



The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations

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COVER: President Erdogan and President Putin at the Akkuyu Nuclear plant, April 2018.
(Source: Kremlin.ru)

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THE RESILIENCY OF TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS

By: **Selim Koru**

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Executive Summary

The Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation are at odds over multiple issues, not least the Syrian Civil War, where they back warring proxies. Yet the two countries have bounced back from crises and are quickly deepening their relations. This paper will argue that this is due to the two countries' relationship with the West, particularly the United States. Rather than concrete economic or strategic gain, it will highlight the importance of the Turkish leadership's worldview as a force that brings the countries together. It will then discuss the limits of Turkey's enchantment with Russia, arguing that enthusiasm is outweighing caution in Ankara.

Odd Bedfellows?

Relations between the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation over the past few years could provide material for a long shelf of spy thrillers. Russia has significantly upgraded its military presence in the Black Sea, far outclassing Turkey's fleet. It has invaded two of Turkey's neighbors; annexed Crimea, the home of the Turkic Tatar people; put sanctions on Turkey's goods; and banned its tourists from vacationing on Turkish beaches. For its part, Turkey has shot down a Russian jet and saw a Russian ambassador assassinated in the center of its capital. Most destabilizing of all, the two countries have backed opposing sides in Syria's long and bloody civil war.

Any one of those things could be enough to cause a significant crisis in bilateral relations. Some of them have. But remarkably, the two countries have not only overcome these crises, but they also have deepened their relationship. Russia is scaling up economic ties with Turkey, building Turkey's nuclear reactors, and selling it top-of-the-line defense equipment—despite protest from members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Trade took a hit when relations were tense, but is quickly reassuming its upward trend.¹ The countries are signing visa agreements, and tourism is at all-time highs. Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are working through their differences on Syria. The two leaders recently negotiated

a ceasefire that has so far stabilized a highly volatile situation in Idlib province. How is it possible that such strong bonds should grow amidst such volatility? How are Turkish-Russian relations this robust?

“Like hot steel quenched in water, our bilateral relationship has hardened and strengthened with every failed provocation.”

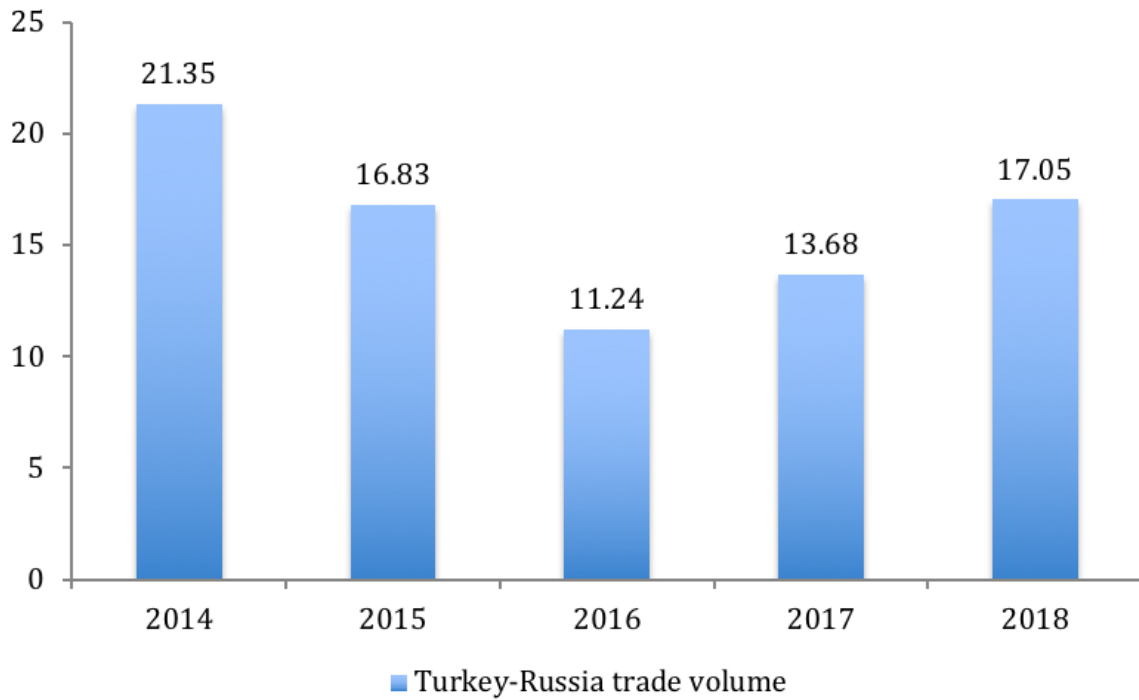
PRESIDENT RECEP TAYYIP ERDOĞAN

Erdoğan is eager to answer these questions to anyone who will listen. “Praise be God, our relations have overcome these harsh tests,” he said while hosting Putin at the site of the Akkuyu Nuclear plant this April. “Like hot steel quenched in water, our bilateral relationship has hardened and strengthened with every failed provocation.”² Erdoğan didn't have to specify who was doing the “provoking.” In his narrative, Western countries are bloodthirsty imperialists, jealous of Turkey's meteoric rise. Russia, on the other hand, is a fellow victim of the Western-imposed world order, and increasingly, a steadfast friend in the fight against it. This point is not a trivial one. In order to understand how relations between the Erdoğan and Putin governments are so robust, one has to understand the Erdoğan government's feelings towards the West.

