominated by continuous instability in the last three decades almost entirely due to the lack of a permanent balance in political relations despite the formalizing impact of economic and trade relations. Bilateral political relations are formalized by the direct impact of the expectations and interests of both parties, which occasionally differ radically under inevitable pressure from global and regional developments. Both countries are under the shade of the personal expectations and relations of strong leaders who call the shots in almost every aspect of political life, which emerges as yet another decisive factor. This prevents the parties from developing a permanent and common perspective on regional and global matters since both parties have cultivated a strong mutual distrust as a legacy of geopolitical and historical competition.

The lack of a common perspective is mainly a consequence of the unstable relations the parties – each known historically as a European power – have with the Euro-Atlantic world. Each party pursues a priority to forge a bond with the Euro-Atlantic community focusing on its own expectations and interests, which is the reason why bilateral relations that are independent from that world and are based on a different regional/global vision cannot be established. The relations between the two countries have an influence on a broad geography the limits of which can be extended from the Black Sea to the Caucasus and from Central Asia to the Middle East in a way to cover almost the entire Eurasian region. That is exactly why the said relations cannot be

considered within the sole framework of bilateral relations. An in-depth analysis of Turkish-Russian relations is only possible in the light of regional and global developments against a historical background. The recent security-focused and aggressive approach by Russia has caused significant fluctuations in Turkish-Russian relations. This plays a crucial role in shaping the structure of the relations the two countries pursue with Western countries as well as Turkey's foreign and security policies. In a similar vein, Russia's agenda on key priority matters such as energy, trade and economy, not to mention regional security and foreign policy, is very much determined by Turkey's choices focusing on the Euro-Atlantic community, which it cannot/will not give up. That is why Russia is a balancing and driving force in the eyes of Turkish decision-makers, specifically against the Western world, in delivering Turkey's regional priorities. However, it is mostly deemed as an opponent or obstacle. Similarly, Russia has considered Turkey a partner that could be cooperated with under certain conditions but mostly a barrier to fulfilling Russia's priorities and interests in its immediate vicinity.

The perspective and attitudes of the Western world towards Russia and Turkey, a priority for both countries, impact both relations with these two players and the mutual perspectives of the two on each other. The Euro-Atlantic community defines Russia as a foe forged in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union but nevertheless a candidate for a partner who could be cooperated with, although in a

limited fashion. Gradually emerging as an opponent starting from early 2000s following the enlargement of the EU and NATO, Russia has been marginalized once again after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and, following the conflict with the Ukraine over Crimea, has been further labeled as an open threat that should be sanctioned.

Engaged in accession negotiations with the EU and acting as part of the Euro-Atlantic security umbrella for almost 70 years, Turkey, on the other hand, has been regarded by its Western allies as a flank or mostly front country. Although Turkey's view on Russia as a threat did not cause any problems on the Turkish side, this led to new issues starting from 2000s under the influence of the changing conjunctural policy. Discrepancies between Turkey on one side and the EU and the US on the other in terms of methodologies to be employed to define and eliminate regional issues and threats emerging in the Black Sea basin, Iraq, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean led to reinforced tendencies in Turkish foreign policy to act autonomously and even independently.

To that end, the two countries which considered the other as an opponent/threat almost until the end of 1990s started to display a tendency to develop a rather independent foreign policy. The developments in the 2000s provided an affirmative response to the question on whether the parties could collaborate to ensure acting independently from Western countries at least within the context of regional matters. The synergy created under the strong governments of two powerhouse leaders in the early 2000s is the main reason behind the emergence of debates on whether there is a regionally and globally effective alliance in place. Bilateral relations were dominated by hostility for about a year after the warplane shoot-down incident but attained a level in July 2018 that "really made some jealous" as President Erdogan put it.¹ Erdogan meant Western countries, chiefly the U.S., when he referred to 'some' in that statement.

Mutual dialogue and interaction created a new space for bilateral cooperation under the severe impact of a basically anti-Western geopolitical discourse adopted by Russia and Turkey and the changing perception on Eurasia. Given the progress of developments, it is hard to say that this cooperation is shaped by rational and realistic approaches.

Ideological, emotional and limited national considerations are usually more decisive. On the other hand, it is evident that bilateral relations fell short of being institutional. Although a meticulously-planned, high-level political body directly controlled by the presidents with the ambitious name of the *High Level Cooperation Council* was established in 2010 to offer joint and permanent solutions to regional issues and stabilize relations, the uncontrolled unfolding of events in 2015 pointed to a lack of institutionalization. Such lack of institutionalization renders the fate of bilateral relations dependent on the tendencies and expectations of both leaders. This is also the reason for the failure to adopt a joint perspective to eliminate the negative consequences of the competition in the Caucasus and Central Asia since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, such structures failed to prevent the instant disappearance of the security umbrella that took 20 years plus great challenges to build in the Black Sea basin, which is described as an area of cooperation, despite severe criticism from Turkey's conventional allies. Events unfolding in Crimea and the Ukraine created yet another huge threat, with the differing approaches and expectations of Turkey and Russia destroying the grounds for a joint vision just as it had been the case in the aftermath of the warplane shoot-down incident.

The foregoing kept the parties from building visionary, permanent and stable relations and led to competition and, ironically, emerged as the major points pushing the parties to cooperate as well. Regional and global developments created by geopolitical competition, coupled with the disagreements with Western countries, force the parties to engage in permanent political relations and diplomatic cooperation. Two countries with enough historical experience to not trust each other are apparently forced into a fragile and sensitive cooperation by their wish to influence and even determine regional and global balances. It is a fact that bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia assumed a different tactic, even a strategic dimension, following recent developments in Syria. It is critical that the parties have been able to come up with common ground despite radically different expectations and interests when they established, together with Iran, the Astana Group. In addition to regional developments, the fact that Turkey did not get the interest and support it expected from its Western allies after the military coup attempt in Turkey resulted in Turkey's

¹ "Erdogan: Rusya ile İlişkilerimiz Birliğini Kiskandırıyor", Yeni Şafak, July 26, 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/erdogan-rusya-ile-iliskilerimiz-birlerini-kiskandiriyor-3386237>.

redefining Russia as a partner which could be cooperated with in terms of regional and global issues, including security. The construction of the TurkStream natural gas pipeline, the ongoing cooperation for constructing a nuclear power plant and, most importantly, Turkey's purchasing of air defense systems from Russia despite objections from its NATO-member allies are construed as concrete signs that cooperation between the two countries has set sail for new horizons.

In brief, understanding the nature of Turkish-Russian bilateral relations requires a full grasp of the history and limitations of bilateral relations as well as a consideration of the relations both countries maintain with other regional

players, chiefly with the Western world. The parties occasionally have radically differing approaches to security and foreign policy within the context of NATO, the EU, Black Sea security, Crimea, the Ukraine and, most recently, Syria. Such approaches deserve a thorough analysis. This paper aims to use such a perspective to provide a closer view of the cooperation-competition cycle dominating the recent period of bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia with a focus on common and differing interests and on the basis of events, incidents and regions. Such an attempt inherently requires an evaluation, in consideration of the historical process, of the reasons behind the similar or differing perspectives of the parties on regional and global issues.

A Brief History of Bilateral Relations

Turkish-Russian relations have a history of more than 500 years when considering the year 1492, when the Grand Principality of Moscow and the Ottoman State had their first diplomatic contact at the ambassador level. This history is depicted as being dominated by fundamental strife, conflicts and wars, and based on suspicion and distrust, rather than amity and cooperation.² The Turkish discourse on the matter is negative, a reflection of defeats suffered in the 12 massive wars during the Empire period. This negative discourse points to continuous power struggles between the two empires. It focuses on developments that highlight 'enmity' and are shaped by competition, usually against the interests of the Turkish side. An overview of the relations show that the Ottoman statesmen did not pay much attention to Russia, which they extenuated, and governed Russian 'affairs' via the Crimean Khans during the 15th and 16th centuries, which can be regarded as the early period of the bilateral relationship. As a result, they could not obtain sufficient information on Russia. Things started to change in the 17th century when Russians came down to the Black Sea and took control of the Caucasus. Starting from the 18th century, relations evolved into a history of wars and diplomacy which was shaped by the Russian priority to control the Straits and the Russian policy to expand along the Turkish borders. Turkish-Russian relations assumed the role of another field

of play in the Great Game after the notorious diplomatic term 'the Eastern Question' was devised, referring to the division of the Ottoman soil between the British Empire and the Russian Empire until the end of the 19th century, when Emperor Nicholas II of Russia styled the Ottoman Empire as 'the sick man of Europe' for the first time. This period marks the start of a process to strike a balance in bilateral relations, a process that also included Western powers. Great Britain and France, two big powers of the era, regarded it an important matter for maintaining the balance of power in Europe to ensure the Ottoman Empire continued to exist, as shown by the example of the 1854-1856 Crimean War.

As a result, Turkish historic literature and therefore the Turkish public continuously marginalized Russians and described them as their main or *primary* enemy under the 'Muscovite' image. Furthermore, Russia was defined as an expansionist power laying a claim on a broad area extending from the Black Sea to the Caucasus, from the Balkans to Eastern Europe and down to the Mediterranean in a bid to 'have access to warm waters'. In short, the narration is rather negative and 'competitive'.

In the same period, the view Russians held about Turks was not positive, either.³ Considered to be equal to

² Dr. Akdes Nimet Kurat, Türkiye ve Rusya, Kültür Bakanlığı, Ankara, 1990; Türk-Rus ilişkilerinde 500 Yıl: 1491-1992, Ankara, 12-14 Aralık 1992, TTK; S. F. Oreškova, "Rusya ve Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Arasındaki Savaşlar: Sebepleri ve Kimi Tarihi Sonuçları", Gülten Kazgan and Natalya Ulçenko (Eds.), Düünden Bugüne Türkiye ve Rusya: Politik, Ekonomik ve Kültürel İlişkiler, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2003.

³ See Ahmet Şimşek ve Nigar Meherremova Cengiz, "Rusya Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Türk-Osmanlı İmgesi", Türk Tarih Eğitimi Dergisi, vol.4, No.2, 2015, p.225-258; Nigar Maharramova Cengiz and Ahmet Şimşek, "Sovyetler Birliği Döneminde Rusya'da Okutulan Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Türk İmajı", Cumhuriyet Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi, Vol.13, No.26, 2017, p.37-66.

Turkish history, the Ottoman history was expressed as an expansionist, 'tyrannical' and oppressive history, specifically in consideration of the Balkans. The Russian narration of history commonly employed the discourse of saving Istanbul and the Straits from Turks or capturing them. The discourse and perception of 'enmity', becoming more significant in a way to include 'religious animosity', focused on the struggle to control and free a broad area that Russia considered its natural expansion field.

The complex and problematic demographic structure that shaped – as a consequence of forced migration – the broad geographical area extending from the Balkans to the Caucasus and from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean in a way to include Anatolia is the most remarkable legacy the struggle between the empires bequeathed to the modern Republic of Turkey and the Soviet Union. This legacy is still active due to the threat and security perceptions determining the policies of former Soviet Republics which gained their independence in the post-Cold War era. In brief, it is the sign of a deep and unchanging mutual distrust that the discourse and perception created by a competition-based, almost-ossified thought system had direct implications on the Turkish-Russian bilateral political relations in the post-imperial, modern age.

Despite such a threat perception and overall distrust shaped by this general framework, it is impossible to say that there was not a single period between the parties when the focus shifted to cooperation. The early bilateral relations between the Republic of Turkey and Bolshevik/Soviet Russia, two new states established after the World War I, is a good example of such periods. The attitude dominating the rapprochement of the two young states as influenced by their relations with the capitalist-colonialist West essentially underlined cooperation and solidarity.⁴

During 1920s and 1930s, which could be regarded as the initial period for modern-day bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia, the main priorities of the two new regimes were to guarantee territorial integrity, establish a sound and stable economic and political order, and gain international recognition. The treaties of Moscow and Kars as well as

the 1925 Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality, signed around that period, not only determined and secured the borders between the countries but were also considered as an expression of the similar views of the parties on world policy and of their wish to abstain from causing problems to one another. The Treaty of 1925 was signed at a time when Turkey had issues in its relations with Britain over the Mosul Question, with Italy over Mediterranean security and the Aegean islands, and with France over border disagreements including Hatay. Therefore, the said treaties were meaningful and important for the young Republic of Turkey in the sense that they marked the first step for establishing constructive and balancing relations with another great power at a time when it had major issues with the other great powers of the day.

During the period between two World Wars, there was not a major disagreement between Turkey and the Soviet Russia. However, the public and decision makers did not cultivate a thought that prioritized cooperation in order to build a common future. The Soviet Union turned a blind eye to Turkey's fight against anti-regime leftist/communist groups in return for Turkey's dropping the cause of Turks in the geographical area today known as Eurasia, in line with the principle of *Peace at Home, Peace in the World*. This indicates that mutual cooperation does not have any exclusive, long-term and deep scope or aim except for great power policies.

The most significant consequence of the failure to establish a deep-rooted cooperation in this period is the negative developments during and after World War II. The Soviet notification of March 1945 to Turkey that the 1925 Treaty of Neutrality and Friendship would not be extended led to a tension in bilateral relations once again.⁵ This tension was further exacerbated when Soviet Russia demanded the revision of the status of the Straits and the deployment of Soviet military troops in the region on the grounds that the Montreux Convention was outdated. Territorial demands including Kars and Ardahan led to the rapid reinstatement of 'distrust' both in discourse and in perception.⁶ Pressurized by a severe threat of Communism by Soviet Russia throughout the 1940s, Turkey reinforced its political, economic and military relations with the US-led Western

⁴ See Kamuran Gürün, *Türk-Sovyet İlişkileri (1920–1953)*, Ankara, TTK Yayınları, 1991; Selami Kılıç, *Türk-Sovyet İlişkilerinin Doğuşu*, İstanbul, Dergâh Yayınları, 1998; Stefanos Yerasimos, *Kurtuluş Savaşı'nda Türk-Sovyet İlişkileri 1917-1923*, İstanbul, Boyut Yayınları, 2000.

