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RUSSIA'S FRIENDS IN TURKEY



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The purpose of this article is to analyze the political forces in Turkey that are interested in developing and maintaining friendly relations with Moscow.

Doubts about Turkey's place in the NATO alliance date back to the collapse of the Soviet Union. When the Turkish army needed weapons to defend itself against the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) attacks, which intensified in the mid-1990s, Turkey's allies were reluctant to supply weapons to the Turkish army. This caused a negative reaction toward NATO among the Turkish security bureaucracy. The US Congress allegedly stated that, in the fight against the PPK, Turkey violated human rights using the US-supplied weapons. Due to that, the sale of the Cobra attack helicopters to Turkey was stopped until 1995. In addition, one more problem arose over the delivery of three frigates of the Perry class. The EU countries were against the use of armored personal carriers (that were delivered through the OSCE's system of arms transfers known as 'cascading') in southeastern Turkey. These decisions by the US and EU prompted Ankara to look for alternatives in foreign policy and the field of defense. As a result, Turkey began to intensify cooperation with the Russian Federation and became the first NATO member to procure weapons, ammunition, and vehicles from Russia for internal security operations.

Despite the aforementioned trend, the Welfare Party (WP), which was in power from 1996 to 1997, sought to create a regional alliance based on Islamic ideology. To achieve this goal, the D-8 organization was formed and consisted entirely of the Islamic countries (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey). However, the Turkish army and part of the Turkey's political elite believed that the D-8 organization would damage secularism, a fundamental principle of the philosophy of the Turkish Republic. Due to that, the WP government was overthrown under military pressure. Particularly, the intervention of the Turkish army came through the National Security Council (NSC), the highest body empowered to make decisions on security and

geopolitics. As a result of these events, the subsequently formed 57th government determined a foreign policy course focused on developing friendly relations with regional powers. As part of this policy, Turkey began to deepen its ties (which had been tense for years) with Syria, Iran, and Russia.. Moreover, in the early 2000s, Turkey reached an indirect agreement on defense technologies with China. Thus, Ankara received rocket technologies from Beijing, thereby launching the production of short-range air defense systems, such as Cirit and Zipkin. Today, these short-range air defense systems have evolved into medium and long-range missile systems such as Atmaca, Hisar, and Umtash¹.

Furthermore, at the Turkish Military Academy's meeting in 2002, the Turkish military elite publicly shared their disagreements with the West. Particularly, Tuncer Kılinc, the Secretary General of the NSC (one of the highest-ranking army commanders), stated that Turkey would not be admitted to the EU as a full member. Instead, Ankara should develop relations with Russia and Iran. This statement indicated the strengthening of the Turkish army's wing that wished to develop friendly relations with Moscow. They also had supporters in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Intelligence Organization (hereinafter we refer to this group as the Eurasians). Further, it is important to emphasize that during that time, Erdogan, who came to power in 2002, submitted a proposal to the Turkish Parliament the purpose of which was to let the American army use Turkish territory during the war in Iraq. However, the proposal was rejected due to the Eurasian wing's military pressure on the MPs. This caused discontent in the US who directly took part in the military operation in Iraq.

As the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was coming to power in 2002, political polarization in Turkey deepened. On the one hand, there was the AKP which came from the WP movement and had the US support from the outside. On the other hand, there were the Eurasian bureaucrats who were suspicious of the EU and

1 Ozer Chetinkaya, 'ABD ve Rusya Parantezinde Türk Füze Sistemlerinin Evrimi', M5 Savunma, 17 July 2019. Web site: <https://m5dergi.com/son-sayi/makaleler/abd-ve-rusya-parantezinde-turk-fuze-sistemlerinin-evrimi/>

the US. The latter believed that Washington was planning to remove them from the levers of government. The conflict between the AKP and Eurasian forces grew over the years and peaked in 2007. Then, Fethullah Gülen's supporters, who were in some sort of coalition with Erdogan and also occupied strong positions in the police and the judiciary, stepped up in the process of removing the Eurasians from the levers of government. Erdogan also supported this initiative, based on the pretext that the Eurasianists were preparing a coup d'état. Along with hundreds of full-time and retired officers, National Intelligence Organization employees, diplomats, judges, politicians, scientists, and journalists were arrested. The Eurasianists claimed that these were politically motivated deeds to eliminate the Eurasian backbone of the army. They also claimed that Fethullah Gülen, who valued the support of the US, was behind all this.

