

## RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

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**Abstract:** The history of Russian-Turkish relations extends far into the past and is marked by numerous striking moments and unexpected turns. The nature of their relations, far beyond mere trade connections, has been shaped by mutual conflicts, as evidenced by the fact that Turks, more frequently than other nations, have been adversaries of Russia on the battlefield. The relations between Russia and Turkey are characterised by complexity and cooperative competition: on the one hand, there is an increase in economic collaboration and exchanges, coupled with the intensification of military-technical cooperation, and on the other hand, support for mutually confronted forces in conflict zones in North Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Russia and Turkey endorse opposing belligerents in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, but their interests do not necessarily clash. As revisionist powers aspiring to restore regional and global influence, they do not view favourably the expansion of influence by the other party. In contrast to past times, when geopolitical disputes were settled through direct military confrontation, these two powers now engage indirectly, employing intermediaries. Despite geopolitical rivalry, the challenges of the regional and global strategic environment are increasingly aligning the foreign policy positions and actions of Russia and Turkey. The pragmatic partnership between the two countries rests on two key pillars. The first is mutual distrust towards the West, and the second is benefit, primarily from the economic cooperation between the two nations. Such a relationship between the two countries is also discernible in the Ukrainian crisis. The implications for the Balkans and Serbia, in terms of the results of mutual relations between Russia and Turkey, are currently relatively favourable, as the current mutual relations between these countries are good and relatively stable, with certain oscillations on specific crisis issues.

**Keywords:** Russia, Turkey, relations, Ukraine crisis, Western Balkan.

### Introduction

The contemporary foreign policy actions and mutual relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey are shaped by the

shifting global power dynamics as we transition from the old to the new millennium. After almost five centuries of Western dominance, first by European powers from the 16th to the 19th century and then by the United States of America in the 20th century, the centre of global power is shifting from the West to the East, gradually but inexorably (Miršajmer, 2017, pp. 29-31). The decline of Western power and the re-establishment of a multipolar world have led to a more active participation of rising powers like China, Russia, and India in global politics in the current redistribution of global power, encouraging their foreign policy agenda in that direction (Vuletić, Đorđević, 2021, p. 53; Đukić, Vuletić, 2023, p. 621).

The described agenda is not a novelty, as the history of international relations demonstrates that great powers, which shape the global system, are in constant competition for power. They actively seek opportunities to alter the distribution of global power in their favour. In support of this, the theory of long cycles indicates that the aforementioned struggle is most evident in the period of imbalance in the world in the global balance of power caused by the decline of the power of the hegemon when, as a rule, new rivals appear aiming to challenge the increasingly vulnerable world leader (Kegli, Vitkof, 2004, p. 167). Today, this is evident in the US's declining global dominance and the emergence of challengers to its global interests, as identified by American strategists and theoreticians. These challengers include not only traditional geopolitical rivals such as Russia and China but also confirmed strategic partners from the Cold War period, such as France, Germany, and the European Union in general, as well as Turkey.

The first diplomatic act in relations between Russia and Turkey was related to a document from 1492 regulating their maritime trade in the waters of the Black and Azov Seas. Their political-diplomatic relations were formally established in 1701 with the opening of the Russian embassy in Constantinople. Nevertheless, the nature of their relations was marked by mutual conflicts, far more than by trade ties. The Turks, more than any other nation, were adversaries of Russia on the battlefield. Their first war occurred at the end of the 16th century, and they clashed more than ten times over the centuries, culminating in the First World War (1914-1918). Most of these wars ended with Russia's victory, resulting in the expansion of its territories to the west and southwest through the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire. This expansion strengthened Russian influence in the world and raised suspicions among Western European countries (Iskendrov, 2020, p. 1).

