
The Relations between Turkey and Russia in the 2000s

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Abstract

Turkey and Russia are working to transform their century-long geopolitical disputes into a geo-economic partnership. From the 2000s onwards, there have been rapid improvements in the political-diplomatic relations between the two countries. In recent years, Turkey-Russia relations have been gradually transforming thanks to the constructive and peaceful approaches embraced by Ankara and Moscow. Ankara and Moscow's approach to international problems generally tends to exhibit overlaps or similarities. For many years both sides have expressed their desire for bilateral relations not to remain merely economic, also encompassing regional and global interests, and being based on shared trust and respect. Relations between Turkey and Russia are often described through various terms such as "strategic." Nonetheless, the existence of some problems between the two countries cannot be denied, even though they are not explicitly voiced. The general structure of Turkish-Russian relations implies that in the coming years, cooperation and competition will remain as determining factors.

Key Words

Turkish-Russian relations, strategic partnership, cooperation, competition.

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Introduction

With their historical, ethnic and cultural ties, and geographical positioning, Turkey and Russia occupy a highly significant position in terms of maintaining global and regional peace, as well as development and cooperation in their respective regions. The relations between Turkey and Russia span over 500 years. Throughout this period, their economic, political, historic and cultural bearings have impacted each other, and the other countries and communities with which they have entered into relations. The present day relations between Turkey and Russia are the product of various phases that have followed a meandering path. Periodic instances of conflict and cooperation characterize this historical past, which have left deep marks in the social memory of both countries.

Due to the erratic nature of their relations, both Turkey and Russia have strived to act most vigilantly in order to obtain maximum benefit, even during the highly restrictive atmosphere of the Cold War. The ground breaking changes

in international politics following the Cold War were the key factors leading to the eradication of the taboos and barriers characterizing Turkish-Russian relations. It is possible to historically examine post-Cold War relations between the two countries within the time frames of the 1990s and 2000s. During the 1990s, despite increasing economic relations, both countries prioritized competition in the fields of energy, ethnic problems and regional balance of power; hence, they were unable to take full advantage of this period. Therefore, in terms of politics, the 1990s can be classified as the “lost years” in Turkey-Russia relations. The second period encompasses the 2000s, which is the current phase. During these years, both countries have come to terms with the negative impact of destructive rivalry and the positive value of increasing economic relations, which today have reached record rates. With this transformed vision, the two countries have been seeking out new ways for improving trust relations. Therefore, in terms of politics and diplomacy, this second phase can be identified as the “maturation” period of Turkish-Russian relations.¹

From the 2000s onwards, there have been rapid improvements in the political-diplomatic relations between the two countries. The course of these relations has changed in accordance with global developments, which have

played an important role in reshaping perceptions of one another. The “win-lose” perspective of the Cold War period has now been replaced by the “win-win” equation. This substantial turn in relations has given way to stability, trust and welfare, which in turn have had a direct and positive impact on lives of the Turkish and Russian populations. For this reason, it can be argued that both societies are supportive of this convergence between Turkey and Russia.

The most obvious examples of this development include rapidly expanding trade volume, top-level visits between the leaders of both countries, removal of visas, and signing of cooperation agreements in the nuclear field. The expansion of diplomatic relations has also facilitated the development of relations in other fields. This state of affairs has greatly contributed to the eradication of the mutually held problems of negative perception and mistrust, both products of the Imperial and Cold War periods. The purpose of this article is to examine Turkey-Russia relations in the 2000s and analyse their present standing.

Winds of Change in Foreign Policy

When speaking of Turkish-Russian relations, the subject must be evaluated in terms of the new foreign policies adopted by both countries in recent

years, and especially as part of Turkey's new foreign policy vision. Equally, this change can be seen as a product of the restructuring processes of Turkish and Russian diplomacies. Turkey's multi-dimensional foreign policy approach is gaining influence. As one of the requirements of Turkey's active foreign policy which is based on increasing its economic relations with other countries, regional security, stability and zero problems with neighbours, Russia is inevitably positioned in the higher ranks of the agenda within this scope.

Turkish-Russian relations began accelerating during the presidency of Vladimir Putin in Russia and with the election of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in Turkey.² The AK party came to power at the end of 2002 and the first signs of their reformed position were apparent in the party program, where it is stated: "The relations established with the Russian Federation, Central Asia and the Caucasus will be based not on competition but friendly cooperation".³ Through this new perspective aimed at multiplying relations in the fields of tourism, economy, energy and regional security, the exchanges between the two countries have deepened. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has defined Russia as important in terms of trade, investment, tourism and energy security, which also points to the new policy transformations.⁴ Moreover, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has

expressed how Turkey sees Russia as "a very important partner, an influential world power, and a country that holds a key role in terms of regional cooperation." Relations with Russia are primary and inseparable aspects of Turkish foreign policy.⁵