⁵ Jamil Hasanli, *Stalin and the Turkish Crisis of the Cold War, 1945–1953*, The Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series, Lexington Books, 2011.

⁶ Suat Bilge, *Güç Komşuluk Türkiye-Sovyetler Birliği İlişkileri 1920-1964*, Ankara, İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1992.

world. The main goal of Ankara for the ensuing period was to become an inseparable member of Western international organizations. In other words, the Russian animosity or threat took on an ideological dimension when the Turkish state's reasoning held it equal to anti-Communism and abused it. In line with this process, Turkey underwent a series of changes in its domestic political structure, switching to a multi-party political life in 1946. Starting from May 1950, the country was governed by the Democrat Party. This series of changes and transformations corresponded to a radical difference between the parties within the context of values and ideological discourse.

In brief, Turkey introduced changes to its domestic political organization in line with its foreign policy choices and reshaped its regime and social structure while the Turkish decision-makers and public defined the Soviet Russia/Russians 'once again' as an ideological *other/threat* pursuing destructive aspirations on Turkish soil and sovereignty. The threat perception deepened by the international conjuncture resulted in not only Turkey's becoming a NATO member but also the re-defining of Soviet Russia as the 'other' or 'enemy'. Such othering assumed an ideological dimension when coupled with anti-communism, pushing Turkey closer to the US and the Euro-Atlantic security organizations, which all adopted an anti-Soviet *Containment* policy, thus driving Turkey further away from the Soviet Union. The Russian side,

on the other hand, perceived Turkey as a front country of the Western/American/NATO line and did not even consider any cooperation options. In this period, it is not possible to speak of Turkish-Russian/Soviet bilateral relations independent from Euro-Atlantic relations.

Even during such a period of hostility, there were times of rapprochement between Turkey and Soviet Russia. These times corresponded to moments when Turkey had issues with its Western allies, reminiscent of today's developments. For instance, Russia was emphasized as an alternative when Turkey faced a US and Western embargo due to the Cyprus Peace Operation. This also emphasized that Turkey could pursue alternative policies, specifically economic and trade policies, independent from the West.

A final point to raise regarding this period is that Soviet Union was regarded as a partner eligible for economic and trade cooperation both in the establishment period of the Republic and during the Cold War. Turkey closely monitored Soviet Russia's successful ventures in industry and agriculture, tending to benefit the Soviet experience in modernization, planned development and industrialization. This could be regarded as a decisive factor that set the basis for the establishment of Turkish-Russian bilateral relations in the post-Cold War period rising essentially from economic and trade grounds.

The Collapse of the Soviet Union: Competition or Cooperation?

The changing borders and emerging nation states following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed for the rise of different geographical *imaginings*, both throughout the world and in Turkey. For Turkey, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant the elimination of a historical threat, the dissolution of the archenemy, and the emergence of a historical opportunity that allowed for the re-establishment of relations with a Turkic geography which had to be neglected for years. This was deemed by those ruling Turkey as the emergence of an opportunity to re-unite the Turkish world from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China and set sail for new horizons under Turkey's lead.

Following the end of the bipolar world, Turkey's threat perception focusing on Russia evolved. This evolution pointed to an essential change in not only the nature and structure of bilateral relations but also the structure of the international system. Turkish decision makers back then believed they

had an opportunity to re-interpret Turkey's geopolitics at a time when the Soviet threat was eliminated, giving way to a new space of opportunity. Therefore, they attempted to re-define Turkey's relations with its neighbors. Such re-interpretations undoubtedly introduced a basic change in the perception of the position of Russia, the new player, and the role it assumed on the international arena. Russia was not equal to the Soviet Union, and it was required to re-calculate and define the position of this new player in the regional and global balance of power. This meant both new opportunities and new threats for Turkey. It was asked whether a country which had been deemed the 'arch enemy' for more than two centuries was no longer a primary threat. The most basic question seeking its answer in the transition period was what kind of new victories could be obtained against the Russian Federation, the new player that was weakened and was on the downgrade as a heavyweight player in the international arena. In such a context, 'competition' was the main concept

that shaped policies. Nobody had even the slightest idea of prioritizing cooperation with the 'new', emerging actor and building different and friendly relations with it.

The governing theme for the post-Cold War period was to gain geopolitical and strategic advantage, and improve relations with the Turkic republics established specifically in Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁷ This was a period when approaches shaped over Turkey's geopolitical significance became clearer. Turkey was defined as the 'model country' for the former Soviet Republics, and doors to new opportunities opened in front of Turkey. It is possible to say that Turkish public opinion immediately adopted such a discourse within a highly-emotional *elder brother* understanding and as a requirement of the historical legacy.⁸ The Russian Federation was the largest obstacle Turkey faced in implementing these policies. The difference it had from the Soviet Union is that, while it was still considered an opponent, it was of a size that a struggle for influence could be waged against it. As a consequence, Turkey actively pursued an anti-Russian attitude in the Caucasus, and later on in conflicts such as those over Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia, which were regarded as 'frozen conflicts'. It is seen that Turkey explicitly initiated a struggle for influence with Russia under the discourse of 'the Great Turkic World from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China' in the Caucasus and the Central Asian republics, which had recently won their independence, and over a large area stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia. This was the basic approach that set the overall tone of Turkish-Russian relations throughout 1990s and shaped Turkey's relations with not only its Western allies but also the targeted Turkic World.

Russia responded to this approach by highlighting competition starting from 1993 through the new Security and Foreign Policy doctrines entering into force after domestic order was secured. The dominant discourse in this period was one that could be considered a conventional discourse of competition with a perceived adversary.

For the early period, it could be claimed that both parties adopted different opinions in their struggle for influence in the area which would later be frequently named Eurasia, that one of them aimed to maintain the former order and retain its influence while the other sought to secure the support of the West and establish a totally new and disparate order. This discrepancy is the main reason for the competition that governed bilateral relations.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Turkey would back down from its competitive policy that it pursued after the end of the Cold War. One of the underlying factors for such a change in Turkey's Cold War-period perception focusing on Russia as an 'opponent or threat', a view that dominated the first half of the 1990s, was that Turkey had not benefited, at least politically, from the competition or struggle it had with Russia, specifically over Eurasia.

An assertion for a reason of this transformation is that Turkey perceived its incapacity starting from mid-1990s and thus stepped back. Indeed, the failure of the Western-backed *active* policy which Turkey pursued, at least initially, to gain an advantage over Russia in terms of Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya and Abkhazia conflicts to lead to desired outcomes resulted in a fundamental change in the policy-making process. Turkey's Kurdish issue was a decisive factor in Turkey's backing down from this competition or switching to another discourse/style. This was the most sensitive issue not only in Turkey's domestic policy but also in Turkish-Russian relations in the 1990s. 1993 and 1994 were two consecutive years when PKK terrorism surged, and Russia played the PKK card effectively and intensively against Turkey. Russia did not approve of the attitude Turkey adopted in the Caucasus conflicts, and the PKK thus evolved into a weapon Russia could employ against Turkey.⁹

The emerging understanding that trade and economic relations between the two countries could lay the foundations for long-term, constructive relations which bore the potential

⁷ Mustafa Aydın, "Between Euphoria and Realpolitik: Turkish Policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus", Tareq Y. Ismael and Mustafa Aydın (Eds.), *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: a changing role in world politics*, Ashgate, 2003, p.139-160; F. S. Larrabee and I. O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Arlington, RAND, 2003.

⁸ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey in the Post-Cold War Era: In Search of Identity", *Middle East Journal*, Vol.49, No.1, 1995, p.48-68; Şener Aktürk, "Counter Hegemonic Visions and Reconciliation Through the Past: The Case of Turkish Eurasianism", *Ab Imperio*, No.4, 2004, p.207-238.

⁹ Robert W. Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel, and Russia, 1991-2000: The Kurdish and Islamist Question*, Kurdish Studies Series 2, Mazda Publication, 2001.

to spread in the surrounding geography and would set the basis for bilateral cooperation also contributed to this transformation.¹⁰ Indeed, figures show that trade relations started in the early 1990s through suitcase trading and then accelerated and deepened, with the bilateral trade volume increasing seven fold in the 2000s. Energy was the decisive/transformational factor in that period. The fact that natural gas evolved into the primary energy resource for Turkey while Russia emerged as a reliable partner that could provide this resource, rendered energy a decisive factor in shaping bilateral relations and striking a balance that prioritized cooperation. Energy cooperation between the countries started via the agreements signed in the 1980s, and grew deeper in the aftermath of the Blue Stream agreement concluded in 1997. Thanks to the foundations laid over that period, Russia proved to be the most reliable and stable partner for energy cooperation on Turkey's road to realize its economic and political goals. For Russia, on the other hand, Turkey was the right address to ensure access to a huge market without having intermediaries in between, and thus gain influence as well as a reliable customer. In brief, Turkey found in Russia the reliable partner it needed to procure much-needed energy for its growing economy, while Russia secured a rapidly developing market and a reliable customer. This meant a long-term interdependence in bilateral relations.

This complex network of relations set the foundations for a '*virtual rapprochement*' which enabled a change in discourse that carried the two countries over to a 'multidimensional partnership' from mutual cooperation

and understanding. This is a constructive rapprochement specifically owing to the fact that decision-makers abstained from producing discourse which could lead to tension.¹¹ In virtual rapprochement, the parties mutually accept the importance of cooperation in a series of fields that would help the development of common interests. Furthermore, they keep their communication channels open to ensure the continuity of relations even in the case of a sudden crisis. However, mutual fear, distrust and suspicion still make an impact as the basic decisive factors in the eyes of the political elite and the public.

In brief, the mutual perception and discourse based on conflict and competition dominating the bilateral relations started to gradually evolve in the late 1990s under the influence of trade and economic relations, the perception of interest in Eurasia, and anti-terrorism efforts. International developments and the disappointments both parties suffered in their relations with the Western world also acted as a catalyst. The first great disappointment Russia had was that the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, three members of the former Eastern Bloc, started their journey to become NATO members in December 1997. In the same period, Turkey was ostracized from EU membership during the Luxembourg Summit. In a similar vein, both countries suffered from economic crises in 1997 and 1998. Such developments not only separated the two countries on an opinion basis from the Western world, which was considered a priority partner by both sides, but also created the notion that they could engage in close cooperation politically, commercially and economically.

¹⁰ Lerna Yanik, "Allies or Partners? An Appraisal of Turkey's Ties to Russia, 1991–2007", *East European Quarterly* Vol.XLI, No.3, 2007, p.349-370.

¹¹ Duygu Sezer, "Turkish-Russian Relations in the 1990s: From Adversity to 'Virtual Rapprochement'", Alan Makovsky and Sabri Sayan (Eds.), *Turkey's New World: Changing Dynamics in Turkish Foreign Policy*, Washington D.C., Washington Institute for Near East Policy Papers. 2000, p.92-115; Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, "Russia: The Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership", Barry Rubin and Kemal Kirişçi (eds.), *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power*, London, Lynne Rienner Publications. 2001, p.151-2.

Attempts to Shift from Bilateral Relations to a Regional and Global Vision

Almost since the beginning of the 2000s, Eurasianism has been the concept used frequently to define the regional and global cooperation of the two countries. The early Eurasianist discourse emerged as an alternative approach that prioritized cooperation with Russia in parallel with the instability in Turkey's domestic policy as well as the blocked EU process, and under the constructive impacts of economic and commercial priorities. The most remarkable statement in this period came from General Tuncer Kılıç, a former secretary general of the National Security Council (MGK), who said in March 2002 that "Turkey needed to cooperate with Russia and Iran against the EU". There was an initial attempt to define Eurasianism as a new version of Kemalism, and a requirement and reflection of Atatürk's foreign policy. It was considered to be a well-placed opportunity to question Turkey's EU- and US-centered foreign policy and an original and cutting-edge geopolitical vision providing Turkey alternative initiatives. The interest in Eurasianism and this movement making an influence under the name 'nationalism' lost its importance as an alternative political movement under the impact of domestic political developments in the subsequent period, the official acknowledgment of Turkey as an EU candidate country during the Helsinki Summit of December 1999 and the progress of Turkish-Russian rapprochement. This movement will re-appear in other versions focusing on Turkish-Russian relations under new discourses such as neo-Ottomanism and 'zero problems with neighbors' during the subsequent Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments.¹²

The phrase *strategic partnership*, which would later be used frequently, was coined for the first time during this period. This was the start of a new period when it became a choice or priority to leave issues behind or at least aside without handling them, and the discourse 'cooperation instead of competition' dominated bilateral relations. Eurasia secured a place on the agenda/at the heart of these relations following the simultaneous suggestion by İsmail Cem, then Foreign

Minister, to establish political and economic cooperation in the Moscow-Ankara-Central Asia triangle, a.k.a. the 'Strategic Triangle', and form a working group to identify such areas of cooperation. This is a sharp turn: For the first time, both parties acknowledged this region, which they traditionally defined as a strategic priority and competed for, as an area for cooperation.¹³

The document called the *Action Plan on Cooperation in Eurasia: From Bilateral Cooperation to a Multidimensional Partnership* signed on November 16, 2001 was the first text indicating that bilateral relations aimed at cooperation in Eurasia. In summary, the document asserted that, as a consequence of radical global changes, the two players were required to prioritize developing a common perspective on regional issues, and a space which needed to be shaped on the basis of friendship and mutual trust was cultivated.¹⁴ The parties declared that they would deliberate on not only those matters concerning bilateral relations but also international matters concerning both countries to focus on developing common strategies, an initial indicator on how bilateral relations would unfold during the next decade. In other words, the Action Plan recorded the idea that Turkey and Russia could create the grounds required for new, pragmatic and alternative cooperation, an idea that had started to reign on both sides. Subsequently, the signing of a military cooperation agreement between the two countries in 2002 meant Turkey, a NATO member, and Russia, its historical opponent, created a new field for cooperation that could stretch from the Black Sea into the surrounding geography. This showed that the competition-based traditional discourse which was used to define Turkish-Russian relations was swiftly abandoned, signaling the start of a new era that highlighted cooperation.