¹ “Turkey becomes Russia's 5th biggest trading partner in H1 2018,” *Daily Sabah*, 8 August 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/economy/2018/08/08/turkey-becomes-russias-5th-biggest-trading-partner-in-h1-2018>.

² Şahan, Fazlı. “Oyunun Kuralları Değişiyor [The Rules of the Game are Changing],” *Yeni Şafak*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/oyunun-kurallari-degisiyor-3192649>.

Figure 1: January – August 2018 cumulative sum, billion USD



President Vladimir Putin and President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan launch the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in April 2018. (Source: kremlin/ru)

Cautious View of the West



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg meets with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Mevlut Cavusoglu April 2018. (Source: NATO)

Turkey and Russia are not countries that can take good relations for granted. The tsars did more than a little to break up the Ottoman Empire, and it was the territorial ambitions of the Soviet Union that drove modern Turkey towards a formal alliance with the West starting in World War II, and continuing with the Cold War. Turkey's membership in NATO meant that it was hardwired into the West's security infrastructure, most significantly as host to American nuclear weapons. Though Ankara could be a prickly ally, it was reliably anti-Soviet throughout the Cold War.

Since the early 2000s however, Turkey and Russia have gone through similar phases in their relations with the West. In his first term, Putin often spoke of Russia as a "European country" and "sharing European values."³ Early Justice and Development Party (AK Party, or AKP) governments employed similar rhetoric,

making European accession a cornerstone of its policy. By the late 2000s, Putin had soured towards the West, and in 2007, he gave his famous speech at the Munich Security Conference on the transgressions of the U.S.-led Western Alliance. "Independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state's legal system," Putin said, "one state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?"⁴ Russian foreign policy has since been aimed at blunting NATO expansion, reasserting Russian influence, and undermining the political coherence of the Western Alliance.

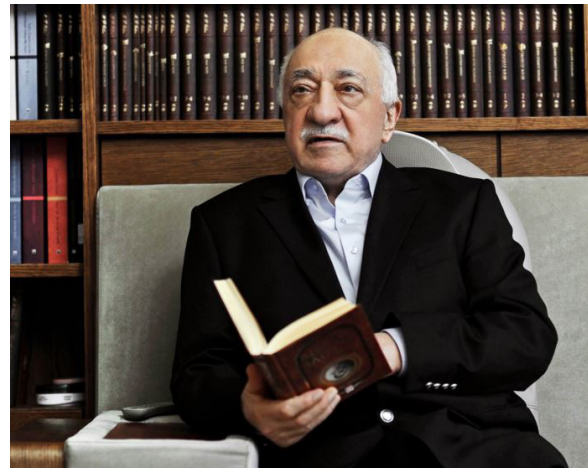
³ İsaev, Andrey. "Jeopolitik Kavşakta Rusya [Russia at Geopolitical Crossroads]," *GazeteDüvar*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2017/08/22/jeopolitik-kavsakta-rusya/>.

⁴ "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," *Washington Post*, 12 February 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>.

Turkey's Western Disenchantment

Erdoğan's first major disappointment with the West remains somewhat underreported. It came in 2010 when Brazil and Turkey arranged for a nuclear deal with Iran. This deal was meant to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons while allowing the peaceful production of nuclear energy. During a visit to Washington, D.C., Erdoğan said the agreement was about "resolving this issue between Iran and Western countries."⁵ Turkey here would be an entity of its own, friendly to the West but separate from it, going out and solving a problem nobody else had been able to.

There were open questions about the technical merits of the agreement, but even without such concerns, Washington was not going to let something this important be done outside of its own initiative. The Barack Obama administration did not want to look obstructive, so it let the negotiations play out, but in private, it was critical. The *New York Times* reported that "White House officials were clearly angered at the leaders of Turkey and Brazil," citing technical problems with the deal. A Turkish academic in Washington wrote that experts there were "bewildered" at the thought of Turkey giving Iran the benefit of the doubt. Erdoğan grew bitter, but pushed on, saying he didn't "need permission from anyone."⁶ The Obama administration begged to differ and steamrolled the deal



Fetullah Gülen at his Pennsylvania residence. (Source: Radio Free Europe)

in the United Nations Security Council.⁷ This was the first time in recent memory that Turkey had wanted to do something of international significance without Western handholding, and it ended in embarrassing failure.

