

## CHAPTER 2

# TURKISH – RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE PUTIN ERA

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this scientific research is to observe the development of Russian-Turkish relations during the Putin era. The analysis also includes a historical review and strategical points as a geopolitical aspect. In the framework of Erdoğan's reforms at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this paper draws attention to new spheres for cooperation such as defense tenders and technology related to regional security. The Cyprus issue as a part of Turkey's international interest was included in the aspect of the Russian presence in the Mediterranean region. The situation in the Caucasian region and the Georgian crisis provided an agenda for Transcaucasian discussions between Russia and Turkey. This research does not bypass the energy issues including «Turkey stream» and Akkuyu. The Ukrainian crisis and the Crimean issue retain their relevance in contemporary Russian-Turkish relations given their significance within Turkey's regional policy. In addition, the SU-24 aircraft accident, which has a critical place in terms of the two countries' relations, and the nine month restoration process that followed this incident, is also addressed in this article. The Syrian crisis, which became a significant issue in the international arena due to its being related to cooperation in the sphere of regional security and defense, is also mentioned in this study.

**Keywords:** Russian-Turkish relations, Syrian crisis, Crimea, Transcaucasian region, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Until the 2000s, when Putin took power, Turkish-Russian relations were such that competition was more the order of the day than general cooperation. Along with the rise of Putin in Russia, and of the AKP in Turkey, the process of transition to a multidirectional partnership started with the building of relations rather than with competition. On September 18, 2000, at the General Assembly of the UN in New York, İgor İvanov -the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia-, and İsmail Cem -the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey- came together. Regional and international issues were addressed at the meeting. In October 2000, Mikhail Kasyanov –the Prime Minister of Russia- made an official visit to Turkey, and at the meeting with Bülent Ecevit –the Prime Minister of Turkey- he drew attention to the importance of transition from competition to cooperation in Turkish–Russian relations (Bdoyan, 2017). In the Putin period, the most significant step in terms of Turkish-Russian relations was Putin’s visit to Turkey in December 2004. That was the first official visit to Turkey by the Russian President. As the result of Putin’s visit, the “Joint Declaration Regarding Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey” was signed (*Ria*, 2019). During the visit to Turkey by Putin in December 2004, he stated that they would like to participate in a defense industry tender in Turkey as equal participants, and that they might be able to provide high quality products having competitive power in that field. The response of Prime Minister Erdoğan to that call was that the tenders of the defense industry, which had been cancelled in May 2004, would be opened again, and that the Russian companies would be able to participate in those tenders (*Tasam*, 2017) The most significant outcome of Putin’s visit was the signing of the “Joint Declaration Regarding Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership between Russia and Turkey”. In the declaration, it was specified that both countries were Eurasian countries, and the key role of both countries in ensuring peace, stability and welfare was emphasized.<sup>7</sup>

The year 2005 was a productive year especially in terms of economic relations. On January 12, 2005, Prime Minister Erdoğan undertook a visit to Russia along with 600 business people. During the meetings in Russia, Erdoğan and Putin mainly addressed trade, the natural gas supply and the status of Cyprus (Bdoyan, 2017). Another significant development that occurred in 2005 in terms of bilateral relations was the actualization of the Blue Stream project. That project was the largest investment that Russia had made in Turkey (Özbay, 2011). Another consequence of the Blue Stream which reflected on Turkish-Russian relations was that Putin, who had taken a stand on the side of Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus during the period of voting on the Annan Plan, declared that he would now support

the Annan Plan along with these developments, and that economic isolation against the TRNC was not fair (*Aljazeera*, 2017). However, in the same year, the decision of Duma, the lower wing of the Russian Parliament, accepting the so-called genocide again put tension into the relations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey made a press statement, and censured Russia for such a decision (Özbay, 2011). In the years 2006 and 2007, many high-level visits took place in order to strengthen the bilateral relations, and to improve cooperation in various fields. In June 2006, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, the President of the Republic, visited Moscow, and Bülent Arınç, the Turkish Parliamentary Speaker, also visited Moscow in June of the same year. In that period, Sergey Lavrov and Abdullah Gül, –the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the period- and other members of the governments met a few times (Bdoyan, 2017).