After the First World War, a weakened Turkey shifted its focus towards internal development and societal reforms rather than pursuing global or

regional dominance. This period saw the nation rejecting its Ottoman past and embracing Western values, defining itself as a national and secular state. During most of the Second World War, it remained neutral, skillfully avoiding attempts by both the British and Germans to involve it in the conflict. It only joined the Allied Powers in February 1945, when the outcome of the war was already determined. The fear of Soviet influence spreading over Turkey led the US to turn towards this country of exceptional geopolitical importance in 1947. Throughout the Cold War, American-Turkish relations, primarily focused on security, remained relatively close. American policymakers recognised Turkey's strategic significance in their efforts to achieve global dominance and curb Soviet influence. Control over Turkey was crucial to containing the USSR and preventing it from accessing the ocean and warm seas. For the reasons stated above, Turkey has been the easternmost member of NATO since 1952 and a key component of the American Cold War strategy, as highlighted by Vračar and Šaranović (2016, 497, p. 504). As NATO's Eastern Mediterranean anchor, Turkey controls the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, restraining Russia's influence in the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and the Balkans. Russia and Turkey are direct rivals in the struggle for supremacy in the Balkans, with the potential to become significant geostrategic players (Stepić, 2016, pp. 479, 501).

### **Cooperation between Russia and Turkey**

The challenges of Turkey's external environment certainly affect its internal conditions as well. The consequences of the world economic crisis, which dates back to the time of the pandemic, significantly affect economic and financial events within the country. High inflation, currency devaluation in comparison to the US dollar, an increased unemployment rate, the price of basic goods and services, and other economic problems induce significant social problems in Turkish society and cause internal political instability. Cooperation rather than confrontation with Russia is the way the authorities in Turkey are trying to reduce some of their problems in the areas of security and economy. It is in this context that the pragmatic, and not allied, relations between Turkey and Russia should be viewed.

The economic partnership between Russia and Turkey has been robust and undisguised, and it is most recognised in the field of energy. It dates back to the time before the start of the Ukrainian crisis, but in the midst of its unfolding, that cooperation intensified. Since 2020, with the commissioning of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline, Turkey has become a

transit country of strategic importance for Russia. However, after blowing up two Nord Stream gas pipelines, Russia found a solution that would increase profits for itself, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, but not for Germany, which for many previous years has done everything to become the gas hub of Europe. Namely, in the background of the energy crisis that broke out during the Ukrainian conflict, Turkey gradually strengthened its position as an “energy hub”, which it now certainly uses as its trump card. In order to make up for the lack of gas delivery via the Nord Stream, Moscow launched an initiative, which Ankara accepted, to make Turkey a gas hub for the whole of Europe. It is assumed that it will be built in Thrace and will be supplied with Russian and Azerbaijani gas. With that project, Russia gets a double benefit. Firstly, it avoids the upper limit of the gas price in direct trade with Europe, and secondly, the gas price will be formed in Turkey, not in Europe. Statements by European officials indicate that the EU is determined to eliminate its energy dependence on Russia, but Russian estimates are such that Europeans will, at some point, return to Russian gas that is many times cheaper and of better quality than the one they currently import from the US (Đukić et al., 2022, p. 8).

Turkey, therefore, tries to maintain good relations with Russia despite numerous disagreements. It is increasing the volume of trade with Moscow in an attempt to stabilise the damaged economy. Against the background of problems with the Kurdish minority in Syria, which is supported by the US side, Turkey is using its partnership with Russia to restore its broken relations with the Syrian regime. Therefore, Ankara proposed to Moscow the organisation of a trilateral meeting in which, in addition to the Turkish and Russian ones, the Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad would also participate. Also, through the “Astana format”, Turkey, through Russia, is trying to improve relations with Iran, its important supplier of energy. However, while developing close economic relations with Russia and using Moscow as a mediator to improve relations with Syria and Iran, Turkey has consistently provided political and military support to Ukraine. In addition to the supply of combat drones since the beginning of the military operation, Turkey has sent an additional contingent of 42 BMC Kirpi-armoured combat vehicles to Ukraine.

Due to close economic relations with Russia and the non-introduction of sanctions, Turkey constantly suffers criticism from the West, both from the US and the European Union. Turkey is under the threat of US sanctions for exporting chemicals and microchips used by Russia in the military industry. It is evident that Turkey’s confrontation with the US and the EU

is taking on a progressive character over time, which certainly suits Russia in the midst of the Ukrainian crisis. That is why Moscow does not react in full capacity to the delivery of Turkish weapons to the Ukrainian side. Russia uses Ankara to mitigate the consequences of economic sanctions, especially in the field of energy, but also as a factor that could undermine NATO unity in the future. Moscow hopes that the process of accelerated polarisation of the world scene will further attract Turkey to its side, and this will certainly weaken the global position of the political West, primarily the US. The further development of Russian-Turkish relations during the Ukrainian crisis should be viewed in this light.