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Turkey's recently upheld new foreign policy approach is reflected within Turkish-Russian relations and has opened the way for collaborative opportunities in solving regional problems. Likewise, it has provided the necessary motivation and aspiration to further develop relations with Russia. Turkey believes in the importance of applying policies of good neighbourliness and zero problems along its border regions, and also views Russia from this perspective. Within Turkey's current policy approach, the improvement of both political and economic relations with Russia is a priority. At the same time, Russia is seen as a vital partner in terms of achieving stability and regional peace in Eurasia.⁶ Alongside Greece, Iran and Iraq, Russia no longer remains among the potential

threat factors listed in Turkey's National Security Policy Document, which is widely accepted as Turkey's secret constitution and publicly known as the "red book." This development is an important expression of Turkey's new foreign policy determination.⁷

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Turkey and Russia's political expectations from one another may not always overlap with their individual capacities to meet these expectations. When one or both of the sides are aware of this fact and take initiative accordingly, it can provide rather important benefits and contributions both to the individual country and the totality of the relations. It is possible to state that this mode of action precisely characterizes Turkey's approach towards Russia in recent years. Had Moscow misinterpreted this approach or not reciprocated it accordingly, serious problems could have surfaced. However, the new developments are a sign that Russian perceptions of Turkish foreign policy are much more encouraging compared to 10 years ago. Russia has been positive about Turkey's new stance

and has showed much less hesitation in taking steps in accord with Ankara.

In the previous framework of Turkish-Russian relations, Moscow evaluated relations with Turkey not in terms of global policies, but regional policies, attributing to them secondary importance. On the contrary, Ankara viewed its northern neighbour, once a superpower, of primary significance in terms of both regional and global policies. In this new period, however, there is a change in Russia's approach as well. Through an active, peaceful and constructive foreign policy, Turkey has achieved growing significance in the Middle East, Islamic World, Balkans, Caucasus and Africa, which is increasingly drawing the interest and attention of Russia.

Russia is a great regional and global power in terms of its natural resources, economic, political and military strength. When examined from the Russian front, it is observable that with the presidency of Vladimir Putin, a new approach is being assumed, which favours collaborations with regional and international actors as long as they do not conflict with national interests. In this same period, Turkey, too, has been pursuing a foreign policy of zero problems, dynamic and multidimensional relations, which has led both countries to grow closer to one another. After Putin was elected as Russian State President, he made the

statement that “As long as there is no conflict of interest, we will cooperate with everyone”.⁸ During the Putin period, high price increases in raw natural resources has led to the strengthening of the Russian economy and the country has been assuming a much more active foreign policy. In this framework, Russia has been trying to establish new relational networks in regions of influence and concern, while also trying to return to the spheres of interest and authority that had been abandoned with the disintegration of the Soviet Union.⁹ As a result, it is possible to state that Russia no longer perceives Turkey as a rival and a threat, as was the case in the 1990s.

From the current perspective of Russia, Turkey has become an economic and political partner that cannot be ignored.

Russia is discomfited by US policies on the Middle East and wishes to see Turkey as an ally in this region, where Russia held close relations during the Soviet period. Due to the hegemonic policies observed after 9/11, the US is currently working to isolate the hostility surfacing in the Islamic world. Hence, for Russia, close relations with Turkey, which is the strongest and most influential country in the Islamic world, holds special importance. Turkey

is positioning itself to become a future energy hub and Moscow is aware that this will not just upset their interests as a competitor, but will also present new opportunities. Therefore, from the current perspective of Russia, Turkey has become an economic and political partner that cannot be ignored.

Economic, Political and Cultural Relations

Turkey and Russia accumulated quite important experiences in trade and economic cooperation towards the end of the 20th century. Some of the main factors accelerating this process include mutual economic interests, scientific-technical potential and Turkey’s rich experiences in shaping the market economy. The expanding trade volume between the two countries has led both sides to emphasize initiatives that improve collaborations around shared economic interests. By increasing and diversifying trade and economic relations, Turkey and Russia have created the opportunity for solving current and prospective political problems more easily and in a manner fitting the conditions of both countries.

In 2008, the trade volume between the two countries reached record height at 38 billion dollars. There are plans to further increase this figure to 100 billion dollars.¹⁰ This Turkish-held aspiration was expressed during the visit of Russian

State President Dmitry Medvedev to Ankara between August 11-13, 2010. The possibilities for its realization will surface with time. Although due to the economic crisis and problems experienced with customs, the trade volume in 2009 decreased to 22 billion dollars, it reached to 27 billion dollars in 2010. In 2009, over 3 million Russian tourists visited Turkey. The share of the Turkish construction sector carrying out contracts in the Russian market has reached 25 billion dollars. Even though they are not as substantial as the Turkish investments in Russia, there are notable Russian investments made in Turkey, transportation and energy being the most notable examples. Turkey purchases 63% of its natural gas and 29% of its petroleum from Russia. Another important item within energy collaborations is the establishment of nuclear plants. As a matter of fact, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has stated “It is significant and meaningful that we make our first investments in energy with the Russian Federation”.¹¹

Some of the main problematic issues in relations between the two countries during the 1990s entailed conflicts of power over the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia’s sale of S-300 missiles to the Greek Cyprus, the CFE (Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty) debates, the passage of Caspian petroleum through the Turkish straits, and the Kurdish and Chechen problems. However, new

fields of opportunity were also formed during this time. Above all others were general economic relations. Additionally, there was the “Blue Stream” natural gas pipeline, cooperation in fighting against terrorism, military-technical relations and search for collaboration in Eurasia.¹²

The core factor leading to the transformation from rivalry to cooperation was the changes in the international system and its reflections upon the relations between the two countries and the Eurasian geography.