In 2008 a noteworthy change in bilateral relations took place which was a direct result of the Georgia war. Georgia started a military operation in South Ossetia which had declared its independence unilaterally. Russia, supporting South Ossetia, soon became involved in that war and Turkey preferred to preserve its objectivity at that time. In fact, Turkey responded to Georgia's request for military assistance only by meeting the demand of Georgia for electricity when the electricity in Georgia was cut by the decision of Putin, and by sending humanitarian aid to the region via the Turkish Red Crescent (*Aljazeera*, 2017). However, when Russia placed long-range rockets in the lands of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Armenia in 2008, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey declared that Turkey considered such action of Russia to be a clear threat against its security (*Politrus*, 2017).

The first step taken for a multidirectional strategic partnership in bilateral relations was the joint declaration signed between Russia and Turkey in 2009. The declaration stated that the cooperation to be actualized between Turkey and Russia was important not just in terms of both countries but also in terms of peace, security, stability and development in Eurasia (Svistunova, 2016). During the meeting, Gül (the President of Republic of Turkey) and Medvedev (the President of Russia) also addressed the problem regarding making the Turkish articulated lorries wait at the Russian customs. Medvedev stated that it was not applied only to Turkey, that it was a general situation for everyone, but that in case it constituted a significant problem for the Turkish articulated lorries that a solution might be found by forming a technical committee between the two countries (*BBC*, 2019).

The year 2010 was a significant year in terms of economic relations. During the meeting of Putin and Erdoğan in Moscow on January 13, 2010, an agreement was reached for the establishment of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (Topsakal, 2016). Sergey Kiriyyenko (the chairman of Rosatom the nuclear facility company of Russia) specified that most of the

shares of Akkuyu would belong to Russia, and that it would be the first nuclear power plant established beyond the borders of Russia (*BBC*, 2019). On May the 12<sup>th</sup> of the same year, during the visit to Turkey of Medvedev (the President of Russia), a cooperation agreement was signed between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Turkey regarding the construction and operation of the nuclear power plant at the Akkuyu site (Bdoyan, 2017). Moreover, a bilateral agreement on visa free movement between the two countries was signed. Accordingly, the citizens of the two countries are able to travel without getting a visa and the period of stay cannot exceed 30 days within 90 days (*DW*, 2019). These steps taken between Russia and Turkey were significant and indicated that bilateral relations were well. However, a development that occurred in 2012 became an indication that the relations between the two countries would enter a new period. In October 2012, a Russian plane taking off from Moscow and going to Damascus was forced to land at Ankara. The reason why the plane was forced to land by F-16 jets was the suspicion that it might contain weapons and ammunition that would be delivered to Damascus. Yet, that incident did not reach a level which would affect the economic cooperation between the two countries (*Aljazeera*, 2017). During the Istanbul visit of Putin on 3 December 2012, the problem of Syria was mainly addressed. Despite Turkey and Russia suggesting different methods for the solution of the Syrian problem, and despite the fact that Russia had placed a Patriot missile defense system on the border of Turkey and Syria, 11 different cooperation agreements were signed between the two countries. The outcome of the visit was that the disputes in Syria would not be able to damage the economic relations between Turkey and Russia (Bdoyan, 2017).

In 2014, the incident that disrupted positive relations between the two countries was the Crimea issue. Crimea was affiliated to Russia through a “referendum” actualized on 16 March, 2014. Turkey became a part of this issue because Crimean Tatars are Turks and Crimea has a historical importance for Turkey. In fact, the issue was highly emphasized in the declarations of Turkey. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, in its declaration, criticized the pressure applied on Crimean Tatars in the process of the referendum, and expressed that it was “inacceptable” for these people to be deprived of security of life (*Bilgesam*, 2017). Prime Minister Erdoğan, who made a statement after the referendum, stated that Turkey shared the same opinion as Western countries regarding the territorial integrity of the Ukraine, that Turkey would be on the side of the Crimean Tatars, and that it would do all in its power for them not to suffer any harm (*Finans Gündem*, 2017). The tension that occurred regarding Crimea in 2014 could not forestall the cooperation in the economic field. In December 2014,

Putin visited Turkey with Russian ministers, business people, and the authorities of Gazprom. During that visit, Putin emphasized that bilateral commercial relations were much more important than disputes in political fields. Moreover, he announced that the South Stream project, planned for conveying Russian natural gas to European countries over the Black Sea but which had not yet been commenced, would be cancelled, and instead the parties were working on a new “Turk Stream” project which would convey the gas to Europe by reaching Greece over Thrace (*Aljazeera*, 2017).

