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- Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has developed multi-level cooperation with Russia, characterized by increasing economic ties.
- In its ideological confrontation with the West, and revisionist foreign policy stance in the Middle East, the Turkish government has been careful not to antagonize Russia in any way.
- In the long run, the dominant neo-imperialist visions in both countries are likely to re-establish the traditional Russo-Turkish rivalry, but for now Russia is an important strategic ally for Turkey.
- At a deeper level, Turkey's strategic cooperation with Russia is symptomatic of the country's own authoritarian, neo-imperialist project that has made the idea of Turkey fulfilling the EU Copenhagen political criteria completely nonsensical.
- In this situation, the EU should suspend Turkey's candidacy until there is a government in power willing to participate in a political union based on shared values.

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Introduction

On 1 December 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Ankara together with a delegation of ten ministers. The meetings focused on bilateral economic relations and regional issues. The most important individual topic was President Putin's sudden decision to abandon the South Stream gas pipeline and replace it with an alternative link to Turkey. The question of whether or not Russo-Turkish relations were now acquiring the form of a strong strategic alliance was widely raised.

Mutual economic interests in the post-Cold War era have brought Turkey and Russia into multi-level cooperation with each other. Whether one reads Russian, Turkish, or Western analysts, all seem to agree that the major structural changes brought about by the end of the Cold War have opened up new possibilities for Turkey and Russia to strengthen their bilateral relations. At an institutional level, this new cooperation has taken the form of the High-Level Cooperation Council (established in 2010) and the Joint Economic Commission. Overall, the increasing bilateral cooperation has been referred to as the *Russo-Turkish Rapprochement* of the 2000s.

In the current international context, Turkey's policy towards Russia is most clearly observable in the Ukraine crisis. Unlike its traditional allies, the EU and the USA, Turkey has not implemented any sanctions against Russia. Further, even though Turkey voted against the Crimea cessation to Russia in the UN General Assembly Resolution, Turkey has nevertheless resolutely avoided heavily criticizing the Russian stance on Crimea – very little has been voiced, for example, about the fate of the Crimean Tatars, a Turkic-language group that has strong historical and cultural relations with Turkey. Thus, even though Turkey underscores the principle of international law in the case of Ukraine, in reality it has undermined the EU's attempt to form a united front against Russian expansionism.

In order to explain Turkey's behaviour in this regard, this briefing paper looks at how the actors loyal to the AKP government in Turkey have recently framed the Turkey-Russia relationship. How is the increased cooperation with Russia understood in terms of Turkey's new, proactive foreign policy doctrine? Is the relationship solely about mutual economic benefits? How is the cooperation

explained in the context where there are several foreign policy issues in which Turkey and Russia have very opposite positions? How do the Turkish actors understand the ultimate nature and future prospects of this relationship? Finally, based on these views, how should one best describe the new Turkey-Russia rapprochement and its impact on Turkey's relations with the Western world in general and the EU in particular?

Russo-Turkish relations:

From confrontation to cooperation

Historically, Turkey-Russia relations were marred by regional competition and recurrent military conflicts during the Ottoman Turkish and Tsarist Russian empires. After both of these *ancien régime* empires collapsed during the First World War, a period of cooperation ensued during the years 1920–1938. The Kemalist Turkish nationalist forces, fighting both the Western imperialist powers as well as the domestic supporters of the Ottoman Caliphate, received crucial material support from the Russian Bolsheviks during the critical years of the Turkish independence struggle (1919–1922). However, during this cooperation, the Turkish leadership took decisive measures against all domestic actors who tried to propagate communist ideas within Turkey.

The next major phase between the countries took place during the Cold War years as NATO member Turkey and Soviet Russia confronted each other as major regional adversaries in the period stretching from the 1950s to the 1980s. Subsequently, a qualitatively completely new era of Russo-Turkish cooperation was made possible by the crucial diminution of the Russian threat for Turkey in the early 1990s.

