

# Turkey and Russia: Making Sense of the “Intriguing Relationship”

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The aim of my presentation is to look into what actually “is going on” between the AKP-led Turkey and post-Soviet Russia and try to make sense of the nature of the two countries’ complex relationship. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union together with its “outer empire” in Eastern Europe, the dominant perception has been that from now on the only game in town will be the continuous Europeanization of Europe’s eastern and southern margins, meaning normative and institutional enlargement of the European Union into Eastern and Southern Europe, including some ex-Soviet republics, Turkey, and, possibly, even Russia. Twenty years on, it is clear that EU-driven Europeanization is but one of several important processes currently transpiring in Europe. The other two are the parallel ascendancy of Russia and Turkey accompanied by their unprecedented rapprochement and the two countries’ growing skepticism with regard to their “European vocation.”

So I intend to investigate the nature of the evolving relationship between Russia and Turkey – a crucial European dynamics that has long been eclipsed by the process of EU enlargement. The key questions that I am going to pose and explore are as follows: What structural factors are behind the Russo-Turkish rapprochement? What makes Russia and Turkey look similar and puts them on the same page with regard to both countries’ uneasy relationship with the EU? Why are they such difficult partners for the Union? Yet, the dissimilarities between Russia and Turkey are no less important than similarities: in the long run, Turkey’s prospects (both economic and political) appear to be brighter than Russia’s. What accounts for this? Why does Turkey seem more successful in terms of economic reform and democratic consolidation? The ultimate question is this: which country -- Russia or Turkey -- is more advanced in pursuing its “Europeanization” project and thus is a long-term ascendant power?

There seems to be a consensus within the analytic community that presently the relations between Ankara and Moscow “are better than ever.” There is no shortage of historical parallels for what is often called the “new Russo-Turkish entente.” Some commentators invoke a precarious honeymoon between the Kemalists and the Bolsheviks in the 1920s,

while others say that today's Turkish-Russian friendship is akin to the Franco-German turnaround following the end of World War II. But what is the nature of this still developing relationship? Is it an emerging "axis of the excluded," a "virtual rapprochement," an "alignment of alienation," or a "new strategic alliance?" To my mind, the relationship is too complex and contradictory; it doesn't lend itself well to a definitive and precise characterization. I would thus suggest that a better term to describe Turkey's international behavior in general and the AKP's policy toward Russia in particular is *recalibrating*. Radical changes in Turkey's immediate strategic environment coupled with the shifts in Turkish policy elites' vision of their country's geopolitical role caused a serious revamp of Ankara's international agenda resulting in a relative weakening of the "Euro-Atlantic vector" and a relative strengthening of the "Russian vector." I would argue, however, that this does not mean that Turkey is turning its back on its traditional Western partners and ready to embrace its new Russian suitor. What is actually happening is that Ankara is recalibrating its relations with both the West and Moscow. The upshot of this exercise is a much more nuanced and ambivalent Turkish international conduct.

I would argue that the evolving relations between Ankara and Moscow can only be properly understood in a broad historical context. I would also contend that the way the relationship is shaping up is being affected by the nature of both countries' regimes, the imperatives of their domestic politics, the shifts in the regional and global geopolitical landscape as well as by the economic situation in Turkey and Russia. My central thesis is this: while there is a broad range of overlapping interests – trade, energy ties, shared neighborhood in the South Caucasus, relations with Europe, the Middle East settlement – Turkey and Russia not only fruitfully cooperate but also energetically compete in most, if not all, of the above areas. This pattern of simultaneous cooperation and competition constitutes the nature of this "multidimensional partnership." Its future direction will largely depend on whether the current precarious equilibrium between the two countries is preserved. At the moment, both Turkey and Russia appear to be ascendant powers, but, long-term, continuing geopolitical ascendancy can only be secured if the two Eurasian countries manage to successfully tackle their formidable domestic challenges.

There is a growing body of literature that investigates the evolution of the Turkish-Russian relations over the past 20 years following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. What is striking, though, is that while dwelling at length on a whole host of

undoubtedly important issues such as the changing threat perceptions, the shifts in military potentials, pipeline geopolitics, the converging and diverging interests of Russia and Turkey, most of the studies rarely bother to compare the two countries themselves. Yet the comparative analysis of both countries' imperial legacies, their struggles to manage multiethnicity and forge nation-states, the patterns of modernization and democratization, the fits and starts of economic reforms pursued by Russian and Turkish elites, the ways Russia and Turkey have related to, and been perceived by, Europe, would reveal some intriguing similarities (as well as dissimilarities), determine numerous points of contact (as well as those of divergence) and thus shed better light on how these two Eurasian neighbors have been interacting in the first decade of the new millennium. The dearth of such comparative research is somewhat puzzling given the fact that already in the early modern period "comparisons with the Turkish Sultan had become commonplace when foreign writers sought to characterize the Czar of Muscovy," noted Vasily Klyuchevsky, an outstanding 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian historian. Furthermore, argued Klyuchevsky in his celebrated study of foreigners' perceptions of the early modern Russia, the ways and mores in the Ottoman Empire and Muscovy -- as seen by Western European diplomats, merchants and travelers -- seemed quite similar: "They perceived both Muscovy and Turkey as the Oriental lands."