Since Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP) came to power in 2002, Turkey has gradually grown into a powerful regional power with significantly greater geopolitical ambitions. During all that time, Turkish foreign policy was guided by national and not necessarily Western interests. As a consequence of that, Turkey's cultural and thus political influence is strongly felt today in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa, practically in the entire area where the mighty Ottoman Empire once spread. In those regions, Turkey has an independent policy, which over time has turned into a stumbling block in its relations with the West. At the very beginning of Erdogan's rule, Turkey openly opposed the American invasion of Iraq. It has also had mixed views on the crisis in Libya and does not look favourably on US support for the Kurds in Syria. These are certainly moments that distance Turkey from Washington and its allies within the NATO Alliance. Certainly, this country is no longer ready to be limited by Washington in conducting an independent foreign policy.

In recent years, Erdogan has simply torn Turkey from the tight embrace of the United States, whose influence in that country has dominated almost since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The success of such a risky undertaking was supported by the economic and military strengthening of Turkey, which, among other things, required its rapprochement with Russia. Turkey's growing economy has become dependent on Russian energy sources and markets, and security problems, such as the Kurdish issue in Syria, have undermined Ankara's trust in Washington and turned it in Moscow's direction. The West is aware that Russian influence is deeply present in Turkey. That is why many Western politicians hoped that the Turkish leader would finally be defeated after more than two decades in power. On the other hand, Russian hopes were focused on the survival of Erdogan's regime. Moscow does not need a hostile regime in Ankara that

would control the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, as well as the movement of the Russian Black Sea fleet towards the Mediterranean and other seas.

The personal relations between Erdogan and Russian President Putin have become close over time. However, the cooperation between Turkey and Russia is not moving in the direction of establishing an alliance between the two countries. It can be defined, above all, as pragmatic, cautious, and limited. It was created on the basis of mutual mistrust towards the West, Turkey's suspicion of American support for the Syrian Kurds, and, of course, the benefits of economic cooperation between the two countries. However, Turkey is not ready to give up its membership in NATO or its candidature for membership in the European Union. Thus, Ankara and Moscow's political, economic, and security ties remain within limits that allow Turkey to achieve certain benefits without endangering its NATO membership, escalating open hostilities, or severing ties with Western countries entirely.

The importance of Turkey in the international arena should not be viewed only through the lens of the Ukrainian crisis. As one of the most militarily powerful members of NATO, a country with an extremely important geostrategic position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia (the Middle East), with complete control of the entrance to the Black Sea, and a regional power with widespread influence, Turkey's position in the international arena is becoming extremely important for the outcome of the current process of recomposing the international structure. Such a role by Turkey encourages Washington and, in general, the West to think that it is "an inconvenient partner that cannot be done without at the moment". That is why Washington does not give up the Turkish alliance lightly, but it is certainly ready to change Erdogan's regime.

Erdogan's many years of disobedience caused first suspicion in Washington and then open dissatisfaction with his policies. This was already evident in the case of Syria, where Turkey avoided a direct confrontation with Russia, which the US encouraged it to do. The turning of Turkey towards Russia after the failed coup, through the establishment of political and security cooperation with Moscow in Syria, then the purchase of Russian air defence systems S-400, the commissioning of the gas pipeline "Turkey Stream", the construction of a nuclear power plant in the province of Mersin by the Russian company "Rosatom", and the construction of a gas hub for Europe on Turkish soil at the initiative of the Russian side, is a more than obvious confirmation of the disobedience of one of the most loyal American allies until recently. Erdogan's refusal to follow the Western

agenda towards Moscow during the Ukraine crisis only added fuel to the fire and deepened Washington's dissatisfaction with Ankara. Dissatisfied with Erdogan's policy, the US certainly did not remain passive towards Turkey. Erdogan still holds the US responsible for the attempt to overthrow him during the failed coup in 2016. In addition, the US constantly undermines Erdogan's position through constant economic pressure, trying to give wind to the Turkish opposition.