Turkey's chagrin and Western disdain only grew from there. The AK Party government became more reactionary, slowly abandoned democratic norms, and centralized power in Erdoğan's hands, while Western countries had less and less respect for Turkish interests. The year 2013 was a turning point in this regard, since it saw the Gezi protests, a nationwide wave of anti-government sentiment, as well as the beginning of Erdoğan's war with his erstwhile ally, Fetullah Gülen, a powerful cleric who resides in Pennsylvania. Erdoğan began to believe that Gülen's organization acts with the oversight and direction of the United States government, calling the

⁵ "Erdoğan: Hiçbir Ülkede Nükleer Silah Olmasın [No Country Should Have Nuclear Weapons]," *Milliyet*, 13 April 2010, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/erdogan-hic-bir-ulkede-nukleer-silah-olmasin-siyaset-1224321/>.

⁶ "Kimseden icazet almayız [We do not need permission from anyone]," *Milliyet*, 28 May 2010, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/kimseden-icazet-almayiz-siyaset-1243609/>.

⁷ Kaplan, Fred. "Are Brazil and Turkey Delusional or Deceptive?" *Slate*, June 2010, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/06/why-brazil-and-turkey-s-nuclear-deal-with-iran-is-worse-than-useless.html>.



Demonstration for slain PKK members in Paris, 2013. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

group “a subcontractor of global forces,” or “the gang that acts with orders from abroad.”⁸

The Kurdish peace process, an initiative to end Turkey’s 40-year-old ethnic conflict, also failed in 2014, reigniting Ankara’s war with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). With a fully blown ethnic conflict, a purge of Gülenists, and the Syrian Civil War on its border—and with increasingly autocratic rule—Turkey no longer looked like a serious candidate for membership in the European Union (EU). To top it off, the United States also chose to support the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, as its ground force against ISIS. In the eyes of the Erdoğan government, the U.S. was now the patron to its two most hated organizations: the

Gülen network and the PKK. The coup attempt on July 15, 2016 was further proof to the Erdoğan government that the West was the enemy. Today, it is an unshakable belief of the Erdoğan government that the U.S. and EU want regime change in Turkey.

⁸ “Türk-ABD ilişkilerinde Pensilvanya açmazı [The Pennsylvania Dilemma in Turkey-USA Relations],” *Hürriyet*, 8 May 2014, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/turk-abd-iliskilerinde-pensilvanya-acmazi-26374632>.

On the Same Level

The Russians, of course, have been talking to the Marxist-Leninist PKK since the Cold War, and they make a point of keeping up those connections. They have also trampled on Turkish interests at the United Nations, killed an enormous number of Muslim civilians as the chief benefactor of Bashar al-Assad, and have done other things that would ordinarily send Erdoğan into fits of rage. But Turkey's relations with its treaty allies is slipping, while its relations with Russia are robust. This has something to do with the way the countries perceive themselves on the global hierarchy. Russian-Israeli political expert Yakov Kedmi said, "The relations of the West with Turkey were of instrumental character. Russia is the only great power to offer equal partnership to Turkey."⁹ It isn't that Russia is Turkey's equal—it has vastly superior capacities—but Putin understands, and to a significant extent shares Erdoğan's emotional state, and approaches him appropriately. This approach makes a big difference.

"It isn't that Russia is Turkey's equal—it has vastly superior capacities—but Putin understands, and to a significant extent shares Erdoğan's emotional state, and approaches him appropriately."

⁹ "Визит Путина в Анкару открывает новую страницу в отношениях двух стран [Putin's visit to Ankara opens a new page in the relationship between two countries]," *Russia 24*, April 3, 2018, <https://youtu.be/0HROjfG3Yk8>.

In September 2015, Putin invited a series of Muslim leaders to open Moscow's renovated grand mosque.¹⁰ Turkey had helped with the renovation, and Putin gave Erdoğan pride of place, asking him to deliver an opening speech. The Turkish president's remarks contained some of the highest praise he has bestowed on any foreign country:

I would like to emphasize that especially when it comes to the freedom of belief, we do not see the tens of thousands of Russian citizens who reside in our country, chiefly in Istanbul and Antalya, as different from our own citizens. We are happy to have them as guests in our country. I believe that our citizens, our soydaş [meaning "kin," used for Turkic peoples abroad], and our coreligionists in Moscow and many places throughout Russia, feel the same way. As the representatives of the two ancient cultures of Eurasia, the genuine cooperation and solidarity we display will benefit our people as well as the whole world.¹¹

¹⁰ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Putin ile Moskova Merkez Camii'nin açılışını yaptı [President Erdoğan Opened the Moscow Central Mosque with Putin]," *Hürriyet*, 23 September 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-putin-ile-birlikte-moskova-merkez-camiinin-acilisini-yapti-30146277>.

¹¹ T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Moskova Merkez Camisinin Açılış Törenine Katıldı| 23.09.15 [President Erdoğan Participated in the Opening Ceremony of the Moscow Central Mosque 23.09.15]," *Youtube*, 24 September 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Bce2abZRn0>.



Erdoğan with U.S. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry during the NATO Summit in Newport, 5 September 2014. (Source: U.S. Department of State)

These are not words spoken as a matter of course, but deeply felt sentiments. The equality between Russian and Turkish citizens, as well as the Islamic and Orthodox faiths, he mentioned in the speech stands against the backdrop of European and American treatment of Muslim refugees, as well as Islamophobia in those countries, all themes that are prominently covered in Turkish media. Putin's appreciation for Turkish involvement, the exchange of gifts that followed the ceremony, and overall acceptance of Erdoğan as an authority figure of Muslims everywhere, including Russia, sweetens a relationship that could otherwise feel very unequal.

