

## From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after The Cold War

**Evren BALTA**

Assoc. Prof. Dr., Department of International Relations, Özyeğin University

**To cite this article:** Balta, Evren, “From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after The Cold War “, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 16, No. 63, 2019, pp. 69-86, DOI: [10.33458/uidergisi.621309](https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.621309)

**To link to this article:** <https://dx.doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.621309>

Submitted: 18 March 2018  
Last Revision: 11 May 2019  
Published Online: 01 September 2019  
Printed Version: 01 September 2019

Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi Derneği | International Relations Council of Turkey  
Uluslararası İlişkiler – Journal of International Relations  
**E-mail : [bilgi@uidergisi.com.tr](mailto:bilgi@uidergisi.com.tr)**

All rights of this paper are reserved by the *International Relations Council of Turkey*. With the exception of academic quotations, no part of this publication may be reproduced, redistributed, sold or transmitted in any form and by any means for public usage without a prior permission from the copyright holder. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the author(s)'s and do not reflect those of *the Council*, editors of the journal, and other authors.

# From Geopolitical Competition to Strategic Partnership: Turkey and Russia after The Cold War

**Evren BALTA**

*Assoc. Prof. Dr., Özyeğin University, Department of International Relations, İstanbul.  
E-mail: evren.balta@ozyegin.edu.tr*

## ABSTRACT

This article examines different analytical perspectives on Turkish-Russian relations and provides a conceptual history of developing connections between Turkey and Russia since the end of the Cold War. It first reviews evolving political relations, including military cooperation, and then focuses on economic relations, including energy cooperation. Finally, it discusses the socio-cultural aspects of bilateral relations, focusing on the movement of people. It shows how conflicting geopolitical interests have overshadowed the increasing economic cooperation and cultural exchange that had marked the previous two decades of bilateral relations. Although Turkey and Russia have competing regional interests, their dissatisfaction with and resentment of Western policies is one of the major reasons for their reluctant geopolitical cooperation. This article emphasizes the need for a multi-causal and analytically eclectic approach to analyzing Turkish-Russian relations that selectively recombines analytic components of causal mechanisms in competing research traditions.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Russia, Turkish-Russian Relations, Economic Cooperation, Military Competition

## Jeopolitik Rekabetten Stratejik Ortaklığa: Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türkiye - Rusya İlişkileri

### ÖZET

Bu makale Türkiye-Rusya ilişkilerinde farklı analitik perspektifleri incelemekte ve Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesinden bu yana Türkiye - Rusya arasındaki ilişkileri farklı boyutlarıyla değerlendirmektedir. Makalede öncelikli olarak askeri işbirliği de dahil olmak üzere gelişmekte olan siyasi ilişkilere odaklanılmakta ve ardından enerji işbirliğini içerecek biçimde ekonomik ilişkilerin gelişimi ele alınmaktadır. Makale aynı zamanda ikili ilişkilerin sosyo-kültürel yönlerini değerlendirerek özel olarak insan hareketlerine odaklanmaktadır. İki ülkenin Soğuk Savaş sonrası ilişkilerini belirleyen ekonomik işbirliği ve kültürel mübadele dinamikleri pek çok örnekte farklı ulusal çıkar tanımlarına dayanan jeopolitik rekabetin gölgesinde kalmıştır. İki ülkenin de Batılı ülkelerin politikalarından duyduğu rahatsızlık, çatışan bölgesel çıkarlara ve jeopolitik rekabete rağmen iki ülke arasındaki güçlenen askeri/ siyasi işbirliğinin ana nedenlerinden biri olarak görülmektedir. Makalede, nihai olarak, farklı araştırma geleneklerinin Türkiye-Rusya ilişkilerini açıklamak için öne çıkardığı nedensel mekanizmaları seçici ve çoklu olarak birleştiren analitik açıdan eklektik bir yaklaşımın gereğine vurgu yapılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye, Rusya, Türkiye-Rusya İlişkileri, Ekonomik İşbirliği, Askeri Rekabet

## Introduction

Economic and political relations between Turkey and Russia have deepened since the early 1990s. The number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey has increased significantly, reaching four million by 2014. By 2015, Russia's share of Turkey's natural gas imports was around 55%.<sup>1</sup> During the 2000s, bilateral trade between Turkey and Russia also increased significantly, from \$4.5 billion in 2000 to \$33.5 billion in 2012.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of the High-Level Cooperation Council in 2010 institutionalized the two countries' expanding economic and cultural ties.

The cooperation that shaped Turkey-Russia relations during the 2000s suffered a notable setback on 24 November 2015, when Turkey downed a Russian warplane on the Syrian border – becoming the first NATO member state to do so since the Korean War. For eight months, from November 2015 to July 2016, the two countries experienced extremely strained political and economic relations – one of their worst crises in bilateral relations since the 1950s. However, just one year later, a rapid and unexpected normalization occurred, gaining momentum after the failed 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. Russia and Turkey once again declared themselves to be essential partners in both foreign political and economic relations.

How can we understand this tumultuous history and the sudden shifts in Turkish-Russian relations? What explains these fluctuations between conflict and cooperation? This article reviews evolving political and economic relations, including military and energy cooperation between the two countries. It then discusses the socio-cultural aspects of bilateral relations, showing how conflicting geopolitical interests have overshadowed the economic cooperation and cultural exchange that had marked the previous two decades. The expansive analytical literature that has emerged on Turkish-Russian relations in recent years has sought to analyze these trends in conflict and cooperation. In what follows, I will proceed to an analysis of different conceptual approaches to Turkish-Russian relations. By reviewing some of the most prominent works on the topic, this article emphasizes the necessity of a multi-causal and analytically eclectic approach to account for diverging relations between the two states.

## Conceptual Approaches to Turkish-Russian Relations

The current literature on foreign policy analysis in general, and on Turkish-Russian relations in particular, are divided – not always neatly – among the competing research traditions in the field, each of which draws on quite distinct theoretical postulates to present an account of the vagaries of international politics. Neorealist theories, for example, emphasize the primacy of power and interests in international relations, mostly focusing on changes in power asymmetries and diverging material interests to account for trends in foreign policy. Similarly, neorealist accounts of Turkish-Russian relations focus on the distribution of power to explain bilateral relations. Reasoning from that perspective, Aktürk, for example, argues that the dynamics of conflict and cooperation between Turkey and Russia can essentially be understood from the power asymmetries between them. As

1 Data drawn from Turkish Statistical Institute, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr> (Accessed 20 June 2017).

2 Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order: Cooperation, Conflict and Asymmetric Interdependence in a Turbulent Region", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 37, No 1, 2016, pp. 71-95.

power asymmetry widens, conflict tends to become more likely, whereas periods of cooperation usually emerge as power structures become more symmetrical.<sup>3</sup>

Neorealist theories also put special emphasis on alliance structures and the distribution of power to explain both state behavior and the dynamics of conflict and cooperation. They assume that relations between states, including those of regional powers, derive directly from the distribution of power at the global level. When this distribution is bipolar, as in the Cold War, alliance structures are more stable. In contrast, in an unbalanced, multipolar world, alliances become more fluid and flexible. Given that states in such a world constantly shift their alliances, this creates more unpredictability and makes conflict more likely.<sup>4</sup> Scholars adopting this perspective towards Turkish-Russian relations have therefore used the global distribution of power as a factor in explaining trends of conflict and cooperation. In a widely cited work, Sezer argues that Turkish-Russian relations can be explained as a derivative of the distribution of power within the international system, while the dynamics of conflict and cooperation between the two countries are a direct consequence of economic and security competition between the transatlantic and Eurasian blocs.<sup>5</sup>