In the context of international events, the relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey continue to represent a complex issue. Relations are characterised by increasing economic cooperation and exchange and intensifying military-technical cooperation while still supporting mutually confronting forces in the conflict areas of North Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Relations between Russia and Turkey are based on mutual recognition of security interests and numerous bilateral agreements. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia and Turkey have not been neighbours in a strictly geographical sense, but a rich legacy of historical relations and a multitude of current ties create a specific interconnectedness. Political efforts to build a "strategic partnership" resonated strongly in both societies, but events such as the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus contributed to the citizens of both countries becoming significantly disappointed in this rapprochement.

### **Russian-Turkish relations in the context of the armed conflict in Ukraine**

Ukraine is historically, geographically, and culturally closely tied with Russia. It is a Slavic, Orthodox country and part of the oldest Russian tradition. With a population of over 40 million and the largest territory in Europe, it has the potential to be a strong ally of Russia. This certainly represents a challenge for Western interests, primarily American. On the other hand, viewed as "anti-Russia", Ukraine represents a powerful instrument for curbing Russia's regional and global ambitions, possessing the potential for long-term destabilisation and even disintegration of the Russian state. Therefore, in addition to providing Russia with the opportunity to rise again to the level of a world power, Ukraine also represents its "weak point", that is, an area on which the very survival of Russian statehood may depend in the long term. The ideas of American strategists and politicians, from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, about the division of Russia into several states are well

known. In the midst of the Ukrainian crisis, which is certainly global in nature, those ideas are reviving and gaining political weight. Statements by Western officials, not only American but also European, are increasingly present in the public, calling for the use of the Ukrainian crisis for the economic weakening of Russia, all with the aim of causing its internal instability and, ultimately, the dismantling of its state territory. Ukraine's independence meant for Russia the loss of a vast, fertile, raw material-rich, energy-industrially developed, and geopolitically significant territory (Bżeżinski, 2001, p. 89).

The role of Turkey in the Ukrainian crisis is noteworthy considering the global character that the crisis has had from the very beginning. The territory of Ukraine represents only the military aspect of a fairly wide battlefield on which the hybrid conflict of the political West with Russia, and indirectly with other challengers of Western supremacy, is currently taking place. At the height of the crisis in which the West is evidently losing its influence in Africa and the Middle East, when significant financial and military aid to Ukraine is not producing results on the battlefield, Turkey's position is certainly gaining strategic importance. The West is aware of the fact that Turkey and Russia are traditional geopolitical rivals in the Black Sea region. Turkey uses Ukraine as an instrument to contain Russian influence in the region, and in this sense, it constantly provides military aid and develops military cooperation with this country. Still, in a way, the West benefits from Turkey's closeness to Russia. It is the only NATO member that has open communication with Moscow and influence over the establishment in the Kremlin. It is in this context that Turkey's persuasion of Moscow to end the maritime blockade of the export of Ukrainian grain should be viewed. During the crisis, Erdogan repeatedly played the Western card. Certainly an important move in recent times is that, after a long hesitation, he approved the entry of Finland into NATO, which is certainly important because of its long border with Russia.

The events in Ukraine undoubtedly have the potential for a global crisis, since the "hybrid confrontation" between the West and Russia has been taking place on its territory for years. After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine represented an area in which the interests of Russia and the Western powers clashed (Vuletić, Milenković, 2023, p. 185). The primary goal of the US in Ukraine, as well as in Belarus, is to prevent the spread of Russian influence in the depths of European space and to keep Russia at the level of a regional power, that is, to prevent its growth into an "equal partner". This would represent at least one step in the direction of stopping, or at least slowing



down, the process of the emergence of a multipolar world in which Russia, along with China, plays a leading role. That is why, since the end of the Cold War, Ukraine has been a geostrategic space in which the US tries to exert a strong influence in order to get militarily closer to Russia's borders with the aim of containing it. In other words, by controlling the territory of Ukraine (and Belarus), the US is trying to break down the existing strategic barrier of Russia towards NATO. Ukraine falling under American influence, in a geo-economic sense, would mean the separation of Russia from the rest of Europe, primarily by putting out of service the wide network of Russian gas pipelines that extend across Ukrainian territory. This would, in accordance with American interests, end European dependence on Russian gas and, at the same time, eliminate Russia's influence on political events within the European area.

