

**PERCEPTIONS**  
**JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

**December 2001- February 2002 / Vol. - VI Num.4**

**SOME FEATURES OF RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS  
IN THE 1990s**

**VLADIMIR I. DANILOV**

*Dr Vladimir I. Danilov is Senior Researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow.*

At the beginning of perestroika, I heard from one senior official in the Soviet Foreign Office: “We have no problem with Turkey.”

This was the result of both sides’ efforts. In the 1960s, Turkey understood the necessity of changing its one-sided orientation to the USA and NATO into multifaceted policies of normalisation of relations with the Afro-Asian world and its neighbours, including the USSR.

In accordance with an agreement made in 1967, the USSR supplied Turkey with combined equipment and technical assistance for the construction of several industrial installations that were extremely important for the Turkish economy. The 1972 Declaration on the Principles of Good-Neighbourly Relations and 1978 Political Document on Good-Neighbourly and Friendly Relations contributed to the improvement of mutual political relations.

This situation changed at the beginning of the 1990s. At the end of the 1980s, the disintegration of the USSR was already showing itself. In 1991, before the official disintegration of the Soviet Union (in April 1992), Turkey was the first state to recognise the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this connection, some Western mass-media noted that Turkey, taking into account the state of her relations with the USSR at that time, could do this only after obtaining the consent of the then President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachov.

So, in Turkey’s foreign policy, a new and very important direction appeared – the active development of relations in different fields with the new-born sovereign states. The reaction in the Russian Federation to Turkey’s line was mixed. Moscow’s confirmed ‘democrats’ approved and even encouraged this activity. For example, Russia’s then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozirev, said that the Turkish model of political and economic development would be the most suitable for the new Islamic republics. As to the majority of Russian society, it appraised the Turkish expansion disapprovingly and even with hostility.

But, let us suggest that Turkey acted by simply taking into account the newly created geopolitical situation in the region and not out of some special rivalry with its northern neighbour.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Turkey had tremendous plans in Azerbaijan and Central Asia. They included the formation of a common economic and political space and even the creation of some common parliamentary body. But, reality changed these plans. The new republics’ traditional ties with Russia turned out to be stronger than Turkey had suspected.

Somehow, the Central Asian republics did not show interest in Turkey's proposals about political integration. Economic co-operation certainly developed, but the financial possibilities Turkey could offer were restricted. The only field where Turkey obtained remarkable success was cultural co-operation, including the organisation of radio transmissions and telecasts, co-operation programmes in education and the training of experts both in Turkey and in the newly born independent republics.

At any rate, by the end of the 1990s, the limit and scope of Turkish expansion to these republics stabilised and thus the hostile public reaction in Russia diminished.

But, the problem has some delicate aspects within the territory of the Russian Federation where there are peoples, like the Bashkirs and Tatars, who are Muslims and speak languages belonging to the same linguistic group as Turkish. They have their republics and their presidents. After the disintegration of the USSR, the separatist tendencies in such republics within the Russian Federation visibly increased. Several separatist circles trying to establish direct contacts with neo-panturkist groups in Turkey were activated after the disintegration of the USSR. In this connection, the Russian Foreign Office issued protests.

The point is that some radical 'democrats' in Russia consider the disintegration of the USSR as only the first stage of the whole process of disintegration of the Russian state and that the second stage will be the disintegration of the Russian Federation itself. Starting with this assumption, they try to instigate the above mentioned separatists.

Such a tendency showed itself in its most striking form in the North Caucasus – in Chechnya, to be precise. All the events in this connection, led to another problem in Russian-Turkish relations. Radical 'democrats' hoped that the Chechen revolt could be used as a fuse to blow up the whole Federation. At first, before and during this revolt, they tried to show it as a "national liberation movement against Russian occupants" and supported it by all means from Moscow.<sup>1</sup> However, in 1994 the Russian Federation government began military operations against General Djovkhar Dudaev's troops. What was the reaction of Turkey at that time? The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs first declared, "The bombings of Grozny has caused serious concern." But, in December 1994, the official position of Turkey changed. The new declaration of the Ministry stated that Chechnya must be considered an integral part of the Russian Federation and that Ankara supports the Federation's territorial integrity. Moreover, Ankara underlined its special understanding of the Russian problem in Chechnya, it having a similar problem with Kurdish separatists in Turkey.