Other scholars, on the other hand, focus not only on the competition between the two blocs but also on their ability to include and represent the particular national interests of Turkey and Russia. Coupled with domestic-level explanations, these perspectives try to explain the increasing cooperation between the two countries as an 'alliance of the excluded' or 'unrepresented'.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, they tend to cooperate more when they find themselves more isolated in the international environment. This isolation can relate to both domestic tendencies, such as increasing international criticism of their human rights records or authoritarian tendencies, and geopolitical competition. Reasoned from this perspective, the likelihood of relations between Russia and Turkey advancing towards strategic alliance increases when both countries have conflicted orientations toward the transatlantic bloc.<sup>7</sup> Sakwa, for example, highlights Europe's inability to form a greater continental unification strategy, a failure that intensifies the conflict between the European periphery and the transatlantic bloc. The failure to create a framework for normative and geopolitical inclusion means that countries like Turkey and Russia feel more excluded and isolated, which draws them closer together.<sup>8</sup>

This 'axis of the excluded', however, is not only based on geopolitical competition, but on historical traumas as well as an overlapping desire to recover the status within the modern world system enjoyed by the former Russian and Ottoman Empires.<sup>9</sup> According to Zarakol, the most significant

---

3 Şener Aktürk, "Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkilerinin Yükselişi ve Gerilemesi: 1992-2015", Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta, and Burç Beşgül (eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2017, pp. 129-147.

4 There is a rich literature on the effects of the distribution of power on alliance structures. See, for example, Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse", *Survival*, Vol. 39, No 1, 1997, pp. 156-179. The literature on Turkish-Russian relations only partially utilizes this rich literature.

5 See Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, "Turkish-Russian Relations a Decade Later: From Adversity to Managed Competition", *Perceptions*, Vol. 6, No 1, 2001, pp. 79-99; also see Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, "Turkish-Russian Relations: The Challenges of Reconciling Geopolitical Competition with Economic Partnership", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No 1, 2000, pp. 59-82.

6 Fiona Hill and Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?", *Survival*, Vol. 48, No 1, 2006, pp. 81-92.

7 James W. Warhola and William A. Mitchell, "The Warming of Turkish-Russian Relations: Motives and Implications", *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 14, No 1, 2006, p. 127.

8 Richard Sakwa, "Russia and Turkey: Rethinking Europe to Contest Outsider Status", *Russie. Nei. Visions*, 2010, p. 51; and Richard Sakwa, "The Death of Europe? Continental Fates After Ukraine", *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No 3, 2015, pp. 553-579.

9 Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

resemblance between these two countries is their intricate historical relationship with the West, since they have inherited the problem of ‘capturing the West’ from the Russian and Ottoman Empires, respectively. Both had to join the modern international system by giving up their previously privileged positions, but their new positions have not been fully compatible with their inner perceptions, which were shaped over centuries of being ‘masters’ of their own land.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, they have experienced significant competition with the West rather than with each other, while their national interests have become defined in direct relation to the West.<sup>11</sup>

Patterns in conflict and cooperation between the two countries cannot be explained only by political and/or ideational factors. In fact, increasing economic cooperation and foreign trade patterns is a major factor in explaining the dynamics of the bilateral relations. Studies show that states with high levels of trade and institutional mechanisms that sustain trade are less prone to disputes than other states.<sup>12</sup> Such empirical links between trade and conflict are, however, limited and quite contradictory since research also shows that trade can continue even during wartime between enemies, and that states can easily compartmentalize their economic relations.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Öniş and Yılmaz argue that one important strategy for Turkey and Russia has been their tendency to compartmentalize economic issues and geopolitical rivalries to avoid negative spillover from either. This trend is especially reflected in energy cooperation, which continued to flourish even during the intense crisis after Turkey’s downing of the Russian jet in 2015.<sup>14</sup> Increasing trade is clearly an important impetus for both states to resolve their differences and to create more compatible regional policies. Furthermore, increasing economic cooperation has prompted flourishing social and economic networks.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Turkey’s increasing economic cooperation and socio-cultural exchanges with Russia have created trade lobbies that directly benefit from the political rapprochement between Turkey and Russia. Increasing migration,<sup>16</sup> tourism, and informal trade,<sup>17</sup> are also transforming the social networks between the two societies. However, an analysis of these networks is missing in the literature on Turkish-Russian relations, except some journalistic works that focus on economic networks, especially in the construction and energy sectors.<sup>18</sup>

10 For such a perspective, see Evren Balta and Süheyla Demir, “History, Identity and Foreign Policy: Ottoman-Turkish Image in the Current History Textbooks of the Russian Federation”, *BILIG*, No 76, 2016, pp. 1-31.

11 For an excellent debate on Turkey’s and Russia’s role in the formation of European identity, see Viatcheslav Morozov and Bahar Rumelili, “The External Constitution of European Identity: Russia and Turkey as Europe-Makers”, *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 47, No 1, 2012, pp. 28-48.

12 Edward D. Mansfield and Jon C. Pevehouse, “Trade Blocs, Trade Flows, and International Conflict”, *International Organization*, 2000, Vol. 54, No 4, pp. 775-808.

13 Katherine Barbieri et al., “Sleeping with the Enemy: The Impact of War on Trade”, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 36, No 4, 1999, pp. 463-479.

14 Öniş and Yılmaz, “Turkey and Russia in a Shifting Global Order”; see also Emre Ersen, “Turkish–Russian Relations in the New Century”, Özden Zeynep Oktav (ed.), *Turkey in the 21st Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy*, London, Routledge, 2011, pp. 95-114.

15 For the importance of such approaches, see Emilie E. Hafner-Burton et al., “Network Analysis for International Relations”, *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No 3, 2009, pp. 559-592.

16 Ahmet İçduygu and Ayşem Biriz Karaçay, “The International Migration System Between Turkey and Russia: Project-Tied Migrant Workers in Moscow”, *International Migration*, Vol. 50, No 1, 2012, pp. 55-74; and Ayla Deniz and E. Murat Özgür, “Antalya’daki Rus Gelinler: Göçten Evliliğe, Evlilikten Göçe”, *Sosyoloji Dergisi*, Vol. 3, No 27, 2013, pp. 151-175.

17 Deniz Yüksek, “Shuttling Goods, Weaving Consumer Tastes: Informal Trade Between Turkey and Russia”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 31, No 1, 2007, pp. 60-72.

18 See for example, DI Paolo Biondani and Leo Sisti, “The Pipeline of the Three Regimes”, 20 April 2017, [http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2017/04/18/news/the-pipeline-of-the-three-regimes-1.299786?refresh\\_ce](http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2017/04/18/news/the-pipeline-of-the-three-regimes-1.299786?refresh_ce) (Accessed 20 June 2017).

Along with analyses that focus on trade networks, perspectives that favor regional analysis are also missing or underrepresented in the literature on Turkish-Russian relations. Although the concept of 'region' is frequently utilized in the literature, studies mostly focus on the geostrategic level and thereby fail to explain emerging regional complexes or underutilize the analytical literature on regional blocs.<sup>19</sup> Finally, as in many other countries, domestic politics provide another important context within which the foreign policies of Turkey and Russia are formulated.<sup>20</sup> Yet the changing context of domestic politics in both countries and their effects on bilateral relations are almost absent from the academic literature on Turkish-Russian relations, although most of the journalistic accounts refer to domestic factors and leadership characteristics to explain patterns of conflict and cooperation.<sup>21</sup>

In what follows, this article provides a conceptual discussion of the history of bilateral relations, showing that none of the research traditions would solely provide a conceptual apparatus for framing and investigating problems related to bilateral Turkish-Russian relations. Rather, a complex causality – which includes asymmetrical power relations, diverging definitions of national interests, relationships with the West, transformations of domestic regime types, and economic and social networks – will be emphasized.<sup>22</sup>

## **1990s: Restructuration and Competition**

During the Cold War, Turkish elites' longstanding antagonism towards the West was eclipsed by their opposition to Communism. Indeed, anti-Communism became a core pillar of the Turkish state's identity and a major motivation for Turkey to join NATO in 1952.<sup>23</sup> The end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet bloc removed the ideological hurdle of anti-Communism that shaped Turkey's political elites' relationship with Russia for more than four decades. Furthermore, during the Cold War, the Soviet economy had been almost 20 times the size of Turkey's, and the Soviet Union had become one of the world's dominant military powers. During the market reforms of the 1990s, however, Russian gross domestic product (GDP) fell by more than half, the living conditions

---

19 See, for example, Stephen J. Flanagan, "The Turkey–Russia–Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No 1, 2013, pp. 163-178.