The end of the Cold War produced in Turkey a certain feeling of pan-Turkish euphoria at the beginning of the 1990s, when the Turkic Republics of Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan) acquired their formal independence. Thus, during this period, Russia and Turkey confronted each other as competitors in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russian leaders were also seemingly irritated by Turkey's eagerness to engage with the Turkic minority groups living in Russia. Soon enough, however, Turkish leaders came to realize that Russia was not allowing the former Soviet Republics to be withdrawn from its own sphere of



Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at a press conference during Putin's visit to Turkey in December 2014. Photo: Presidential Press and Information Office, Kremlin.

influence, thus disappointing Turkey's more grandiose designs about bringing these allegedly "kin nations" under Turkey's political guidance.

In practice, this meant that Turkey adjusted its pan-Turkish policies in Central Asia to Moscow's Near Abroad Doctrine, issued in 1993.¹ The Near Abroad Doctrine has been defined as a "Russian version of the Monroe Doctrine", whereby Russia states that its interests in the former Soviet Republics must be respected by other actors, even though it was never regarded as an official doctrine.

The most recent period, during which Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the unquestioned central authoritarian figures in their respective countries, has witnessed a significant increase in bilateral trade. The last few years have also witnessed cooperation in major energy projects as well as visa liberalization, evoking discussions in both countries about new strategic cooperation. It is thus possible to speak about inaugurating new strategic cooperation from 2010 onwards, the year of establishing the High-Level Cooperation Council.

There are several reasons why Russo-Turkish rapprochement has become such a prevalent phenomenon in Eurasian regional politics during the new millennium. These include: the status of Turkey and Russia as emerging powers, both economically and politically; the relative declining dominance of the United States in the Greater Middle East and Central

Asia; and the re-emergence of a strong nationalist-conservative constituency in both Russia and Turkey that is built by imagining authentic Russian-Orthodox and Turkish-Islamic civilizations against the West. Thus, in this new structural context Russia and Turkey confront each other not only as regional competitors but also as strategic allies.

Mutual economic interests and regional competition

Present Russo-Turkish ties are often seen as being defined by pure pragmatism. On the other hand, according to Süleyman Şensoy, the director of the Turkish think tank TASAM, there is a strong personal connection between Putin and Erdoğan, and this is now also reflected in the bilateral relationship. In Şensoy's view, regarding the balance between East and West, Turkey has increasing strategic importance for Russia. Şensoy asserts that the Russo-Turkish relationship will be defined by an increasingly important "strategic dimension", but he does not believe that Turkey would participate in a wider Eurasian political integration. Şensoy concludes his observations with an argument that seems to be widely shared by Turkish political analysts: the increasing competition between the East and the West, and the concomitant repercussions of this competition in the Middle East, Ukraine, and the Caucasus, will in the historical perspective intensify and emphasize the importance of the Russo-Turkish bilateral relationship.²

1 Şener Aktürk (2006), "Turkish-Russian Relations after the Cold War (1992-2002)", *Turkish Studies* 7 (3): 337-364.

2 http://tr.sputniknews.com/turkish.ruvr.ru/2014_08_14/Turk-usmani-rus-Turk-ilishkileri/

In recent years, Turkey has made considerable efforts to construct a new Silk Road trade and energy corridor, encompassing Central Asia and the Caucasus, and thus connecting China and the Mediterranean region. This has taken the form of Turkish companies investing in construction, financial services, and information technology in the region. However, within its new multi-dimensional foreign policy doctrine, Turkish analysts have been cautious about indicating any kind of economic or political union with Russia and the Central Asian republics. The cooperation with Russia is in this sense firmly based on furthering national economic interests, rather than “choosing the side”. In the words of one Turkish commentator, “this is about diversifying Turkish foreign policy options, not about breaking with the West and turning to the East”.³