However, in 2011, disagreements between Fethullah Gülen and Erdogan began to be observed. Gulenists had political and commercial connections through business councils (such as TUSCON) in hundreds of countries. Experts point out that businessmen, who were in close contact with Erdogan, did not manage to develop as deep-rooted relations with these countries as the Gulen movement did. What they could not share inside Turkey was the influence over positions in state bodies and share of the treasury. The Gulenists had great financial power in Turkey with the help of their schools, private teaching institutions, and hospitals. Erdogan's close (including family) circle also operated in such sectors. Moreover, the Gulen movement significantly strengthened its positions in the Turkish Armed Forces after the Eurasians began to be purged from there. Thus, this time, Erdogan started to perceive the Fethullah Gulen supporters as a threat. In 2014, as part of his search for a new ally against the Gulenists, he began releasing previously imprisoned Eurasians. Some of them even returned to key positions in the security agencies. In this regard, Gulen's supporters, who understood that in 2016 they could be completely purged from the state apparatus, attempted a military coup, which ultimately turned out to be unsuccessful. Here, it is also important to emphasize that the Turkish government believed that this coup attempt was carried out with the support of NATO and the US. After the coup failed, the influence of the Eurasian bureaucracy began to increase significantly in the Turkish Armed Forces, National Intelligence Organization, and Foreign Ministry. This

influence continues to this day. Eurasian's position has an impact on Turkey's decision-making process in the field of foreign policy. This is an important factor influencing the thaw in the Russian-Turkish relations.

It should be noted that today Erdogan uses Russia and the Eurasian military-political elite as leverage against the US-NATO bloc. With this maneuver, he is trying to overcome the risk of losing his power (fueled by a depreciating Turkish lira) a bankrupt economy, and a huge number of refugees in Turkey. The Eurasian wing of the bureaucrats and Moscow also understand that Erdogan's relative neutrality is beneficial to them, and, therefore, support him in every possible way. At the same time, the preservation of power is a decisive factor for the President of Turkey.. If he can find a source outside of Moscow or a more pragmatic offer comes to him, he will not hesitate to eliminate the pro-Russian and Eurasian wing.

Thus, at the present stage, a significant number of the employees of the Turkish Armed Forces, National Intelligence Organization, and Foreign Ministry are in favor of a balanced foreign policy. The President of Turkey also supports this position. It means that the Russian track of Turkish foreign policy should be given the same consideration as the American one. The need for that is justified by several disagreements in the US-Turkey relationship. Especially, considering the point of view of the aforementioned military and intelligence employees, one of the most pressing issues between the US and Turkey is Washington's support for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party. In Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party is designated as a terrorist organization. The supply of weapons to the PYD is perceived as a manifestation of a US policy aimed at creating a Kurdish state in the region to contain and subordinate Turkey. It leads to Turkey's perception that Washington attempts to preclude Ankara from increasing its military-political and economic influence and tries to maintain bilateral relations at the level of "director - subordinate". In short, the Eurasians oppose Turkey's complete dependence on the US, which was also observed during the Cold War. Such a format of cooperation did not improve the economic well-being of Turkey and did not solve its problems in terms of internal stability and security. From the Eurasians' point of view, Turkey deserves a more economic and military-political weight in the system of international relations.

The negative attitude of the US toward the development of the domestic military-industrial complex by Turkey is also a prominent motive in this narrative. The US position can be attributed to the fact that Ankara's development of its domestic military-industrial complex may deprive Washington of its ability to control how Turkey would use the weapons. Due to that, the Turkish Armed Forces gained an opportunity to carry out any military operation secretly from Washington and its NATO allies, thereby reducing Washington and NATO allies' influences on Ankara. In light of that, Lockheed Martin, the executive director of the F-35 project, does not provide Ankara with the source codes and presents a problem for Turkey. This means that all control over the F-35 weapon systems remains with the US. Also, in practice, it is not possible to integrate any weapons, not wanted by the US, into the the F-35 weapon system. In addition, any further system upgrades can be carried out only with the approval and guidance of the US. Finally, combat aircraft cannot hit a target that the Pentagon does not approve².