20 See Fearon for how domestic politics can be used as a tool for foreign policy analysis. James D. Fearon, "Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 1, No 1, 1998, pp. 289-313. For one of the few comparative analyses of Turkey and Russia and how Turkish and Russian domestic politics converge creating similar tendencies for foreign policy, see Sinan Birdal, "Tek Adamlaşma", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül (eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, pp. 321-343.

21 Micheal Burleigh. "The Sultan and the Tsar: Will the Imperial Ambitions of Russia's Putin and Turkey's Erdoğan will Spark a New World War", *Daily Mail*, 15 February 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3446089/The-Sultan-Tsar-imperial-ambitions-Russia-s-Putin-Turkey-s-Erdogan-spark-new-World-War-asks-historian-MICHAEL-BURLEIGH.html> (Accessed 5 September 2017).

22 In analyzing Turkish-Russian relations, analytical eclecticism offers the advantages of downplaying unresolvable divides between the different research traditions and formulating problems that are wider in scope than the more narrowly delimited problems posed by adherents of competing research traditions. See Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Analytic Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms Across Research Traditions", *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 8, No 2, 2010, pp. 411-12; and Rudra Sil, "Simplifying Pragmatism: From Social Theory to Problem-Driven Eclecticism", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 11, No 3, 2009, pp. 648-652.

23 For example, see Behlül Özkan, "1945 Türkiye-SSCB Krizi: Dış Politikada Kurucu Mitin İnşası", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül (eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, pp. 55-79; and Behlül Özkan, "The Cold War-era Origins of Islamism in Turkey and its Rise to Power", *Hudson Institute*, 4 August 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/research/13807-the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-turkey-and-its-rise-to-power> (Accessed 6 September 2017).

of most Russians deteriorated, and the Russian military lost its competitive edge.<sup>24</sup> This involutory degeneration of Russia – prompted by sudden economic and political reform – narrowed the erstwhile asymmetry in economic and military power between Turkey and Russia for the first time in centuries.<sup>25</sup> Infrastructural weaknesses, inflation, legal confusion, and political uncertainties hampered Russian foreign policy and created an incoherent definition of interests and insufficient means to pursue these interests.<sup>26</sup> These domestic and international developments gave Turkey an opportunity to exert influence in the post-Soviet geographic space, which increased the geopolitical competition between the two countries, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus.<sup>27</sup>

Having cultural, religious, and ethnic links with the region, Turkey was promoted as a model country for these countries, especially within Western policy circles—an identity that was quickly adopted by policy makers in Turkey.<sup>28</sup> For Turkey’s political leaders, the engagement with these newly established republics was an opportunity not only to extend Turkey’s sphere of influence but also to restore the country’s political and strategic importance for the West, which had faced the prospect of a serious decline in the immediate wake of the end of the Cold War. On 27 January 1992, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) commenced work under the aegis of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the aim of increasing Turkey’s soft power in this region.<sup>29</sup> According to the new Turkish foreign policy discourse, the aim was to re-establish the Turkic world from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China. In 1992, Turkey’s Prime Minister, Süleyman Demirel, declared that even though borders were fixed, Turkey would expand its influence by other means:

Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia ... Although there are some conflicts among them, they will be subdued. The Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan ... most of them are looking at us. Doors will be open. While the borders of Turkey remain fixed, Turkey has actually grown beyond its borders. A new Turkey is established from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China. More precisely, a Turkic world has come on the scene. We do not forget any of the tribes in the Caucasus. They are all our brothers.<sup>30</sup>

The gradual expansion of Turkey’s sphere of influence into the Caucasus and Central Asia, supported and even encouraged by the West, was considered one of the most serious challenges to Russia’s regional interests, since it signified the expansion of not only the Turkish but also the U.S. spheres of influence.<sup>31</sup> Starting from 1993, Russia began to follow a more integrationist approach

24 Michael Burawoy, “Transition Without Transformation: Russia’s Involuntary Road to Capitalism”, *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 15, No 2, 2001, pp. 269-290.

25 Aktürk, Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkilerinin Yükselişi ve Gerilemesi; Burawoy Transition without Transformation, p. 270

26 Ariel Cohen, “Engaged Realism: US Foreign Policy Toward the New Russia”, *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 19, No 1, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 32–35.

27 Kenneth M. Jensen, “Introduction”, Leon Aron and Kenneth M. Jensen (eds.), *The Emergence of Russian Foreign Policy*, Washington D.C., United States Institute of Peace Press, 1994, pp. 3-14.

28 Emrah Denizhan, “Türkiye’nin Kafkasya ve Orta Asya Politikası ve TİKA”, *Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi*, Vol. 2, No 1, 2010, pp. 17-23.

29 Hakan Fidan and Rahman Nurdun, “Turkey’s Role in the Global Development Assistance Community: The Case of TİKA (International Cooperation and Development Agency)”, *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 10, No 1, 2008, pp. 93-111.

30 “Sovyetlerin Dağılması Türkiye’yi Büyüttü”, *Milliyet*, 24 February 1992.

31 Andrei Zagorski, “Traditional Security Interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Perceptions and Realities”, Rjan Mennon et. al., (eds.), *Russia, The Caucasus, and Central Asia: the 21st Century Security Environment*, London, Routledge, 2016. pp. 63.

in its near abroad, since the disintegration of Soviet strategic space had begun to be perceived as a direct threat to its security interests.<sup>32</sup> Yet even in this period competition over influence in the post-Soviet sphere between Russia and Turkey never transformed into a full-blown crisis, mainly because of Russia's relative weakness at that time, the newly established republics' balanced foreign policies that avoided alienating either Turkey or Russia, and, more importantly, Turkey's careful approach not to provoke Russia. Around the mid-1990s, the discourse of the 'Turkic world' also began to lose its appeal within Turkish policy circles; it had become clear that Turkey had neither the means nor the resources to assert its influence in the region.<sup>33</sup> In 1999, Demirel, who had been elected president in 1993, claimed that his statements on the Turkic world from the Adriatic to the Great Wall were still valid but only referred to Turkey's responsibility towards its 'related communities'.<sup>34</sup>

Although Turkey and Russia did not experience a full-blown crisis, geopolitically motivated competition made the two countries ignore potential cooperation.<sup>35</sup> In the South Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan created a storm in Russian-Turkish relations and the tensions around the conflict did not fade away even after the 1994 ceasefire.<sup>36</sup> According to Çelikpala, besides competing geopolitical interests, the most problematic areas during the 1990s were Russia's failure to comply with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces (CFE) in Europe; Russian military bases in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia; NATO's attempts to establish military bases in the post-Soviet territories; the role of the Turkish navy in the Black Sea; Iranian-Russian relations; the status of the Turkish Straits; and energy transmission lines and pipeline construction.<sup>37</sup>

However, during this period, one of the most important issues between the two countries was related to internal conflicts and domestic security issues. During the 1990s, Turkey accused Russia of supporting the PKK, and Russia accused Turkey of supporting Chechen separatism. Indeed, progress in all other issues only happened after the two countries reached a tacit agreement over the PKK/Chechen issue. In 1998, the Chief of Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, İsmail Hakkı Karadayı, visited Russia, having been invited by his Russian counterpart. Shortly after this visit, on 5 November 1999, a Joint Declaration on Anti-Terrorism was signed during the Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's

---

32 This more assertive approach to Russia's near abroad was enshrined in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept and a corresponding military doctrine, both of which were approved in November 1993. See Leon Aron, "The Emerging Priorities of Russian Foreign Policy", Leon Aron and Kenneth M. Jensen (eds.), *The Emergence of Russian Foreign Policy*, Washington D.C., United States Institute of Peace Press, 1994, p. 18.