But the commercial as well as other ties between Turkey and Russia have become voluminous indeed. As President Erdoğan’s chief adviser İbrahim Kalın recently stated, Turkish-Russian economic relations continue to grow strong. The current trade volume is around \$30 billion. Turkey buys 60 per cent of its gas from Russia, while in exchange it sells industrial and agricultural products. Russia is building Turkey’s first nuclear power station in Akkuyu, expected to start operations in 2023. Around 4.5 million Russian tourists visit Turkey every year and Turkish construction companies are among the top bidders in Russia. In Kalın’s words, the new rapprochement with Russia is nevertheless no different from the Western countries’ economic ties with Russia:

*As a NATO member and a candidate country for the EU, Turkey treads a fine line in its relationship with Russia. No doubt, Turkey’s traditional alliances and the current differences over Syria and Ukraine limit the extent of strategic partnership. But in essence, this is not very different from how Germany and France manage their relationship with Russia.*⁴

3 “Türkiye’nin Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği’ne üye olma konusu tartışılıyor: Türkiye artık hem doğusuna hem batısına bakıyor,” *AB Haber*, 8.6.2014. Available at: <http://www.abhaber.com/turkiyenin-avasya-ekonomik-birligine-uye-olma-konusu-tartisilyorturkiye-artik-hem-dogusuna-hem-batisina-bakiyor/>.

4 İbrahim Kalın, “Turkey and Russia: Promises and limits of a partnership,” *Yeni Sabah*, December 3, 2014.

Based on this, it can be stated that according to the official government view, Turkey’s new rapprochement with Russia is thus mainly based on advancing national economic and commercial interests within the new multi-vector foreign policy approach. In reality, there is of course a major difference between Germany’s and France’s policy towards Russia, and that of Turkey, because Turkey has not implemented any sanctions against Russia.

In any case, according to the official government position, cooperation with Russia as well as with other non-Western actors is not about making ideological commitments but rather about cooperating with all potential powers. In terms of Russia, the relationship is characterized just as much by economic cooperation as it is by regional competition regarding the markets, investment opportunities, and access to gas and oil reserves in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

However, one could argue that this is only one part of the story. As in Russia, Turkey’s incumbent AKP regime has during its 12-year rule managed to establish a strong nationalist-conservative constituency. The articulation of this nationalist-Islamic constituency is largely built on imagining an authentic Turkish-Islamic civilization, and this project has had radical implications for Turkish foreign policy. Analyzing this aspect is thus crucial for providing a fuller analysis of Turkey’s current Russian policy as well.

Turkey’s Russian policy and the West: Combining pragmatism with revisionism

According to İbrahim Karagül, a well-known columnist in the influential pro-government daily *Yeni Şafak*, Turkey’s new position in the Middle East and wider neighbouring region has increasingly come to challenge the region’s traditional powers. In his article published on the same day that Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Ankara with an array of ministers in order to boost Russo-Turkish cooperation, Karagül stated that this meeting was definitely not only about the economy and energy. He stated that it was necessary to comprehend more thoroughly the areas of cooperation and competition between these two countries. In Karagül’s view, the most important feature connecting Turkey and Russia was the way these powers had now returned

to their “traditional geopolitical calculations”.⁵ It is obvious that this assertion must be seen in the context of both countries’ more assertive neo-imperialist state projects, defined in the Russian case as *Russkiy mir* (Russian world) and in Turkey’s case as *yeni Türkiye* (New Turkey).

In Turkey, the concept of *yeni Türkiye* is constantly used by the AKP leadership. In domestic politics, it is closely related to a dominant narrative advocated by the AKP. According to this narrative, the Westernization of Turkey has been a grave historical mistake, producing a disgraceful situation whereby the Turkish Muslim nation has been repressed by the Kemalist Westernizers throughout the republican decades. From this domestic narrative, there is a clear link to Turkey’s new foreign policy, within which Turkey is seen as predestined to become, again, the leading power in the Islamic Middle East.