In addition to the escalation of the conflict in all dimensions, the Ukrainian crisis is further complicated by the involvement of other global and regional actors, certainly including Turkey. Like the West, Turkey does not look favourably on the expansion of Russia's influence and its growth into a regional and great power. The strengthening of Russian influence began with the military intervention in Georgia in 2008, further progressing with the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine since 2014, as well as with the military intervention in Syria since 2015. Such an action taken by Russia poses a threat not only to Turkey's regional interests but also to its global interests. Namely, Moscow becomes an attractive partner for all those countries where Turkey wields considerable influence, such as Libya or Syria. That is the reason why Turkey, years ago, used Ukraine as an instrument to curb Russian influence in the Black Sea region. Nevertheless, despite its NATO membership, Turkey's political objectives in Ukraine are not as overtly aimed at undermining Russia as those of Western countries. Primarily, Turkey lacks the requisite means, namely the power, for such endeavours, and secondly, in recent years, Turkey has become more and more dependent on Russia in terms of economy and security.

In order to counteract the spread of Russian influence in the region, Turkey has been fostering a partnership with Ukraine for years, irrespective of Western involvement. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ankara openly supported the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, which it continues to do unequivocally. In recent years, Turkey has become one of the leading investors in Ukraine, and the two countries have signed a free trade agreement. In addition to providing diplomatic support and deepening economic cooperation, Turkey has also developed military

relations with this country. During 2019, Ukraine purchased Turkish combat drones of the “Bayraktar” type, and a year later, the two countries signed important agreements in the field of defence, facilitating the provision of Turkish weaponry to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Just prior to the commencement of the Russian “special military operation”, the two countries also signed an agreement on the joint production of Turkish combat drones in Ukraine.

With the start of the Russian “special military operation”, the events in Ukraine take on a fundamentally new significance for Turkey’s foreign policy agenda and the development of its relations with Russia. The global implications of the Ukrainian crisis have outweighed the importance of Turkey’s regional interests and shaped its relations with Russia in a manner divergent from initial assumptions. Despite their disagreement on many issues, it is evident that the challenges presented by the global strategic landscape are gradually aligning the foreign policy stances and actions of the two countries. Despite being competing powers, they are forced to build a pragmatic partnership to confront common challenges that surpass the significance of their regional competition.

Without a doubt, Ukraine is the area where Russia is trying to regain its regional and global influence. However, of greater significance is the fact that among the countries of Central Asia, Ukraine represents a “vulnerable locus” through which the West is trying to endanger the very existence of the Russian state. That makes it a space of vital importance for Russian interests. On the other hand, Ukraine has no such importance for Turkey. Vital Turkish interests are currently located in the area of northern Syria and Iraq, which is inhabited by a majority Kurdish population, otherwise closely linked to the separatist-oriented Kurdish population in the south of Turkey. Therefore, the Kurdish question is of vital importance to Turkish national interests. However, Ukraine does not pose threats to Turkey’s vital interests; rather, it holds significance in terms of advancing its regional influence. According to official Ankara, Ukraine is pivotal for fostering stability, security, peace, and prosperity in the Black Sea region. Yet, underlying this stance is Turkey’s utilisation of Ukraine as a tool to counteract rival Russian influence in the region.

The political partnership between Russia and Turkey lacks substantial strength. It would be more accurate to describe it as prudent, which can be seen through Turkey’s political actions at the scene of the Ukrainian crisis. Since the onset of the Russian military operation in Ukraine, Ankara has been trying to position itself as a neutral intermediary between Moscow and

Kiev, as well as between Russia and the West. At the beginning of the crisis, Turkey hosted negotiations between Moscow and Kiev; although they were unsuccessful, it successfully mediated the exchange of Russian and Ukrainian prisoners. Turkey, in fact, plays a multiple role in Ukraine, trying not to hold grudges against Russia or the West while at the same time gaining benefits from both sides. Furthermore, Turkey seeks to garner favour with the international community. This is exemplified by the agreement on the free export of Ukrainian grain brokered by Turkey with the involvement of Russia, Ukraine, and the UN. The agreement entailed facilitating the export of grain that was stalled in Ukrainian ports along the Black Sea. This export was crucial in addressing the global food shortage crisis, which posed a significant humanitarian threat.