In 2016, Erdoğan flew to another mosque opening, this one in the U.S. This mosque was one of the largest in the United States, fully funded by Turkey, and included a large complex for Islamic

education.¹² Turkish news—pro-Erdoğan and otherwise—reported weeks in advance that Erdoğan and Obama would be present at the opening together. For all its resentment of the West, the Turkish right actually loves basking in its attention, and a mosque opening with a President of the United States with the middle name of “Hussein” would have been of enormous significance. Right before the trip however, the *Wall Street Journal* published a story saying that Obama had turned down Erdoğan's request to join him at the mosque opening and would not be meeting him face-to-face. Erdoğan was too authoritarian, the article said, and would face “a cool reception.”¹³ The

¹² AA, “Erdoğan opens Maryland social complex and mosque in US with message of peace and faith,” *Daily Sabah*, 2 April 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2016/04/02/erdogan-opens-maryland-social-complex-and-mosque-in-us-with-message-of-peace-and-faith>.

¹³ Nissenbaum, Dion and Lee, Carol E. “Turkish President Faces a Cool Reception in U.S. Visit,” *Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-president-faces-a-cool-reception-in-u-s-visit-1459114068>.

president's opponents at home gloated at the news.

At the mosque opening, Erdoğan's remarks were quite a contrast to those in Moscow:

It is utterly unacceptable that all Muslims should be made to pay for the pain and horror a handful of terrorist inflicted on the people of America on September 11. In the wake of this tragic indecent, prejudice against Muslim groups and individuals continues to climb in the West as a whole, as in America. Today there is terror in Brussels, and there is terror in Paris. But never forget, there is incomparably more terror in Turkey. There is incomparably more terror in Lahore. Let us please see this. We [Turkey] have been fighting terror for 35 years. We have lost 40 thousand lives to terror. But despite all this, when we request [the arrest] of terrorists who have fled Turkey to the West, they do not return them to us.¹⁴

Russia is a place where Muslims are seen as equals, they are treated with respect, and their senior-most leader was honored at the highest level in the capital. "The West" is a place where Muslims—and therefore also Turks—are treated as suspect. In the Western-imposed order,

Western lives are more valuable than Muslim ones. Western governments are also arrogant—they do not respect other authorities and flaunt their designations of terrorist groups. An informed analysis of these matters might well reach different conclusions, but that has little impact on this worldview.

¹⁴ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, (CAMİ AÇILIŞI) Amerika Diyanet Merkezi Açılış Töreni 02.04.2016 ABD [President Erdoğan, (MOSQUE OPENING) Diyanet Center America Opening Ceremony 02.04.2016 USA]," *YouTube*, April 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnpEx8s7ZEo>.

Revolutionaries

To understand the Erdoğan government's disposition towards these relations, it pays to take a closer look at the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. On that night, a group within the military, including, if not led by the Gülen network, tried to capture the government, but succumbed to stiff resistance from security forces and the public.¹⁵ Erdoğan had often referred to his ascent as a “slow revolution,” implying that his government was becoming more than a mere link in the chain of democratic succession.¹⁶ In the wake of the coup, he accelerated this transformation by centralizing powers in the executive. “New Turkey,” as this new order is known, takes the coup attempt as its founding event—“the Turkish nation's second war of independence” as Erdoğan likes to put it.¹⁷

Both, the U.S. and Russia feature prominently in New Turkey's founding myth. There was an impromptu recording of Erdoğan on the night of the coup in which he strongly implies that the action was staged by the “higher mind,” a term used for the United States government among

his people.¹⁸ For months afterwards, pro-Erdoğan media and the president himself framed the coup squarely as an “invasion attempt” by the U.S., so much so that today this is framed as fact in the vast majority of media channels in the country.¹⁹ Russia, on the other hand, features as the helping neighbor. Turkish media across the board wrote that Putin was the first to call Erdoğan, expressing full-throated support and regret at the loss of life.²⁰ Stories abound about how “the Russians did not sleep that night either,” and watched closely as its neighbor fought off an alleged U.S. invasion attempt.²¹ So positive was Russia's image that soon after the coup, there were rumors about how

18 “Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan'ın darbe girişiminin yaşandığı 15 Temmuz gecesi yaptığı ilk konuşma, 4 ay sonra yayımlandı [First speech made by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the night of the attempted coup on July 15, has been released 4 months after the event],” *Sputnik*, 20 November 2016, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201611201025892099-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-15-temmuz-ilk-yayin/>.