The subject of Syria was another issue creating tension in bilateral relations. The problems caused by this issue between Turkey and Russia started after Russia’s increase of its military presence in the region. In that process, there were several encounters between Turkish and Russian soldiers as opposing sides in the war zone. (Demir, 2016). On October 15, 2015, a military committee under the leadership of Major General Dronov (the Deputy Commander of Air Forces of the Russian Federation) came to Turkey in order to discuss the incidences in Syria. In the written declaration provided by the Turkish General Staff, it was stated that the committee visited the General Staff for the purpose of clarifying the breaches of Turkish air space which had occurred on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of October 2015, and for the purpose of taking the required measures for non-recurrence of them (*Hürriyet*, 2017). However, the downing of a Russian warplane by fire opened by the Turks on 24 November 2015 brought the bilateral agreements regarding air space breaches to breaking point. The situation was so grave that Putin spoke of this incident in terms of “being shot from behind” (*Politrus*, 2017). Russia requested an apology and indemnity from Turkey by stating that it had not been involved in any breach of air space. In that period, Turkey’s response to this was that such an act had been undertaken in order to preserve its own security, and that it would not apologize for that (Erşen, 2016). The warplane crisis directly and negatively affected nearly all the fields of cooperation including that of energy. The Akkuyu nuclear power plant and the Turk Stream natural gas pipeline projects were suspended. On November 26, 2015, Aleksey Ulyukayev stated that the Turk Stream project had been included in the ‘special economic measures’ being applied against Turkey. And on December 3, Aleksander Novak (Russia’s Minister of Energy) stated that the Turk Stream project had been suspended in connection with the intergovernmental suspension of commission operations (Bdoyan, 2017).

A series of provocative acts on the part of Russia followed the warplane crisis. In December 2015, the incident of a Russian warship opening fire on a Turk fishing boat in the Aegean Sea was one example of this. In the declaration made by the Ministry of Defense of Russia, it was specified that the frigate named “Smetlivy” had opened fire for the purpose of preventing a

possible collision (*BBC*, 2017). Another incident was the sighting of a Russian soldier with a missile on his shoulder during the passage of a Russian warship named “Caesar Kunikov” through the Bosphorus strait in Istanbul. The reaction of Russia against the warplane crisis was not limited to these, and the Russian government started to impose severe sanctions against Turkey. On January 1 2016, Russia suspended the visa free regime between Turkey and Russia. In addition, Russia imposed the obligation of visas on the flight crews of passenger planes arriving from Turkey, in complete defiance of international rules (*Hürriyet*, 2017).

The warplane crisis also deeply affected the tourism sector in Turkey. Initially, Sergey Lavrov (Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs) warned Russian citizens not to travel to Turkey. And then at the command of the Federal Tourism Agency of Russia, all tour operators in Russia declared that they had stopped sales of trips to Turkey (*Turizm Global*, 2019). Another sanction applied after the warplane crisis was the prohibition applied on vegetables and fruits being imported from Turkey. Russia indicated that the reason for this ban was that pests had been identified on the products (*T24*, 2017). As the result of these economic sanctions applied after the warplane crisis, the import of Russia from Turkey receded to a level less than half compared to the same period of the previous year (Ulchenko, 2016).

Following the apology of President of Republic Erdoğan in June 2016, relations started to soften again. According to Russian specialist Lyudmila Kravchenko, the reason for the softening was the desire of Russia to actualize the Turk Stream project, in other words it was in the interests of the energy industry (*Gazete Duvar*, 2019). Another important step in terms of bilateral relations was Putin’s support message given via a phonecall to Erdoğan on the day after the coup attempt of July 15 (Svistunova, 2016). This convergence in the political field was also positively reflected on economic and martial relations. During the Putin-Erdoğan meeting in St. Petersburg on August 9, 2016, it was decided to establish a Turkish and Russian joint investment fund, and to have close cooperation regarding the defense industry. On August 11 2016, the first meeting of the formation intending to strengthen the political–martial cooperation regarding Syria was held. This meeting brought together Turkish and Russian intelligence, foreign affairs and general staff authorities. Another important development in the field of martial cooperation was the visit to Ankara by Gerasimov (Chief of General Staff of Russia) on September 16, 2016. The importance of that visit was the decision to establish a direct martial communication line between the two countries (Erşen, 2016). The incident of the assassination of the Russian Ambassador Karlov did not change this positive course in the relations of both countries. Erdoğan and Putin characterized this incident as a “provocation” for the prevention of the development of relations between the two countries (*Vesti*, 2017).