It would appear that the subsequent developments -- the relative success of Russia's Westernization, the Ottoman demise, the upheavals of the communist revolution in Russia and Turkey's transformation under Kemalism and, in particular, the long decades of the Cold War when the relations between Turkey and Russia were effectively subsumed within the global confrontation between the capitalist and the socialist systems -- made drawing comparisons between the two countries seem to be a rather futile intellectual exercise. However, the end of the Cold War has brought about a tectonic shift in the global geopolitical landscape that also involved the most dramatic changes in Turkey's and Russia's strategic environments. In this "brave new world," Turkey and Russia appear to be behaving as increasingly independent and assertive international actors. The shift in the overall political conjuncture seems to be slowly causing an adjustment of the epistemological optics: it has finally dawned on analysts that there are indeed some remarkable parallels between Russia's and Turkey's historical trajectories. "Russia is often compared with Europe, with North America, somewhat less but still quite often with Latin America. Yet the comparisons with Turkey are relatively rare," one Russian commentator has noted recently. "However, it is

precisely our [Turkish] neighbor that provides particularly rich opportunities for comparative analysis.”

Any wide-ranging comparison between Turkey and Russia is, of course, beyond the scope of my presentation. However, some key points need to be made. I will focus on several critically important aspects: 1) the significance of imperial legacies for both Turkey and Russia; 2) the specifics of the two countries’ encounters with (European) modernity; and 3) the persistent elements in Russia’s and Turkey’s political culture that seemingly make these countries the two “odd men out” vis-à-vis the United Europe.

I would argue that one of the most important long-term paradigms for understanding Turkey’s and Russia’s behavior is *imperial collapse* and *post-imperial readjustment*. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of imperial legacies for both Turkey and Russia. The two countries are classical post-imperial successor states with the imperial past still powerfully reverberating in Russia’s and Turkey’s present. But while the post-Soviet Russia has claimed historical continuity with the Soviet Union and clung to the coveted status of *derzhava* (great power) all along, Turkey’s “Ottoman infatuation” is a relatively recent affair. Reconnecting with Turkey’s Ottoman past began during the Turgut Özal years in the 1980s, but the so called “neo-Ottomanism” has flourished in earnest only since the 2002 AKP’s ascent to power. Remarkably, while both countries’ elites insist that their strategy “does not, in any shape or form, involve a restoration of Empire” and are keen to draw an “extremely vital distinction between imperial vision and imperialism,” they are also quick to point out that Russia and Turkey are not some “ordinary nation-states” and like to talk about “privileged” relationships or “privileged” interests in their strategic environment. Furthermore, policymakers in both countries regard themselves as being not just politically but also *morally* responsible for what is transpiring in the former imperial borderlands. Clearly, this structural similarity can facilitate understanding of one another’s position but it also contains potential for the clash of interests in Turkey’s and Russia’s shared neighborhood. Yet another similarity stemming from Turks’ and Russians’ self-perception as heirs of powerful empires is that both countries tend to be excessively proud and at times even prickly nationalistic – particularly when they think they are not treated with due respect or being taken for granted.

The process of post-imperial readjustment usually means that the former metropole disconnects from its former dependencies and seeks new ways to reconnect with them as

neighbors and partners. To be sure, it's not an easy business. Any student of empire remembers an old adage (said to be first uttered by Evelyn Waugh): "The creation of empires are often occasions of woe; their dissolution, always." As a rule, former land-based empires don't have a terribly impressive track record of turning imperial borderlands into good neighbors and loyal allies. Throughout most of its republican period, Turkey has been geopolitically isolated in its immediate strategic environment (which made its membership of NATO a particularly valuable asset), while Russia's attempts to integrate the post-imperial space have so far been unsuccessful. Significantly, over the past decade, Turkey and Russia appear to have been resorting to different strategies while dealing with their respective neighborhoods, including their shared neighborhood in the Black Sea and Caspian region: Ankara relies mostly on its soft power, while Moscow alternates cajoling and bullying in its post-Soviet backyard.