19 Arango, Tim and Yeginsu, Ceylan. “Turks Can Agree on One Thing: U.S. Was Behind Attempted Coup,” *New York Times*, 3 August 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/world/europe/turkey-coup-erdogan-fethullah-gulen-united-states.html>. A few examples of this phenomenon are: Karagül, İbrahim. “ABD'nin Teröristleri Türkiye'ye Saldırıyor [The US' Terrorists are Attacking Turkey],” *Yeni Şafak*, 21 July 2016, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahimkaragul/abdunin-teroristleri-turkiyeye-saldiriyor-2030563> (for an English translation, see: <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/columns/ibrahimkaragul/the-uss-terrorists-are-attacking-turkey-2030568?n=1>); and Ramoğlu, Ersin. “ABD Önce ‘Darbe’ Sonra ‘İşgal’ istiyor [The USA wants first a coup, then an invasion],” *Sabah*, 9 October 2017, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/bolgeler/ramoglu/2017/10/09/abd-once-darbe-sonra-iscal-istiyor>.

20 “Darbe Girişimine Karşı Dünyadan Türkiye'ye Destek [Support for Turkey from the World against the Coup Attempt],” *Anadolu Agency*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gunun-basliklari/darbe-girisimine-karsi-dunyadan-turkiyeye-destek/640160>.

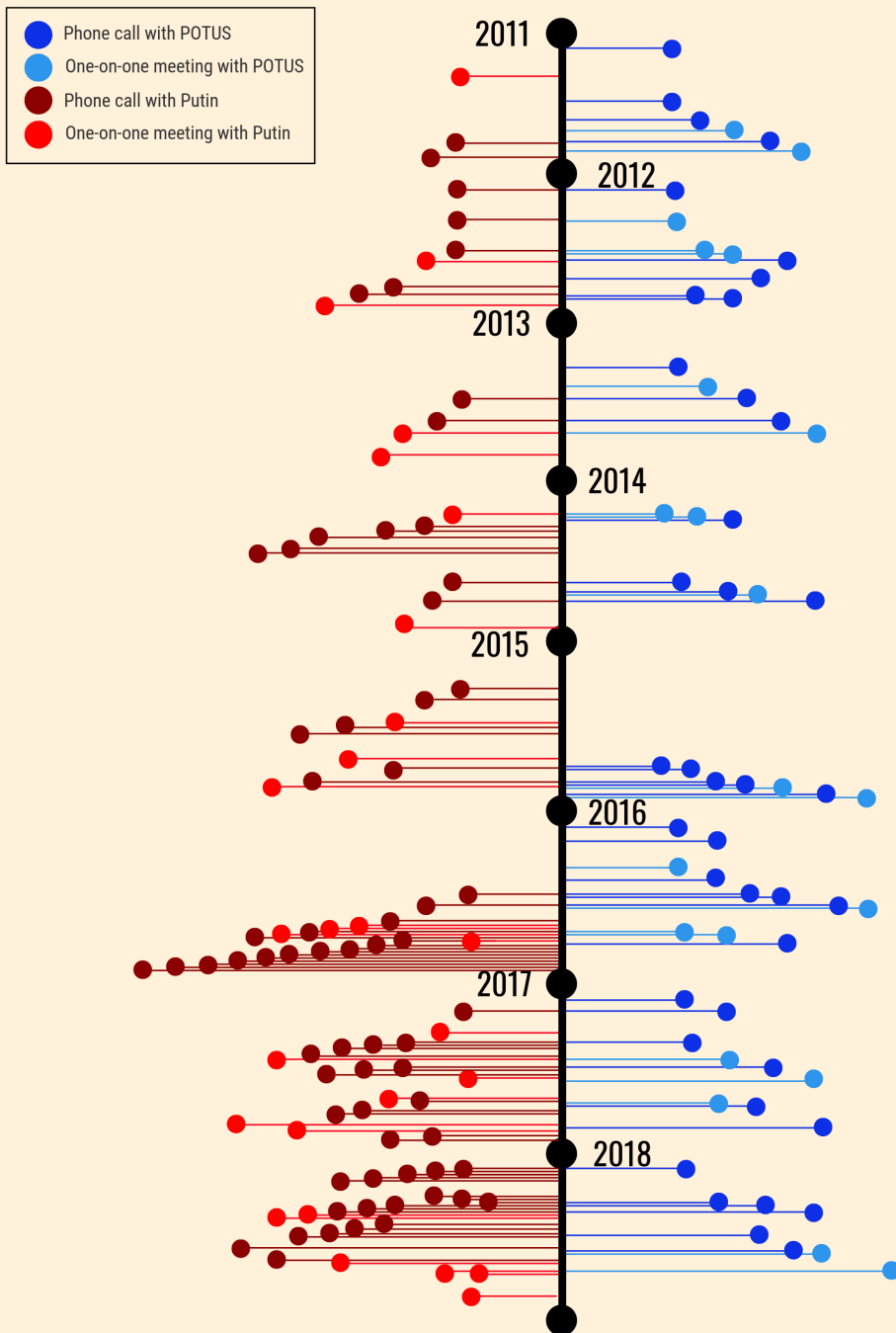
21 “O gece Ruslar da uyumadı [The Russians did not sleep that night either],” *Hürriyet*, 22 August 2016, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/o-gece-ruslar-da-uyumadi-40163428>.