During the 1990s, the greatest problem between the two countries has been the lack of trust and both sides focused on eliminating this problem. It is observable that in the early 1990s, both Russia and Turkey became aware of this fact. Between December 15-17, 1997, Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin made his first official visit to Ankara. This visit occurred during a period in which Russian-Turkish economic relations had reached record heights and was the first concrete outcome of the convergence in relations. Both countries were seeking out ways in which economic relations could be expanded into other fields. It was during this period that the term “strategic partnership” was first expressed.¹³ The visit by the Turkish Chief of Staff İsmail

Hakkı Karadayı to Moscow in May 1998 may also be seen as the first signs of the evaporation of the Cold War cloud overshadowing relations.

The core factor leading to the transformation from rivalry to cooperation was the changes in the international system and its reflections upon the relations between the two countries and the Eurasian geography. In December 1997, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, and other former members of the Warsaw Pact, took the first steps towards NATO membership. Despite Russian opposition, the Western world had initiated the process, and this, for Russia, was unacceptable. In the same period, Turkey was experiencing serious problems with the EU regarding membership, which became evident during the Luxembourg Summit. Moreover, in 1997 and 1998, both countries struggled with economic crises. These circumstances had already started bringing both sides closer to one another both in the political, commercial, and economic domains.¹⁴

The most important development indicating an open and decisive drive to move towards cooperation in bilateral relations was the visit made by Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit to Moscow during November 1999. During this visit, Ecevit was posed a question regarding Chechnya, where he answered: “We do not want to meddle in the internal affairs of Russia. We believe that the problem

will be solved through peaceful means”.¹⁵ Likewise, in his meeting with Ecevit, Russian President Vladimir Putin made the statement “Whatever the source may be, Russia has not and will not support any terrorist acts against Turkey”.¹⁶

This increase in diplomatic relations during the first years of the 2000s was a clear sign that relations between the two countries were becoming determinedly different from the 1990s

As a result of these parallel developments, there was a notable increase in diplomatic visits between Turkey and Russia, and new channels for political dialogue, which today are progressively expanding, also started to take form. This increase in diplomatic relations during the first years of the 2000s was a clear sign that relations between the two countries were becoming determinedly different from the 1990s. Both sides began evaluating the present level of their relations within economic, political, military-technical and other fields. They also identified each other’s perspectives and developmental tendencies in these fields, openly exhibiting their shared desire in carrying relations to a higher level. Before the end of the 1990s, bilateral relations

between Turkey and Russia proceeded without a particular central focus and in a somewhat unstable manner. At the end of the 1990s, however, economic and energy issues started framing relations. A shared description was not reached on the subject of terror and counter terrorism. Nonetheless, it no longer hindered the relations centered around economic and trade relations, and also prepared the ground for multi-dimensional partnerships.¹⁷

On September 6, 2000, Vladimir Putin and Ahmet Necdet Sezer held a top-level meeting during the “Millennium Summit” in New York. In October 2000, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov visited Ankara, which was to become a turning point in Russian-Turkish relations. Most notable was his statement: “Russia and Turkey are not rivals. We are partners and our governments will enter into relations in accordance with this principle.” Both sides expressed the future potential of developing the relations even further, “from collaboration to strategic partnership”.¹⁸ For many years, both countries had been damaged by terror, therefore the events of September 11, 2001 presented the opportunity for convergence in the framework of mutual understanding. The policy of putting problems behind and emphasizing economic cooperation was taken a step further in the climate formed after 9/11. On November 16, 2001, the Turkish

and Russian Foreign Ministers, İsmail Cem and Igor S. Ivanov, who were in New York for the UN General Assembly Meetings, signed the document titled: “Action Plan Between the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation on Cooperation in Eurasia: From Co-operation to Multidimensional Partnership.”

In the years 2004-2005, the new frameworks established by these agreements began bearing fruits and can be identified as the period in which relations prospered.¹⁹ Between February 23-26, 2004, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül made an official visit to Moscow. In light of the changing dynamics of the Turkish-Russian relations, such a visit was, for the first time, treated as an “exception” and accepted at the level of “Prime Minister.” It was then reciprocated through the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Ankara on 5-6, December 2004. In the span of over 500 years of Turkish-Russian relations, perhaps the only other comparable visit was that of Nikolai Podgorny, President of the High Presidium, in 1972. Therefore, Putin’s visit to Turkey was of great historic significance. When evaluated from the perspective of bilateral politics, the year 2005 was in every sense an *annus mirabilis* (‘incredible year’). Within one year alone, Putin and Erdoğan came together four times, including a seven hour long special meeting held along

the Black Sea coast.²⁰ Russian President Putin came to Samsun (Turkey) on November 17, 2005 to join the opening ceremony of the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Turkey between May 31 -June 1, 2006. Turkey's President Ahmet Necdet Sezer visited Russia during June 28-30, 2006. This was the first presidential level visit to take place between the two countries since the founding of the Russian Republic and was highly significant in that respect. In the following years, this traffic of mutual visits was maintained in a regular fashion. Between 12-15, February 2009, Turkey's President Abdullah Gül set forth on a visit including Moscow and Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. This was the first time for a Turkish president to visit the Tatar Republic and was also an important reflection of the emerging trust between Turkey and Russia. In previous decades, such a visit by Turkey to the leaders of a Turkic community unit in Russia would have caused much suspicion. On this point, President Abdullah Gül made the statement, "Normally such visits are followed by some disturbances. For this reason, both sides have exhibited mutual sensitivity. We did not experience the slightest problem regarding our visit to the Tatar Republic. On the contrary, it was encouraged. This is proof that a relation based on trust is evolving between Turkey and Russia".²¹