In land-based empires with their blurred borders between the national "core area" and the periphery, an overarching imperial identity stalls the development of (ethnic- or civic-based) nationalism and the emergence of nation-state. In both Turkey and Russia the process of nation-building has not been completed, as the very notions of "Turkishness" and "Russianness" are being vigorously contested and there is no agreement yet as to what it means to be Turkish or Russian. In both countries – where the memories of the imperial collapse are still vivid and purposely cultivated by policy elites -- the concept of *national* unity is largely understood as *state* unity (which basically equals territorial integrity), and all separatist forces are ruthlessly suppressed. This fixation on state unity and national sovereignty is remarkable as it makes Russia and Turkey, in the words of EU theorist Robert Cooper, arguably the most "modern" states in Europe. Unlike the "post-modern" EU countries which delegate powers both upwards and downwards, Ankara and Moscow put a special premium on (state) nationalism, centralization and sovereignty. Clearly, such "modernism," as some commentators argue, makes it hard for Turkey and Russia to integrate with the EU.

From the standpoint of historical sociology, there are a number of affinities between Turkey and Russia that have been conditioned by what is usually termed the "catch up modernization" of both countries. The specific nature of this type of modernization accounts for the enhanced role of the state in Russia and Turkey, the relative weakness of domestic bourgeoisie (which has long been reflected in the latter's subservient position vis-à-vis the

state bureaucracy), the underdevelopment of independent agents and the resultant feebleness of democratic institutions. However, over the past decade – the period that roughly coincides with the AKP rule in Turkey and the Putin-Medvedev rule in Russia – the two countries appear to be moving along the diverging political trajectories. The 2002 electoral victory of Turkey’s “moderate Islamists” should itself be seen as a result of the powerful processes that are reshaping the socio-political life of the country. Among the historical forces driving change are: the spectacular economic development in the Anatolian hinterland; the broadening of the elite through the emergence of the new ambitious provincial social actors, who are economically dynamic and culturally conservative; and the increasing role of elected officials and thus also a stronger government. At the same time, Russia’s direction was generally characterized as being the one whose most outstanding features are the rise of state control over economy and the “rollback of democracy.” And yet the difference between Turkey’s and Russia’s domestic situations appears to be less dramatic than it might seem at the first glance. There’s no question that Erdogan’s Turkey is more democratic than Putin’s Russia. But in both countries democracy has yet to be consolidated. The AKP, as some Turkish commentators perceptively note, is a “democratizing force” but not necessarily a “democratic” one. In reality, the AKP possesses a number of negative characteristics that make it look similar to other Turkish political parties past and present. Among those are the absolute dominance of a party leader, the unhealthy habit of using bureaucratic levers (the Russians would call it the “administrative resource”) to suppress the opposition, the creation of numerous patronage networks that spawn corruption, and the tendency to sacrifice strategic objectives in favor of petty egotistic interests – like, for instance, perpetuating personal power. In this sense, the AKP has yet to evolve into a genuine liberal party that espouses the principles of pluralism, openness and the rule of law. Symptomatically, some observers who argue that an authoritarian bent is developing in Turkey are highlighting the AKP leader’s alleged fascination with Putin’s policies. “Erdogan has indicated a number of times that he’s an admirer of Putin,” says the Middle East specialist Steven Cook. “This has led some Turkish commentators to talk about the ‘Putin-ization’ of Turkey.” At the same time, some Western analysts who are trying to define Putin’s ideology suggest that its roots lie not in this or that strand of Western political philosophy or even in Russian political tradition but rather in Turkey’s recent historical experience of the profound social transformation. “Putin’s ideology has been clear and consistent,” asserts Christopher Stone. “He is a Kemalist.” At first blush, this characterization might seem as being a polar opposite of what Erdogan’s AKP strives to represent as it casts itself as a party of Islamic Democrats who appear intent to

dispatch the authoritarian Kemalism to the dustbin of history. But let's not rush our conclusions. Turkey's tragedy, argues one Turkish pundit, "is that all parties [in Turkey] are Kemalist," referring to the strong authoritarian tradition that permeates Turkish political culture. So it is the authoritarian proclivities of the two countries' "national leaders" rooted in Turkish and Russian national traditions that provide a kind of common denominator. As the Turkish journalist Hilmi Toros colorfully put it, "If there is the touch of a Czar in Putin, there is a Sultan in Erdogan."