15 Oğur, Yıldırım and Kenar, Ceren. “Who Was Behind The 15th July Coup in Turkey?” *Medium*, 21 March 2017, <https://medium.com/@15thJulyCoup/who-was-behind-the-15th-july-coup-in-turkey-19f75a5771c5>.

16 “Erdoğan: AK Parti Devrimci bir Partidir [Erdoğan: The AK Party is a Revolutionary Party],” *Sputnik*, 6 August 2017, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201705301028666338-erdogan-cumhurbaskani-ak-parti-grup-toplantisi/>.

17 “15 Temmuz Türk Milletinin İkinci Kurtuluş Savaşı' dır [The 15th of July is the Turkish Nation's Second War of Independence],” *The Presidency of the Republic of Turkey*, 29 September 2016, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/52441/15-temmuz-turk-milletinin-ikinci-kurtulus-savasidir>.

President Erdogan's Reported Communications with President Putin and POTUS



Data compiled by Tuğçe Sarı, visualized by Zhanar Irgebay
Source: Anadolu Agency, Sabah, haberrus.com

the Russians helped Erdoğan's plane avoid getting shot down by putschist F-16s.²² The Turkish air force's prominent role in the attempted coup also strengthened the notion that the pilots who shot down the Russian SU-24 had been rogue Gülenists—and therefore under American orders.²³ Regardless of the highly dubious veracity of many of these accounts, they set a narrative with a very clear notion of who the good guys and bad guys were.

A boost in real Turkish-Russian relations reflects this idea. On August 9, Russia was the first foreign country Erdoğan visited after the coup.²⁴ Only shortly prior to the coup, Erdoğan and Putin had agreed on moving past the SU-24 crisis and normalize relations. They would now accelerate that process. In subsequent months and years, Erdoğan and Putin scaled up their communication (see below figure) and broadened their cooperation on a number of fronts. In December 2016, they began the Astana process, a platform for high-level talks on Syria, which included Iran and excluded Western countries.²⁵ The Russians dropped sanctions on Turkish products, and the two sides went ahead with energy deals in which Turkey has

received fairly good prices.²⁶

In December 2016, a Turkish police officer who appeared to sympathize with Turkish-backed Syrian rebel groups shot and killed Russian Ambassador Andrei Karlov at a public event in Ankara. Both leaders growled that the act was a “provocation” by dark actors who wanted to stop normalization between the countries.²⁷ Turkey predictably argued that the perpetrator had been an undercover Gülenist. Russia sent investigators who worked closely with Turkish authorities, but if they had different findings, they didn't say. Turkey renamed the street in front of the Russian embassy in Ankara after the slain ambassador, and relations ploughed on.²⁸ The synchronized language at the top and the speed with which both sides moved on from the brutal event was striking, and certainly a contrast to Turkey's crisis-prone relations with Western countries.

In the following months, Turkey braved (with relish) Western criticism to purchase

22 “15 Temmuz gecesi Ruslar Tayyip Erdoğan'ı nasıl kurtardı [How the Russians saved Tayyip Erdoğan on the night of July 15th],” *odaTV*, 7 April 2017, <https://odatv.com/15-temmuz-gecesi-ruslar-tayyip-erdogani-nasil-kurtardi-07041852.html>.

23 “Uçak Krizini FETÖ Çıkarttı [The Plane Crisis was caused by FETÖ],” *A Haber*, 23 July 2016, <https://www.ahaber.com.tr/gundem/2016/07/23/ucak-krizini-feto-cikardi>.

24 Walker, Shaun and Rankin, Jennifer. “Erdoğan and Putin discuss closer ties in first meeting since jet Downing,” *Guardian*, 9 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/09/erdogan-meets-putin-leaders-seek-mend-ties-jet-downing-russia-turkey>.

25 Wintour, Patrick. “Turkey and Russia ‘agree terms of Syria ceasefire,’” *Guardian*, 28 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/28/turkey-russia-agree-terms-syria-ceasefire>.

26 Astakhova, Olesya and Tattersall, Nick. “Russia and Turkey sign gas deal, seek common ground on Syria as ties warm,” *Reuters*, 10 October 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-energy-summit-turkey-russia/russia-and-turkey-sign-gas-deal-seek-common-ground-on-syria-as-ties-warm-idUSKCN12A244>; and Bechev, Dimitar. “The Turkey-Russia Gas Saga Continues,” *Ahval*, 1 June 2018, <https://ahvalnews.com/russia-turkey/turkey-russia-gas-saga-continues>.

27 “Erdoğan says attack on Russian envoy ‘provocation’ to harm Turkey-Russia normalization,” *Daily Sabah*, 19 December 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/12/19/erdogan-says-attack-on-russian-envoy-provocation-to-harm-turkey-russia-normalization>; and Kremlin Press Service. “Putin Says Assassination of Russian Ambassador in Turkey Was a ‘Provocation’,” *Moscow Times*, 19 December 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/putin-says-assassination-of-russian-ambassador-in-turkey-was-a-provocation-56584>.