In brief, bilateral relations were dominated by a rapid transformation starting from the early 2000s. This transformation was influenced by the foregoing domestic elements

¹² Emre Erşen, "Geopolitical Traditions in Turkey: Turkish Eurasianism", Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (Eds.), *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, Rowman and Littlefield, London, 2017, s.263-281; Emre Erşen, "The Evolution of 'Eurasia' as a Geopolitical Concept in Post-Cold War Turkey", *Geopolitics*, No.18, 2013, p.39.

¹³ Özgen Acar, "Ankara-Moskova-Orta Asya Stratejik Üçgeni", *Cumhuriyet*, 11 Sept. 2001.

¹⁴ Sami Kohen, "Rusya ile yeni ortaklık", *Milliyet*, 23 Nov. 2001.

that governed bilateral relations as well as international developments and the attitudes both parties adopted in terms of such developments. A new era had begun, one that was controlled by the new leaders rising to power in both countries, and dominated and shaped by centralized, strong single party rule on both sides, and saw the establishment of sustainable relations. The old understanding, which once focused on two countries fighting against each other and saw each other as a fundamental security threat, was replaced by one that cultivated strategic partners with a focus on cooperation. The parties rather highlighted trade relations, compartmentalizing and thus keeping isolated the issues that could lead to conflicts, and strived to forge a new approach which focused on spreading cooperation to neighboring areas under the name Eurasia and was based on the premise of two countries with similar interests.

Erdogan-Putin Cooperation

The new approach on bilateral relations became more evident when some radical changes took place in the dynamics setting Turkey's foreign policy-making process after the AKP rose to a single party rule. The team of leaders shaped by the dominant ideology in the Cold War era was then out of the political scene. The new decision-makers in the country started to act within an approach that differed from the understanding set by the ideological polarization during the Cold War. Developments in the two decades after the Cold War also affected the fundamental values and foreign policy principles of both sides. Bilateral relations developed under the impact of the new foreign policy approach of the AKP on a new plane which had basically been established in the second half of the 1990s and was shaped around *multidimensionality*, and had pragmatic priorities rather than ideological ones.¹⁵ The priority that then shaped Turkey's new perception of Russia was the perception of a *trading state* which scored a rapid economic growth and put trade relations at the heart of the general foreign policy-making processes.¹⁶ In this context, Russia was defined as a stable, essential and reliable trade partner.

It is worth stating that Turkey did not entirely push aside its relations prioritizing the West. During the early days of

The international environment also favored the development of such relations. International developments that made a positive influence on bilateral relations as well as the discourse dominating these relations included the developments in Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent dismissal of the motion for a mandate to send US troops to Iraq over Turkey, Russia's opposition to the resolution of the UN Security Council to use power, the similar reactions by Turkey and Russia against the Black Sea-based security discourse by the US, and the joint steps taken to that end. Further developments contributing to Turkey's classification, together with Russia, in the West's 'axis of the excluded' included Turkey's refusal to join in Western sanctions on Iran, and its efforts to improve relations with Syria, which was isolated by the West specifically after the assassination of Rafic Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon.

AKP rule, EU accession was still the top priority, specifically in terms of domestic political balances, and relations with the US were still important and sensitively handled. To that end, the AKP's approach was dubbed a kind of 'soft Euro-Asianism'. This approach attempted to re-define pragmatism within a multidimensional foreign policy and still emphasized the priority of the Euro-Atlantic axis for Turkey.¹⁷ During that period, Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate country for EU accession during the Summit of Heads of State and Government of the EU Member States in Helsinki on December 10-11, 1999, and was clearly and explicitly declared to be on an equal footing with the other candidate states. The period between 2001 and 2005 was when efforts focused on shaping bilateral relations with Russia on the basis of economic and trade priorities and within a pragmatic approach. This also marked a period when Turkey's relations with the EU were bound to a schedule in the light of the Accession Partnership Document and within the context of the National Program. In the meantime, Turkey continued to issue and enforce legislative packages for harmonization to meet the political criteria, a prerequisite for the start of accession negotiations, and to launch domestic reforms which expanded the scope of fundamental rights and freedoms as well as reinforcing

¹⁵ Şener Aktürk, "Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War (1992-2002)", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.7, No.3, 2006, p.337-364.

¹⁶ Kemal Kirişçi, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No.40, 2009, p.29-57.

¹⁷ Ziya Öniş and Ş. Yılmaz, "Between Europeanisation and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey During the AKP Era", *Turkish Studies*, Vol.10, No.1, 2009, p.13.

and guaranteeing the existing legislation and practices in a number of fields including democracy, rule of law, freedom of thought and expression, and human rights. Relations reached a peak when it was decided during the Brussels Summit of December 17, 2004 that Turkey had sufficiently met the political criteria and accession negotiations could start on October 3, 2005. As result, it is clear that, in the early 2000s, Turkey attempted to establish balanced and complementary relations with both the West and Russia for the sake of making a multidimensional, balanced and pragmatic foreign policy, and presented a profile as an ideal partner for the West and Russia alike.

In such an overall atmosphere, the years 2004 and 2005 were decisive in shaping today's complicated bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia. The leaders of the two countries met frequently in a matter of two years starting with the visit of Abdullah Gul, the then Foreign Minister, to Moscow on February 23-26, 2004. Putin's visit to Turkey on December 5-6, 2004 was a milestone in bilateral relations. He became the first Russian head of state to visit Turkey in 32 years. The two leaders met four times in a year after Putin's visit.¹⁸ The visit of then President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to the Russian Federation on June 28-30, 2006 upon invitation by President Putin can be added to the series of such visits as it marked the first visit by a Turkish President to the Russian Federation following the establishment of the latter. As a result, these two years, which also included 2005, dubbed as *annus mirabilis*, were the spring of bilateral relations when concrete steps were taken for institutionalizing relations.¹⁹ Putin explained his views on political relations as follows: "Our relations started to change after the end of the bipolar world. There are positive developments. Our countries do not have any remaining commitments regarding blocs. We have started to consider our own interests. Interestingly, there were many wars in the past but we do not have even a single issue to cause any conflicts today. There is no reason for competition."²⁰ Prime Minister Erdogan responded to these remarks, saying the parties had totally overlapping views on the state of the region and on the matters regarding the maintaining of global stability. Considering how the developments unfolded, it is seen that the parties preferred

to proceed slowly and cautiously despite the foregoing remarks. The reason behind such cautious behavior was the persistent mutual fear, distrust and suspicion still haunting the political elite and the public despite the fact that the parties had already mutually acknowledged the importance of cooperation in a range of areas which could help develop common interests. The main element feeding such suspicion and distrust is the international developments and the differing attitudes and positions of the parties against these developments.

The period between 2005 and 2008 was one when, from Russia's perspective, the Western threat gained significance once again due to the enlargement of the EU and NATO, and Putin frequently made general remarks, specifically within the context of Color Revolutions, to criticize the Western policies aiming at influencing and controlling countries in the close vicinity of Russia. There was a growing tension between Russia and the Western world, specifically the US. The surface cause of this tension was the US intention to deploy missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic as well as the persistent US criticism against Russia in terms of democratization in the aftermath of the NATO and EU enlargement. In return, Putin explicitly criticized international organizations such as NATO and OSCE, which Turkey is a member of and attaches significance to. He then went on to suspend the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) before declaring that Russia was the target of a US-led threat. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence, he also criticized the making of decisions on internationally controversial matters despite Russia's opposition and without reaching an agreement. Rising regional tensions initially with the Ukraine and then with Georgia on pricing natural gas could also be added to the tally. Turkey responded to the global and regional developments led by this tension with suspicion and concern.

In the same period, the spring between Turkey and the EU continued, with Turkey using its growing economy and improving trade relations in an attempt to establish its influence in its close vicinity. Although Turkey then had

¹⁸ Prime Minister Erdogan's first visit to Russia to open the Turkish Trade Center in Moscow on January 10-12, 2005; Erdogan's attendance to the ceremony marking the 60th Anniversary of Victory in World War II in Moscow on May 8-9, 2005; the meeting of the two leaders for a working visit in Sochi on July 17-18, 2005; and Putin's visit to Samsun on November 17, 2005 to attend the opening ceremony of the Blue Stream gas pipeline.

¹⁹ Suat Kiniklioğlu and Valeriy Morkva, "An Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol.7, No.4, p.533-553.

²⁰ "Türk Gazeteciler Sordu, Rus Lider Vladimir Putin Yanıtladı: AB İlişkimizi Etkilemesin", *Radikal*, 2 Sept. 2004; Murat Yetkin, "Putin Ziyaretinin Önemi", *Radikal*, 7 Dec. 2004.

some issues with the US in terms of the situation in Iraq, the fight against the PKK and the approach regarding Iran, it nevertheless supported NATO's enlargement as a NATO member, and took joint action with its Western allies on general foreign policy matters such as the recognition of Kosovo. It maintained its existing security-based relations with its Western allies over the land extending from the Caucasus to the Balkans.

From the perspective of bilateral relations, the two leaders stated in almost each meeting and under the influence of the rising trade volume and the friendship discourse governing the relations that Turkey and Russia pursued similar approaches in terms of developments in Iraq, Afghanistan, the South Caucasus and the Middle East. On the other hand, radical differences persisted regarding Russia's not including the PKK in its list of terrorist organizations; the different perspectives on Nagorno-Karabakh, the Cyprus issue and the Armenian Question; Turkey's NATO membership; and Russia's aggressive attitude towards former Soviet states that pursue Western-oriented policies such as the Ukraine and Georgia.

Energy rose to a position as the driving force for bilateral relations during that period, and evolved into a priority for the Turkish economy, which regained dynamism and issued signs of growth.²¹ Turkey's rapidly growing energy demand in the 2000s, coupled with Putin-led Russia's consideration of energy exports and chiefly of natural gas as an economic and political priority, united the two sides around common

interests. It is noteworthy that almost all the talks between the parties aimed to launch energy projects/cooperation, chiefly the Blue Stream. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the issue of 'trusting' Russia was still a thorn in the flesh. Considering the examples of the Ukraine and Georgia, the possibility of Russia using its energy resources as a political tool was a major issue as well as the dangers of dependence. The matter was taken to the National Security Council (MGK), emphasizing that long-term policies were needed to ensure supply security in energy, specifically in natural gas, and that Turkey needed to diversify the countries it imported gas from.²² In the ensuing period, the discourse that considered energy dependence as a threat almost instantly started to evolve into mutual dependence as a consequence of the bonds established and the agreements signed. Although the trade volume between the two countries was asymmetrical due to energy trade, that led to the emergence of a relationship which developed around the interdependence discourse and 'prioritized the bright side'. An indicator of the impact of energy relations on trade is that, while the trade volume between Turkey and Russia stood at USD 1.7 billion in the early 1990s, it rose to USD 4.2 billion, USD 10.8 billion and USD 15.1 billion in 1997, 2004 and 2005 respectively. The trade volume rose to USD 28 billion in 2007 before surging to USD 37.8 billion in 2008. However, Russia's exports to Turkey stood at USD 31.3 billion while Turkey's export of goods and services to Russia remained as low as USD 6.5 billion. Energy trade, chiefly the gas trade, was undoubtedly the decisive factor behind the imbalance.

²¹ Mitat Çelikpala, "Rusya Gazı Keser mi? Son Gelişmeler Işığında Türkiye-Rusya Enerji İlişkilerine Bakmak", Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta and Burç Beşgöl (Eds.), *Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkilerinde Değişen Dinamikler: Kuşku ile Komşuluk, İletişim*, İstanbul, 2017, p.205-223.

²² Deniz Zeyrek, "Bu Türkiye'ye Ders Olsun", *Radikal*, 3 Jan. 2006; "Güler: Biz Ukrayna Değiliz", *Radikal*, 4 Jan. 2006.

Black Sea Cooperation

Black Sea cooperation is a matter that deserves focus in the context of political and security cooperation with regional and global repercussions in the period until 2008, a year that could be considered as a transition year. Black Sea-focused relations between Turkey and Russia were established in the early 1990s under the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) with the support of the Western world. Although the BSEC has not attained great success, it has introduced some positive aspects as the only organization serving to shape institutional relations between the Black Sea littoral states including Russia and other elements in the Black Sea basin as well as regularly holding meetings to bring the parties together. In addition to the civilian BSEC, successful steps by Turkey for the sake of regional security also include military initiatives such as the Black Sea Naval Force (*Blackseafor*) established in 1998 and the “*Black Sea Harmony*”, a naval operation and task force similar to the NATO-led “*Active Endeavour*” in the Mediterranean. Turkey has considered Russia a fundamental partner that must be a part of these initiatives and conducted joint work with the latter. Russia’s joining Operation Black Sea Harmony in December 2006, a period dubbed the summit of bilateral rapprochement, was considered a major development to improve bilateral relations in the Black Sea and strengthen security in the region.²³

Although Turkey regards the Black Sea cooperation as a successful initiative that brought together Russia and two countries that it has issues with, namely the Ukraine and Georgia, this cooperation led to the emergence of differing perspectives between Turkey and its traditional allies including the US in terms of the form of relations to be established with Russia. This difference is clearly visible in the US policies in the region as well as the regional developments triggered by the enlargement of NATO and the EU. Turkey’s main approach is based on shaping regional security policies through realistic approaches in

consideration of Russia’s regional influence and limits. Turkey has insisted that Russia must be included in the process regarding every step to be taken by the Euro-Atlantic world in the region. This attitude sometimes profoundly impacted Turkey’s relations with its allies due to the negative views towards Russia of the new members of the EU and NATO, and also the former members of the Warsaw Pact.²⁴

The US description of the Black Sea basin as a security gap was what led to not only an issue between Turkey and the US but also a convergence between Turkey and Russia within the context of the Black Sea. The US wished to deploy US troops in the region to eliminate this gap as well as the threats it caused. Turkey opposed this approach in the light of the memories of World War I but other littoral states in the Black Sea, specifically Romania and Georgia, which considered Russia as a growing threat from 2005 onwards, supported it. Consequently, a concrete disparity in approaches came up and led to a confrontation between littoral states. The initial reaction from the Russian side was to pursue an approach that highlighted cooperation with Turkey and was based on defending the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits as well as the current status of the Black Sea. During the visit of Admiral Vladimir Vysotskiy, the commander of the Russian navy, to Turkey on June 23, 2008, military cooperation between the two countries was highlighted, and an agreement was reached on improving coordination between the Russian and Turkish navies as well as a cooperation and collective security system in the Black Sea. These steps led to the criticism that the Black Sea was evolving into a Turkish-Russian lake.