Now, Turkey and Russia belong, of course, to different religious realms: the first is overwhelmingly Muslim, while the second is an Orthodox majority country. What is remarkable, though, is an enhanced role that religion has played in both countries over the past decade. This increasingly prominent role of religion, in its turn, has sparked off a crucial debate in both societies on how a nation's religion and culture correlate with its striving to become modern. Put simply, the question under discussion is this: how does a particular religious denomination affect the country's modernization? Does it facilitate social development or does it slow it down? It is noteworthy that in both Russia and Turkey Max Weber's famous notion of cultural determinism is being reappraised with Turkish and Russian intellectuals arguing that the problems that modernization has encountered in both countries stem not so much from the peculiarities of Turkey's and Russia's culture and religion (i.e. Islam or Orthodoxy) as from the specifics of the two countries' historical paths. National culture (including its religious component), Russian and Turkish thinkers assert, cannot be an obstacle on Turkey's and Russia's road to modernity. In fact, they contend, the opposite may be true. Thus, in Turkey there is talk of the proliferation of "Islamic Calvinists" in Anatolia's economically booming urban centers, whereas in Russia, the Putin-led United Russia party has recently argued, in a programmatic document, that Orthodoxy constitutes a "spiritual foundation" of the country's modernization. Symptomatically, there is an interesting parallel between the ways in which the narratives of the two countries' modern history are being revised. In Russia, a country with a longer record of "Westernization," the heated debate between the proponents of "organic development" and the champions of Western social models forcefully imposed through the "revolution from above" has been going on for almost two centuries. But now in Turkey, too, a school of thought is rising that challenges the standard Kemalist narrative with its central assertion that at the heart of Turkey's recent history is "a battle between Western enlightenment and obscurantism." In fact, the opponents of the Kemalist historical vision contend, "Turkey's real dichotomy has always been between

its westernizers and its modernizers. Whereas the westernizers, led by Atatürk, sought to remodel Turkey into a fully European nation, emphasizing cultural westernization and secularization, the modernizers called for political and economic reform but insisted on preserving the traditional culture and religion at the same time.” According to this new narrative, Turkey’s modernizers include Prime Minister Adnan Menderes (executed by the Kemalist military rulers following the 1960 putsch), Özal, and, of course, Erdogan with his AKP. The willingness of the growing numbers of Turkish and Russian elites to embrace traditional religion as well as their emphasizing of indigenous cultural sources of development contribute to Turkey’s and Russia’s diminishing reliance on Western (European) templates and their growing sense of strategic independence.

This brings us to one of the most salient parallels between Turkey and Russia – namely, both countries’ position vis-à-vis Europe. As has long been argued, historically, the two Eurasian powers sitting on the periphery of Europe were perceived as Europe’s significant Others. As Klyuchevsky put it 150 years ago, referring to his Western European sources, Turkey and Russia were viewed as distinct from the Occidental world and constituting part of the Orient. Despite the profound social changes that both countries have undergone in the last two centuries, European mass publics continue to perceive them as cultural *aliens, others*. To be sure, there is one significant difference: unlike Russia which considers itself equal to the EU as a whole, Turkey has become an EU candidate country and started negotiating for EU accession. But one can advance a counter-argument that this difference is being progressively eroded. First, some EU leaders are having second thoughts about Turkey’s membership and advocating the idea of a “privileged partnership” as an alternative. Second, if the Cyprus talks come to naught (which they well might), Turkey’s EU negotiations will stall indefinitely. This will effectively leave Turkey and Russia basically on the same page as Ankara would probably have to look for forms of association with the EU other than the full membership. This is not the only similarity, though. Significantly, both Turkey and Russia are themselves uncertain about their European identity as their heated domestic debates illustrate so well. In both countries there is no consensus as to what it means to be European, which potentially opens up the way for Moscow and Ankara to cooperate in the intellectual effort of redefining the meaning of Europe to “contest outsider status.”

To conclude this section, I would advance a thesis that the complex interaction between the three aforementioned processes in Europe (dying out EU eastward enlargement and parallel

ascendancy of Russia and Turkey) ultimately leads to two important consequences. First, a new dividing line appears to have been drawn across Europe between the (European) nations that will be integrated within the Union and those that will not. Second, the countries that are left out but still regard themselves (at least, in certain respects) European – and this seems to be the case of Turkey and Russia -- will have to face a tough dilemma. These nations will have to either revisit the thorny issue of their own “civilizational” identity or push for reinventing the concept of Europe. Given the fact that the idea of Europe has been perennially contested and can be defined in a variety of ways, the second option is more likely. So long as there are countries that perceive themselves as European but are rejected by the members of the EU club, the former are likely going to continue pushing for a “construction” of Europe whereby *their* norms, values and institutions are regarded as European as those upheld by the EU.