In 2009, three high level visits were realized between the two countries: President Gül between 12-15, February 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan's Sochi visit on May 16, 2009, followed by Russian President Putin's Ankara visit on August 6, 2009. During his visit to Turkey, Putin agreed to provide oil to the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline; at the same time Turkey declared that as an alternative to Nabucco, the South Stream pipeline would be permitted to cross Turkish waters. This matter between the two countries has not yet been resolved. While Russia is expecting an "official permit" from Turkey in order to start construction, Turkey is demanding the prior completion of ecological and seismic research. Matters related to this project continue to progress according to a timeline. During Putin's visit, agreements were reached on a number of other topics as well, including the construction of the Blue Stream-2 pipeline, the creation of underground natural gas reserves in Turkey, and Russian construction of nuclear power plants in Turkey.

The year 2010 was also very successful, raising the bar in Turkish-Russian relations. Top level contacts and visits between the two countries continued full speed. Visits at the level of prime minister and president, as well as agreements reached, especially around energy, transpired in a stable manner. Following the invitation by Russian

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Russia at the beginning of 2010. Subsequently in May, Russian President Medvedev made a three-day official visit to Turkey. During this visit, Medvedev held meetings with both President Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan, and signed 17 agreements including, foremost, agreements foreseeing a visa exemption between the two countries and the construction of a nuclear power plant in Turkey. The latter agreement involves the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Mersin-Akkuyu at the cost of 20 billion dollars.

Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu evaluated this visit during a private interview he gave to the Russian *Ria-Novosti* news agency. Davutoğlu expressed that Turkey and Russia had entered into a sincere and open dialogue on the topic of bilateral relations as well as regional and international matters, stating: "In our bilateral relations with Russia, in all regional and international fields, our dialogue is one of sincerity and openness. The eradication of past prejudices and formation of mutual trust has been achieved. Cooperation with the Russian Federation constitutes one of the most important elements of our multidimensional foreign policy".²²

Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to both Moscow and Kazan during March 14-16, 2011 has indicated that Turkish-Russian relations will continue to

strengthen in the coming years. During the "High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council" various issues were addressed and lengthy negotiations were made. The Russian side demanded that Turkey make a definitive statement about the nuclear power plant tender and declare their decision on the Blue Stream. The Turkish side expected that Russia take the necessary steps regarding the visa exemption, the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline and an appeasement of the "take or pay" principle in the natural gas agreement. The final steps towards the visa scheme exemption were in effect realized, and it was declared that the visas would ultimately be removed in April 2011. This development can be identified as one of the greatest gains from the relations in recent years and another one of the peaks achieved. Following the earthquake in Japan and the subsequent accidents in the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, nuclear energy has become a contested matter throughout the world. In this negative climate, Turkey's commitment to the nuclear power plant project also became questionable. However, Prime Minister Erdoğan has spoken in a very clear and precise manner stating that the project will continue full speed.²³ This approach has created a great sense of relief on the Russian front. Turkey has requested that Russia freeze the "take or pay" clause stated in the natural gas agreements, but the Russians have declined the offer on the presumption that it may encourage

other clients. In turn, the Russian side has conveyed that Turkey has still not granted Russia an official permit for use of the exclusive economic region in the Turkish Black Sea for the South Stream project. Another topic of negotiation concerns the construction of the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline. For the Russians, the transit passage fee requested by Turkey is too expensive and they would like to participate in the project as a “major partner.”

Prime Minister Erdoğan’s March 2011 visit should not be considered

either as a diplomatic, economic or political victory, nor a defeat of any kind, but rather as a new step towards improved relations.²⁴ The fact that meetings gave way to lengthy

negotiations is a clear sign that bilateral relations are being re-established on solid foundations and an understanding of trust. Both sides are trying to make the maximum gain by taking a pragmatic approach. The fact that the meetings and negotiations were long and that agreements could not be reached on certain matters is actually an important indication that both sides are strong, being seated around the table as equals. Meetings where such equality does not exist inevitably lead to one side being unjustly treated. Whereas meetings

amongst equals are lengthy and difficult, and end with both sides being satisfied.

There is one point that must be emphasized and concerns the announcement regarding the realization of final arrangements for the visa exemptions in April 2011. On this matter, Turkey had been the enthusiastic side, even though it would mean a loss of millions of dollars of visa fees which Turkey earns from the more than 3 million Russian tourists annually visiting Turkey. However, for Russia, this is not a priority issue. Either way, the number

of Turkish tourists to Russia does not exceed a couple hundred thousand people. Moreover, there is rising opposition towards migrants and foreigners in Russia.