In the following period, Russia would take successive steps that ended this cooperation, and the divergence triggered by the Russo-Georgian War would once again render the process as a conflict after Russia launched its program to modernize its navy in the Black Sea and occupied Crimea.²⁵

²³ Mitat Çelikpala, “Escalating Rivalries and Diverging Interests: Prospects for Stability and Security in the Black Sea Region”, *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 10, No.3, Sept. 2010, p.287–302.

²⁴ Mustafa Aydın “Turkish Policy towards the Wider Black Sea and the EU Connection”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.16, No.3, 2014, p.383-397.

²⁵ ICG, “Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus”, *Europe Report*, N°250, 28 June 2018.

2008 Russo-Georgian War: First Signs

In terms of their consequences, the Russo-Georgian War starting on August 7-8, 2008 and the subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia profoundly impacted not only Turkish-Russian relations but also Turkey's regional and global policies. The Russo-Georgian War was the transformation of the gradually-fiercer competition between Russia and the Western world, chiefly the US, since 2004 from discourse into action. The relevant developments made a direct impact on Turkey due to its location as a country in the region and its recent close relations with Russia as well as its position as a historic partner/ally of the Western world and its organizations. The Russo-Georgian War was a sign that Russia would not hesitate to use force to defend its interests in its close surroundings and would not attach any importance to the priorities of any players including Turkey. It also served as a first warning issued to the entire world as well as Turkey for them to be careful. The subsequent developments point out that Turkish decision makers believed they could still manage the process despite the warning, reconcile Russia and the Western players, and suggest regional solutions that would respond to the security priorities of other regional players by including Russia.

It is concluded that Turkish decision makers perceive the situation as a fundamental security issue within the context of changing regional balances and the threat to Turkey's interests.²⁶ Calling on the parties to set a ground for normalization in order to establish regional peace and stability, Turkey's concrete proposal was to set up a 'Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform'. Raised as a regional structure, the platform was criticized for focusing on Russia despite its position as the aggressor and for failing to make concrete solution proposals. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan first visited Moscow upon these developments, a reason for criticism of Turkey by its Western allies. Turkey's move was regarded as an attempted initiative excluding the US and the EU in the Caucasus without negotiating first with the countries/organizations it was an ally/member of. As a result, questions such as whether Turkey pursued a different vision and even considered leaving the NATO came up. Discussions hitting the agenda once again in this period included those on the interception of US ships navigating

the Black Sea, whether the Montreux Convention had been violated and what the future of the Convention would be. Although there was an attempt to shape the proposed platform as a regional organization within the framework of the OSCE principles and in consideration of the criticism, the proposal was shelved as a stillborn platform that made Turkey appear closer to Russia. It is worth stating that the proposed platform was then backed by Russia and commonly spoken of highly by Russian officials at all levels.

The related developments also made an impact on Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia. Regional instability arising from the destruction of Russo-Georgian relations and the consequences of the destructive war between the two countries negatively impacted Turkey's economic and political projects such as the BSEC, BTC/BTE pipelines, and the BTK railway. Furthermore, the instability ruined Turkey's aforementioned Black Sea-based regional security initiatives including the Blackseafor and the Black Sea Harmony. Regional projects that required decades of efforts as well as straining every nerve and fine-tuning simply collapsed as a consequence of a unilateral initiative by Russia. From then on, regional players would adopt negative approaches and perspectives regarding any regional organizations and relations that included Russia. Later on, the view of said players towards Turkey as a Western player that balanced Russia would fall moribund within the context of Turkish-Russian relations.

The reason why Turkey opted for maintaining and improving its relations with Russia despite such negative developments, the reservations of its regional partners and criticism from its Western allies, is important for understanding the progress of relations in later periods. Firstly, it is necessary to mention the impact of economic and trade relations growing rapidly on an energy basis (chiefly natural gas-Blue Stream) in a way to cover nuclear power (back then, an FDI inflow of USD 7 billion into Turkey was anticipated). As mentioned previously, the trade volume with Russia had stood at USD 38 billion in 2008. This is an un-ignorable factor. Turkey's contracting services in Russia rising to USD 25-30 billion (this constituted 22% of all works Turkey contracted abroad

²⁶ Mitat Çelikpala, "Turkish Foreign Policy and Cross-Border Cooperation in the South Caucasus", Ayça Ergun and Hamlet Isaxanlı (Eds.), *Security and Cross-Border Cooperation in the EU, the Black Sea Region and Southern Caucasus*, IOS Press, NATO Science for Peace and Security Series, Vol.107, 2013, p.119-136.

back then) and the 2018 tourism revenues from 2.8 million Russian tourists should also be added. Another factor is the trouble caused by the instability that specifically haunted the southern neighbors. Regarded as a model country and a regional power, Turkey had lately failed to produce constructive solutions proportionate with its interests to the problems it had with its Western allies led by the US over the southern borders. This increasingly exposed Turkey to unwanted situations. Turkey did not want to end up in a similar situation along its northern borders. This was reflected in Turkey's moves to develop bilateral or tripartite regional relations with Iran and Azerbaijan, start diplomatic talks with Armenia as a step for normalization, invest further in its surroundings including the Ukraine and Georgia and try to sustain such investment in addition to developing its multidimensional relations with Russia. In brief, although Russia was deemed as a global element of unrest and threat, Turkey considered Russia a balancing element and a partner that could be controlled by acting in cooperation. The belief was that bilateral relations with Russia made Turkey appear like a regionally-influential foreign policy player independent from the West. Finally, unlike his predecessor, President Obama, then new president of the USA, started to pursue a 'reset policy' towards Russia from 2009 onwards, another factor that comforted Turkey.

At this point, it would be good to take an overall snapshot of the existing situation then before delving into how Turkish-Russian relations unfolded under the influence of Russia's internationally changing image in the post-2008 period. Firstly, there was no difference in the minds of Turkish decision makers in terms of the importance of geographical location and the diversity of threats arising therefrom. However, it is necessary to mention some basic changes on the sources of such threat and the identity of reliable partners. It was not possible to identify a space for common solutions and interests with the US and the Western allies specifically in terms of the developments in the Middle East. Indeed, there was a common approach with Russia regarding Iraq's territorial integrity, resolving conflicts, and improving relations with Syria and Iran. In terms of forging a multidimensional foreign policy supported by economic and trade relations, Russia was not a threat any longer, but rather defined as a reliable partner. This was a short-term change in perception that had a limited number of examples throughout history, but it was real and significant. The two players had

some disagreements between them but the suspicion and threat perception dominating the previous period did not exist anymore. There was a fundamental transformation in the existential threat perception, an Ottoman legacy that shaped the foreign policy of the early Republican Period. Russia was not considered as a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and independence. In this context, the traditional foreign policy shaped on the assumption that Russia, be it an empire or a federation, was a major geopolitical opponent in the close vicinity of Turkey was left aside. The new foreign policy understanding which defined Turkey as a more independent player establishing relations with its immediate vicinity caused a change in the image of Russia dominant in Turkey, and Russia was considered as a potential and reliable partner that had common interests with Turkey in regional policies over the Black Sea and the Caucasus/Central Asia and could commonly be acted with.²⁷

Going back to bilateral relations, the post-2010 period was marked by a focus on permanent and stable institutionalization and *strategic cooperation* while the emphasis was on reinstating the positive atmosphere of the period between 1920 and 1930 in the 2000s. This means a goal was set to attain a new level in bilateral relations that outperformed the 1930s, although under the heavy impact of regional and global problems. President Abdullah Gul's visit to Moscow in February 2009, also dubbed a 'State Visit', after the consequences of the Russo-Georgian War had relatively cooled down, was intended as a visit which showed the discourse on cooperation dominating relations was actually maintained without any impact from the recent developments. In addition to Moscow, Gul's visit also covered Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan, indicating that the Eurasian borders of Turkish-Russian cooperation extended further east. Gul's visit to Kazan marked the first visit by a Turkish president to Tatarstan, a proof that a place which was not even considered for a visit during the competition period could actually be visited as a result of cooperation. The new economic and trade target of bilateral cooperation was to issue an arrangement that allowed the free movement of goods, services and capital between the two countries. A decision was made to use the Turkish Lira and Russian Ruble as currency in bilateral trade in order to deepen trade and prevent any impact of external factors on trade. This decision was too significant a decision to be reduced to a symbolic one.²⁸

²⁷ Bülent Aras and Hakan Fidan, "Turkey and Eurasia: Frontiers of a New Geographic Imagination", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No.40, 2009, p.212.

²⁸ Vügar İmanov, "Türkiye'nin Rusya Politikası 2011", Burhanettin Duran, Kemal İnat and Ali Resul Usul (Eds.), *Türk Dış Politikası Yılığ* 2011, SETA Yay, Ankara, 2012, p.457-496.

In 2010, a year bearing special importance as it marked the 90th anniversary of the start of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1920, bilateral relations were deepened and institutionalized. The target for trade relations, which were regarded as the driver for bilateral relations, was to increase the trade volume of almost USD 40 billion to around USD 100 billion within 5 years. Shaping the oil- and gas-centered energy cooperation in a way to cover nuclear power was a prominent and highly-focused point.²⁹ The trade volume goal of USD 100 billion, on the other hand, drew a unilateral picture that did not favor Turkey commercially. It was always Russia that secured a disproportionate benefit from such trade relations, a fact proving that the overall progress of relations presented a potential to shift towards a problematic and threatening direction.

It is possible to speak of some steps taken in order to prevent the realization of such a possibility. The most concrete step as a sign of multidimensional bilateral relations was the decision to abolish visa requirements between the two countries. The establishment of a *High-Level Cooperation Council* which would act as an umbrella for relations and regularly bring together the leaders of the two countries served as a tool to set up a permanent and exclusive institutional structure in order to coordinate relations at the highest level and solve problems rapidly. The Council incorporates a *Joint Strategic Planning Group* chaired by the foreign ministers to discuss international matters, a *Joint Economic Commission* to review economic relations, and a *Turkish-Russian Social Forum* made up of civil society representatives to strengthen interactions between the peoples of the two countries. The establishment of such a comprehensive institutional structure for bilateral relations was important in terms of attaining the goal set in the early 2000s and rapidly overcoming problematic issues.

In brief, this is noteworthy as a new approach intended to prioritize the social dimension of bilateral relations and entirely cross out any discourse of animosity from public discourse. 2007 was declared the Russian Culture Year in Turkey. This was reciprocated by the designation of 2008 as the Turkish Culture Year in Russia. In 2010, various scientific and cultural events were held under the celebrations for the 90th anniversary of the start of Turkish-Russian diplomatic relations. Furthermore, a Turkish Cultural Center was inaugurated in Moscow in October 2010 aimed at highlighting the Turkish model, which was considered an insurance

against radical movements. In addition, the Presidency of Religious Affairs started joint work with the Islamic Education Council, a body composed of 5 Islamic Universities in Russia, in June 2010. This marked a cooperation effort that could not have been even thought of in the 1990s. Such steps aimed to gradually replace the state-to-state aspect of Turkish-Russian relations with a people-to-people and individual-to-individual level by including the intellectual capacities of the two societies. This was a consequence of efforts to convert the change in relations into a radical, permanent change in public discourse/perception and approach.

In addition to all the foregoing positive transformation and developments, a final point deserving specific attention was that the officials from the two countries preferred not to cover problematic matters in full public view under any circumstances whatsoever. As mentioned above, compartmentalizing and individually handling issues, and focusing on further success as well as on points that bear a higher potential for success were all results of this approach. On that note, it is seen that matters such as the potentially negative impact of Turkey's involvement in projects such as Nabucco and TANAP, which were developed as an alternative to Russia, on Turkish-Russian energy relations and the regional balance; the domestic repercussions of assassinations of opposing or dissident Chechens in Turkey or the likely impact of recently more different approaches and practices by the parties in response to the developments in Crimea, the Black Sea and the Middle East in general were not voiced aloud. Starting from the early 2010s, these developments raised the question of whether Turkish-Russian bilateral relations had reached their natural limits. However, leaders and political players tended to ignore these issues under the impact of negative developments in Turkey's relations with its Western allies. Yet the incidents initially in Libya as part of the Arab Spring and later in Syria showed that this ignorance could not be sustained. The speed at which the incidents unfolded, coupled with the differing attitudes and interests of Turkey and Russia, started to drive the process into a bottleneck from 2012 onwards. The annexation of Crimea by Russia totally eliminated all possibilities for cooperation in the Black Sea, a notion that had still been given a chance in the north. Once again, Russia assumed the role of a regional hegemon that only pursued its own interests and priorities under the influence of Western players and established hegemony all around Turkey. The differences in the interests and perspectives of the parties could no longer be ignored in the aftermath of the developments in Syria.

²⁹ Ibid., p.465.

Limits of Cooperation: Developments from Crimea to Syria

The tension between Russia and the Western players moved to another phase due to the direct impact the Russian threat, specifically in the context of the Ukraine, made on the Euro-Atlantic security umbrella. This was coupled with discussions on what order would reign in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, pushing the international platform into further confusion. This had its negative repercussions on the Turkish-Russian bilateral relations rapidly and increasingly starting from 2012. Even before the occupation of Crimea, the agenda of bilateral relations was restricted to matters such as the changing balance in the Black Sea, which required more effort compared to the past, as well as the Arab Spring and security issues focusing on the developments in Libya and Syria. Here came a fragile juncture that required further efforts by both sides in order for any progress or positive considerations to be possible. In other words, a highly challenging process to sustain multidimensional relations in the context of differing national interests and security threats was imminent. The aggressive regional and global policies Russia started to pursue towards its neighbors revealed that Turkey's various policies such as 'zero problems with neighbors' or 'precious loneliness' failed to bring the parties together around similar visions and interests as opposed to the past. The period between 2012 and 2015 was one when the limits of Turkish-Russian bilateral relations were ever more visible despite energy cooperation, the presence of high level bodies with flamboyant names and more frequent meetings between leaders. In the respective period, a more complex network of relations came up compared to the past due to the differing approaches of the two parties with the Western players on the said matters.