These long-term social, political and cultural trends that I have just discussed form an important context within which a complex and multifaceted interaction between Moscow and Ankara is taking place.

Over the past decade, the Turkish-Russian relations have undergone the truly remarkable changes. Bilateral economic ties have flourished and, as the two countries’ experts assert, the potential for economic cooperation is far from exhausted. This period has also seen a significant convergence of Moscow’s and Ankara’s strategic outlooks. This unprecedented turnaround in relations between the erstwhile historical rivals was one of the results of the larger geopolitical shift caused by the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union’s unraveling. Once the relationship was “liberated” of the Cold War straightjacket, the structural similarities between the two countries shaped in the process of the so called “catch up modernization” of the former semi-peripheral land-based multiethnic empires became manifest and started making themselves felt. At the same time, both countries’ increasing turning into free agents that are unrestrained by various international alignments and bent on aggressively pursuing their own “vital interests,” has broaden the scope of Turkish-Russian cooperation in the spheres where policy elites believe their respective national interests coincide. Remarkably, though, in almost all the main spheres, Russia’s and Turkey’s interests appear to be simultaneously converging and colliding. This peculiar combination of cooperation and competition constitutes the essence of what might be called the emergence of an uneasy Turkish-Russian partnership in Eurasia.

Some Turkish policymakers and intellectuals liken their modus operandi with Moscow to the “taming of the [Russian] bear.” This “taming of the bear” metaphor appears to be neatly encapsulating Turkish elites’ understanding of their country’s long-term interaction with Russia. While pursuing its strategic objectives in Eurasia, Turkey is compelled, for the time being, to seek Moscow’s backing for, or at least acquiescence in, all its undertakings in the region. There is nothing, it seems, that Ankara can achieve in Eurasian geopolitical space against Moscow’s will. But this situation might change if the overall balance of power starts shifting in Turkey’s favor. Presently, both countries are ascendant powers. But Russia’s ascendancy, some analysts argue, might prove rather short-lived. As one comment put it, “Russia is an ascending power in the short run, but is a declining power in the long run.”

The biggest problem Russia faces is its abysmal demographic situation. Simply put, Russians are progressively dying out. By contrast, Turkey’s population dynamics looks pretty good. While Russia’s population is forecast to drop from 140 million to 115 million by 2050, the number of Turks will increase from the present 70 plus million to almost 100 million by mid-century. The other main challenge is sustainability of Russia’s inefficient, wasteful and corrupt “statist” economic model. Again, a quick comparison with Turkey is not in Russia’s favor. Three parameters appear to clearly expose Russia’s economic inferiority. First is the size of the state’s share of national economy. The AKP government has carried out a massive privatization program which significantly reduced the role of state sector. Presently, private sector accounts for 89% of Turkish GDP. In Russia, the state’s share of national GDP, according to official estimates, amounts to almost 40%, but one third of the country’s workforce is employed in the state sector, while the latter’s role in the leading industries is simply overwhelming: the state-run companies produce 90% of gas and 45% of oil; 90% of aviation industry is under state control. Second is the level of corruption. According to Transparency International’s latest Corruption Perception Index, Turkey’s ranking is 61, while Russia shares the 146<sup>th</sup> position with such countries as Kenya, Cameroon, Ecuador, Sierra Leone and Ukraine. In the World Bank’s Doing Business Project, a survey measuring business regulations worldwide, Turkey’s ranking is 73, while Russia’s is 120. The third factor is the quality of legal system. The European Commission reports recognize that, thanks to the recent legislative reforms, property rights in Turkey are adequately protected, basically on par with other European countries. Russia, where business community is constantly plagued by the so called *reiderstvo* (lawless asset seizing), is not going to receive a similar

compliment from Brussels any time soon. Currently, Turkey is the 16<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world and a serious regional economic power in its immediate neighborhood. Its GDP is twice that of Iran and Greece and already half as big as Russia's. With good luck, Ankara may be looking toward closing this gap by mid-century.

But Turkey, too, faces serious challenges of its own. First of all, it has to find an adequate solution to a divisive and potentially explosive Kurdish problem. The formidable task of consolidating democracy still lies ahead. The country will also have to find the way to reconcile the ruling elites' outdated ideal of all-embracing social control with the increasingly diversifying and modernizing Turkish society.

So the answer to the question which country will remain an ascending power – and thus a leading partner in the Turkish-Russian relationship – will ultimately depend on who – Erdogan's AKP or the Putin-Medvedev duo – better cope with their respective "home works."