33 Ibid.

34 *Milliyet*, 29 November 1999.

35 For a comprehensive Review of Turkish-Russian competition in Central Asia and Caucasus, see Mitat Çelikpala, "Rekabet ve İşbirliği İkileminde Yönünü Arayan Türk-Rus İlişkileri", *Bilgi*, No 72, 2015, pp. 117-144; Mitat Çelikpala, "Türkiye ve Kafkasya: Reaksiyoner Dış Politikadan Proaktif Ritmik Diplomasieye Geçiş", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 7, No 25, 2010, pp. 93-126; Mustafa Aydın, "Foucault's Pendulum: Turkey in Central Asia and the Caucasus", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 5, No 2, 2004, pp. 1-22; and Mustafa Aydın, "Turkish Policy toward the Caucasus", *Connections*, Vol. 1, No 3, 2002, pp. 39-48.

36 Baev Pavel K. and Kemal Kirişçi, "An Ambiguous Partnership: The Serpentine Trajectory of Turkish-Russian Relations in the Era of Erdoğan and Putin", *The Brookings Institute* <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/pavel-and-kirisci-turkey-and-russia.pdf> (Accessed 27 September 2017).

37 Mitat Çelikpala, "1990'lardan Günümüze Türk-Rus İlişkileri", *Avrasya Dosyası*, Vol. 13, No 1, pp. 273.



visit to Moscow.<sup>38</sup> Collaboration over the PKK/Chechen issue and Turkey's less assertive policy in post-Soviet territories helped both states to reduce their reciprocal threat perceptions and collaborate on economic and energy-related issues.<sup>39</sup>

## 2000s: Stabilization and Cooperation

At the end of the 1990s and start of the 2000s, the patterns of foreign policy began to change in both countries, and a new mix of multilateralism and bilateralism began to characterize relations. On 28 June 2000, Russia announced the new Foreign Policy Concept that prioritized the Russian interest in the post-Soviet territories.<sup>40</sup> In Turkey, on the other hand, the Foreign Minister İsmail Cem (1997-2002) was in favor of strengthening Turkey's relations with its neighboring states, shifting to a more trade-oriented and less-conflictual foreign policy, and transforming Turkey's traditional Western-oriented foreign policy to a more multi-dimensional approach.<sup>41</sup> Cem's multi-dimensional approach was continued by successive AKP governments in the 2000s, and Turkey's political and military cooperation with Russia subsequently flourished.<sup>42</sup> In this period, Turkey pursued a policy that was dubbed 'zero problems with neighbors'. It aimed to deescalate conflicts with neighboring states while negotiating proactively and looking pragmatically for opportunities to resolve disputes and create cooperation with them. The policy also infused a dramatic expansion of trade linkages, especially with neighboring Russia and also with the wider Middle Eastern countries, which eventually turned Turkey into a trading state.<sup>43</sup>

During this period, both Turkey's and Russia's relations with the West were also improving. Although Putin continuously expressed his reservations about the further projection of U.S. power, especially into Russia's near abroad, he also fully supported the United States' declared war against global terrorism and made a strong case for a Russian alliance with the United States against those attacking the 'civilized world'.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, he used a 'global terror' discourse as a tool to justify

38 See Lerna K. Yanık, "Allies or Partners? An Appraisal of Turkey's Ties to Russia, 1991-2007", *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No 3, 2007, pp. 349-371. Olson argues that the PKK issue has significantly undermined Turkey's diplomatic advantage over Russia and has stopped Turkey from taking advantage of the Chechnya's Declaration of Independence in 1991 to reduce Russian military and political influence in Caucasus. See Robert Olson, "The Kurdish Question and Chechnya: Turkish and Russian Foreign Policies since the Gulf War", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 4, No 3, 1996, pp. 106-119.

39 Yanık, "Allies or Partners?"

40 According to the document, Moscow sought to prevent other regional powers from establishing influence in the post-Soviet territories and to protect its economic interests and ethnic Russians in these regions. Documents specifically mentioned Central Asia as one of Russia's priorities and, for the first time, radical Islam was mentioned as a major security priority. Sally Cummings, "Happier Bedfellows? Russia and Central Asia Under Putin", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 32, No 2, 2001, pp. 142-152.

41 Mehmet Ali Tuğtan, "Kültürel Değişkenlerin Dış Politikadaki Yeri: İsmail Cem ve Ahmet Davutoğlu", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 13, No 49, 2016, pp. 3-24. In fact, in 2001, Turkey and Russia joined forces with other Black Sea countries to establish BLACKSEAFOR to undertake humanitarian search and rescue missions. See "Karadeniz Gücü Kuruldu", *Milliyet*, 4 Nisan 2001.

42 Ziya Öniş, "Multiple Faces of the 'New' Turkish Foreign Policy: Underlying Dynamics and a Critique", *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 13, No 1, 2011, p. 47.

43 Kemal Kirişçi, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No 40, 2009, pp. 29-56.

44 For such an example, see the "Joint Statement by President Bush and President Putin Against Terrorism", 21 October 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011022-11.html> (Accessed 20 September 2016).

Russia's highly criticized anti-terror campaign in Chechnya.<sup>45</sup> During the U.S.-led coalition attacks on the Taliban government, Putin agreed to supply intelligence about the infrastructure and locations of international terrorists in Afghanistan and made Russian air space available for the U.S. over-flights carrying humanitarian cargo to anti-terrorist operation areas. He even approved the establishment of U.S. bases in Central Asia.<sup>46</sup>

Turkey's relationships with its Western allies were also improving at this time, at an even faster rate than its relationship with Russia. Indeed, during the first decade of the 2000s, Turkey's relations with the West reached a level that was unprecedented in Turkey's recent history due to its strengthened institutional ties with the EU. In December 2002, the Copenhagen European Council recommended the opening of negotiations with Turkey for full membership, which started on 3 October 2005.<sup>47</sup> These parallel developments of Turkey's and Russia's relations with the United States and the West in general had a positive effect on bilateral relations between Russia and Turkey. Although U.S.-Turkish relations were briefly strained in 2003, when Turkey's parliament rejected a proposal to allow U.S. troops to operate from Turkish bases and ports in the event of war with Iraq, this did not change the Western orientation of Turkish foreign policy. The brief estrangement, on the other hand, helped strengthen Russian-Turkish relations. It pushed the Turkish government towards more multi-dimensionality in its foreign policy and changed the perception of Turkey within the Russia policy circles from being a country that cannot act independently from the United States to a more independent political player.<sup>48</sup> The next section focuses on how the rise of anti-Westernism both in Russia and Turkey shaped their bilateral relations.