Almost a decade-long tension with the Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea clearly showed that Turkey and Russia had fundamental differences in their perspectives on regional issues and their solutions. Specifically, after the annexation of Crimea, Turkey emphasized that the referendum Russia ordered had been illegal and the annexation could not be accepted, thus beginning to act together with its Western allies.³⁰ During that period, Turkey

asserted economic reasons to not join the sanctions by the EU and the US against Russia. However, it adopted a general political discourse that reflected the discourse and attitude of a Western member of NATO. This attitude was significant in the sense that it showed the two players did not have a similar attitude at all on introducing solutions to regional issues, unlike what the leaders stated previously.³¹

The first matter that evolved into an issue in bilateral relations was the Black Sea, the supposedly exemplary scene of cooperation in previous periods. This paper previously stated that, until the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, there had been an attempt led by Turkey and joined and contributed by all littoral states, chiefly Russia, to design the Black Sea as a scene for security and trade cooperation under a discourse of 'regional ownership'. From 2008 onwards, the process got complicated. The perspectives of NATO-member littoral states, chiefly of the Ukraine and Georgia, on Black Sea security entailed the establishment of a new mechanism focusing on the Russian threat and Western support. Turkey, the oldest NATO member in the region, faced a difficult choice and policy-making process at that stage.³² The first sign that Russia shifted to an approach focusing on improving its own security was the 2014 modernization program which aimed to render the Black Sea navy a superior naval force that could navigate the high seas, including the Mediterranean. The plan included an expenditure in excess of USD 2 billion to form a superior Black Sea naval force until 2020. In addition, the Black Sea navy was intended to incorporate 30 ships of various sizes and capabilities until 2020, the ending date for the program. As of the date when Crimea was annexed, this program had enabled the Russian navy in the Black Sea to attain a level that allowed it to exert its influence not only in the Black Sea but also in the Mediterranean. This meant two things: Turkey had lost the dominance in the Black Sea which it had enjoyed in the post-Cold War period, and Russia had evolved into a threat to the maintenance of the Montreux Convention and to Turkey's maritime security. Adding Russia's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capacity that it established against

³⁰ On that note, the statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, as repeated on the anniversary of the occupation, are worth a look. As an example, see T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Güncel Açıklamalar, "No: 75, 16 Mart 2018, Kırım'ın gayrimişru ilhakının dördüncü yıldönümü hk.", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-75-kirim-gayrimisru-illhakinin-dorduncu-yildonumu-hk.tr.mfa.

³¹ For a different analysis of the perspectives of the two countries on regional cooperation, see Seçkin Köstem, "Different Paths to regional Hegemony: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Economic Strategy in Russia and Turkey", *Review of International Political Economy*, DOI: 10.1080/09692290.2018.1511450.

³² Mitat Çelikpala and Emre Erşen, "Turkey's Black Sea Predicament: Challenging or Accommodating Russia?", *Perceptions*, Summer 2018, Vol. XXIII, No.2, p.72-92.

NATO and aimed to deny adversaries access to the area which almost encircling Turkey and connects the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, it was apparent that the security-focused cooperation between the two countries evolved in an entirely different direction than what was dreamt of in the early 2000s. To that end, President Erdogan's statement before NATO's Warsaw Summit – "NATO's absence in the Black Sea make the latter appear like a Russian lake" – was a sign that the Turkish decision-makers had begun to consider the matter differently.³³ Although the Turkish side cared about the balance, it just remembered that it was a NATO member, and at least repositioned Russia on the opposite side where the balance in the Black Sea was concerned. As a result, the door to regional cooperation on Black Sea security that was led by Turkey and Russia and covered all littoral states was almost entirely closed.

Another factor which showed that the duo had moved away from each other was the Arab Spring. The Erdogan administration welcomed the Arab Spring as a new regional vision and a window of opportunity for the leadership of the Islamic World, while Russia considered it a US-backed initiative that disrupted peace and stability. However, it was Syria that underlined the fundamental divergence of the expectations and interests of the two countries.

Regarding Syria, Ankara pursued an active policy which aimed at regime change in Damascus and favored explicit support to the anti-regime opposition forces along the border, while Russia extended its all-out support to Assad and focused on preventing a new Libya case as a result of Western-led policies. Indeed, Russia apparently deemed the 2011 incidents in Libya as a neglect of Russia's global role as well as a blow to its reputation in the Arab world. Therefore, it started to pursue an active policy in Syria, Russia's ally since the Cold War era, to ensure its weight in the Middle East was acknowledged by both the regional players and the Western world.³⁴

The first signals that Turkish-Russian relations were headed towards a difficult period due to Syria had indeed come up in June 2015. The increase in the frequency of news reports that Turkey would intervene in Syria coincided with Russia's decision for a direct military intervention in Syria.³⁵ The process had already led to a point of no return when international news reports showed in September 2015 that the Russian Air Force had started to build up at *Hmeimim* air base, the former *Bassel al-Assad* Airport.³⁶ After Turkey allowed the anti-ISIL coalition the use of Incirlik base, Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, and Feridun Sinirlioglu, the Turkish Foreign Minister, had a meeting in Sochi on September 17, 2015. Following the meeting, Lavrov's statements showed that Russia was not happy with Turkey's anti-ISIL coalition, another indication that the political differences between the two countries had grown deeper. During his visit to Moscow on 23 September to inaugurate the Central Mosque in Moscow, which is a recently-renovated 111-year-old mosque, President Erdogan quoted Tolstoy's words saying "A person's main task in life is becoming a better person," and continued: "In another story, Tolstoy writes 'the arson of a home risks burning an entire village'. This is the perspective to adopt on regional developments. We should try and extinguish the fire in the Middle East with goodness, justice and conscience. That is why we did not refuse 2 million victims who had come to our borders. That is why we help these people as best as we can."³⁷ These remarks showed that he expected Putin to consider Turkey's priorities. This also marked the end of the approach to not publicly engage in a dispute over a problematic issue, an approach that had been pursued for so long in consideration of bilateral relations.

Starting from early October, Russian war planes deployed in Syria in September 2015 began violating, especially around the province of Hatay, the rules of engagement declared by Turkey in 2012 after the downing of a Turkish fighter jet by the Syrian air force. The agenda for bilateral

³³ "NATO liderlerinin Varşova gündemi Karadeniz ve terör", Habertürk, 7 July 2016, <https://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/1263563-nato-liderlerinin-varsova-gundemi-karadeniz-ve-teror>.

³⁴ For an extensive analysis of Russian policies in the Middle East see Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (Eds.), *Russia in the Middle East*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington DC, 2018.

³⁵ Gencer Özcan, "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta, Burç Beşgül (Eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk, Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkilerinde Değişen Dinamikler*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2017, p.269-288; Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "With Friends Like These: Turkey, Russia, and the End of an Unlikely Alliance", ECFR Policy Brief, June 2016.

³⁶ Rob Crilly, "Russia is Building Military Base in Syria", Daily Telegraph, 5 Sept. 2015.

³⁷ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Putin ile birlikte Moskova Merkez Camii'nin açılışını yaptı", Hürriyet, 23 Eylül 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/cumhurbaşkanı-erdogan-putin-ile-birlikte-moskova-merkez-camiinin-acilisini-yapti-30146277>.

relations was quickly transformed once Russia's airborne operations started to target groups explicitly supported by Turkey, including Turkmen. President Erdogan's following statement in early October openly pointed to an imminent transformation in bilateral relations: "For Turkey, Russia's operations in Syria are in no way acceptable. Such an attitude will ultimately lead Russia into loneliness in the region. Such steps Russia took despite Turkey have upset and bothered us. Russia has no borders with Syria. I wonder what Russia intends to achieve this way. They claim the Syrian regime demanded such operations. It is not necessary to launch such operations just because the regime demanded them."³⁸

In the ensuing days, Erdogan switched to a higher level of criticism:

"There are those who have their sensitivities on the Syrian crisis, the ending of war in Syria, and al-Assad's leaving his position as well as those who don't. A person who engaged in state terrorism and caused the death of 350 thousand people is now in power in Syria but there are those countries which try to defend and protect him. Iran is one of them. Russia is another. Those trying to defend and protect him - and now what Russia does in Turkey, its attempt to establish a base for itself, and its violations against our borders. As you know, NATO also issued a harsh reaction, an ultimatum, on the matter yesterday. Definitely we cannot tolerate this. Unfortunately, some undesired steps had been taken yesterday and the day before. Turkey cannot accept these. They are also violations of NATO's principles. Therefore, NATO has adopted a certain attitude against them, and I am certainly sure that it will continue to do so. An attack on Turkey means an attack on NATO. This should be known. To that end, our relations with Russia are known but if Russia loses a friend like Turkey, with whom it has been co-operating on the issue, it will lose a lot, and it should know that."³⁹

Following an increased number of breaches by Russian jets despite such warnings by Erdogan, the defense ministers of NATO member countries met in Brussels on 8

October upon Turkey's call to discuss Russian air strikes in Syria. After the meeting, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared that the alliance was ready to protect Turkey and send troops to support Turkey if necessary and emphasized that NATO was in solidarity with Turkey, which was a relief for Turkey. These developments suggested that, when vital interests were concerned, Turkey prioritized its traditional alliance relations with its Western allies against Russia and Iran, which were considered a resurrecting threat. Responding to media questions upon his return from Brussels, President Erdogan said Russia's statements about the breaches were far from being serious. When asked "Will you be having a phone call with Putin?", he answered, "We are definitely offended by what happened. There is no meaning of calling him under such circumstances." This was a sign that bilateral relations had reached a new low.⁴⁰

The key message from these statements was that Turkey had considered suspending its relations with Russia in the aftermath of the developments in Syria. During the process, Turkey highlighted its NATO membership and sided with NATO, moving away from Russia. Starting from early November, Syria and the Russian presence in Syria were two main themes on the agenda of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu as well as President Erdogan. It could be seen that both of them persistently emphasized the rules of engagement within the framework of Turkey's priorities in Syria and issued warnings to Russia.

During the G-20 Summit in Antalya in November, Turkey failed to convince any relevant country including its Western allies in terms of its expectations and interests, chiefly about setting up a safety zone in Syria. The summit was held under the impact of the recent ISIL attacks in Paris. Following the summit, Russia increasingly bombed Aleppo and Latakia regions, specifically the Turkmen Mountain, clearly showing that bilateral relations were on thin ice. Such bombardments against the Turkmen opposition forces were covered in the headlines of the Turkish media, and Erdogan repeatedly issued calls to Russia to stop the bombings. Subsequently, Andrei Karlov, the Russian Ambassador to Ankara, was summoned by the Turkish foreign ministry on 19 November

³⁸ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan Rusya Açıklaması", ntv.com.tr, 4 Oct. 2015, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogandan-rusya-aciklamasi,rmUYtZDD3EK574l6kpw1A>.

³⁹ "Rusya Türkiye'yi kaybederse çok şey kaybeder", TRTHaber, 6 Oct. 2015, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/rusya-turkiyeyi-kaybederse-cok-sey-kaybeder-207330.html>.

⁴⁰ "NATO'dan Rusya'ya mesaj: Türkiye'yi savunmaya hazırız", BBC News Türkçe, 8 Oct. 2015, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/10/151008_nato_turkiye.

for the first time in a long period and warned about the consequences of Russian jets breaching the airspace of a NATO member country. This was a sign that a tough period in bilateral relations was looming ahead.

The culmination of the rapidly-rising tension was reached on November 24, 2015 when an F-16 fighter jet of the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian war plane that violated Turkish airspace to the south of the Turkish city of Hatay. This was the incident that put an end to the cooperative spirit which governed the last 15 years of Turkish-Russian bilateral relations. The shoot-down was followed by a period of about 9 months which was dubbed the 'Horrible Year' or '*annus horribilis*' in bilateral relations. This period was proof that bilateral relations were indeed very sensitive and quickly influenced by external developments.

The jet shoot-down was important for Russia in the sense that it was the first after a long period of time from 1953 to 2015. The disappointment was much greater because that recent incident had occurred with Turkey, a NATO member which had lately been considered 'a close friend'. Vladimir Putin's remarks when he said, "That was a stab in the back committed by accomplices of terrorists. I guess Allah decided to punish the ruling clique in Turkey by depriving them of sense and reason," were an undisputed end to the positive atmosphere in bilateral relations lately.⁴¹ Putin's reaction to Turkey's application to NATO on 24 November to evaluate the developments indicated that the issue would remain on the agenda for a long time: "Today's tragic events will have serious consequences for Russo-Turkish relations."⁴²

Before delving into the developments in the aftermath of jet shoot-down, the question that needs to be answered is why the parties did not actively use the official channels established after 2010 and preferred aggressive policies based on exacerbating tension over a diplomatic solution/process. Why had the same two leaders who met frequently in the past, tended to ignore, delay and extend over time any matters that they found to be politically challenging and focused on matters highlighting cooperation then chosen to increase the tension? The answer to such questions is related to the nature of Russo-Turkish relations which this paper attempts to elaborate on. The habit of compartmentalizing

issues to avoid relating them with each other and just ignoring problematic themes prevented the parties from effectively managing the process on a subject which they deemed as 'a vital interest'. It may be asserted that the parties never thought things would end up that way. However, statements by Erdogan and Davutoglu since October provided the early signs that the developments would lead to an undesired outcome. It may further be asserted that Ankara and Moscow failed to anticipate that a decade of accord shaped by geopolitical priorities would evolve into a conflict so quickly and also failed to understand and appraise accurately their mutual flexibilities. In the end, geopolitical facts and vital interests rapidly outweighed commercial and economic priorities. The reason why things ended up that way may be discussed in the light of a series of internal and external factors influencing the progress of developments for Turkey. These factors will also help understand the reasons why the jet downing incident took place against the context of Russia's failure to accurately interpret the developments in Turkey as well as the repercussions of such developments on not only the developments in Syria but also Turkish-Russian bilateral relations.⁴³

The peak of the Syria-focused tension was the downing of the Russian fighter jet, which coincided with a period when domestic political problems in Turkey heavily impacted on the country's stability. In 2013, all of Turkey was the scene for Gezi Protests resembling the Arab Spring in the Middle East, which Erdogan supported right from the beginning. The governing clique suggested the protests had been motivated by Western countries. Developments in the aftermath of the coup in Egypt raised the sensitivities of the Erdogan government and fueled tension in domestic politics. Turkey's indecisive view on the almost simultaneous Euromaidan Protests in the Ukraine was very much affected by those developments.

