

CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER

No. 16/04

*April 2016*

---

# **RUSSIA-TURKEY: FROM HONEYMOON TO RIVALRY**

## **A RETURN TO THE GHOSTS OF THE PAST?**

**Dr. ÇIGDEM ÜSTÜN**

*Assoc. Professor*

*Chair, Political Science and Public Administration Department*

*Gediz University*

*Izmir, Turkey*

Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 16/04

© Çiğdem Üstün, 2016.

All rights reserved

The Cicero Foundation is an independent pro-Atlantic and pro-EU think tank.

[www.cicerofoundation.org](http://www.cicerofoundation.org)

The views expressed in Cicero Foundation Great Debate Papers do not necessarily express the opinion of the Cicero Foundation, but they are considered interesting and thought-provoking enough to be published. Permission to make digital or hard copies of any information contained in these web publications is granted for personal use, without fee and without formal request. Full citation and copyright notice must appear on the first page. Copies may not be made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage.

# **Russia-Turkey: From Honeymoon to Rivalry**

## **A Return to the Ghosts of the Past?**

Prof. Dr. Çiğdem Üstün

### **ABSTRACT**

Turkish-Russian relations have experienced ups and downs for centuries. The election victories of Putin in Russia and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey at the beginning of the century opened a gate for strengthening relations through increased trade, economic activities, and diplomatic relations - including visa-free travel. However, the drastic changes in the neighboring regions, as well as Turkish and Russian aspirations in the wider Black Sea area and the Middle East region, brought back the question of rivalry between the two states. Arab uprisings, the Ukrainian crisis, changing governments in the southern Mediterranean countries, civil war in Syria, a growing number of migrants from the region heading to the EU countries, and the downing of a Russian warplane, made it possible for the ghosts of the past to reappear - not only in the relations between Turkey and Russia, but in the whole region.

## A ROCKY RELATIONSHIP IN THE PAST

Russian-Turkish relations have had their ups and downs throughout centuries. During the imperial era (Ottoman and Russian Empires), the Russo-Turkish wars started in the mid-1500s and continued till the end of the 1800s. In 1925, after the establishment of the new Turkish Republic, Turkey had one of its first bilateral agreements with Russia - on neutrality, non-aggression and mutual consultation. However, the Montreux Convention in 1936 became a crucial dispute and during World War II, Russia demanded the modification of the convention.<sup>1</sup> In 1952, Turkey's membership in NATO and its acting along with the USA deepened the divide between the two neighbours. However, at the end of the Cold War Turkey diverted its attention to regional countries by putting efforts towards creating cultural, political and military bonds. Despite Russian discomfort with these policies, official trade between Russia and Turkey increased to 3,5 billion US Dollars. The unofficial luggage trade<sup>2</sup> was estimated between 6-10 billion US Dollars. As Sezer<sup>3</sup> argued, the managed geopolitical rivalry of the 1990s, together with economic cooperation brought virtual rapprochement.

In the 1990s, Russia-Turkey relations experienced some important hiccups, regarding Turkey's support for ethnic separatism in Chechnya and Russian support for the terrorist organization PKK. Media coverage in Turkey was perceived as a sign of support for Chechnya's declaration of independence in the mid-1990s, visits of Chechen leaders to Turkey caused controversy, and the discontentment in Moscow increased in 1996, when Chechen groups hijacked the Avrasya Ferry.<sup>4</sup> In retaliation, Russia did not hesitate to play its

---

<sup>1</sup> N. Sadak, (1949). "Turkey Faces the Soviets," *Foreign Affairs*, 27: 3, p. 452.

<sup>2</sup> Luggage trade is unofficial cross-border economic trade especially between Russia, the CIS countries, and Turkey. In the 1990s, this type of trade was estimated at \$10 billion. The visitors are popularly known as 'luggage traders' because of the huge amounts of goods they buy and pack in their luggage for the return trip. Laleli, a district of İstanbul, is known as the trade center for luggage trade.