## **Crisis, Conflict and the Rise of Anti-Westernism in Russia and Turkey**

After 2008, however, both Turkish-Russian relations and their own relations with the West began to evolve because of new regional and global economic-political developments. At its April 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO welcomed Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership and agreed that these countries could become members in the future.<sup>49</sup> In May 2008, the EU announced its Eastern Partnership Initiative, which aimed to foster prosperity in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in order to integrate them into the EU economy.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, protests backed by Western governments erupted throughout the former Soviet space, reaching Russia by 2011. However, the real strain between Russia and the Western alliance began after Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008 to support South Ossetia separatists. Also a major reorganization of the structure and chain of command in the Russian army began in 2008, upgrading Russia's military

---

45 John Russel, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens Before and Since 9/11", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No 1, 2005, pp. 101-116.

46 John O'Loughlin et al., "Russian Geopolitical Storylines and Public Opinion in the Wake of 9-11: A Critical Geopolitical Analysis and National Survey", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 37, No 3, 2004, p. 286.

47 Senem Aydın Düzgit and Nathalie Tocci, *Turkey and the European Union*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

48 Baev and Kirişçi, "An Ambiguous Partnership".

49 "Bucharest Summit Declaration", *NATO Official Documents Archive*, 8 May 2014, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm?mode=pressrelease](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm?mode=pressrelease) (Accessed 5 September 2017).

50 Igor Gretskiy, Evgeny Treshchenkov and Konstantin Golubev, "Russia's Perceptions and Misperceptions of the EU Eastern Partnership", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 47, No 3, 2014, pp. 375-383.

power.<sup>51</sup> According to Mearsheimer, the West's triple package of policies – NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion – scared Russia and provided the fuel needed to ignite a crisis and upgrade its military power.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, Turkey was also experiencing an estrangement with the West. Around 2010, as existing problems with the EU became more acute, the Turkish government began to lose hope of Turkey becoming an integral part of Europe and understood that if it was going to restore its status as an insider, it would have to do so without full membership recognition from Europe.<sup>53</sup> As their relations with the West deteriorated, Turkey's and Russia's paths started to converge. They both saw a window of opportunity to assert their power after the 2008 global financial crisis, while the presidency of Barack Obama distracted U.S. attention from the Middle East. Indeed, the Obama Doctrine was a policy of offshore balancing and retrenchment that aimed to transfer the strategic, operational, and tactical burdens of warfare onto regional powers.<sup>54</sup> These global and regional dynamics created a propensity for both conflict and cooperation. On the one hand, both Russia and Turkey felt increasingly alienated by Western powers, which drew them closer.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, an intense geopolitical competition was ongoing between Turkey and Russia.

These pull and push factors that shaped bilateral relations became more acute after 2011, as the Arab revolts erupted across the Middle East. It was then deepened by the civil war in Syria, which became a real test of the Turkish-Russian strategic relationship, given that Turkey and Russia backed opposing sides, and their help was tilting the balance of power on the ground.<sup>56</sup> In Syria, Russia backed Assad, who it claimed to be the only legitimate actor in Syria to represent the sovereign interests of the Syrian state, while Turkey backed what it labeled the 'moderate Islamist opposition' against Assad. These conflicting agendas in Syria damaged Turkish-Russian relations significantly.<sup>57</sup>

In 2013, Russia adopted a new foreign policy concept that emphasized Russia's role as an important global military and economic pole, a restraining factor in an increasingly chaotic world, and a unique civilization, whose values should be transplanted globally through soft power.<sup>58</sup> This

51 Dmitri Trenin, "The Revival of the Russian Military: How Moscow Reloaded", *Foreign Affairs*, No 95, 2016, p. 23.

52 John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin", *Foreign Affairs*, No 93, 2014, p. 77.

53 For an excellent discussion of de-Europeanization trends in Turkey, see Senem Aydın Düzgün and Alper Kaliber (eds.), *Encounters with Europe in An Era of Domestic and International Turmoil: Is Turkey a de-Europeanising Candidate Country?*, London, Routledge, 2016.

54 Andera Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East", *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No 1, 2016, pp. 97-113; and Hal Brands et al., "Should America Retrench: The Battle Over Offshore Balancing", *Foreign Affairs*, No 95, 2016, p. 164.

55 For example, during the Russian-Georgian standoff in 2008, Turkey distanced itself from a sharply critical campaign launched against Russia by other NATO allies and partners and has pursued its own policies with regard to the disputed Abkhazia region in Georgia. See Sergey Markedonov and Natalya Ulchenko, "Turkey and Russia: An Evolving Relationship", 19 August 2011, <http://carnegiendowment.org/2011/08/19/turkey-and-russia-evolving-relationship-pub-45383> (Accessed 20 July 2017).

56 Gencer Özcan, "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül (eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, pp. 269-299.

57 See Balta for a comprehensive analysis of Turkey's Syria policy and its conflict of interest with Russia. Evren Balta, "The Syrian War and Turkey's Kurdish Conflict", Karen E Young et al. (eds.), *Mapping GCC Foreign Policy: Resources, Recipients and Regional Effects*, London School of Economics, Middle East Center, 2015.

58 "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", 18 February 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/en\\_GB/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/en_GB/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/122186) (Accessed at 8 September 2017). For a thorough evaluation of this doctrine see Maria Engstrom, "Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 35, No 3, 2014, pp. 356-379.

new foreign policy was more assertive, as revealed by Russia's active role in Syria and its annexation of Crimea in March 2014. The latter significantly exacerbated hostilities between Russia and the West,<sup>59</sup> while also substantially increasing Russia's naval presence in the Black Sea.<sup>60</sup> Moscow also resumed naval activity in the Mediterranean, alarming NATO.<sup>61</sup> Although the Turkish government expressed its support for Ukrainian territorial integrity several times, it acted strategically and calmly despite its concerns for Crimean Tatars and over the balance of power in the Black Sea.<sup>62</sup> In fact, in order not to alienate Russia, Turkey did not join anti-Russian EU sanctions over Crimea, and even criticized them as being too harsh in some respects.

Alarming developments in the Middle East and an emerging competition for regional influence also transformed Turkey's foreign policy to a neo-revisionist stance. Concepts such as the Turkish model and an area of Turkish influence returned to the foreign-policy toolbox, this time with regard to the Middle East, while an interventionist foreign policy seeking to recover Turkey's lost Ottoman past became an important framework.<sup>63</sup> The foreign policy thinking of Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2009-2014 and Prime Minister between 2014-2016, emphasized Turkey's responsibilities in the Middle East to restrict Western dominance and promote Turkey's unique civilizational responsibilities. During this period, many analysts began to draw parallels between Russia and Turkey in terms of their expansionist and neo-imperial foreign policies alongside the centralization of government powers in domestic politics.<sup>64</sup>

These pull and push factors operating at more structural and political levels drew Russia and Turkey towards each other and simultaneously increased the risk of conflict, particularly by intensifying disputes among domestic military and political elites in Turkey around the choice of alliances.<sup>65</sup> It was, however, the Russian decision to intervene directly in Syria in late September 2015 that most significantly challenged Turkish interests, thereby sparking an escalation in tensions with Russia. This peaked with the downing of a Russian military jet by the Turkish military on 24 November 2015, which nearly broke ties between the two countries. Turkey not only lost billions of dollars because of Russian economic sanctions but also lost its leverage over Syria, since Russia effectively closed Syrian airspace to Turkish planes by deploying its S-400 air missile defense system.<sup>66</sup> Russia then even

---

59 Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis".

60 Igor Delanoë, "After the Crimean Crisis: Towards a Greater Russian Maritime Power in the Black Sea", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 14, No 3, 2014, pp. 367-382.

61 For an excellent analysis of changing military balance in the Eastern Mediterranean, see Serhat Güvenç and Sıtkı Egeli, "Changing Naval Balances in the Eastern Mediterranean: Implications for Turkey", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No 1, 2016, pp. 93-105. According to Güvenç and Egeli, the Black Sea was the first region where Turkey lost its naval superiority to Russia. In the Mediterranean, the Syrian conflict provided Russia with the pretext for asserting its power and status as a significant naval power there and its presence was peaked with six warships in July 2013.