28 Borger, Julian. “Why killing of Russian diplomat may well bring Turkey and Russia closer,” *Guardian*, 19 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/19/why-killing-of-russian-diplomat-is-likely-to-bring-turkey-and-russia-closer>.

Russian S-400 air defense systems, which are not compatible with NATO systems. Turkey had expressed interest in the S-400 as early as 2009, but would now speed up the process.²⁹ Some have argued that given the prominent role of the Turkish air force in the attempted coup, and Turkey's near-complete reliance on American fighter jets, the S-400 purchase might be about protecting Ankara from NATO planes as well as its own.³⁰ Though it might sound outlandish, the idea is plausible considering the country's post-coup mindset.

Much of Russian-Turkish diplomacy today appears to consist of an exercise in cleansing the relationship of Western influence. Both countries seem to agree that Western influence is a silently imposed, malicious presence that poisons the daily lives of their citizens. In Erdoğan's Turkey, pushing back against this tide is called being "yerli ve milli" or "local and national." When adorned with this adjective, anything from weapons systems to children's toys is assumed to be inherently virtuous.³¹ In a recent interview, the Russian Consul General to Istanbul displayed a keen awareness of the concept:

Open up any Turkish newspaper, and you will see – if there is anything written on Russia, it will have been written with reference

29 "Turkey hopes to buy S-400 air defense systems from Russia," *Sputnik*, 27 April 2009, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/20090427121328739/>.

30 Stein, Aaron. "Ankara's Look East: How Turkey's Warming Ties With Russia Threaten Its Place in the Transatlantic Community," *War on the Rocks*, 27 December 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/ankaras-look-east-how-turkeys-warming-ties-with-russia-threaten-its-place-in-the-transatlantic-community/>.

31 Kocalar, Zuhale. "Çocuklar 'yerli oyuncaklar'la büyüyecek [Kids will grow up with local toys]," *Anadolu Agency*, 17 April 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/cocuklar-yerli-oyuncaklarla-buyuyecek/1120429>.

*to Western news agencies. By [sic] developing Western clichés in Turkey, these agencies present to the Turkish reader generally inaccurate information about Russia that is established in the West. In Russia, there is a similar problem concerning Turkey's perception. This was discussed at the extended Russo-Turkish public forum. There is a serious attitude towards rectifying this situation.*³²

The idea here is that there is a Western membrane between Turkey and Russia that impedes good relations. Without that membrane, the thinking goes, the two sides will be free to form a natural friendship. When Erdoğan said that he would like to trade with "national currency" rather than U.S. dollars for example, Russia immediately responded, saying that it has been advocating the issue for a long time.³³ There may indeed be disadvantages to relying too much on things like the English language and the American dollar in bilateral relations between countries like Russia and Turkey. But this is not a matter for debate in Erdoğan's Turkey as much as a new orthodoxy. Purging the relationship of Western influence is a virtue of its own.³⁴

32 Sudagezer, Elif. "Başkonsolos Podyelişev: Rusya-Türkiye ilişkileri spekülasyonlarla değil gerçeklerle değerlendirilmeli [Consul General Podyelishev: Russia-Turkey relations should not be evaluated with speculations, but with realities]," *Sputnik Türkiye*, 11 May 2018, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201805111033404133-rusya-turkiye-podyelisev-istanbul-baskonsolos-ikili-iliskiler-ticari-siyasi-isbirligi-spekulasyonlarla-degerlendirilmemeli/>.

33 "Türkiye'nin milli para hamlesine Rusya'dan destek [Support from Russia for Turkey's national money move]," *TRT Haber*, 13 August 2018, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/turkiyenin-milli-para-hamlesine-rusya-adan-destek-379915.html>.

34 "Turkey favors switching from dollars to national currencies in trade with Russia & China," *Russia Today*, 15 August 2018, <https://www.rt.com/business/436005-dollars-turkey-russia-china-trade/>.

Russia: Model or Friend?

Turkey's transformation also includes a shift in strategic culture. The generation of Turkish leaders that came out of the Cold War conducted themselves based on the principles of liberal internationalism. Turkey saw itself as a country that placed great importance on international norms, laws, and regulations. It was inherently skeptical of the use of force and had relatively underdeveloped foreign intelligence capabilities. Since the Syrian Civil War, Erdoğan has left this path, and looking back, does not have a high opinion of it. "There was a Turkey," he says, "that looked in one direction only, it was pro-status quo, afraid of change, lacked confidence, its fighting spirit was blunted, it was closed into itself."³⁵ The new Turkey likes to speak of its "national interest" and flout international norms. AK Party types study up on military hardware and speak of a "new realism" that "does not act cowardly when it comes to the use of force."³⁶ Like Russia, Turkey now stages military interventions and when necessary, even occupies neighboring territory, as it has done in Syria.

Turkey is very understandably preparing itself for a world without friends, but this is where there is a subtle contradiction in Turkey's attitude towards Russia. Russia

is a model for Turkey's new realists. It is a self-reliant, hard-nosed country that stands up to the West. Feeling sympathy for Russia makes them want to be friends and work side-by-side towards common objectives. But do such countries have "friends" in any real sense? Does Russia ever make itself as reliant on another country as Turkey has made itself reliant on Russian energy and technology? Looking closely at Turkey's approach to Russia, one still sees a desperation for friendship that can never be.