It is possible to understand Moscow’s reluctance in light of the presence of millions of Caucasian diaspora members in Turkey and the volatile situation in the Northern Caucasus region of Russia. Therefore, it is possible to claim that the elimination of the visa with Russia is a psychological barrier that needs to be surpassed through bilateral relations. With these points taken into consideration, the agreement reached on the visa exemption is an important marker of the level of success achieved in mutual relations.

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Besides the economic and political dimensions, cultural relations are also an important aspect of bilateral relations, which facilitate the two countries to know and understand each other better and contribute to the strengthening of socio-cultural ties. Yet the cultural dimension tends to be ignored.²⁵ Despite the positive developments in the fields of politics and economics traced above, Turkish-Russian relations in the cultural domain have not yet reached the desired levels even though they carry great potential. The existing activities taking place in the cultural field are indeed important, however they remain insufficient. In Turkey, the year 2007 was celebrated as the “Russia Year” and, in 2008, Russia celebrated the “Turkey Year.” A notable development in this field has been the establishment of the “Russian-Turkish Societal Forum” aiming to accelerate cultural relations. The Forum was founded during the official visit by Russian President Medvedev in May 2010 and held its first meeting on February 18, 2011. On the occasion of its founding, Mikhail Svidkoi, the Russian President’s special representative for foreign cultural relations, stated that “Russia and Turkey have agreed on developing cultural relations through the context of the Societal Forum.” The Forum aims to improve societal relations, as well as social relations in the fields of culture, arts, education, science, history, media, tourism, sports, business and

religious dialogue. Vladimir Ivanovskiy, Russian Ambassador to Turkey, has commented that the Societal Forum stands as an important step towards the improvement of public diplomacy.²⁶

Despite the positive developments in the fields of politics and economics traced above, Turkish-Russian relations in the cultural domain have not yet reached the desired levels even though they carry great potential.

In fact, both societies have been experiencing a convergence of relations irrespective of the political and economic atmosphere. The number of shared families, of Russians settling in Turkey, of Russian Culture Associations and language centers found in Turkey, and Turkish language courses in Russia, are all rapidly increasing. Turkish youth are becoming ever more interested in learning Russian and receiving higher education in Russia. Today, Russian is taught in 17 Turkish universities, whereas in 2000, this number was only 5. Also, there are on-going discussions about establishing a Turkish-Russian University in Turkey.²⁷ Tourism plays a very important role in improving the level of trust between both societies. It is expected that, with the removal of the visa restriction, there will be a significant

rise in the number of Turkish tourists to Russia, which is an important step for both societies to better know each other directly.

Fields of Cooperation, Problems and Discussions about Strategic Partnership

Ankara and Moscow's approaches to international problems generally tend to exhibit overlaps or similarities. During the July 2005 Erdoğan-Putin meetings, Erdoğan made the statement "Our opinions on matters related to the maintenance of global stability, as well as the situation of the region, completely overlap".²⁸ Turkey and Russia share similar perspectives on international issues such as: solving the Iranian nuclear problem through diplomatic means, normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, solving the Nagorno-Karabakh problem through negotiations, maintaining peace in the Middle East, the problem between Syria and Lebanon, restoring security in Afghanistan and Iraq, and military intervention in Libya. Russia has been supportive of Turkey's EU membership and Turkey has supported Russia's participation in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as an observer. Both countries have been working towards improving the effectiveness of the the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization.

One of the most important developments shaping the bilateral relations was the Turkish Parliament's rejection of the March 1, 2003 Iraq Resolution. Russian President Vladimir Putin has declared this act as the most vital incident on the eve of the Iraqi occupation.²⁹ Through this act of rejecting the resolution, in Russian eyes, Turkey confirmed its position as an independent actor.³⁰ After this incident, Russia no longer saw Turkey as a classic US ally, and instead began accepting Turkey as a reliable and powerful country exhibiting a strong political resolve by taking independent decisions on issues concerning national interests. The fact that the American government was preoccupied with the Iraqi and Afghan occupations at the time also had a positive impact on Russian-Turkish relations. With US attention steered elsewhere, Turkey and Russia found room for manoeuvre in applying more lax policies in the Caucasus and Middle East.³¹

During the August 2008 Russia-Georgia War, Turkey earned Russian recognition for remaining neutral, for making peace efforts, for following the rules of the Montreux Agreement and initiating the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact.