62 Dimitar Bechev, "Russia and Turkey—What Does Their Partnership Mean for the EU", *EPC Policy Brief*, No 13, 2015, [http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub\\_5304\\_russia\\_and\\_turkey.pdf](http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_5304_russia_and_turkey.pdf) (Accessed 17 July 2017)

63 Behlül Özkan, "Turkey, Davutoğlu and The Idea of Pan-Islamism", *Survival*, Vol. 56, No 4, 2014, pp. 119-140.

64 President Putin repeatedly refers to Nikolas I (who instigated the Crimean War) as his favorite historical personality, claiming that he influenced his own concept of "orthodoxy, autocracy and nation". Similarly, President Erdoğan frequently emphasizes Ottoman symbols and the Ottoman past. These references can be interpreted as an ideologization of each country's imperial pasts and an indication of a desire to implement a more assertive and expansionist foreign policies.

65 For the ongoing conflict between these two camps and how this elite conflict can be seen as a cause of not only changes in Turkey's relations with Russia but also the July 15th coup attempt, see Metin Gürcan, "Never Again! But How? State and the Military in Turkey After July 15", *IPC Policy Report*, İstanbul, 2017.

66 Gencer Özcan, "Rusya'nın Suriye Bunalımına Müdahalesi ve Türkiye", *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, Gencer Özcan, Evren Balta and Burç Beşgül (eds.), İstanbul, İletişim, 2017, pp. 269-299.

accused the Turkish government of having connections with ISIS, specifically Turkey's involvement in trading oil.<sup>67</sup>

This sudden crisis was just as suddenly normalized after President Erdoğan wrote a letter of apology to the family of the Russian pilot on 27 June 2016.<sup>68</sup> Turkish-Russian rapprochement quickly gained momentum after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, when Putin expressed Russia full support for Erdoğan, who then made his first overseas trip after the coup attempt to Russia on 9 August 2016. In the following months, a bilateral agreement on visa-free movement between the two countries, which had been suspended after the downing of the Russian jet, was partially restored, restrictions on Turkish companies operating in Russia were lifted, a ban on employing Turkish workers in the country was stopped, and an embargo on a range of Turkish imports was ended. Most importantly, Russia allowed Turkey to launch a military operation in northern Syria dubbed Operation Euphrates Shield.<sup>69</sup> The operation ended in March 2017 when both Russia and the United States effectively resisted and stopped Turkey's offensive against the Kurdish-controlled city of Manbij.<sup>70</sup>

Then, Russia and Turkey, along with Iran, jointly sponsored ceasefire talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, which took place in a context in which the Turkish government felt increasingly estranged from the United States because of the latter's support for the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. The first draft for de-escalation zones was approved in May.<sup>71</sup> However, major disagreements among these three countries have been present with regard to the future of Syria and Assad, possible autonomy for the Kurds, the role of Hezbollah, and the role of the Turkey-backed opposition. Russia and Turkey also have profoundly diverging views towards counter-terrorism. Islamic extremism is the number one security issue for Putin, who repeatedly expressed that there is no need to distinguish between moderate and radical Islamists.<sup>72</sup> However, President Erdoğan is unenthusiastic about the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition and puts the main emphasis on countering the threat of Kurdish insurrection in Syria.<sup>73</sup> Putin, on the other hand, tries to keep his leverage over the Kurdish parties, including the YPG, actions that the Turkish government overlooks. Nevertheless, it was only through reconciliation with Russia that Turkey was able to intervene in Syria to prevent the YPG from advancing further.

Some analysts interpreted this cooperation as Turkey's acceptance of Russia's agenda in Syria rather than vice-versa.<sup>74</sup> In fact, Turkey's hardline position towards the Assad government softened after Turkish-Russian rapprochement over Syria. Turkish officials even publicly announced that they had started to maintain low-level contacts with Damascus. In September 2018, Turkey and Russia

67 Maria Tsvetkova and Lidia Kelly, "Russia Says It Has Proof Turkey Involved in Islamic State Oil Trade", *Reuters*, 2 December 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-idUSKBN0TL19S20151202> (Accessed 10 June 2017).

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Cengiz Çandar, "Operation Euphrates Shield: A Postmortem", *Al-Monitor*, 5 April 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/04/turkey-post-mortem-in-syria.html> (Accessed 10 July 2017).

71 Lorenzo Trombetta, "How the 'De-Escalation Zone' Plan Benefits Syria's Foreign Players", *Atlantic Council Syria Source*, 23 May 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/how-the-de-escalation-zone-plan-benefits-syria-s-foreign-players> (Accessed 20 September 2017).

72 "Putin: No Need to Distinguish Between 'Moderate' & Other Terrorists", *Russian Times*, 22 October 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/319405-putin-valdai-discussion-club/> (Accessed 8 September 2017).

73 Baev and Kirişçi, "An Ambiguous Partnership", p. 6

74 Aaron Stein, "How Russia Beat Turkey in Syria", *Atlantic Council*, 27 March 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/how-russia-beat-turkey-in-syria> (Accessed 10 July 2017).

also agreed to create a demilitarized buffer zone in Syria's rebel-held Idlib. In July 2017, Turkey agreed to buy the most advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile-defense systems from Russia, which cannot be integrated with NATO's missile-defense architecture and would not create inter-operability with NATO systems.<sup>75</sup> Despite U.S. officials constantly warning Turkey of "grave consequences," Erdoğan announced in March 2019 that Turkey would soon receive the S-400 missile systems. This move is a further sign of Turkey's evolving security rapprochement with Russia, which would also significantly undermine the Turkish-Western alliance and Turkey's position in NATO.<sup>76</sup>

While increasing tensions with the West have created a practical necessity for both countries to cooperate, the two countries' similar ambitions and conflicting national interests still remain a major problem for further cooperation. Besides, conflicting interests in Syria and the Black Sea, Russia also took a position antithetical to Turkey's position in Cyprus, seeing any change in the *status quo* a direct threat to its influence over Nicosia. Despite these major differences, geopolitical relations have evolved from a strategic partnership to a partnership of convenience mainly because both states feel increasingly alienated from the West.<sup>77</sup> However, cooperation is not only related to geopolitical concerns. In fact, Turkey and Russia are growing economic partners. The next section deals with their evolving economic relations, including energy cooperation.

## **Gas, Pipelines and Tomatoes**

The Cold War was not the only factor that impeded economic relations between Turkey and the Soviet Union. Their similar import substitution industrialization policies largely limited trade relations, keeping the overall trade levels of both countries low. During the 1980s, however, Turkey's trade relations with the Soviet Union, especially in energy, gained momentum with the liberalization of the Turkish economy. Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Tikhonova visited Turkey in December 1984 and met with Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal.<sup>78</sup> Two agreements signed during the visit established the foundations of energy cooperation between the two countries, as Turkey agreed to buy Soviet natural gas. After 1984, many Turkish private and public companies began to establish trade relations with Russia and the percentage of trade with the Soviet Union in the overall trade of Turkey rose in 1984.<sup>79</sup>

In the 1990s, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, trade once again increased as the Russian economy experienced liberalization and capitalist restructuring. Turkey too went through a substantial economic restructuring in the 1990s, which liberalized the economy and increased overall

---

75 Can Kasapoğlu, "Why Turkey Might Buy Russia's S-400 Defence System", 24 March 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/03/turkey-buy-russia-s400-missile-defence-system-170323131537509.html> (Accessed 24 March 2017).

76 Metin Gürkan, "US, NATO Wait to See If Russia-Turkey Defense Deal Goes Through", *Al-Monitor*, 1 August 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/turkey-russia-west-missile-defense-system-crisis.html#ixzz4s93MhbPf> (Accessed 25 September 2017).