As a consequence of the martial cooperation between the two countries on December 20, 2016, a declaration was signed by the ministers of foreign affairs of Iran, Russia and Turkey. It stated what kinds of steps had to be taken for the finalization of the Syrian crisis. All three countries declared that they were supporting Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, and the role of the UN in the resolution of the Syrian crisis was emphasized (*Habertürk*, 2017).

On May 3, 2017, Erdoğan (President of the Republic of Turkey) met with Putin in Sochi. The main article on the agenda of the negotiations was the issue of economic cooperation. Following the meeting, the parties declared that they had come to some agreement regarding the removal of limitations on export to Russia of Turkish agricultural products, and visa liberalization for the Turkish citizens. In addition, the two presidents addressed the issue of the S-400 Russian anti-aircraft missile system and the establishment of secure zones in Syria. And at the meeting between Putin and Erdoğan at the G20 summit of 7-8 July, the Turk Stream, the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant and the resolution of the problem of Syria were discussed (Bdoyan, 2017). All these developments occurring between Turkey and Russia following the overcoming of the warplane crisis revealed that both parties' policies were willing to improve relations. On the other hand, there were particular issues that seemed hard to be solved. In fact, the declaration of Dmitry Peskov –the spokesperson of Kremlin– underlined the cooperation between Moscow and Ankara including the issue of Syria, but it also stated that these two countries were not in agreement on all issues emphasizing some specific fields where the duties of both countries are different. The declaration draws attention to these hitches in the relations between Russia and Turkey (*CNN Türk*, 2019). It is clear that one of the subjects of conflict between the two countries is Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea. Yet, it is being observed that Russia was making an effort to eliminate the concerns of Turkey regarding Crimea. In 2018, the article written by Sergey Aksenov –the President of Republic of Crimea– targeting the Turkish public opinion, was a development revealing the importance of this subject in bilateral relations. In his article, Aksenov had stated that the three languages of Russian, Ukrainian and Crimean – Tatar languages were being defined as official languages in the Constitutional Law of Crimea which was accepted in April 2014. He adds that it could be only dreamed of in the period of Ukraine. Aksenov also mentioned projects to do with lodging, day nursery, school, water and gas networks, sewerage system and road constructions where the Crimean Tatars live collectively within the scope of federal program for the year 2017. (*Sputnik News*, 2019). This statement indicates that the concerns of Turkey regarding Crimea were being considered seriously by Russia. Furthermore, Russia had offered

to restart the ferry services between Turkey and Crimea. Turkey had made the decision to stop the ferry services with Crimea by March 2017. Sergey Aksenov (the Prime Minister of Crimea) had declared in the previous April during the Yalta International Economic Forum that, “This is not something about us. We don’t have a problem with Turkey. If Turkey requests, there is no limitation regarding entrance to our ports. Everything is dependent on our partners.” (*Yeni Asya*, 2019). But even if Turkey wants to keep its relations with Russia in balance, it has a special sensitivity regarding Crimea because of the Crimean Tatars of its own race. In fact, after the meeting with Vladimir Zelenskiy –President of Republic of Ukraine- in August 2019, Erdoğan –President of the Republic- said that “Turkey does not and never will recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea.” He clearly underlined that Turkey would not step back on this subject (*Haberler*, 2019).

In addition to the issue of Crimea, another important hitch in the relations between the two countries is the issue of Syria. In the civil war of Syria that started in 2011, Russia and Iran took sides with Assad, in other words with Baath regime, and Turkey acted along with the USA-led Western coalition. In other words, Russia and Turkey were on different camps on the subject of Syria which has a very critical importance in terms of the interests of Russia in the Mediterranean Sea, and Turkey’s regional security. In this sense, an agreement on the issue of Syria was very crucial for the future of bilateral relations. At this point, Nur-Sultan meetings, where Iran is also involved, had been a significant step towards the solution of the Syrian crisis. The purpose of these meetings was to strengthen the decision of a ceasefire in Syria made on December 30, 2016. The process started by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan –President of the Republic of Turkey- and Vladimir Putin –President of Russia-. They decided to hold a meeting on January 23, 2017 at Nur Sultan the capital of Kazakhstan that would gather the parties being present in Syria (*BBC*, 2019). Nursultan Nazarbayev (the President of Kazakhstan) declared that his country was ready to host this meeting. In the declaration made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, it was stated that the meetings would commence on January 23, 2017, and end on January 24, and that they would continue for 24 hours in total. The participants were representatives of armed groups signing the decision of ceasefire and Staffan de Mistura, UN’s Special Representative for Syria. Syrian Kurds, which were kept outside of the ceasefire, were not invited to Nur-Sultan. In addition, USA did not send a formal delegation to the meeting, stating the process of change in its administration as the reason. It was also announced that the state would be represented by the ambassador who would attend the meeting as an observer (*Sputnik News*, 2019). At the meeting which ended on 24 January, Syria’s independence and territorial integrity were emphasized, it was