Despite the narrative of pursuing a neutral policy towards the Ukrainian crisis, Turkey provided unequivocal support to Ukraine until the commencement of the Russian military operation. Ankara's actions were met with disapproval from Moscow, resulting in a response from Russia. Indeed, Moscow refrained from taking drastic measures akin to the economic sanctions imposed on Turkey in 2015 following the downing of a Russian fighter jet over Syria. Although less impactful on the Turkish economy, Russia's actions conveyed a clear warning message. In the lead-up to the military operation in Ukraine, Russia rejected Turkey's offers for mediation. Furthermore, to express its discontent with Turkey's policies, Russia repeatedly leveraged Turkey's economic dependence. In 2021, following a meeting between the Turkish president and his Ukrainian counterpart, Russia suspended commercial flights to Turkey. Subsequently, Russia repeatedly rejected Turkish agricultural products, citing alleged pesticide contamination. It is evident that these economic measures, along with others, aligned with Moscow's disapproval of Ankara's perceived unfavourable political actions towards Kiev.

The onset of the Russian military operation in Ukraine prompted significant changes in Turkish policy. The newly established circumstances narrowed the scope of Turkey's previously perceived neutral political engagement. Given the strained and openly hostile relations between the West and Russia, it was anticipated that Turkey would adopt a more assertive stance as one of the parties involved in the conflict. In formulating its policy towards the Ukrainian crisis, Turkey was guided by the recognition that the American policy of sanctioning Russia, which was unequivocally supported by other NATO members, poses significant risks to its economy. Turkey's decision not to align with such a policy was further motivated by

the recognition that, unlike other NATO members, it has lacked complementary interests with the US on many issues for an extended period. Turkey's security policy in Syria no longer receives the same level of support from the US and the West as it did at the onset of the crisis. It was largely shaped by Turkish national interests as well as the outcomes of trilateral cooperation with Russia and Iran within the "Astana format". Overall, Turkey's mistrust towards the West, concerns regarding the Kurdish issue, and the challenging economic situation within the country have led to its apparent adoption of a neutral policy towards the Ukrainian crisis.

As a member of NATO, which maintains good relations with both Ukraine and Russia, Turkey is acceptable to the West in the role of negotiator. Specifically, for the West, it is unacceptable for the negotiating party to be a country perceived as sympathetic to Russia. Nevertheless, such a stance enables Turkey to assert certain concessions from the West and NATO, as evidenced by its role in the admission process of Sweden and Finland to the organisation. The Kurdish issue stands as a significant obstacle in the relations between Turkey and the US, and the Ukrainian crisis provides a favourable opportunity to raise this issue within the framework of NATO, as was evident during the reception of Sweden and Finland.

Russia perceives Turkey as a factor that undermines the unity of the Alliance, a perception that has been reinforced by the commencement of the Russian military operation. In order to appease the West, Turkey continues its diplomatic efforts to support Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, it also criticises certain NATO members for their role in exacerbating the conflict. During a period when Russia encountered an almost complete financial and economic blockade by the West and lacked clear allies or declared support from other countries for its military venture in Ukraine, Turkey opted not to align with Western policy and maintained a neutral stance. Indeed, Turkey condemned Russia for its aggression but refrained from joining the Western sanctions. Furthermore, in the initial stages of the war, Turkey opted not to close its airspace to Russian flights, a move that Western countries had taken. However, at the explicit request of Ukraine, Turkey closed the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. Remarkably, this move by Turkey was also supported by Russia. By closing these sea passages, Turkey not only prevented the entry of Russian military ships into the Black Sea, as desired by Ukraine, but also hindered NATO ships from entering, a development that aligned with Russia's interests. Two weeks after the onset of the conflict, Turkey also declined NATO's invitation to provide Ukraine

with Russian S-400 air defence systems in exchange for American Patriot systems, as Slovakia did with its S-300 devices, for instance.