Following the rejection of the March 1, 2003 resolution, the second incident greatly accelerating relations was the war between Russia and Georgia. Ankara's new geographical perspective involves the development of special relations with Moscow, but equally so, it refrains from taking part in any kind of conflict around "Russia versus the West".³² During the August 2008 Russia-Georgia War, Turkey earned Russian recognition for remaining neutral, for making peace efforts, for following the rules of the Montreux Agreement and initiating the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact. During the war, NATO and US ships made attempts to enter the Black Sea, making the excuse of wanting to take aid to Georgia. Turkey's response to the matter largely prevented disruptions to the regional balance of power and gave Russia great advantages in the war. Prime Minister Erdoğan pointed to the importance of relations with Russia stating: "The US is our ally, and Russia is an important neighbour. Moreover, Russia is our primary trade partner. Two thirds of our energy need is met by Russia. We are acting on the basis of our own national interests...we cannot ignore Russia".³³ According to the Prof. Aleksey Bogaturov of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), Turkey's stance on the Caucasus region, its attitude on the Russia-Georgia war and other foreign policy approaches

have radically transformed Moscow's perceptions of Turkey.³⁴

The Black Sea factor plays an important role within Turkish and Russian relations.³⁵ According to Prime Minister Erdoğan, Turkey and Russia are the two main countries determining the success of regional cooperation policies especially on the Black Sea region.³⁶ One of the important factors bringing Russia and Turkey closer together in the 2000s was the American efforts at defining the Black Sea basin as a security void, hence justifying, as in other parts of the world, the presence of American military forces in the basin in order to eliminate this threat. For the first time in history perhaps, this approach aligned Russia and Turkey on the subjects of the existing status of the Black Sea and defense of the Montreux Convention. Both sides strongly agree on the point that the Black Sea should not become a new arena for global power struggle. Both Russia and Turkey want problems relating to the Black Sea to be solved among countries neighboring the basin in a cooperative manner, and that foreign powers and third parties do not interfere. Turkey holds that a NATO operation in the Black Sea for the purpose of counter terrorism is unnecessary and has advocated instead that the required interventions and operations be carried out by member states and in the framework of BLACKSEAFOR (Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group) and

OBSH (Operation Black Sea Harmony). This policy is also supported by Russia.

Relations between Turkey and Russia are often described through various terms such as “enlarged,” “multi-dimensional,” “deepened,” and “strategic.” Nonetheless, the existence of some problems between the two countries cannot be denied, even though they are not explicitly voiced.³⁷ Both countries make every effort to politely evade disputed matters.³⁸ On certain occasions, Russia has tried to utilize its advantageous position within economic relations as a means of control and persuasion. This policy has been used against countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and Georgia. The aim of this policy has been to expose the side that is sensitive and fragile within the relations. At times, Russia has also played out this policy against Turkey. The harsh rules applied against Turkish products in Russian customs still remain fresh in memories. The vegetable–fruit crises between the two countries during summer months have almost become something of a tradition. Turkey’s greatest flaw in this respect has been its inability to develop equivalent policies to respond to these Russian ones.

On the other hand, it is noticeable that Russian investments in Turkey are

far below Moscow’s expectations. Russia claims that their companies face many difficulties in Turkish energy, military and transportation tenders. Russia was greatly disappointed with the result of the ATAK tender for procurement of military helicopters. In this tender, Turkey chose Italian helicopters made by AgustaWestland over the Russian offer. Russia maintained grave concerns over experiencing the same disappointment with the tender for the nuclear power plant. The tender was in fact annulled by the State Council, which meant that these concerns were somewhat well founded.

Both Russia and Turkey want problems relating to the Black Sea to be solved among countries neighboring the basin in a cooperative manner.

However, Turkey has been determined to improve relations even further with Russia, and to overcome the aforementioned problems. They

decided to allocate the contract for nuclear power plant construction to Russia through an interstate agreement rather than the tendering process. This has been a great source of relief for Russia and has clearly pointed out to Turkey’s determination.

It should be remembered that Turkey is opposed to the literal use of the Turkish Straits as a pipeline for concerns over the environment and security. This situation had been a source of dispute between the two countries, especially during the 1990s. At present, however, this problem

remains much less important, thanks to the realization of projects developing alternative passage routes.

There are also disagreements between the two countries about the types of projects to be developed for making the oil and natural gas coming from the Caspian basin and Central Asia available to the world markets. Russia utilizes the matter of energy as a foreign policy tool and wishes to maintain monopoly. Therefore, Russia tends to oppose all projects that aim to develop resource diversity and sideline Russia. Instead, as a counter attack, Russians have been developing their own projects. The North Stream and South Stream projects are a result of this policy. Russia has been negative towards the Nabucco project, to which Turkey is a partner, holding the view that it is a political rather than economic project. By developing an East-West corridor for transferring Caspian energy sources to European markets, Russia claims that the Nabucco project aims to “bypass” it. Turkey wants Russia to participate in the Nabucco project and does not perceive of it as being against Russia. On the other hand, the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline project has also re-entered the agenda, as a result of the decisions by Turkey to allow

Following his Ankara visit in May 2010, Russian President Medvedev stated that Turkish-Russian relations are characterized by “partnership, not just in words, but in reality.”

Russian usage of the Black Sea’s exclusive economic zone for the South Stream project and to grant Russia the nuclear power plant tender. Moreover, Moscow has directly proposed to Ankara that a second pipeline be built parallel to the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline.

During the 1990s, relations between the two countries were marked by the “Chechen” and “Kurdish” problems. Both countries occasionally had to confront one another due to the activities by the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey and the Kurdish and Armenian

diaspora in Russia.³⁹

These problems largely came to an end in 1999 thanks to the agreement signed between Russia and Turkey on counter terrorism.