Several important Turkish newspapers showed one way or another their sympathy for the Chechen revolt, noting that the Chechens are ethnically and religiously close to the Turks and that Chechnya would be the Russia's second Afghanistan. At the same time, certain circles in Turkey tried in different ways to support Chechen separatists.

Here I cannot but remember the words of one prominent Turkish politician, the late İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil, who said that those who plan to divide the skin of the not-yet-killed Russian bear should be careful.

The first war in Chechnya ended with an agreement with Moscow that gave the separatists' leaders

practically full independence. But, instead of national liberation, the Chechen people got the terror of separatist, armed organisations, economic devastation, anarchy and the rebirth of the ancient slave trade.

In 1999, separatist leaders tried to enlarge the territory under their control but this second war ended in the defeat of their principal forces. This time, almost all society, including an important part of the Chechen population itself, supported the Russian armed forces' operations.

The official position of Turkey did not change, as the Turkish Premier, Bülent Ecevit, reaffirmed during an official visit to Moscow at the end of 1999. But, as stated in some Turkish publications,<sup>2</sup> some hesitations in Turkey's official position during the first Chechen war and the activities of Chechen separatist supporters in Turkey influenced Russian public opinion negatively. In the Russian Federation, these circumstances were used by those who tried to direct Russian society against Turkey and to divert attention in this way from the people responsible for the destructive policies in the Russian Federation, including the Chechen events.

During the second Chechen war, the slogans of the separatists and their supporters changed. Instead of national liberation, they used slogans proclaiming Islamist values and the creation of an Islamist state. But, I should note that during the seventy years of the Soviet regime, all Islamist groups in the USSR, wherever they lived, being under the influence of communist ideology, were far from those 'Islamist' values and in reality were half atheistic.

So, the new slogans are somehow artificial. But their aim is to win support for the Chechen separatists from Islamist communities and, by this means, ensure the success of the separatists. Turkey's enemies in the Russian Federation say that Turkish Islamists support Chechen Islamists and so Turkey is the enemy of Russia.

We can find here the interest of the globalist forces of the United States. Since their principal enemy is the world Islamist movement, they hope to divert Islamist terrorists' attention away from themselves, to Chechen and towards the Russian Federation, putting the Islamic world and Russia against each other.

The United States' propaganda has the tendency to use the words 'Islamist', 'fundamentalist' and 'terrorist' synonymously. But, as far as I know, Islam is one of the two greatest confessions in the world and, being the adept of Islam does not contain any sin. Fundamentalists in Islam, as in any other confession, try to support or regenerate original values of confession and here there cannot be any criminal element. Only if that is realised through violence and with arms are we dealing with terrorism. So, we have no reason to consider the entire Islamist world as composed of terrorists. By the way, the remaining Chechen terrorists have lost all connection with real Islamist values and are fighting their own people.

In recent Russian Federation-Turkey relations, some observations can be made about economics. One of these observations is about keeping Turkey supplied with energy resources such as oil and natural gas. The point is that Turkey extracts about three million tonnes of oil a year but consumes about 30 million tonnes in a year. The problem is searching for suitable oil supplies.

The destruction of the USSR and, as a consequence, the weakening of the Russian Federation's position in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region created new perspectives for Turkey. The

deposits of oil in these regions ceased to belong to the USSR<sup>3</sup> and became sovereign. The new geopolitical situation pushed Turkey to search for ways to access rich energy sources. To turn future oil pipelines towards Turkey with the construction of a terminal on its Mediterranean Sea coast was found suitable. Accordingly, several projects were prepared.

On the other hand, the Russian Federation, although weakened and bewildered, did not want to lose entirely what belonged to it in the past and planned other directions for pipelines across its territory and with terminals on the Black Sea coast. Oil tankers were supposed to transport the oil further, out through the Straits. So, yet another point of contention, one more problem appeared in the Russian Federation-Turkey relations.