77 One should note here that there is a great power asymmetry between Russia and Turkey. Russia's purchasing power in foreign reserves is almost three times larger than Turkey's. Russia's defense budget is five times larger. The Russian air, ground and naval forces are also stronger, not only in terms of sheer size but also in technology. For the most current figures in 2017, see the Firepower Index, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/> (Accessed 7 September 2017).

78 "Sovyetler'le Karşılıklı Güven Arttı, Kaygılar Giderildi," *Milliyet*, 27 December 1984.

79 Ayşem Biriz Karaçay, "Rusya ve Türkiye İlişkilerinin Unutulan İnsani Boyutu", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül (eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, pp. 225-249.

trade figures. The percentage of trade with Russia doubled from 4.1% in 1990 to 8.3% in 1994, even though there were occasional fluctuations. For example, in 1998, trade with Russia dropped to 4.4%, mostly due to the Russian financial crisis, which significantly reduced its overall trade figures.

The major increase in trade began in the early 2000s, parallel to the political developments explained in the previous section. Trade volumes increased six-fold in just five years from \$5 billion in 2002 to \$37.7 billion in 2007. By 2015, Russia became Turkey's third largest trading partner in imports (the first two being China and Germany) and eleventh largest in exports (the first two being Germany and the UK).<sup>80</sup> Growing trade and deepening economic relations led to the mutual lifting of visa requirements in 2011, consideration of the use of national currencies in bilateral trade, and the formation of a joint investment bank to boost economic cooperation.<sup>81</sup> These developments, however, took place in the context of a huge trade imbalance in favor of Russia, making Turkey's economy asymmetrically dependent on Russia. The trade deficit was also a consequence of the nature of the bilateral trade relations, in which Turkey's gas and oil imports constituted a major portion of overall volume.<sup>82</sup>

What needs to be emphasized here is the importance of the construction sector for the Turkish economy. The Turkish model of economic growth under successive AKP governments has been based on construction,<sup>83</sup> and Russia is a major investment site for Turkish construction companies. Between 2010 and 2013, 16.9% of Turkey's construction sector's foreign investments were in Russia, making it the second largest investment site for Turkish construction companies, the first being Turkmenistan at 23.5%.<sup>84</sup> After the downing of the Russian jet in November 2015, Russia imposed strict sanctions on Turkish entrepreneurs with construction firms taking a major hit; Turkish businesses operating in Russia were restricted and work permits for project-based workers were cancelled.<sup>85</sup> With the ensuing crisis, trade between the two countries dropped to \$8.5 billion from \$38 billion a year earlier. Of that \$8.5 billion, \$7.7 billion was imports from Russia, mostly natural gas.

As stated above, the major component of trade between Russia and Turkey is natural gas, which has increased considerably since 1998, making Russia Turkey's dominant gas provider, followed by Iran and Azerbaijan. By 2015, 27 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas imports from Russia represented 55% of Turkey's overall gas imports of 49.2 bcm. This was partly the result of Turkey's remarkable annual 7%-8% increase in energy demand but also its inability to diversify its energy suppliers.<sup>86</sup> The over-reliance on a single country has long been regarded not only as an important energy security issue but also an important matter for Turkey's overall national security.<sup>87</sup> The

80 Turkish Statistical Institute's database, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr> (Accessed 20 June 2017).

81 Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey-Russia Energy Relations: The Limits of Forging Cooperation Through Economic Interdependence", *International Journal*, Vol. 67, No 1, 2012, p. 89.

82 While Turkey imports natural gas, oil and oil products, grains, iron, steel, and charcoal from Russia, Russia imports textiles, food, semi-manufactured items, and chemicals from Turkey.

83 See Tanıl Bora (ed.), *İnşaat Ya Resulullah*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2017.

84 The figures provided to the author by the Turkish Constructors Union are as follows: Iraq 11.6%, Saudi Arabia 5.2%, Azerbaijan 4.9%, and Kazakhstan 4.5%. These figures show that the majority of the construction sector projects took place in the post-Soviet space.

85 See "Executive Order on Measures to Ensure Russia's National Security and Protection of Russian Citizens Against Criminal and Other Illegal Acts and on the Application of Special Economic Measures Against Turkey", 28 November 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50805> (Accessed 20 July 2017).

86 Mitat Çelikpala, "Rusya Gazı Keser mi?", Özcan, Balta and Beşgül (eds.), *Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, 2017, p. 205.

87 Ibid.

AKP governments therefore proposed using nuclear energy to diversify Turkey's energy resources. However, the contract for the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, one of the first in Turkey, was also given to a Russian company, Rosatom, which increasing the worries about granting Russia control over a significant part of national electricity production and generation.<sup>88</sup>

Another vital issue is the transportation of energy resources, especially natural gas, which is not only about economic relations but also significantly alters power projections and geopolitical interests. After the Cold War, Turkey tried to establish itself as a major transit hub for oil and natural gas supplies between producers in Central Asia, Russia, and the Middle East and consumers in Europe.<sup>89</sup> During the 1990s, however, Turkey largely positioned itself against Russia, especially over the development and transportation of Caspian Basin and Central Asian oil and gas reserves, by taking an active role in projects aiming to bypass Russian-controlled transportation lines. Turkey also believed that, by contributing to Europe's energy security, this move would help its membership bid.<sup>90</sup> Yet Turkey's attitude towards transport routes became more inclusive of Russian interests, which also contributed to evolving political relations.<sup>91</sup> As a result, a major pipeline, Blue Stream, which carries natural gas from Russia to Turkey underneath the Black Sea, became fully functioning in 2003.

Throughout the 2000s alternative pipeline projects were on the table. Putin announced the TurkStream pipeline in December 2014 to eliminate gas transit to Europe through Ukraine and to enhance the reliability of gas supply to Turkey, which is Russia's second biggest gas client after Germany. The project would also make Turkey a major European hub for gas transfer and would increase its geopolitical standing. After various rounds of negotiations, in October 2016, Turkey and Russia signed a deal on TurkStream, which was set to be fully operational by the end of the 2019.<sup>92</sup> The construction of the pipeline has further increased overlapping networks of corporate interests in Turkey and Russia.<sup>93</sup>

Economic relations between Russia and Turkey have always been sensitive to the evolving political relations. But, at the same time, the development of economic relations and an attentive attitude toward each other's economic interests are also important factors in developing political relations. It can be argued that the strong tendency to solve political problems have partially stemmed from strong economic ties between the two countries. However, the Russian jet crisis of 2015 showed clearly that, while compartmentalization of economic matters may not be possible during severe political crises, strong economic relations are an impetus for both countries to work through their differences. Thus, what emerges is a shift in focus from state-level interactions to more bottom-up processes that also help both countries to strengthen their relations.

---

88 For an analysis of the nuclear contract signed by a Russia, see Azime Telli's report. Azime Telli, "Akkuyu Akliman'a Karşı: Nükleer Antlaşmaların İçerik Karşılaştırması", *Eppen Enstitüsü*, 2016, [http://www.eppen.org/resim/haber\\_resim/EPPEN17.Azime-Telli.pdf](http://www.eppen.org/resim/haber_resim/EPPEN17.Azime-Telli.pdf) (Accessed 31 July 2017).

89 Çelikpala, "Rusya Gazı Keser mi?"

90 Çelikpala, "1990'lardan Günümüze Türk-Rus İlişkileri".

91 Kardaş, "Turkey-Russia Energy Relations", p. 93.

92 See Gazprom's website for the technical and operational specifics of the "Turkstream, <http://www.gazprom.com/about/production/projects/pipelines/built/turk-stream/> (Accessed 7 September 2017).