Indeed, during recent years, Turkey has increasingly taken a position that used to be the sole domain of Middle Eastern Islamist movements, and siding with the Muslim Brotherhood forces in several countries (Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria) has become a highly visible aspect of Turkish new foreign policy behaviour. As recently observed by Halil Karaveli and Svante E. Cornell, when read against the highly ideological, pan-Islamist doctrines developed by current Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in his academic writings during the last twenty years, there is no doubt this is a call to re-establish Turkish hegemony in the Middle East:

*Davutoğlu stated as much last year, when he said “it is now high time to close a hundred year old parenthesis”. Davutoğlu’s writings leave no doubt that his is an unabashedly imperial vision, one in which Turkey ascends to its proper place as one of the greater powers of the world.*⁶

There is thus no doubt that both terms, *Russkiy mir* and *yeni Türkiye*, imply a neo-imperialist pursuit of

power. Thus, even though both partners currently underscore the benefits of bilateral cooperation, especially in terms of the economy and energy, in the long run the currently highly influential expansionist foreign policy doctrines in both countries will cause the traditional Russo-Turkish adversary to re-emerge. It is indeed obvious, for example, that the Russian position regarding the Syrian regime is very hard for Turkey to digest. As the following statement reveals, Russia is the most significant international actor obstructing Turkey from implementing its grandiose foreign policy vision in the Middle East:

*Russia has in fact proved to be the main obstacle for Erdogan’s Syria policy, which from the start has been based on getting rid of Bashar al-Assad. Moscow has firmly opposed Turkey in this regard and has used its veto in the UN Security Council to block all resolutions against Assad. Meanwhile, it has continued to arm the Syrian regime against the Free Syrian Army, which is supported by Ankara, and other opposition groups.*⁷

This, however, has not prevented Turkey and Russia from continuing and even strengthening their pragmatic cooperation. Turkey resolutely avoids heavily criticizing the Russian stance on Crimea or Syria – it is, for example, noteworthy how little Turkey has voiced about the fate of the Crimean Tatars when compared to Erdoğan’s feverish daily calls to save the Palestinians from Israel’s “state terrorism”.

In this context, a very plausible explanation for Turkey’s pragmatic stance coherently followed in its relationship with Russia is that this Russo-Turkish rapprochement is being utilized as a necessary balancing for a much more ideological and even revisionist foreign policy doctrine being applied regarding the Middle East and the West. There is no doubt that İbrahim Karagül’s arguments about Turkey and Russia returning to their “traditional geopolitical calculations” reflects a more widely held view among the Turkish power elite. According to these views, the well-established relationship with Russia is a necessary balancing regarding Turkey’s strained relationship with the West. According to Russia experts, similar reasons explain Russia’s

5 İbrahim Karagül, “Erdoğan ve Putin kimleri korkuttu!”, *Yeni Şafak*, December 1, 2014.

6 Halil Karaveli and Svante Cornell, “Davutoğlu and the “New Turkey”: The Closing of a ‘Hundred Year Old Parenthesis’”, Bipartisan Policy Center, August 26, 2014; for Davutoğlu’s pan-Islamist doctrines, see “Davutoğlu, Neo-Osmanlıcı değil Pan-İslamist”, *Taraf*, August 23, 2014.

7 Semih İdiz, “Despite differences, Turkey, Russia forge on”, *Al Monitor*, November 21, 2014.

increasing interest in finding new allies, such as Turkey.