Within the framework of the listed problems with the US, the aforementioned bureaucrats believe that rapprochement with Moscow is a necessary mechanism to fend off Washington's pressure on Turkey. Particularly, Washington puts pressure on Turkey's foreign policy to change its position on the following issues:

1. Move away from the mediating position regarding the war in Ukraine, openly side with Kyiv, impose sanctions against Russia, as well as intensify cooperation with the US in support of the Crimean Tatars against the Russian Federation.
2. Block the Astana Platform to exert military-political pressure on the Russian Federation and Iran in Syria.
3. Intensify cooperation with the US in support of the Uighurs against Beijing, as well as Iranian Azerbaijanis against Tehran.
4. Cooperate with the US in Central Asia and the Caucasus against Russia.
5. Resume full intelligence sharing with NATO allies,

It goes without saying that Eurasians' position on Turkish foreign policy plays into the hands of Moscow. Particularly, it allows Russia to actively promote its military-political and economic interests in Turkey.

Taking advantage of the tension in relations between Ankara and Washington, Russia exported the S-400 systems to Turkey. By exporting military technology to Turkey, Russia managed to weaken Turkey's solidarity within the ranks of NATO to some extent.

Moreover, taking advantage of Turkey's balanced foreign policy, Moscow has activated the Astana Platform together with Ankara and Tehran to resolve the conflict in Syria. Astana Platform certainly harms the image of the US as a leading state in resolving conflicts and maintaining stability and security in the international system. Astana talks provide an opportunity for Russia to agree with Turkey on a sphere of influence in Syria with no consideration of the US interests. There is a possibility that this practice is also transferred to the conflicts in Karabakh and Libya.

Furthermore, Russia also launched the Turkish Stream through Turkey and began construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant in Mersin province. Turkey's cooperation with the Russian Federation in the energy sector does not align with Washington's view on this issue that is interested in weakening Russia's position in the energy market. Opposite to the case of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, Gazprom has not encountered any major obstacles while constructing TurkStream. This pipeline strengthens Russia's influence in the European energy market, as well as cements Turkey's status as a lead recipient of Russian gas. Overall, this provides massive support for Russia, whose budget largely depends on the export of energy resources.

Playing with the contradictions between Ankara and Washington, Moscow is also trying to inflame them further in order to weaken the influence of the US in the world and separate the US from their allies and partners. To achieve that, Russia uses information operations as part of its efforts to influence public opinion around the world. Especially, Russia emphasizes that the US is an unreliable ally that is trying to weaken and divide Turkey.

Furthermore, Turkish businessmen constitute another force interested in developing friendly relations with the Russian Federation. The Turkish businessmen profit from cooperation with Moscow through their tourism businesses in Turkey (which are dependent on the flow

2 Ozer Chetinkaya, 'F-35teki Şüpheler ve Duvara Asılı Rus Silahları', M5 Savunma, 15 October 2019.
Web site: <https://m5dergi.com/son-sayyi/makaleler/f-35teki-supheler-ve-duvara-asili-rus-silahlari/>

of tourists from the Russian Federation), the export of agriculture to Russia, the import of cheap gas from Russia, among others. Consequently, Russia (following China) became the second country from which Turkey imported the most in 2021.. Turkey's imports from Russia reached approximately \$26 billion in 2021. In comparison, Turkey's imports were \$17.8 billion in 2020. Further, Turkey's exports, which were 4.5 billion dollars in 2020, increased to 5.1 billion dollars in 2021.

In light of the above, it would also be important to mention that Turkey refused to impose sanctions against Russia for the war unleashed by Moscow against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. This position can be partly explained by the significant influence of the above-mentioned business elites on the foreign policy of Turkey. Some of the elite Turkish businessmen include Ethem Sanjak, Javit Chaglar, and Genjehan Tunay.