Undoubtedly, Ankara's various actions during the Ukrainian crisis could be characterised, if not as partnership, then at least as benevolent towards Moscow. Russia is cognizant of Turkey's current position and is increasingly welcoming its involvement in mediating the crisis. After the initial talks were held in Belarus, the subsequent round of negotiations took place in Turkey. Despite not yielding significant results, Turkey persisted in mediating the crisis. The first significant strides in its mediation efforts were achieved through the agreement brokered between Russia and Ukraine regarding the export of grain. This agreement effectively lifted the wartime halt on the export of several million metric tonnes of Ukrainian grain. The direction of Turkish mediation will depend significantly not only on the willingness of the warring parties but also on Turkey's own stance.

It is crucial for Turkey that Ukraine maintains its integrity and sovereignty, as it serves as a bulwark against the expansion of Russian influence along the northern coast of the Black Sea. Nevertheless, we cannot discount the possibility that Turkey may not agree with Ukraine's close association with the West. In doing so, Turkey would risk losing opportunities to expand its influence in Ukraine and the broader region. In this regard, it's important to consider Turkish perspectives on the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, as there is a certain analogy with the situation in Ukraine. The full integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia (due to the Raška region and the so-called Preševo Valley), and potentially Kosovo within the framework of the Western political sphere would result in a reduction of space for the expansion of Turkish influence in that region of Europe. Hence, it could be inferred that the non-integrated regions of the Western Balkans align more closely with Turkish interests. Similarly, an independent and neutral Ukraine, unaligned with either the East or the West, corresponds to Turkey's preferences. It is essential for Turkey that Ukraine remains a buffer zone between the two conflicting geopolitical blocs, as this allows for the unimpeded expansion of Turkish influence in the Black Sea region.

### **Russian and Turkish engagement in the Western Balkans**

Both Turkey, which has been present in the Balkans since the 14th century during the Ottoman occupation, and Russia, which expanded westward and southwestward through the Balkan territories of the Ottoman

Empire since the 18th century, have profoundly influenced Balkan events. During that period, Russia consistently asserted itself as a great power, particularly in conflicts with Turkey, exerting significant influence on Balkan affairs and emerging as one of the primary geopolitical actors in the region. While the civilizational role of Russia in the Balkans and its connection with the Orthodox Balkan peoples is widely acknowledged, it is often overlooked or intentionally disregarded that Russian foreign policy towards the Balkans has consistently been driven by geostrategic interests, particularly regarding access to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, i.e., aspirations for access to the Mediterranean (warm seas). Russian wars against Turkey progressively weakened the Ottoman Empire's resistance, bolstered nationalist movements in the Balkans, and reinforced Russia's perceived role as the protector of Orthodoxy (Terzić, 2021, pp. 705-708).

Russia's interest in the Balkans persisted beyond the creation of the Soviet Union. Despite the rejection of pan-Slavism and Orthodoxy as the basis for the Soviet presence in the Balkans in line with the ruling communist ideology, the Soviet Union maintained its claim to Turkish territories and interest in controlling the straits. At the outset of the 1990s, following the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc, the Cold War ended, leading to a decade characterised by unipolar global dominance by the US. These profound changes reverberated throughout the Balkans like a geopolitical earthquake, with the epicentre situated in the multi-national Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which, akin to a testing ground for assessing the influence of major powers, vanished from the political map of Europe. During this period, Turkey skillfully exploited the ensuing geopolitical region and, in alignment with American interests, actively engaged in the Balkan crisis.

The term Western Balkans refers to the region comprised of the newly formed states on the territory of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), excluding those that have already joined the European Union (Slovenia and Croatia), and including Albania. The term Western Balkans is relatively recent, initially used informally but quickly gaining acceptance as an official designation in international politics and even appearing in some international documents (Svilar, 2010, pp. 503-504). The introduction of the term Western Balkans nearly coincides with the gradual development of the European Union's regional approach to the conflict-ridden region, which has been beset by conflicts for several years (Đukanović, 2009, p. 496). The term Western Balkans was also introduced by the European Union, delineating its strategy through a specialised

programme of economic, financial, political, expert, and other assistance aimed at that region of the Balkans. The Western Balkans is not a geopolitical or geostrategic category; rather, it is exclusively a practical political-economic term, serving as a common designation for a subset of countries in the Southeast European region (Vuletić, 2018, p. 41).