In such a severe political atmosphere, Erdogan secured about 52% of votes during the presidential election on August 10, 2014, a bid that he entered to eliminate the instability caused by the graft probes in 2013 as well as the local elections. The political environment emerging after Erdogan's election as the president forced the country into two successive general elections in 2015, one on 7 June

⁴¹ "Putin to Turkey: Expect more sanctions for jet shoot-down", Reuters, 3 Aralık 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin/putin-to-turkey-expect-more-sanctions-for-jet-shoot-down-idUSKBN0TM0YF20151203>.

⁴² "Putin sırtımızdan bıçaklandık", NTV, 24 Kasım 2015.

⁴³ Mitat Çelikpala, "Russia's Policies in the Middle East and the Pendulum of Turkish-Russian Relations", Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (Eds.), *Russia in the Middle East*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington DC, 2018, p.105-130.

and the other on 1 November. The AKP's failure to gain a majority required for maintaining single party rule in 7 June elections, coupled with the rise of the HDP as a political actor based on a claim to be 'Turkey's party', gave rise to a political atmosphere where domestic political balances were essentially altered. This interim period also marked the end of the government's 'Kurdish Initiative', which had been launched to seek a moderate and constructive solution to the Kurdish issue after the PKK's July 2015 decision to resume terrorist activities by engaging in 'trench and barricade warfare'. As a result, the determined fight launched by the Turkish Armed Forces against the PKK in the entire Southeastern Anatolia region, chiefly in Sur, Silopi and Cizre, re-militarized the Kurdish issue and rapidly related it to Syria. The battlefield in Turkey's fight against terrorism broadened, instantly making any developments in Syria a domestic issue for Turkey. Turkey expected its allies to recognize the PYD/YPG as a terrorist organization just like ISIL and to engage in a fight in Syria within the same understanding but failed to get the support it wanted from the US and Russia, also failing to launch land and air operations in Syria. These all drove Turkish decision makers into nervousness. The argument of nationalist and conservative cliques in Turkey that external powers conspired to divide Turkey was actually resurrected and influenced the public during that period. Discussions on a 'Sèvres Syndrome' which focused on protecting Turkey's territorial integrity once again became an item on the agenda. Thus emerged an atmosphere that combined domestic developments with external factors which mutually fed and fueled each other.

In addition to the international attitude adopted against Turkey's interests and expectations in the aftermath of the developments in Egypt and Syria, Russia's indifference/negligence on the matter coincided with a time when Ibrahim Kalin, Erdogan's chief advisor, suggested the concept of 'Precious Loneliness'.⁴⁴ That was a key statement for understanding the psychology which influenced the Turkish decision makers during that period. Russia's attitude meant a cul-de-sac for Turkey's foreign policy which focused on ousting Assad as well as its security policies within the context of the fight against the PKK. Due to Russia's approach, the expected end of the Assad regime was not coming any nearer. This resulted in Turkey's reducing its Syrian policy down to almost only the fight against the PYD/YPG. Yet that struggle was being hampered by the Russian bombings. Russia was destroying not only Turkey's investments but also the opposition elements that Turkey trained under great difficulties. The downing of the jet thus coincided with a moment when things were far from being acceptable for Turkey against such a background.

It may also be asserted that Russia was not able to interpret the developments in Turkey and the impact thereof on bilateral relations in a realistic manner. Furthermore, it may be assumed that Russia favored and prioritized its global interests over its bilateral relations with Turkey, and thought the issues could be sorted out through a kind of appeasement initiative towards Turkey.

⁴⁴ "Turkey not 'lonely' but dares to do so for its values and principles, says PM adviser," *Hürriyet*, August 26, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-not-lonely-but-dares-to-do-so-for-its-values-and-principles-says-pm-adviser--53244>.

The Ice Age in Relations

Considering what happened between November 24, 2015 and Erdogan's visit to St. Petersburg on August 9, 2016, it is evident that Russia, and Putin in person, attempted to isolate and pressurize Turkey. Russia's rapid and efficient reaction was to put into effect sanctions against Turkey that resembled the EU sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea. Starting from January 2016, Russia began to enforce the sanctions consisting of 6 articles. These were deliberately selected in a way to harm Turkey's economic and trade interests. The sanctions mainly included prohibiting any security-related operations in Russia by Turkey-based firms that were legally bound by Russian laws, prohibiting the recruitment of Turkish nationals in Russia, banning certain Turkish-made products from entering Russia, applying a very strict control and audit process for vehicles carrying commodities into Russia, suspending all *charter* flights except for scheduled flights between the two countries, instructing Russian tour operators to avoid selling tours to Turkey, and suspending the visa-free travel regime.

In Turkey, the focus was on the impact of Russian sanctions on food exports and tourism. To that end, the sanctions made a real impact. However, what bothered Turkey most was whether Russia would abuse Turkey's energy dependence to Russia as a 'diplomatic card' or 'weapon'. Two main concerns were the approaching winter and Turkey's dependence on Russian gas for power generation. The first question that popped up was whether Russia would pursue an approach similar to what it previously pursued against Georgia and the Ukraine. President Erdogan's following response to a question on the matter revealed certain concerns: "You know, we have not always had natural gas throughout our history. We all know when we first had natural gas in our country. Our nation is used to enduring sufferings. The Russian gas is not indispensable. I have already stated that we have been purchasing gas from many other countries except Russia."⁴⁵

The matter had somewhat populist repercussions publicly. The specific highlight for such an approach was the short programs in which visual media agencies asked questions to citizens in various Turkish cities to feel the public pulse

and manage perceptions. In Erzurum, people were asked the question "What would you do if Putin cut down the gas?", to which many responded, "He (Putin) should apologize. We will burn turf if need be!", an answer that revealed a lack of realistic public understanding and perception. Apart from the public response, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's statement saying, "Consider the Russian sanctions as an unexpected natural disaster," and his subsequent remarks provided the impression that the matter was not analyzed in detail by decision makers, and the possibility of facing some negative developments was not ruled out:

"If they had said, 'We will launch an operation against ISIL in that region. Let us act in coordination,' this would not have happened. If we had known. And they would have been more careful. We will now prioritize compensatory measures. I will soon be publicly sharing the short-term measures we will take to make sure any impacted importers, tourism sector representatives and the Turkish economy will not be affected any further. We will withdraw our fresh fruits and vegetables pending at Russian customs to ensure they do not go bad. Turkish-Russian relations are not easily breakable. They are mutually needed. Regarding energy... We have to be ready for the worst. I hear someone from Erzurum said, 'We will burn turf but we will not see our borders violated.' Definitely I am not suggesting anything like that."⁴⁶

From Turkey's perspective, the answer to how things ended up like that in bilateral relations, specifically in energy cooperation, despite the traditional distrust against Russia is hidden in international developments. In the 2000s, the civil wars and political instabilities in energy-rich countries such as Iraq, the international isolation of potential partners such as Iran and the embargoes it imposed, and the insufficiency of infrastructure to connect alternative resources, e.g. those in the Caspian Sea, to Turkey were all factors that rendered Russia an unrivaled country of origin for Turkey.

On the other hand, as mentioned before, it was quite reasonable for Russia to be able to take resources to a market as big as Turkey without any intermediaries and to

⁴⁵ Verda Özer, "Bana Mert Derdi", Hürriyet, 2 Dec. 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/bana-mert-derdi-40021650>.

⁴⁶ "Davutoğlu: Rusya'nın yaptırımlarını beklenmedik afet gibi değerlendirin", BirGün, 2 Dec. 2015, <https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/davutoglu-rusyanin-yaptirimlarini-beklenmedik-afet-gibi-degerlendirin-96680.html>.

acquire a reliable customer. It should be kept in mind that Turkey is a loyal and reliable customer or partner for Russia. Turkey found in Russia the reliable provider from whom it could procure much-needed energy for its growing economy while Russia secured a rapidly-developing market and a reliable customer. This meant a long-term interdependence in bilateral relations.

Figures show that Turkey contributes an annual income of about USD 15 billion to the Russian economy. This is more than the amount Russia earned from the sales of weapons, a source of pride for Russia. If Russia's income from oil and gas sales to Turkey was to be taken out of the equation, Russia's trade deficit would have stood at about USD 2.5 billion. In the end, the parties acted sensitively on that note despite the excessive remarks made by the public and political leaders. Two statements that are still remembered include one by Maria Zakharova, the Spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, who said, "I do not see any reasons why Turkish-Russian relations, specifically the bilateral economic cooperation, suffer from challenges and deteriorate. Bilateral relations are dynamically sustained,"⁴⁷, reciprocated by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's remarks when he said, "Turkish-Russian relations are not easily breakable. They are mutually needed. I do not think Russia would resort to such an option in energy. There are highly complicated engagements involved as well as the international law. We are a real customer for Russia. We have mutual rights and commitments."⁴⁸

Considering a possible asymmetrical Russian response to the matter, it may be asserted that Russia did not deem it as a wise step to disrupt trade relations with Turkey, a reliable energy partner, while the sanctions against Russia continued. The previously-stated facts that Russia took advantage of its energy in terms of pricing rather than supply and Turkey bought gas over market prices were the two basic factors preventing Russia from taking a step to that end.⁴⁹

On the other hand, the downing of the Russian jet drove both parties into suspicion about the opposite side. Turkey issued specific signals that it had started to set its eyes on

other locations regarding its energy policy. One of these locations was the Caspian. TANAP emerged as a new aspect of Turkish-Azerbaijani relations and became the top item on the agenda. During the press meeting after Prime Minister Davutoglu's visit to Baku on 3 December soon in the aftermath of the jet shoot-down, both parties stated that they mutually decided to complete the project before 2018, the anticipated deadline, with the construction efforts accelerating right then. Another development was President Erdogan's visit to Qatar on 2 December and the signing of a memorandum of understanding between BOTAS and Qatar's national oil company for long-term and regular LNG imports from Qatar. The dates should be considered within the context of the progress of Turkish-Russian relations.

In brief, the political circles in Turkey treated Turkey's dependence on Russia for energy as a security issue explicitly for the first time since the start of the 2000s. To that end, discussions resumed on how reasonable an approach it was to engage in nuclear cooperation with Russia in addition to the dependence on the latter in natural gas.

Throughout that period, Russia did not hesitate to re-employ certain conventional tools against Turkey in a way that recalled the competition period of the 1990s. Aware of Turkey's anti-terrorism priorities and the impact of developments in Syria on those priorities, Russia increased its interaction with the YPG/PYD in Syria and established open connections with the Kurdish opposition elements within Turkey. This was also the end of the approach not to meddle with the likes of Kurdish and Chechen issues, which the two countries mutually included on their agenda in the early period of cooperation. In January 2016, Maria Zakharova, the Spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, shifted from the traditional Russian attitude and strikingly declared Russia's support for the petition signed by a group of academics that demanded Turkey to stop human rights violations in the fight against the PKK, a petition that dominated the domestic politics in Turkey back then. In a similar vein, Selahattin Demirtas, the chairman of the HDP, was invited to Moscow by the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in December to discuss the Kurdish issue and Turkey's operations. That meeting paved the way

⁴⁷ "Rusya Dışişleri Bakanlığı Sözcüsü Zaharova Türkiye-Rusya ilişkileriyle ilgili açıklamalarda bulundu", HaberTürk, 8 Oct. 2015, <https://www.haberturk.com/gundem/haber/1137730-rusya-disisleri-bakanligi-sozcusu-zaharova-turkiye-rusya-ilkileriyle-iligili-aciklamalarda-bulundu>.

⁴⁸ "Davutoğlu: Rusya'nın kararlarına karşı tefeli edici tedbirleri yakında açıklayacağım", Radikal, 1 Dec. 2015, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/davutoglu-rusyanin-kararlarina-karsi-tefeli-edici-tedbirleri-yakinda-aciklayaca-1484198/>.

⁴⁹ Habibe Özdal, "Türk-Rus İlişkilerinin En Zorlu Sınavı", Analist, No.58, Dec. 2015, p.100-101.

for subsequent meetings between Russian officials and different Kurdish groups, which re-opened political bureaus in Moscow and Yerevan. At that point, Turkey was hamstrung against Russia, unable to issue any other political response than diplomatic reprimands against the steps Russia had taken.

Russia's revival of the security network surrounding Turkey, this time within a different perspective, was another negative regional repercussion of the rupture of bilateral relations. The foregoing change focusing on the Black Sea took on a new dimension upon Russia's initiatives that connected the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, and also encircled Turkey. The first negative repercussion was the security cooperation agreement which was signed by and between Russia and Armenia and stipulated the development of Armenia's air security network. Turkey's never-normalizing relations with

Armenia had led to a tripartite cooperation in the Caucasus among Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Although Russia occasionally stated its discontent with that cooperation, it did not engage in a counter initiative but improved its relations with Armenia, its permanent priority in the Caucasus, and kept its relations with Azerbaijan at a balance. It was still apparent that Russia established a strategic partnership with Armenia, a full member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and pursued security policies which prioritized the latter. One of the first steps Russia took in the aftermath of the jet shoot-down incident was to reinforce its existing military presence in Armenia that was comprised of two active military bases and about 5,000 soldiers, and to establish a new air defense network. Once Turkey used the TANAP Project and its relations with Azerbaijan as a basis for its energy policies, Russia issued grants and loans to Armenia for military restructuring.