Turkey succeeded in finding a weak point in the Russian Federation's oil pipeline projects. Turkey declared that the necessary increase in oil transportation through the Straits from terminals on the Black Sea coast could have negative effects on the ecological situation in Bosphorus. In July 1994, Turkey introduced new regulations for navigation in the Straits and these affected the interests of the Russian Federation. In November 1998, Turkey declared new navigation rules for the Straits.<sup>4</sup>

So, the whole problem was aggravated but it concerns not only Russia and Turkey. There is a third factor - the USA, which declared the whole world a zone of their strategic interest. The United States supported (mostly by declarations) the Turkish oil pipeline projects, but spoke of no real investments. But, the USA was also interested in supporting pro-American rule in Moscow, which would provide them with big geopolitical and economical advantages.

Of course, not all aspects of relations between our countries are problematic. For example, the development of commerce shows great success. The volume of trade increased from \$500 million in 1986 to \$4 billion in 1997. Turkey, as Russian officials stated, became one of Russia's principal trade partners. We see great developments in the activities of Turkish contractors in Russia. The value of their work is estimated in billions of dollars. Russian tourist flow to Turkey has also grown remarkably.

Though we can identify some problems here, they exist only for one side – Russia. The so-called economic reforms ruined many of the most developed branches of Russian industry and high technology and this changed the structure of Russian exports. Raw materials, which are not profitable for exporters, replaced industrial and high technology products.

At any rate, there are some points of contention in recent Russian Federation-Turkey relations. Some Turkish political analysts indicate the oil pipelines and changes in the Turkish Straits regime as the most acute problems. Others point to the policies of Turkey in the Caucasus and that these may contribute to a break up of the Russian Federation's territorial integrity.<sup>5</sup> After the disintegration of the USSR, the Russian Federation's international position weakened. Russia also has internal problems. In appearance, the population looks inert and passive but, actually, there is great socio-political tension in a latent condition. It showed itself once: in 1993, in a mass revolt in Moscow concerning former President Boris Yeltsin's bombing of parliament. Not long ago, the former Duma attempted to impeach Yeltsin. As a result of pressure from the presidential administration, voting fell just short of the number required to confirm the accusations against Yeltsin, which included the destruction of the armed forces, genocide of the Russian people, the Chechen war and others. An important section of the Russian electorate considers the results of the

last parliamentary and presidential elections to be tainted after press reports of major falsifications in different regions of the country.

The overwhelming majority of Russian society passively resists the imposition of things incompatible with national and traditional values and this majority is full of desire to restore and consolidate the 'Great Russian' state.

On the other hand, Turkish society has its own problems. The political events of the 1990s demonstrated the return of some elements of political instability. The essential changes showed themselves in the correlation of the main political forces. The 1995 and 1999 parliamentary elections demonstrated the strengthening of Islamist and nationalist political forces. So, we see a renaissance of the so-called Turkish-Islamist Synthesis, which is aiming to strengthen national unity, national and traditional values and territorial integrity.

The best way to resolve the problems between our two countries is not to serve foreign interests and create conditions for conflicts but to have constructive discussion, mutual understanding and co-operation.

1 I attended some sessions of the Duma's commission investigating the events of the first Chechen war (1994-1996), the Govoruchin Commission. During the hearings, the former Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of the Chechen Republic stated that, at the very beginning of the formation of General Dudaev's armed bands, the Chechen local authorities had enough force to suppress all during a couple of weeks. But a group of very high-ranking 'democrats' came from Moscow, prohibited any measures against Dudaev's organisation and recommended allowing their arming.

2 Avrasya İşbirliği (Eurasian Co-operation), Perspektif, No. 24, Istanbul, January 2000, p. 12.

3 Soviet geologists explored these huge oil and natural gas deposits and, in the planned Soviet economy, they were destined for extraction and use later in the twenty-first century.

4 Mustafa Aydın, 'New Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus: Causes of Instability and Predicament', SAM Papers 2/2000, Ankara, 2000, p. 73.

5 Avrasya İşbirliği (Eurasian Co-operation), Perspektif, No.10, April 1998, p. 29.

---