For instance, Ethem Sanjak was a member of the Justice and Development Party. He also maintains close ties with the Patriotic Party of Dogu Perincek. Sanjak has business relations with Russia in the fields of agriculture and pharmaceuticals. He justifies Turkey's reluctance to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation based on the fact that the failed military coup against Erdogan in 2016 was organized by the NATO bloc. From Sanjak's point of view, the US is still planning to remove Erdogan from power. Thus, Turkey does not trust NATO and counters it with rapprochement with Russia. Moreover, Sanjak notes that Ankara has been asking its allies to build a nuclear power plant for years but was refused. Russia, on the other hand, gave Turkey this opportunity.

Furthermore, Javit Chaglar, another Turkish businessman, invests in Dagestan. He has friendly relations with the top leadership of Moscow, as well as Ramazan Abdulatipov, the former president of Dagestan. After the jet downing crisis in November 2015, Çhaglar received the Russian Order of Friendship for his contribution to the process involving the normalization of relations between Turkey and Russia. He was an important figure behind the Turkey-Russia normalization process and accompanied Presidential Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın to deliver a letter of condolences written by President Erdogan to Putin. In addition to certain economic benefits in the Russian Federation, he also refers to other aspects to justify the need for friendly relations with Moscow. These aspects involve the US support for the PYD, the EU ongoing

reluctance to accept Turkey as its member, and the US reluctance to extradite Fethullah Gülen to Turkey.

Genjehan Tunay, another Turkish businessman, is the representative of Turkey in the State Council of the Republic of Bashkortostan of the Russian Federation for Foreign Economic Relations. He has close contacts with representatives of the state apparatus of the Russian Federation. Genjehan is also a sponsor of the Crimean Development Fund, headed by Unver Sel. Sel, a citizen of Turkey, is a Crimean Tatar, who openly takes a pro-Russian position. He is one of the most influential lobbyists in promoting Turkey's trade and economic interests in the Russian Federation. There are several activities that capture how Sel lobbies for Russia's interests. First, Sel systematically visits the Crimean Peninsula, bypassing the jurisdiction of Ukraine, and holds meetings there with local pro-Russian political elites and representatives of the Crimean Tatar diaspora. He carries out his activities through the following organizations: the Crimean Development Fund, the Federation of Culture of the Crimean Tatars, and the International Association of Friends of Crimea. Despite that, it is critical to mention that Turkey does not officially recognize the annexation of Crimea. At the official level, Ankara maintains contacts with the Crimean Tatars through the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People stationed in Kyiv. Relations with the Mejlis are developed directly by official representatives of Turkey, as well as by the Crimean Turks Culture and Solidarity Association, based in Ankara. This Association, however, does not have direct access to the Crimean Peninsula, and the organization itself is banned in the Russian Federation. Second, Sel maintains very close contacts with the Russian Embassy in Ankara and Alexander Sotnichenko, the head of the Rosstrudnichestvo office in Ankara,. Together with them, he organizes cultural and educational events in Turkey. Representatives of the Crimean Tatars living in Crimea, which is occupied by Russia, participate in such events. Sel openly supports the Kremlin in terms of the legalization of the annexation of Crimea on the international arena. His open pro-Russian position makes him a friend of Moscow, which opens up a window of opportunities for him to contact high-ranking officials in the Kremlin in order to lobby for Turkish interests in the Russian Federation. Particularly, these interests involve the development and deepening of trade and political relations, as well as the activation of cooperation in the area of security. Representatives of Russia also turn to Sel

to promote their interests in Turkey. At the same time, it should be emphasized that Sel's activity is not limited to Russia only. It also covers part of the post-Soviet space, specifically Belarus and Kazakhstan. Moreover, by maintaining friendly relations with Moscow, Sel is also trying to protect the interests of Turkish businesses on the territories of Ukraine occupied (or which may still be occupied) by Russia.

At the same time, Sel also performs a few political functions that go beyond pure trade lobbying:

1. Turkey does not completely trust the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People. Thus, Sel is an alternative source of information about the situation in Crimea and throughout the post-Soviet space.
2. Sel acts as a bridge between the Russian Federation and Turkey even during the most difficult times of their bilateral relations.
3. Sel actively promotes the idea of a multipolar world in Turkey through the Association of International Friends of Crimea. Under the roof of this Association, he works to consolidate all pro-Russian forces in the West, including the right-wing parties in the EU.