However, Russia still does not accept PKK

as a terrorist organization. Turkey has requested that Russia include the PKK in their list of terrorist organizations, but has not received a positive response thus far.⁴⁰ In Russia, only those organizations carrying out activities within Russian territories and having links to Russia may be considered as a “terrorist organization.” Because of Russia’s geopolitical strategies concerning the Middle East, Moscow has been unwilling to define the PKK as a terrorist organization thinking that the Kurds may in the future become useful.

Today Russia remains Armenia's strongest ally, and is the most influential country in terms of mediating between Turkey and Armenia, as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan. Yerevan sees Russia as a strategic partner. However, Russia has concerns over Armenia becoming closer to the West. Therefore, despite Ankara's great expectations, Russia failed to support the normalization process between Armenia and Turkey. Although Moscow has expressed that they are supportive of the Turkey-Armenia normalization process and resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, they request that both problems be unravelled separately. On the one hand, Russia is abstaining from solving the problem, while on the other hand, they do not wish to remain outside the process. Moreover, due to the efforts of the Armenian diaspora, the sub-section of the Russian Parliament, the Duma, has twice recognized (in 1995 and 2005) the so-called genocide.

The Cyprus issue is another area of dispute between Russia and Turkey. Russia has interests in Cyprus that go against Turkey.⁴¹ From its own perspective, Russia rightfully sees barriers in establishing and developing relations with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Russia maintains strong trade and economic relations with Greek Cyprus. It is known that Russia uses Greek Cyprus as an off-shore region for Russian capital. For this

reason, Russia does not wish to damage political and economic relations with Greek Cyprus. In April 2004, only a few days prior to the Cyprus referendum prepared by the UN in the framework of the Annan Plan, Russia vetoed a decision that potentially would have relieved the Greek Cypriots' security concerns, giving the excuse that the parties should not be put under pressure and that the Russians had not been consulted beforehand. Following the referendum held on April 24, 2004, Russia prevented a UN Security Council call to end the seclusion of Cypriot Turks.

Following his Ankara visit in May 2010, Russian President Medvedev stated that Turkish-Russian relations are characterized by "partnership, not just in words, but in reality." Likewise, Turkish President Abdullah Gül stated that the rapidly expanding and multidimensional relations entail "a strategic dimension." In fact, during this visit Turkey and Russia did ascribe a "strategic dimension" to their relations in the field of energy through the agreements signed.⁴²

Can one really speak of a strategic partnership between both countries in its full sense? Relations between Turkey and Russia are not exactly at the level of "strategic partnership" in the real sense. However, strategy does play a dominant role for both countries in terms of relations. In fact, relations in fields such as energy and trade do maintain a strategic dimension.⁴³ Even though relations have

been progressively developing since the 2000s, this convergence has not yet transformed from a virtual framework to a true strategic partnership for a number of reasons, including Turkey's preference to take a place within the Western world and Russia's desire to keep relations within an economic frame rather than a strategic one, working to Russia's advantage.⁴⁴

In terms of achieving the target of “strategic partnership,” the removal of the visa has played a very important role in strengthening trust relations.

Contrary to the view of top-level officials and diplomats, experts argue that Turkey-Russia relations are not yet identified by a strategic partnership.⁴⁵ According to Vladimir Ivanovskiy, Russia's Ambassador to Ankara, a pragmatic understanding and the need for maintaining national interests trigger the development of partnership between Russia and Turkey. Russian-Turkish partnership has strategic importance on matters of vital importance to both countries.⁴⁶ According to Dmitriy Vasilyev, an expert from the Oriental Institute of the Russian Science Academy, Turkey continues to be a strong rival to Russia in the Black Sea and Southern Caucasus.

This is a geopolitical reality and Russia must take this into consideration.⁴⁷ Konstantin Simanov, Director of the National Energy Security Foundation, has expressed that Turkey does not see Russia as a strategic partner and that the US still retains a heavy influence over the Turkish elite.⁴⁸ Various reports issued on the topic of Turkish-Russian relations also highlight this matter.⁴⁹ In essence, the strategic partnership which is arguably being developed between Turkey and Russia has a defensive basis. It permits taking joint action in the face of possible regional instabilities. It can also be perceived as a natural reflex against the new European model, which seemingly excludes both countries.⁵⁰

In terms of achieving the target of “strategic partnership,” the removal of the visa has played a very important role in strengthening trust relations. Turkish-Russian relations will soon reach a brand new level, thanks to the signing of the nuclear power plant agreement, the removal of the visas, and the activation of the “High Level Strategic Cooperation Council.” This council will be determining the strategic dimensions and new fields of partnership. As such, the activities of the council will be very important for carrying the relations towards strategic partnership. Previously, Russia has formed similar top-level councils with Germany, France and Italy. Turkey is currently the fourth country. This fact can be seen as an indication

of Turkey's significance to Russia. The strategic transformation of relations will depend upon the council becoming operational.⁵¹

The West is another factor whose influence on the bilateral relations cannot be ignored.⁵² Turkey's relations with Russia have been important in overcoming the sense of exclusion and declining confidence felt by Turkey in its relations with the West. From time to time, Russia too has experienced the problem of not being understood and feeling alienated. This sense of exclusion laying in the unconscious of both countries naturally draws them closer to each other. Both Turkey and Russia think that there are problems in the way the West receives them and have thus developed reactive policies. In a sense, these reactive policies have facilitated the process of trying to form a common language or understand one another.