"Like Russia, Turkey now stages military interventions and when necessary, even occupies neighboring territory, as it has done in Syria."

In Ankara, this tension comes up again and again in conversation. Many think that Russia's status as a former superpower gave it an advanced start in the global struggle against Western domination. In 2006, for example, Russia shut down the schools of the Gülen network, then known for its close connections to the AK Party government. Russian media stated that this was done on national security grounds, citing the esoteric ideology of the movement, as well as its efforts to gather sensitive intelligence.³⁷ Conservative media in Turkey reported that then-Prime

³⁵ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan seçim manifestosunu açıkladı [President Erdoğan announced election manifesto]," *Anadolu Agency*, 6 May 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gunun-basliklari/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-secim-manifestosunu-acikladi/1136739>.

³⁶ Yeşiltaş, Murat. "Türkiye Merkezli Yeni Dış Politika [Turkey-Centered New Foreign Policy]," *SETA*, 12 May 2018, <https://www.setav.org/turkiye-merkezli-yeni-dis-politika/>.

³⁷ "Нурджулар. Российская ФСБ оказалась права? [Nurdjular. The Russian FSB turned out to be right?]," *Glosislama.ru*, 26 March 2018, <https://goloslama.com/news.php?id=22750>.



Joint news conference of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, April 2018. (Source: kremlin.ru)

Minister Erdoğan called Putin to vouch for the schools, warning him that economic relations could suffer if he insisted on closing them.³⁸ A young civil servant looks back on that time: “Russia is a serious state. They were already in the fight when we asleep. We have catching up to do,” he says, and goes on to praise Russia’s intelligence and defense capabilities.

Whether this can be the basis of a friendship is a touchy topic. A civil servant in a position to know says: “The most America is going to do is to put a few of its men in as your aide-de-camp,” referring to the president’s aides who were arrested after the coup attempt for being clandestine members of the Gülenist network. “Would the Russians be that gentle? From what I can see, they don’t go for half measures.” When asked

whether he shares his thoughts with his colleagues, he says he does freely, but that “they [pointing up] have their own ideas.”

Erdoğan’s “New Turkey” urgently needs a discussion on Russia, but there is no evidence that such a discussion can take place in any meaningful way. Even if the government tried, it would be hard to start. The Turkish elite has traditionally focused on the West, and the Islamists have in recent decades devoted some attention to understanding the Middle East, but the country has little experience in studying Russia. There are only a handful of Turkish bureaucrats and experts who speak Russian. The only serious work of history on Russian-Turkish relations in Turkish appears to have been written by a Tatar historian named Akdes Nimet

³⁸ “Putin’e okul resti çekti [He called Putin on schools],” *Star*, 7 December 2013, <http://www.star.com.tr/politika/putine-okul-resti-cek-ti-haber-813591/>.

Kurat in 1970.³⁹ There is some notable contemporary work by think tankers and journalists, but hardly enough to serve as a base for a workable Russia strategy. Absent a more analytical conversation, Russia as a model of independence might increasingly turn into Russia the friend, setting Turkey up for a costly disappointment.

Meanwhile, its Western treaty allies will continue to struggle in interactions with Turkey. Liberal observers in the West seldom take it seriously when they are portrayed as the bad guys in someone else's story, dismissing it as a cynical autocrat's pandering to the masses. They are also hesitant to think that countries will forego tangible economic and security interests for intangible things like national pride and resentment. In Turkey's case, they are wrong on both counts: Erdoğan may be a pragmatic tactician, but his strategic goal comes from an emotional place, rooted deep in the country's consciousness.

The emotional aspect of the relationship does not mean that Turkey will always be on bad terms with Western countries, or will always enjoy good relations with Russia. A month after the Moscow mosque opening in 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian SU-24 jet (probably by executive order) and relations with Russia went into a tailspin. When President Donald Trump imposed sanctions and tariffs on Turkey, the Erdoğan government launched a full-throated rapprochement with the EU.⁴⁰

Economic and security interests still matter, and can—for tactical reasons—override the Erdoğan government's emotional proclivities. Yet, the question of identity means that Turkey is more likely to overcome crises with revisionist countries such as Russia than it is with Western countries. Over time, this makes a difference. It puts pressure on Turkey's treaty obligations with NATO and its application to the EU, while giving impetus to new, and ever-deepening ties with Russia. 🌐

39 Kurat, Akdes Nimet. *Türkiye ve Rusya: XVIII. Yüzyıl Sonundan Kurtuluş Savaşına Kadar Türk-Rus İlişkileri (1798-1919)* [Turkey and Russia: Turkco-Russian Relations from the XVIII. Century to the War of Independence (1798-1919)], (Ankara, 1970).

40 Yetkin, Murat. "Thanks to Trump, Turkey and Europe get closer," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 August 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/murat-yetkin/thanks-to-trump-turkey-and-europe-get-closer-135882>.





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