The Turkish leadership has made it abundantly clear that it perceives the former Ottoman territories in the Middle East as its legitimate sphere of influence, from where, to use President Erdoğan's own expression, "modern day Lawrences" should be kept out. Erdoğan was referring here to T. E. Lawrence, a British adventurer and officer who incited the Arabs to rise against Ottoman rule during the First World War.⁸

The AKP leadership perceives the Sykes-Picot agreement of the First World War as the ultimate reason for all that is bad and wrong in the Islamic Middle East. Officially known as the Asia Minor Agreement, this was a secret agreement between the governments of the United Kingdom and France defining their proposed spheres of influence and control in the Middle East should the Triple Entente succeed in defeating the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Turkey has thus become a revisionist state, eager to annihilate the Western-dominated status quo in the region. Similar to Russia, the project of building a strong domestic power base by articulating a nationalist-conservative constituency requires an emotionally powerful counter-image, namely degenerated imperialist Western powers that threaten Turkish authentic values. In Turkey, the domestic representatives of this "despicable West" are of course the Kemalist secularists, while in the Arab countries the same comprador role is allegedly played by corrupt and illegitimate Arab regimes backing the Sykes-Picot status quo.

Conclusions and policy recommendations for the EU

From the Turkish perspective, the current Russo-Turkish rapprochement is mainly based on pragmatic economic calculations and furthering Turkey's national interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Further, the actors loyal to the AKP government realize that in the long run Russia is just as much

a competitor as it is an ally, and in this sense the historical pattern of Turkey and Russia confronting each other as adversaries is an alternative that cannot be ignored. The fact that Russia has been one of the most significant powers obstructing Turkey from implementing its own strategy in Syria has obviously been a major disappointment for Turkey. However, it is highly significant that this has in no way changed the widely held perception about Russia as Turkey's important strategic ally.

A crucial aspect of this rapprochement with Russia is ignored unless it is analyzed together with Turkey's new pan-Islamist foreign policy in the Middle East, including this doctrine's effects on Turkey's relations with the Western world. As Turkey increasingly criticizes the Western world and the EU for backing the status quo in the Middle East, Turkey's cooperation with Russia is a sorely needed pragmatic approach to balance the ideological, missionary foreign policy stance implemented in the Middle East. Further, Russia is a practical ally in that both the Turkish and Russian regimes are increasingly utilizing and reproducing a discourse whereby the West threatens their allegedly authentic civilization. In Turkey, the production of the nationalist-conservative constituency is based on the idea of an authentic Turkish-Islamic civilization distinct from the secularized, degenerated Western world. In this sense, the Russo-Turkish rapprochement witnessed during the last ten years has now come to include characteristics of a strategic alliance, where both partners are increasingly making use of each other's antipathy towards the West.

From the EU's perspective, the time has come for a serious re-definition of the EU-Turkey relationship. Rather than standing – as an official EU candidate country – in the same vanguard as the EU in implementing sanctions against Russia, Turkey is playing its own power games with no desire to adjust its policies to be in line with the EU. But even more importantly, not only in this particular issue but in a whole array of important current topics, especially regarding the turmoil in the Middle East, it is increasingly difficult to pinpoint those issues in which Turkey and the EU can find a common stance.

All this trouble stems, ultimately, from the ideological approach of the current Turkish government. Within that ideology, the Western world is seen as something that needs to be rejected. Further, with

8 See, for example, Erdoğan's recent speech in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, "Bu hakkı biz kendimiz alacağız", *Yeni Şafak*, January 21, 2015. Available at: <http://www.yenisafak.com.tr/gundem/bu-hakki-biz-kendimiz-alacagiz-2067877>.

the authoritarian regime established during recent years, within which the rule of law and fundamental rights have been completely sacrificed, talking about Turkey fulfilling the EU Copenhagen political criteria has become completely nonsensical. The ease with which Turkey now cooperates with the authoritarian Russian regime is symptomatic of its own authoritarian, neo-imperialist project. Actors engaging in a strategic alliance need to have a common goal. In the case of Russia and Turkey, that common goal is to increase one's own power at the expense of the Western countries and organizations, including the EU.

In this situation, if there is any consistency in the EU's proclaimed normative approach, the Union should immediately suspend Turkey's candidacy until there is a government in power willing to participate in a political union based on shared values. The argument that this would end the EU's ability to influence Turkey's political development is pointless – at the moment there is no influence to speak of that could be lost.

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