Rapprochement Anew: 15 July and a New Direction in Relations

After the calming down of a fierce period full of accusations, both parties evaluated the consequences of the recent developments and felt that a 15-year effort had been shelved overnight. Bilateral relations had been shadowed by a new period of mutual distrust when Russia imposed sanctions against Turkey which resembled the EU sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea. The "Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy" surveys, which have been regularly conducted by Kadir Has University since 2011, revealed that Russia was not on the list of the countries which posed the biggest threat to Turkey but later on topped the list as the country which posed the biggest threat to Turkey with a percentage of 64.7%.⁵⁰ 2016 was a year of loss in bilateral relations for both sides. The Turkish side was more harshly and rapidly impacted by the process. The first signs came in tourism and agriculture. The Turkish tourism sector received a huge blow when more than 4 million Russian tourists canceled their reservations in Turkey. Coupled with the decline in the number of incoming European tourists due to terrorist attacks by ISIL, that withdrawal brought about the worst period for Turkish tourism since the Iraqi War. The emerging crisis led to a steep fall in bilateral trade volume which came down from USD 31.5 billion in 2014 to USD 23.3 billion in 2015.

It may be asserted that the parties were forced by the economic and security issues created by the situation in Syria to question their positions as well as the recent developments. The fight against terrorism was intertwined with the cross-border developments, specifically with those in Syria, making a significant impact on Turkey's security policies. Things turned more problematic for Ankara when Turkey was isolated from what was going on in Syria due to the tension with Russia.

It was the Turkish side that took the first steps for normalizing bilateral relations under a severe impact of all the foregoing developments. President Erdogan's new political initiative called the '2023 Goals' included a different series of economic, trade and political measures. That was a period when Erdogan prioritized the fight against terrorism, converged with the nationalist faction and engaged in a struggle against the Gulenist elements, the recent threat which was called the 'parallel structure' back then, in addition to the existing fight against the PKK. In May 2016, there was a change in the government as required by the need to support the domestic struggle with foreign relations. Ahmet Davutoglu was replaced by Binali Yıldırım as the prime minister. The new government took off by introducing

⁵⁰ Kadir Has University Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy, <http://ctrs.khas.edu.tr/sources/TDPAA16.pdf>.

some basic changes to Turkey's foreign policy in relation to Russia, Israel and Syria under a discourse of 'increasing the number of friends, decreasing the number of foes'.⁵¹ Letters by President Erdogan and fresh Prime Minister Yıldırım to their Russian counterparts on June 12, 2016 on the occasion of Russia Day about a month before the coup attempt were the first signals of the intent to improve relations. The letters were followed by the Turkish government's launch of a series of new measures to improve relations with Russia. Those measures meant the practical implementation stage had started. It was declared that a series of measures would be undertaken including re-establishing high-level diplomatic relations between the two countries, actively involving the media and civil society organizations in the process for improving relations, and setting up a working group for normalization.⁵² President Erdogan sent a letter to Putin on June 27, 2016 in which he assumed, although in indirect expressions, the responsibility for the downing of the Russian war plane and stated the family of the Russian pilot who died in the incident would be paid damages. This was the first fruit of the détente period between the countries.⁵³

The coup attempt of July 15, 2016 was what transformed the initial warm-up laps into a rapid normalization process. The nine-month break to bilateral relations came to an end after Russia issued a rapid reaction to the 15 July coup attempt and President Erdogan paid his first official visit after the coup attempt to St. Petersburg on 9 August in a bid to 'return to the pre-November period'. Subsequently, the two leaders were accompanied by a large delegation of ministers including economy and energy ministers during the meeting held in Hangzhou, China on September 3, 2016 for the G-20 Summit. The meeting increased the expectations that relations could be rapidly normalized in the new period.

The extraordinary developments in Turkey's domestic and foreign politics within a period of about nine months between November 24, 2015 and August 9, 2016 could be deemed as the main reason that reinstated rapprochement at an undoubtedly unexpected pace. Back then, as a result of domestic developments, Turkey was unable to receive the interest it expected from its Western allies in foreign politics, thus feeling isolated and alone. That was a decisive

factor. Turkish decision makers believed that their Western allies, chiefly the U.S., did not want to understand their priorities in the fight against terrorism which was considered a matter of survival. Adding the new threat perception emerging after the rupture of bilateral relations with Russia, it was concluded that the Turkish foreign policy was facing serious bottlenecks despite great success in the last decade. Russia's failure to improve its relations with Western countries, coupled with its unilateral international operations falling short of winning international legitimacy, enabled Russia to conclude that none of the parties would benefit Russia's sustaining tension with the Turkish side at least on certain key matters. Furthermore, as can be inferred from subsequent developments, it may be asserted that Russia needed Turkey in the game it wanted to set up in order to eliminate the long-bothersome Ukraine and establish new transition routes, and thus have safer access to the European market.

Bilateral relations recovered at a surprising quick pace during the year that followed President Erdogan's visit on 9 August. Considering the developments in Syria, the parties needed each other, a main reason why recovery was so quick. The fact that Turkey was unable to receive the attention it expected from its traditional allies, chiefly the US, was a major contributing factor. The Turkish-Russian convergence was directly fueled by the increased cooperation of American forces with the PYD/YPG to the east of Euphrates, a security priority for Turkey, the US weapons and ammunition support to the PYD/YPG, and the visual media reports that the American soldiers were conducting a joint operation with those elements, not to mention the belief that the Gulenist Movement was supported by the US (and that the US was the secret power behind the coup attempt). To that end, Operation Euphrates Shield launched on August 24, 2016 marked Turkey's return to Syria for the sake of actively fighting terrorism and its establishment of a new room for alliance including not only Russia but also Iran. The operation aimed to ensure Turkey's border security and start a fight against both ISIL and the PYD/YPG, an extension of the PKK, within the framework of the UN Treaty. Moreover, it acted as the driver for the normalization of Turkish-Russian relations and, to put it even more ambitiously, for

⁵¹ "Binali Yıldırım'dan Dış Politika Mesajı", *Milliyet*, 16 Haziran 2016, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/binali-yildirim-dan-dis-politika-gundem-2263739/>.

⁵² Çetiner Çetin, "Dokuz Adımda Normalleşme", *Yeni Şafak*, 17 June 2016, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/dokuz-adimda-normallesme-2481662>.

⁵³ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Putin'e mektup gönderdi", *TRT Haber*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-putine-mektup-gonderdi-258503.html>.

the reinvigoration of the relations in line with a vision which pursued certain political goals.⁵⁴

The Turkish-Russian cooperation not only opened the Syrian airspace and territories for military operations by the Turkish Armed Forces but also created a new diplomatic space among Turkey, Russia and Iran, and enabled Turkey to communicate with the Syrian regime, albeit indirectly. The operation served as a means to issue a public message that the Turkish Armed Forces maintained their strength in the aftermath of the coup attempt and a tactical depth was secured on Syrian soil abroad in order to ensure permanence

of the success in domestic anti-terrorism initiatives. The operation provided Turkey with the conditions that would enable it to fulfill the requirements of its priority interests which it felt it could not explain since 2012, and saw Turkey return to Syria as a military power that controlled the Azaz-Jarabulus-Al-Bab triangle. To that end, the visit by General Valery Gerasimov, Russian Chief of the General Staff, to Ankara on September 15, 2016 was the first visit after 11 years, especially in the aftermath of the jet shoot-down, and carried an importance even beyond that. The counterparts from both sides regarded the meeting as 'fruitful'. That meeting laid the foundations of military cooperation in Syria.⁵⁵

The Astana Process

Turkey and Russia used the Euphrates Shield as a means to re-establish bilateral relations within the framework of military cooperation unlike the past initiatives, and transposed this effort to diplomatic and political domains under the Astana Process, an initiative for cooperation among Turkey, Russia and Iran. On December 20, 2016, the Moscow Declaration was issued after the meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey in Moscow. The document signaled the intention to transfer the efforts of the trio, which conducted military activities and the fight against terrorism on Syrian soil, onto the political arena in a bid to find a solution to the Syrian issue.⁵⁶ The document also included a road map for 'political negotiations' in Syria and specifically emphasized the multi-religious, multi-ethnic, non-sectarian, democratic and secular character of Syria. The common vision of the parties was to assume a decisive role to solve the crisis within the framework of respect to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic and in line with the UN Security Council Resolution No. 2254. The key step deserving attention in Syria after 2012 was that the three countries defined themselves as 'facilitators', or guarantors, in the negotiations for a potential agreement between the Syrian Government and the opposition. The document also addressed ceasefire, non-prevention of

humanitarian aid and the free movement of civilians, pointing to the transition to a new level in the Syrian issue. For Turkey, the document meant the establishment of a legitimate basis for active armed struggle against the PYD/YPG as well as ISIL and Al-Nusra, the separation of armed opposition forces sponsored by Turkey from them, and their acceptance as legitimate opposition forces. Furthermore, the lack of any reference to Bashar al-Assad in the document may be regarded as Turkey's tacit acceptance of its giving up the priority and policy to oust Assad.

Responding to the invitation from the President of Kazakhstan, the first meeting was held in Astana, therefore the name the Astana Process. Both the declaration and the process turned the trio into active and legitimate players determining and bringing together the parties of the problem for a solution to the Syrian issue. The talks during that period enabled certain steps that served the priorities of delivering an active fight against the PYD/YPG, an item Turkey paid much attention to since the beginning; protecting civilians and moderate opposition elements; establishing de-escalation zones; maintaining the issue of immigration on the agenda, and securing a permanent solution in Syria. Just like it had been the case in the Astana Process, the expectation was

⁵⁴ For general information and evaluation on Operation Euphrates Shield, see Anadolu Agency "Operation Euphrates Shield: Aims and Gains", <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis-news/operation-euphrates-shield-aims-and-gains/730531>.

⁵⁵ "Rusya Genelkurmay Başkanı Gerasimov, Genelkurmay Karargahı'nda", *Hürriyet*, 15 Sept. 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/rusya-genelkurmay-baskani-gerasimov-genelkurmay-karargahinda-40224107>.

⁵⁶ "Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey on agreed steps to revitalize the political process to end the Syrian conflict", 20 Dec. 2016, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-statement-bv-the-foreign-ministers-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-the-russian-federation-and-the-republic-of-turkey-on-agreed-steps-to-revitalize-the-political-process-to-end-the-syrian-conflict-20-december-2016-moscow.en.mfa>.

to render Turkey an active and efficient player for a solution in Syria under the Geneva Process, a more comprehensive initiative including Western powers.

Following the first meeting in the Kazakh capital of Astana on January 23-24, 2017, the parties had 8 other rounds of talks throughout 2017. Adding the Sochi Summit attended by the leaders of the three countries on November 22, 2017, Russia and Turkey, which had almost come to the brink of war about a year ago, placed the Syrian issue on the agenda of their relations, this time under a completely different discourse and content. That is key in terms of showing the fluctuations in relations. During the process, the parties addressed a myriad of matters such as facilitating talks between the Syrian government and the armed opposition, ensuring the permanence of the ceasefire declared and establishing monitoring mechanisms, identifying and drawing the borders of de-escalation zones and leaving them to the control of guarantors, establishing coordination between them, identifying the elements that would contribute to the drafting of a new constitution to shape Syria's future, and developing trust-building measures between the parties.

It may be deemed that the process enabled the parties to shift to a compromising mindset regarding the developments in and the future of Syria, revealed different and similar approaches, and encouraged positive steps targeting a solution. Making an impact on bilateral relations in the process, the issue of fighting against the PKK/PYD/YPG was also an occasional highlight in the Astana Process. Although Turkey was usually supported by Russia to that end, there were times when uncertainties prevailed, for instance, on what attitude Russia would adopt against the PYD within the framework of the plan to gather a 'public congress' which was made up of all relevant ethnic groups. Turkey's priority was to 'exclude the terrorist groups from the process' while Russia wanted to 'hold a meeting in which all factions in Syria would be represented', which led to a short-lived tension that came to an end when the parties quickly addressed and solved the matter without covering it, unlike what they had done in the past. The solution was brought along by Turkey, which submitted to Russia a list of Kurdish groups that could attend the congress excluding the PYD. At that point, it is possible to say that Russia carefully and accurately interpreted Turkey's sensitivities and issued the desired responses to expectations. When the Syrian issue

was concerned, the Astana Process acted as an assurance that supported bilateral cooperation.

The most powerful outcomes of Turkey's cooperation with Russia and Iran in Syria were that Idlib was established a de-escalation zone and left to Turkey as the guarantor, and Turkish military troops were deployed in Idlib. Launched by the Turkish Armed Forces in coordination with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) on Afrin on January 20, 2018 in order to put an end to terrorist activities originating from the north of Syria, Operation Olive Branch was regarded as a military operation which was concluded successfully in a brief amount of time. Relating the Syrian issue with its own fight against terrorism, Turkey enjoyed the success it attained during that operation, which led to consequences such as proving Turkey's military capacity, establishing an efficient strategy in the fight against the US-backed YPG, which moved its troops to the east of Manbij and the Euphrates controlled by the US, and reviewing relations specifically with the US.

In 2018, the Astana Process was gradually progressing towards the end of armed conflict and the subsequent step of restructuring Syria. That also marked a period when a challenging phase had been reached in Turkish-Russian bilateral relations, and discussions had prevailed on whether it was possible for the Astana Process to survive. It was the Tehran Summit in September 2018 when disagreements among the parties became noticeable and expectations started to differ.⁵⁷ As observed in live media broadcasts, the summit presented breaking points between the parties such as how radical terrorist groups would be separated and distinguished from elements regarded as the armed moderate opposition groups, and what the status of Idlib, the last de-escalation zone controlled by Turkey as the guarantor, would be. The parties were able to overcome differences when a declaration of 12 articles was signed, and they succeeded in coming up with a roadmap as a result of intensive bilateral talks between Turkey and Russia. To that end, a new phase had been attained in which the parties cared about the continuation of the Astana Process and still backed the process through bilateral relations even though they fell short of fully satisfying the expectations of each other. As a result, it may be asserted that the Astana Process presented a certain convergence between Russia and Turkey (and Iran, definitely) in cognizance of the priorities

⁵⁷ "Son Dakika: Tahran'da Tarihi İdlib Zirvesi", *Hürriyet*, 7 Sept. 2018, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/son-dakika-tahranda-tarihi-idlib-zirvesi-40949318>.

and expectations of the parties and in order to improve the capacity to manage a regional cooperation initiative that had the capacity to sort out a regional issue. It is critical that the two countries were able to agree on Syria, on which they had almost fully opposite views and expectations in 2015, and establish common interests to set up a basis to support bilateral cooperation. However, it goes without saying that challenging issues loomed on the horizon for the parties.