93 Di Paolo Biondani and Leo Sisti "The Pipeline of Three Regimes" <http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2017/04/18/news/the-pipeline-of-the-three-regimes-1.299786> (Accessed 20 June 2017).



## History from Below: Turks and Russians on the Move

Starting from the mid-1980s, goods and capital flows and macro-level political cooperation between Turkey and Russia were followed by ever-increasing flows of people. New business ties, construction firms' operations, and large numbers of tourists contributed to the increase in the flow of people and daily cultural encounters. As the Russian economy liberalized during the 1990s, many people from the post-Soviet geography discovered İstanbul as a center for trade. The city's geographical proximity to post-Soviet territories, low transportation costs, and large product range made it a center of attraction for people from Moldavia, Georgia, Armenia, and Russia, among others.

As a result, İstanbul neighborhoods such as Laleli were transformed overnight to incorporate this ever-increasing transnational trade network between Russia and Turkey by hosting many Russians as residents or workers. In this network, not only people and goods, but also Western fashion and images were circulated and transformed through the activities of informal entrepreneurs.<sup>94</sup> Grassroots economic actors, such as jobless Russian women, immigrant shopkeepers in İstanbul, street vendors, and itinerant traders have underpinned the informal trade between Russia and Turkey. Yüksekler calls this process 'transnationalism from below' in contrast to globalization driven by corporations or global financial institutions.<sup>95</sup>

Another important grassroots trend has been the increase in the number of mixed marriages. Indeed, marriage has become a major reason for migration from Russia to Turkey.<sup>96</sup> Many Russian medium-sized entrepreneurs have also settled in Turkey, especially in southern cities, and operate both within the tourism sector and outside it.<sup>97</sup> Apart from the immigrant populations who are actively working or has migrated for marriage, a growing Russian population has come to retire in Turkey, especially in the south.<sup>98</sup> This population growth has significantly increased the visibility of Russian culture and institutions within Turkish society, such as Russian restaurants, religious institutions, and foundations. Research on Russian immigrants suggests that the Russian diaspora in Turkey can be defined as 'bi-cultural', that is, acculturated into Turkish culture while simultaneously retaining its Russian roots.<sup>99</sup>

Finally, the number of Russian tourists coming to Turkey has also flourished, especially in the 2000s. From 945,000 in 2002, visitor numbers rose to 4.5 million in 2014.<sup>100</sup> Tourism, however, is particularly sensitive to political crises. Thus, after the downing of the Russian jet in 2015, the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey immediately dropped by around 90 percent in 2016, after Russia cancelled visa-free travel and warned its citizens not to travel to Turkey.<sup>101</sup> After the two countries

94 Deniz Yüksekler. "Shuttling Goods, Weaving Consumer Tastes: Informal Trade between Turkey and Russia", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 31, No 1, 2007, pp. 60-72.

95 Ibid. It is not possible to get exact figures concerning this trade.

96 Deniz and Özgür, "Antalya'da Rus Gelinler". Unfortunately, there are no reliable statistics on mixed marriages, predictions ranging from 10 thousand 100 thousand. See Hakan Aksay, "Türkiye'deki Gizli Rus Ordusu", 2 August 2014, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/turkiyedeki-gizli-rus-ordusu,266239> (Accessed 7 September 2017).

97 Karaçay, "Rusya ve Türkiye İlişkilerinin Unutulan İnsani Boyutu".

98 Deniz and Özgür, "Antalya'da Rus Gelinler".

99 Elena Antonova-Unlu et al., "Russian Immigrant Diaspora in Turkey: Language Use, Preference and Attitudes", *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 16, No 3, 2015, pp. 391-410.

100 Turkish Statistical Institute's database. <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr> (Accessed 20 June 2017). See also Karaçay, "Rusya ve Türkiye İlişkilerinin Unutulan İnsani Boyutu".

101 Karaçay, "Rusya Türkiye İlişkilerinin Unutulan İnsani Boyut".

patched up their relations, Turkey once again became the most popular foreign destination for Russian tourists in 2018.

On the other side, the main source of flow of professionals and project-tied migrants from Turkey to Russia is the growing construction sector. As stated in the previous section, starting from the mid-1980s, Turkish construction companies rapidly gained experience and sophistication by focusing initially on low-technology projects in difficult locations in post-Soviet countries, including Russia. As a result, the number of Turkish businesspeople, professionals, entrepreneurs, and project-based migrant workers living in Russia continuously increased throughout the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, Turkish investors with small or medium-sized amounts of capital took the risk of establishing gift shops, cafes, restaurants, bakeries, or slaughterhouses in the newly emerging Russian market economy.<sup>103</sup> Although there was a sharp decrease in the number of Turkish entrepreneurs and workers living in Russia after the 1998 Russian financial crisis, which was followed by the Turkish economic crisis, the number has gradually recovered since 2002, although it again took a serious hit after the Russian sanctions of 2015 and 2016.<sup>104</sup>

Despite the ever-increasing mobility of people and cultural encounters, bottom-up cooperation through civil society organizations seem low, particularly given the shrinking space for civil society organizations in both countries. One important exception to this is the experience sharing of Turkish and Russian human rights organizations over cases brought to the European Court of Human Rights since the beginning of the 2000s.<sup>105</sup> Given the lack of such societal level organizations, relations between the two countries are either dominated by political interests or by powerful economic actors with private economic interests.

## Concluding Remarks

As the discussion in this paper showed neither economy nor power or identity can solely explain bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia. Rather, complex causality – which includes asymmetrical power relations, diverging definitions of national interest, relationships with the West, transformations of domestic regime types, and economic and social networks – has determined the fate and density of bilateral relations.

Despite various policy differences in matters of national interest, recent domestic political developments in both countries have increasingly driven Turkey and Russia together. Trends towards the personalization and deinstitutionalization of politics have generated significant criticism from the West and isolated both regimes. The recent rapprochement and close cooperation on Syria, the signing of the S-400 missile agreement despite strong NATO objections, their joint plans to build TurkStream to allow Moscow to strengthen its position in the European gas market, and Turkey's

---

102 İcduygu and Karaçay, "The International Migration System Between Turkey and Russia: Project-Tied Migrant Workers in Moscow", *International Migration*, Vol. 50, No 1, 2012, p. 60.

103 Ibid., p. 61.

104 "Turks in Russia Hit By Putin's 'Serious Consequences' After Downing of Warplane", *Guardian*, 2 December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/02/turks-in-russia-hit-by-putins-serious-consequences-after-downing-of-warplane> (Accessed 20 September 2017).

105 Based on interviews conducted by the author in Moscow and İstanbul with human rights organizations in 2005 and 2010.

appeasing attitude towards Russia's annexation of Crimea and unwillingness to join EU sanctions are all signs of a rapprochement in a context of faltering relations with the West.

What characterizes Russia-Turkish relations is its transactional and *ad hoc* nature. Despite strong economic links and dense security cooperation, the relationship remains uninstitutionalized and highly dependent on the personalized decisions of its leaders. These countries do not share a comprehensive and mutual vision even for their near abroad. Both countries think of each other as 'good-enough' allies to overcome their current isolation. Russia also thinks that it can restore its great power status and increase its influence by playing Western allies against one another. Turkey too considers Russia instrumental in balancing the leverage of the West over Turkey. However, as this article has suggested, they are also competitors, in that they share competing national interests in the region and fail to create a shared security framework. In short, Turkey and Russia find themselves in regional and global contexts that create push and pull factors for both cooperation and conflict. Because of these broader trends, there have been abrupt shifts in bilateral relations. As long as these regional and global trends continue to loom over Turkish-Russian relations and as long as bilateral relations remain uninstitutionalized, one can predict that there will be periods of cooperation in the future followed by periods of conflict.