Now let us move on to the most pro-Russian political force in Turkey - left-wing nationalism represented by the Patriotic Party (PP). Despite their marginal status in society and an insignificant electorate (i.e., the Party is not represented in the Turkish Parliament), the PP has supporters in the Turkish Armed Forces. Some experts note that these supporters were behind Turkey's purchase of the S-400 system from Russia. Left-wing nationalists also have influence among the youth through the Youth Union of Turkey.

Needless to say, the PP is hostile to pro-Western politics and globalization. The party criticizes the unconditionally pro-Western policies of successive Turkish governments. They base their criticism on the asymmetrical economic and political developments between Turkey and its Western partners, the continuation of Kurdistan Workers' Party terrorism, and problems with territorial integrity. The foreign policy position of the PP can be characterized as follows: 1. Development of cooperation with Russia, China, Central Asian countries, India, and Pakistan. 2. Withdrawal from NATO. 3. Joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In addition, the PP sympathizes with Dugin's Eurasianism and works closely with the International Eurasian Movement (IEM), in Russia. Dugin is the founder and leader of the IEM whose ideology is neo-Eurasianism. The main objective of IEM is to weaken the influence of the United States in the international system. Neo-Eurasians oppose the spreading of American liberal democracy. They uphold the principle of multipolarity, opposing the unipolar globalization supported by the Atlanticists. The multipolar world insists on the presence of several independent and sovereign centers for making global strategic decisions at the planetary level. These centers must be sufficiently equipped and financially independent to be able to withstand the material and military-strategic hegemony of the United States and NATO countries. They are not required to recognize the universalism of Western norms and values (democracy, liberalism, free markets, parliamentarianism, human rights, individualism, cosmopolitanism, etc.) and can be completely independent of the spiritual hegemony of the West.

According to Dugin, just a couple of weeks after the F-16 fighters of the Turkish Air Force had shot down a Russian Su-24M attack aircraft near the Syrian-Turkish border on November 24, 2015, a group of the PP supporters, consisting of Ismail Hakka Pekin, the former head of military intelligence, and Admiral Soner Polat, arrived on a confidential visit to Moscow. They spoke at private events, including the one at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies. Moreover, they gave an interview to the Tsargrad channel and met with Konstantin Valerievich Malofeev, the founder of the Katechon analytical center. The visit, organized by the Katechon analytical center, was conducted at the moment of the greatest aggravation in the Russian-Turkish relations. Overall, the purpose of this visit was to prevent escalation in bilateral relations and find a mechanism to resolve tensions.

Dugin and Doğu Perinçek, the head of the PP, also hold bilateral meetings from time to time. One of such meetings was held in 2019 in Ankara, where the parties discussed several problems in the Russian-Turkish relations. The PP also periodically invites Dugin to take part in events organized by the party. For instance, the online symposium "New International Order - NINTO", organized in April 2021 and attended by representatives from 23 countries, was one of such events. The PP also

provides an opportunity for Dugin to share his opinion with the Turkish society through the Aydınlık news resource affiliated with the PP.

Dugin's Eurasianism began to attract the PP because Dugin started to construct a conception of Eurasia, based on the regional economic integration model, and presented it as a resistance strategy against the Western global hegemony. Thus, unlike the bureaucrats of the Turkish Military Forces and National Intelligence Organization, mentioned in the first part of this article, who advocate a balanced foreign policy course, the PP takes a more radical position to foreign policy: rapprochement with Russia and distancing from the US.

To sum up: at this stage, the above-mentioned political situation inside Turkey is generally in line with Moscow's

interests. However, despite this, mistrust between Russia and Turkey still remains, which does not allow them to further deepen their relations. This is due to the fact that the Kremlin is well aware that if the US makes concessions to Turkey in terms of increasing its military-political weight in the international system, Ankara can move away from a balanced foreign policy by normalizing relations with Washington against Moscow. Moreover, the likelihood of pro-Atlantic political forces opposing Eurasians coming to power could lead to the normalization of US-Turkish relations and the cleansing of Eurasians in the state apparatus of Turkey. Undoubtedly, the development of events according to these scenarios will negatively affect Russian-Turkish relations.

About the Author

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