<sup>3</sup> D. Sezer, (2000). "Turkish-Russian relations: The challenges of reconciling geopolitical competition with economic partnership," *Turkish Studies*, 1: 1, 59-82.

<sup>4</sup> The Avrasya ferry was hijacked in 1996 in the Black Sea by 5 Turkish nationals and two Chechens as the ferry was departing from Trabzon for Sochi. The group demanded that Russian forces halt the operations at the border between Chechnya and the Russian republic of Dagestan. The crisis between Turkey and Russia

Kurdish card and Russian government officials attended a conference organized by the PKK in Moscow. By the end of the 1990s, Russia and Turkey backed opposing sides in the wars following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia: Russia supported Serbia and Turkey sided with Bosnia and Kosovo.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE 2000s – A NEW BEGINNING?

At the beginning of the 2000s, Putin’s election victory in Russia coincided with the election of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey. Energy security<sup>6</sup> has been one of the topics that the two countries emphasized for their increasing cooperation. As a result of the intensification of trade relations, Russia became one of Turkey’s largest trading partners, with the bilateral trade volume reaching 24 billion US Dollars in the first 9 months of 2014. (*International Business Times*, 2014).

The Russian–Georgian War (a.k.a. the 5 Day War) increased concerns over the supply of energy resources from the region. Just after the war, Turkey proposed a multilateral cooperation mechanism, titled the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, which was inspired by Süleyman Demirel’s Caucasus Stability Pact. During the 2000s, therefore, Russia and Turkey focused more on their commonalities than on the conflicts in their relations, which increased economic and trade relations, as well as diplomatic relations between the two neighbours.<sup>7</sup>

---

escalated when the Turkish government did not react as harshly as Russia requested. Then President Boris Yeltsin accused Turkey of being slow to launch operations to rescue the ferry (*The Day*, 1996: A3).

<sup>5</sup> D. Sezer, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> See E. Biresselioglu (2012), “NATO’nun Değişen Enerji Güvenliği Algısı: Türkiye’nin Olası Konumu,” *Uİ Dergisi*, 9:34, 227-252; E. Biresselioglu, M. H. Demir, S. Dönmez (2014), “Danish Straits versus Turkish Straits: The Potential Impact of Prospective Russian Oil Exports,” *The Romanian Journal for Baltic and Nordic Studies*, 6:2, 223-239 for further information.

<sup>7</sup> Ş. Aktürk, (2013), *A Realist Assessment of Turkish-Russian Relations 2002-2012: From Peak to the Dip*, Caspian Strategy Institute Center for Politics and International Relations Studies, p. 13.

## THE IMPACT OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS ON THE NEIGHBORS

The picture began to change with the start of the Arab uprisings in the countries of the southern Mediterranean. Both Turkey and Russia, during the down periods of their relationship, tried to increase their influence in the neighboring regions, i.e. the wider Black Sea and wider Middle East. During the Cold War, the Middle East was the region where the “free world” and the Soviet Union competed for influence. In 2011, when the Arab uprisings started, one was reminded of those days again. In the 2000s, Russian efforts to increase its influence in the region were not successful and Syria under the leadership of Bashar Al Assad was seen as one of Putin’s remaining few allies.<sup>8</sup> Also the Russian cooperation with Iran began to be questioned after the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1.

Turkey - just after the start of the Arab uprisings - perceived this as an opportunity for itself to act as the leader of the region, since it was the only country which had close ties to the West, increased economic and trade relations with the countries of the region, visa free travel agreements to boost its trade relations, as well as people-to-people contacts. In the 2000s, therefore, Turkey’s image was overall positive in the region.<sup>9</sup> While, at the beginning, Russia perceived the uprisings as a conspiracy of the Western countries, Turkey perceived them as the awakening of the region and a movement of democratization.<sup>10</sup> Turkey supported the opposition groups in the region and gave up its traditional Middle East policy of staying aloof from the regional conflicts. In the end, the political and civil unrest of its southern neighbors became a part of its domestic political rhetoric as well. Thus the historical rivalry between Turkey and Russia, each trying to gain the upper hand over the neighboring regions, reemerged.