In brief, Turkish-Russian bilateral relations pursued an unstable path under a direct impact of the expectations and interests of both parties which occasionally differed radically against the inevitable pressure from global and regional developments. The leaders of the two countries met 11 times over the previous year and attempted to manage the process in person, a sign that they were both aware of this challenge as well as the instability. The parties are now trying to eliminate mutual distrust, a legacy of geopolitical and historical competition, and develop a permanent and common perspective on regional and global matters. This effort produced some positive outcomes in Syria, albeit to a limited extent, as can be inferred from how things progressed. The parties had come to the brink of war in 2015 but, as of end 2018, they were seeking a collaborative, peaceful and permanent solution for the Syrian issue through diplomatic means. Although the success of that process was not directly dependent on bilateral relations, friendly and cooperation-focused relations apparently and highly contributed to the success of the solution process. In other words, the two players cultivated a common belief that acting in cooperation was the only way to success against the considerable global issues they faced. Furthermore, it is possible to state that the restriction and obstacles such cooperation faced in terms of bearing a result led the parties to a point where they focused on the process itself. To that end, process orientation formed the main axis of the recent Turkish-Russian relations.

Considering the importance and priorities of such rapprochement for Turkey and against a context of domestic political developments, another point to stress is the conviction of the Turkish decision makers that it was the US-backed powers, which Turkey called 'the mastermind', behind the domestic and regional problems Turkey faced lately. Despite that, Russia was still deemed a reliable partner for the highly-emphasized 'New Turkey', which meant the

restructuring of public agencies and bodies under the state of emergency conditions and the presidential system. There was a move away from individual liberties as well as liberal values including the freedom of the press within the framework of a discourse on anti-terrorism and reinstating stability in the country, carving out an illiberal government system that almost took Russia as a role model. Under such circumstances in which the Turkish political system almost entirely evolved into the one in Russia, the new political system held the Western world, chiefly the US, as the threat or the other under the ongoing 'national struggle'. The Gulenist military officers under the auspices of the US were held responsible for the jet shoot-down incident which had driven a wedge between Turkey and Russia, representing an entirely different perspective than that observed in November 2015 in terms of explaining and understanding the causes and consequences of the incidents. On a similar note, in December 2016, Andrei Karlov, the Russian ambassador to Ankara, was assassinated by a police officer who was related to the Gulenist movement at a time when Turkey and Russia had started to agree on certain security issues including Syria. Unlike the jet shoot-down, this abominable incident was calmly handled by both parties from the very beginning and was regarded as an act of provocation intended to hinder the progress in bilateral relations. It was implied that the perpetrator for the provocation was naturally Western players.

It is ironic that what happened in Syria was the reason why the parties had caught an actual wave of rapprochement. The developments in Syria first brought the relations to a point of rupture due to the jet shoot-down but then converged the parties within an initiative for a common fight against terrorism and establishing order in the Middle East. However, the factor that forced such cooperation to focus on the process rather than the outcome is the unstable relations the parties, each known historically as a European power, have with the Euro-Atlantic world.

Turkey's decision to buy S-400 defense systems from Russia emerged as a new issue that led to discussions on NATO membership and the reliability thereof.⁵⁸ This decision is considered as a step taken as a result of the change in Turkey's security perception and a measure against Western provocations. The air defense systems were first discussed during the visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to

⁵⁸ Dr. Can Kasapoğlu, Turkey's S-400 Dilemma, EDAM Foreign Policy and Security Paper Series 2017/5, July 2017.

Moscow in March 2017 and were soon bought after the visit with an expected initial delivery in 2019. An explanation of the reasons for such a step considered that the efforts of the Turkish side to permanently reinforce its air defense systems against the developments in Iraq and Syria were to no avail, and Turkey was unable to have an opportunity within the NATO to pursue steps in terms of its own defense understanding. To that end, Russia was regarded as an alternative for a permanent solution to Turkey's demands which had for so long been met via delays by its NATO allies. The reasons why Turkey deemed an agreement with Russia as an 'urgent' need in July 2017 included, among others, the decrease in the number of pilots after a huge number of pilots was expelled in the aftermath of the coup attempt, and the dissatisfaction caused by the U.S. support to the Syrian Democratic Forces, which were comprised of the YPG elements that Turkey deemed as an extension of the PKK, during the civil war in Syria. The fact that these systems were bought from Russia, a perceived threat against the NATO members, and that S-400 systems would not work in harmony with the NATO systems pointed out to a gradually-increasing pressure on Turkey from its Western allies in the future. Indeed, Turkey's NATO allies, chiefly the US, always kept the matter on their agenda and issued threatening warnings to Ankara. Finally, after the US Department of State confirmed the sale of Patriot systems, which would work in harmony with the NATO systems, to Turkey in December 2018, the statement that the US government had offered a bid to Turkey in January 2019 for the sales of Patriot air and missile defense systems both created a great satisfaction in Ankara and pointed to an expected, gradually-improving competition and negotiations. Pending negotiations in the upcoming days will decide whether Ankara can buy both systems, whether the US will allow the sales of Patriot systems to Turkey if Ankara does not give up on S-400 systems, or whether Ankara will take into account the US demands and cancel the purchase of S-400 systems to revert to NATO

systems. In any case, it goes without saying that Turkey's decisions will have some permanent and direct impact on its bilateral relations with Russia as well as its relations with the Euro-Atlantic world.

The rapidly-developing bilateral political relations with a focus on Syria had some instant influence on economy and trade, the two priorities of the former period, as well as trade/energy within the specific context of TurkStream project and Akkuyu nuclear power plant. Putin's visit to Turkey in October 2016 was critically important as it marked a fresh start at a time when the two leaders intensified cooperation and stressed the elimination of negative repercussions of the period in between. During the visit, the TurkStream agreement was signed and the project for the Akkuyu nuclear power plant was reinvigorated, the sign of a return to priorities set in 2010. During the ceremony held in Istanbul on November 19, 2018 to mark the rapid completion of the sea section of TurkStream natural gas pipeline, Putin said, in full emphasis, "The new pipeline will be an important project for the development of Turkey's economy. I would like to thank President Erdogan for his political will and courage. It is not possible to run a project without courage. This project would have been impossible if it were not for the trust-based relationship between the two countries." These remarks highlighted the matter of trust which would determine the progress of bilateral relations not only in economy and trade but also in the political domain.⁵⁹ Apparently, the matters that would test this trust-based relationship present more challenging conditions compared to the past due to the existing international conjuncture and the heavy weight of regional issues.⁶⁰ How the two leaders will interpret these conditions will be the decisive factor for the progress in bilateral relations. To that end, the attitude the Euro-Atlantic world will adopt against the developments in the Middle East will be decisive as the main external factor with an impact on bilateral relations.

⁵⁹ "İstanbul'daki Türk Akımı Töreninde Konuşan Putin: Projeye Adını Erdoğan Verdi", Sputnik Türkiye, 19 Nov. 2018, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201811191036214620-putin-erdogan-turk-akimi-toren-istanbul/>.

⁶⁰ As examples of recent comprehensive analyses on bilateral relations in consideration of various factors, see Pavel K. Baev and Kemal Kirişçi, *An Ambiguous Partnership: The Serpentine Trajectory of Turkish-Russian Relations in the Era of Erdoğan and Putin*, Turkey Project Policy Paper, No.13, Center on the US and Europe at Brookings, Sept. 2017; Selim Kuru, *The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations*, Black Sea Strategy Papers, Foreign Policy Research Papers, 19 Nov. 2018.

Conclusion

Turkish-Russian bilateral relations have followed an unstable path in the last 30 years. The main reason behind this instability is that the history of the two countries is dominated by fundamental strife, conflicts and wars, and is based on suspicion and distrust rather than amity and cooperation. Despite some hard-to-manage, undesired circumstances arising occasionally, the relations have transformed in a way that prioritized cooperation and partnership in the last 30 years. Two countries with sufficient historical experience to not trust each other are apparently forced into a compulsory but fragile and sensitive cooperation by their wish to influence and even determine regional and global balances. Economic and trade relations make a positive impact on cooperation and converge the parties within a mutual dependence for each other. The main axis setting the tone of relations and the pace of rapprochement is the cooperation- or competition-focused relations the duo have historically established with the Euro-Atlantic world.

The parties have failed to establish political cooperation based solely on the expectations and interests of Turkey and Russia, independent of the impact of security and threat perceptions dominating regional/global relations. Each party pursues a priority to forge a bond with the Euro-Atlantic community focusing on its own expectations and interests, which is the reason why bilateral relations that are independent from that world and are based on a different regional/global vision cannot be established. In the context of security-focused and aggressive approach Russia pursued lately, the ups and downs in Turkish-Russian relations have played a crucial role in shaping the structure of the relations the two countries pursue with the Western countries as well as Turkey's foreign and security policies. In a similar vein, Russia's agenda on key priority matters such as energy, trade and economy, not to mention regional security and foreign policy, is very much determined by Turkey's choices focusing on the Euro-Atlantic community, which it cannot or will not give up. That is why Russia is considered as a balancing and driving force but mostly an opponent or obstacle in the eyes of Turkish decision-makers, specifically against the Western world, in delivering Turkey's regional priorities. Similarly, Russia has considered Turkey a partner that could be cooperated with under certain conditions but mostly an opponent in terms of fulfilling Russia's priorities and interests in its immediate vicinity.

To that end, it is concluded that two countries which

considered the other as an opponent or threat almost until the end of the 1990s started to display a tendency to develop a rather independent foreign policy. The developments in the 2000s provided an affirmative response to the question on whether the parties could collaborate to ensure acting independently from Western countries at least within the context of regional matters. Cooperation has started to flourish since the early 2000s under the umbrella of strong governments headed by two strong leaders, and, within a period as short as a decade, has rendered the parties as two partners which cooperated on multiple dimensions.

Starting from the second half of the 2000s, mutual dialogue and interaction have gradually created a new space for bilateral cooperation under the severe impact of a basically anti-Western geopolitical discourse adopted by Russia and Turkey and the changing perception on Eurasia. Despite the establishment of carefully-planned, high-level political structures chaired directly by the two leaders in order to offer common and permanent solutions to regional issues and stabilize relations, uncontrolled developments resulted in a failure to ensure institutionalization. This failure made the fate of bilateral relations dependent on the tendencies and expectations of the leaders on one side and exposed it to the direct and occasionally damaging impacts of daily developments on the other. Such impacts mainly include the failure of the parties to adopt a common perspective in eliminating the negative consequences of competition in the Caucasus and Central Asia since the end of the Cold War despite statements stressing cooperation in Eurasia, their failure to prevent the dissolution of the security umbrella in the Black Sea basin that had been built up in 20 years under great hardships, and the different priorities and expectations they held against the developments in Crimea and the Ukraine.

Last but not the least, despite the achievements and ongoing cooperation in the last two years, bilateral political relations had a highly fragile basis in terms of the developments in the Middle East, chiefly in Syria, due to the different and imbalanced perspectives of the parties which are easily impacted by daily developments. To that end, the possibility that the imbalanced US policies on Syria, coupled with the EU's giving up on its indifferent approach on the matter, will evolve into a form that prioritizes cooperation with Turkey bears the potential to directly influence Turkish-Russian relations in the future. It may be asserted that Turkey will

need its Western allies in the upcoming period in order to balance, as a minimum, the increasing influence of Iran and Russia specifically in the Middle East. Furthermore, we will apparently witness a difficult process in the future, considering that Russia gives the green light to cooperation with players having a regional influence such as Israel in addition to its need for Turkey in order to balance the occasionally-increasing Iranian influence.

On the other hand, the foregoing kept the parties from building visionary, permanent and stable relations and led to competition and, ironically, emerged as the major points pushing the parties to cooperate as well. Regional and global developments created by geopolitical competition, coupled with the disagreements with the Western countries, force the parties to engage in permanent political relations and diplomatic cooperation. It is a fact that bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia assumed a different tactic, even a strategic dimension, following recent developments in Syria. It is critical that the parties have been able to come up with a common ground despite radically-differing expectations and interests when they established, together with Iran, the Astana Trio. In addition to regional developments, the fact that Turkey did not get the interest and support it expected from its Western allies after the military coup attempt in

Turkey resulted in Turkey's re-positioning Russia as a partner which could be cooperated with in terms of regional and global issues including security. The construction of the TurkStream natural gas pipeline, the ongoing cooperation for constructing a nuclear power plant and, most importantly, Turkey's purchasing of air defense systems from Russia despite objections from its NATO-member allies are construed as concrete signs that cooperation between the two countries has set sail for new horizons.

In brief, understanding the nature of Turkish-Russian bilateral relations requires a full grasp of the history and limitations of bilateral relations as well as a consideration of the relations both countries maintain with other regional players in the neighborhood, chiefly with the Western world. The parties occasionally have radically-differing approaches on security and foreign policy within the context of NATO, the EU, Black Sea security, Crimea, the Ukraine and, most recently, Syria. Such approaches indicate that the upcoming period will gradually unfold as a process-focused one. The circumstances that could possibly transform the process-oriented approach into a result-oriented, visionary cooperation do not exist yet. This is proof that Turkish-Russian relations will be sensitive and fragile in the upcoming days.



Foreign Policy & Security 2019/6

April 2019

**VIEWING PRESENT AS HISTORY:
THE STATE AND FUTURE OF
TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

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