It is possible to observe this situation, especially in the case of Turkish-EU relations. Interestingly, in the 1990s, either immediately before or after the meetings in which the EU reached an important decision concerning Turkey, either a Russian top-level commission visited Turkey or vice versa. During the 1990s, the EU negatively responded to Turkey, time and again. For this reason, the Turkish political elite entered debates on exploring and realizing alternative geopolitical initiatives with other countries such as Russia and Iran.

Even though this situation continues today, Turkey and Russia have managed to develop a successful policy towards enhancing a rational relations network, centered less around the Western factor and more on shared interests. Such an approach is the requirement for a healthy relationship that is not stuck on conjunctural developments.

Conclusion

At present, the regional and global strategies adopted by Russia and Turkey have become a much more significant trigger in reinforcing relations between the two countries compared to economic factors. Turkey has chosen to remain in the Western system for its own security and stability, and will remain determined in holding on to this view. However, this condition does not form a barrier to the development of multidimensional relations with Russia. On the contrary, strong relations with Russia will empower Turkey in its relations with the West. Turkey must remain cautious in isolating uncontrollable competition and conflict from relations with Russia. There is still a long way to be achieved within these relations and it should not be expected that this is going to be an easy process. Also, it must not be forgotten that the two countries share a longer history of rivalry compared to cooperation.

Turkey and Russia are working to transform these century-long

geopolitical disputes into a geo-economic partnership. The mutual initiatives taken to this end are an indication of the efforts to create new relational dimensions. In this sense, the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline project that Turkey proposed was an important step towards ending the competitive spirit of the 1990s. In the 2000s, the nuclear power plant project, which again Turkey fervidly advocates, is another very important step in strengthening relations. The catalyst of the 1990s was economic relations; in the 2000s, it has become energy relations. In recent years, Turkey-Russia relations have been gradually transforming thanks to the constructive and peaceful approaches embraced by Ankara and Moscow. In this sense, one could argue that the formatted relations are being re-loaded.

Turkey and Russia are working to transform the century-long geopolitical disputes into a geo-economic partnership.

The frame or border defining relations between Turkey and Russia is rather sensitive and the prospect of both narrowing and broadening this frame or border depends on the initiative of the two countries. In the history of bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia, several events can be pointed out for broadening borders such as: Soviet

assistance during Turkey's independence war, industrial cooperation in the 1930s and 1960s, the 1984 natural gas agreement, Russia's position regarding Abdullah Öcalan in 1998, the Blue Stream project, Bülent Ecevit's visit to Russia in 1999, Putin's Turkey visit in 2004, the visits made by President Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan to Russia and the recent decision by Turkey to grant the nuclear power plant construction project to Russia. For many years both sides have expressed their desire for bilateral relations not to remain merely economic, also encompassing regional and global interests, and being based on shared trust and respect. The current level of relations achieved is an important indication of Turkey and Russia's success to this end.

Cultural relations between the two countries continue to lack. Despite the thousands of common families and millions of tourists visiting each year, the Turkish and Russian peoples do not yet know each other at the level desired. The climate of trust in relations must be maintained through frequent top-level visits. For ordinary people to also sense this positive spirit, cultural relations must be activated and new projects must be developed which encompass both societies. The realization of the visa exemption decision in April 2011 is an important step in this direction. Furthermore, history books in both countries should be jointly examined,

while the media should refrain from using a negative sounding language. Both sides need to pay special attention to cultural relations so that the current level of relations achieved is permanent and long lasting. Efforts in the cultural domain will not only facilitate political efforts, it will also allow for the erasure of all negative images marked in the memories of both sides. Public dialogue, shared cultural, arts and sports activities and educative collaborations serve as effective means for reaching this goal.

Despite the thousands of common families and millions of tourists visiting each year, the Turkish and Russian peoples do not yet know each other at the level desired.

Turkey and Russia are situated in a geography spanning from the Caucasus to the Balkans, from the Middle East to Central Asia, home to numerous regional identities and diverse perceptions of interests. The general structure of Turkish-Russian relations implies that in the coming years, cooperation and competition will remain as determining factors. The relations must be of a quality

that is able to serve the interests of both countries. When evaluating the present standing and future prospects of relations, it is necessary to be as realistic as possible. Being realistic also requires withholding the element of caution in relations. It must not be forgotten that the present day multidimensional relations achieved between Turkey and Russia bear within it the unpleasant marks of history and the difficulties of their shared geography. Both countries maintain historical and cultural ties within this geography and also have a shared impact upon it. Therefore, any prospective problems to surface in the region have the potential of deteriorating relations. Even though such a situation is only a probability, it is important to remain prepared and prudent. Such an approach means that a multidimensional relational network must always be protected and developed carefully, and in case problems do occur, rational and pragmatic solutions should be sought after. The confinement of relations to the cliché term “strategy” in this early stage could present a barrier to the establishment of a healthy relational model. As long as the relations remain just, realistic, transparent and direct, and satisfying to both sides, Turkey and Russia will continue to reap the benefits.

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