---

<sup>8</sup> A. Malashenko, (2013), *Russia and the Arab Spring*, Carnegie Moscow Center. Available at [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/russia\\_arab\\_spring2013.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/russia_arab_spring2013.pdf). Accessed on April, 9, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> M. Akgün, G. Perçinoğlu, S.S. Gündoğar, (2009). *Ortadoğu’da Türkiye Algısı*, TESEV. Available at [http://www.aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr/pdf/orta\\_dogu\\_rapor.pdf](http://www.aciktoplumvakfi.org.tr/pdf/orta_dogu_rapor.pdf). Accessed on April 9, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> *Erdoğan: Arap Baharı demokrasiye geçişte ivme yarattı*, *Hürriyet Daily*, 06.12.2011. Available at <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/erdogan-arap-bahari-demokrasiye-geciste-ivme-yaratti-19404022>. Accessed on April 9, 2016.

During the Ukrainian crisis, Turkish authorities emphasized the importance of Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political unity. However, Turkey was reluctant to adopt an aggressive attitude.<sup>11</sup> This reluctance was even observed regarding the annexation of the Crimea, home to the Tatars, an ethnic Turkish minority. Although Turkey raised some concerns, Ankara preferred not to disturb the relations with Russia in the region. However, on November 24, 2015, relations deteriorated sharply when Turkey shot down a Russian warplane. However, it needs to be understood that the Russian response and the escalating tension between Turkey and Russia were not only related to the policies of the two states, but also to other regional and international actors who were active in the region. Although Turkey's NATO membership raised questions as to whether NATO would be involved in the Russian-Turkish military standoff, NATO's response was not perceived as promising by the Turkish side.<sup>12</sup>

Russian support of Al-Assad, Western countries' overt and covert support to Kurdish groups in the region in the fight against ISIS, and the increasing number of migrants fleeing from the region, left Turkey in a stranded position. In particular due to the PKK's terrorist activities in Turkey, any support to Kurdish groups in Syria increased Ankara's concerns vis-à-vis an autonomous Kurdish authority in the region, which would have a direct effect on the Kurds in Turkey. The number of migrants arriving in Turkey reaching 2,5 million<sup>13</sup>, together with the increasing security threats after the bombings in Suruç, Ankara, and İstanbul, turned the Syrian issue into a domestic matter. These security concerns merged with the economic losses in several sectors, including agriculture, construction, and tourism, as a result of the tension between Turkey and Russia. It made Turkey feeling vulnerable and isolated - not only

---

<sup>11</sup> L. Adilgizi, *Old rivals or regional partners: Russia, Turkey and Crimea*, Aljazeera, 16.03.2014. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/03/old-rivals-regional-partners-r-2014315144016585481.html> Accessed on April 9, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> C. Harress, "Amid Russia-Turkey Ceasefire Violations In Syria, NATO Concerned About Wider Conflict With Moscow," *International Business Times*, 29.02.2016. Available at <http://www.ibtimes.com/amid-russia-turkey-ceasefire-violations-syria-nato-concerned-about-wider-conflict-2327186> Accessed on April 9, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> *Mülteci Sayısı 4,5 Milyona Doğru*, Aljazeera Turk, 15.12.2015, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/multeci-sayisi-45-milyona-dogru> Accessed on April 9, 2016.

within the region, but also internationally. While in the beginning of the 2000s Turkey had zero problems with its neighbors, after the Arab uprisings this was no longer the case.