stated that a martial resolution of the issue was not possible. In addition, it was declared that the breaches of ceasefire would be minimized, and also it was specified that the required operations would be made for humanitarian aid to Syria and for the protection of civilians (Yılmaz, 2018). As of today the parties have held meetings 13 times. The 13<sup>th</sup> Nur-Sultan Meeting, being the last of these meetings, was actualized on the first of August 2019. The governments of Russia, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and representatives of armed opposition in Syria took part in the meeting and also UN, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon participated with the status of observer (*Sputnik News*, 2019). In the final declaration published by the end of the meetings by Russia, Turkey and Iran, it was declared that they were against all kinds of separatist plans for disrupting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria (*Haber Sol*, 2019). As has been observed, the common aspect in nearly all the Nur-Sultan Meetings had been the emphasis made on Syria's territorial integrity and the resolution of the problem through peaceful means. However, a statement made by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the President of Republic of Turkey, gave rise to a question mark regarding the resolution of the issue of Syria through peaceful means. He said, "We don't have even one more day to wait. At this juncture in time, we don't have any other choice than to proceed on our own way." As is well known, Turkey had made an agreement with USA on August 7 regarding the establishment of a safe zone in the north of Syria. Despite the fact that the absence of this zone was disturbing Turkey, the allies of NATO remained incapable of clarifying this issue. Then, Erdoğan made this statement (*T24*, 2019). Upon that, Dimitri Peskov –the spokesman of Kremlin- said that Russia was closely following-up Ankara's declarations regarding a possible operation towards Syrian Kurds and also that Turkey has the right to defend itself against the terrorists, but that the sovereignty of Syria should be respected (*Ria*, 2019). And then, a declaration was also made by Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia. Lavrov stated that USA was not ready to consider the rightful requests of Turkey regarding the status in the northeast of Syria. In this sense the declaration of Erdoğan –the President of Republic of Turkey- was very reasonable (*Ria*, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Time will show what kind of a course the process in Crimea or Syria will have, and what its effect will be on Turkish and Russian relations. However, when the events experienced until today are assessed, we can easily say that the Turkish and Russian relationship in the Putin era is one in which cooperation comes to the forefront despite the disputes arising from time to time. Even if the bilateral relations had been negatively affected by the incidents arising after the initiation of the Arab Spring in the Middle East and from the developments

in Ukraine, the cooperation in the economic field would have continued to improve. But the downing of the Russian warplane in 2015 caused a significant rift in the relations between Turkey and Russia, and all relations came to a breaking point. Following the apology of the President of the Republic, Erdoğan, from Moscow in June 2016, the crisis was averted, and relations started to be strengthened again. Since 2016 until today, many projects in various fields such as trade, tourism, agriculture and energy have been realized and are continuing to be actualized between the two countries.

Considering the interests of USA in the Middle East, and its cooperation with the PKK and with DUP being its extension in Syria, carrying out relations with Russia seems to be for the benefit of Turkey. It is clear that convergence with Russia will affect international relations, and that it will indicate a disruption of relations with USA. In the article of Matiya Şeriş under the heading “Is a bright future expected from the alliance of Russia and Turkey?”, the following statement can be read: “A good or bad state of bilateral relations between Russia and Turkey directs the foreign policy. Other governments such as Israel, Iran, the countries of the Persian Gulf, the European Union and USA are being affected by Turkish and Russia relations. If the Turks establish good relations with the Russians, they won’t need to ally with West.” (*İnosmi*, 2019). According to this statement, even if it is an exaggerated expression, it is an expected result that convergence with Russia would negatively affect relations with the West. However, as long as it is for the benefit of Turkey, it is clear that Turkey will take the required risks and try to keep relations with the West in balance as much as possible. In this sense, it is very important for Russia and Turkey to be able to carry out a policy based on cooperation without allowing the conflicts of interest experienced by them to negatively affect the bilateral relations, especially regarding the issues of Crimea and Syria.

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