As some argue<sup>14</sup>, the hybrid war in the region is World War III happening just at Turkey's doorstep. It directly affects not only Turkey's foreign policy regarding the neighbors, but also Turkey's domestic security. The conflict, which is expected to continue for decades in the region, urges the states to redefine their foreign policies. From this angle, the Turkish-Russian confrontation has been perceived as instrumental for Russia to increase its regional influence during the peace talks, as well as the restructuring which will take place in the aftermath of the conflict.

#### TURKEY'S NEED TO REDEFINE ITS POSITION IN THE REGION

As was the case in the aftermath of World War II and at the end of the Cold War, Turkey is feeling the need to re-orient its policies. In the beginning of this century Turkey had the ambition of taking the lead in Middle East politics. However, today its foreign policy choices show an inclination to align with the Western alliances. The migrant crisis that EU member states are facing as a result of the Syrian war, created an opportunity to open the communication channels with the EU. The EU and Turkey reached an agreement during the summit on November 29, 2015, just 5 days after Turkey shot down the Russian warplane. This summit has been regarded as an opportunity for the revitalization of Turkey-EU relations. However, there were some sceptical perspectives at this summit as well. Due to the increasing security concerns of the EU as a whole, it was argued that it could lead to a strategic partnership between Turkey and the EU, rather than a full membership.<sup>15</sup> In March 2016, the EU and Turkey agreed on a plan which includes a one-for-one principle, meaning that all new irregular migrants, crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands, will be returned to Turkey. For every Syrian returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be

---

<sup>14</sup> A. K. Han, "Üç Yüzyıllık Bu "Müesses Nizam" Değişiyor," Near East University, <https://neu.edu.tr/doc-dr-ahmet-han-yakin-dogu-universitesi-yakin-dogu-enstitusu-guvenlik-akademisinde-vurguladi/?lang=tr> Accessed on April 16, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Ö. Şenyuva, Ç. Üstün, (2015), *A New Episode in EU-Turkish Relations: Why so Much Bitterness?* GMF On Turkey, available at [www.gmfus.org/file/7180/download](http://www.gmfus.org/file/7180/download) Accessed on April 9, 2016.

resettled from Turkey to the EU.<sup>16</sup> As part of the plan, there will be financial support (up to 6 billion EUR) to Turkey, as well as the acceleration of the implementation of Turkey's roadmap for visa liberalization. However, only the budgetary chapter (chapter 33), was accepted to be negotiated. Thus, this plan, although it opens up communication channels between the EU and Turkey, does not promise an acceleration of the prospect of full membership.

The political developments after the start of the Arab uprisings have already emphasized the importance of a paradigm shift in Turkish foreign policy. The Turkish ambitions to be the leading actor in the region could not create a safe and stable political environment, neither externally nor internally. On all fronts, the need for a reconsideration of Turkey's foreign policy options is visible. Since the shooting down of the Russian warplane, one can see the ghosts of the past reemerging, not only in the relations between Turkey and Russia, but in the region as a whole. Instability in the region, increasing security threats from the southern neighbors, defrosting of conflicts in the east between Armenia and Azerbaijan, growing rivalries in the Black Sea and in the Mediterranean, push Turkey to redefine its role. In this redefinition, readdressing the importance of Western alliances and smoothing relations with Israel are also on the table.

---

<sup>16</sup> European Commission, *EU and Turkey agree European response to refugee crisis*. Available at [http://ec.europa.eu/news/2016/03/20160319\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/news/2016/03/20160319_en.htm) Accessed on April 9, 2016.

---

## **The Cicero Foundation**

**Independent Pro-EU and Pro-Atlantic think tank**

**Founded in 1992**

Hondertmarck 45D

6211 MB MAASTRICHT

The Netherlands

Tel. +31 43 32 60 828

Tel. +33 1 41 29 09 30

Fax: +33 1 41 29 09 31

Email: [info@cicerofoundation.org](mailto:info@cicerofoundation.org)

Website: [www.cicerofoundation.org](http://www.cicerofoundation.org)

Registration No. Chamber of Commerce Maastricht 41078444