Even years after the end of the armed conflicts, the Western Balkans continues to be a distinct region characterised by its political, economic, and security attributes. Clearly, this is a geopolitically significant area where armed conflicts occurred in the recent past, and the political and security situation remains unstable even today. Owing to its crucial geopolitical and geostrategic position, the Western Balkans serves as a focal point where the diverse strategic interests of America, Europe, and Asia, as well as the Christian and Islamic worlds, collide and intertwine.

The influence of Turkey on the area of the Western Balkans is increasingly strong, and such a trend will continue with the strengthening of Turkish economic power and the conduct of a more independent foreign policy in relation to the US and NATO. The foundation of Turkey's contemporary political influence in the Western Balkans is precisely the Muslim communities of Albanians and Bosniaks, with whom they have close relations. Turkey's short-term and medium-term objectives in the Balkans entail bolstering Bosnia and Albania. The future of Bosniaks and Albanians is pivotal for the trajectory of the entire Balkan region. Turkey's foremost priority in the Balkans lies in ensuring security for societies that, by remaining in their respective areas, align their futures with Turkey's regional power and influence. For Turkey, this scenario represents not only a responsibility but also the most significant avenue for shaping its sphere of influence in the Balkans (Talić et al., 2015, pp. 75-80; Tanasković, 2010, pp. 92-94; Proroković, 2012, pp. 463-464, 724-725). In this context, Turkey's contribution includes the donation and sale of specific weapons and equipment to the Kosovo Security Forces, such as drones like the "Bayraktar TB2", anti-tank systems like the "OMTAS" with a range of up to 4500 metres, howitzers such as the 105mm calibre "Boran," infantry fighting vehicles like the "Vuran", and mortars like the 120mm calibre "ALKAR".

Besides the political dimension, the economic aspect also plays a crucial role. Turkey perceives itself as a significant regional investor, particularly in the infrastructure, construction, agriculture, trade, and tourism sectors. The primary objective of this foreign policy is to expand economic diplomacy throughout the entire Western Balkans region. This is evidenced by the presence of numerous prominent companies in the construction

sector, particularly in highway construction. Turkey is actively involved in road construction projects in the Balkans, particularly in Albania and Kosovo, but also in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with efforts focused on linking traffic corridors E-10 and E-8. Turkey aims to forge connections between the Balkans, the Middle East, and Asia. Consequently, Turkey is keen on investing in collaborative projects such as transport infrastructure and capacities, with a clear emphasis on horizontal east-west directions, aimed at linking territories with significant Muslim populations. Turkey's engagement in the Balkans places strong emphasis on the economic dimension, particularly considering that many countries in the region are undergoing transition periods where every investment is welcomed (Tanasković, 2010, pp. 102-103).

On the other hand, Russia endeavours to pursue its long-term political and economic interests in the Western Balkans, primarily focused on exerting influence over the Orthodox population, thereby encompassing both political and economic dimensions. Russia's political interests in the region include diminishing NATO's influence and fulfilling its centuries-old aspiration of gaining access to warm seas. However, Russia is acting very cautiously in this effort, guided by the changed geopolitical situation in the Western Balkans, in which certain countries, such as Montenegro, have reoriented themselves to a western course. Therefore, Russia's foreign policy emphasis on this region lies in restoring traditional civilizational ties and primarily in fostering economic cooperation, particularly in the energy sector. This involves developing infrastructure to transport energy products from Russia to the European market. Russian energy policy in the region is prominently demonstrated through the strategy of constructing new oil and gas pipelines. This strategy aims to circumvent countries that have fallen under political dependence on the US, thereby bypassing existing gas pipelines built during the Soviet Union era. In this context, the construction of gas pipelines like the "South Stream" and "Turkish Stream" holds particular significance. The interests of Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans were notably manifested during the construction of the Balkan gas stream. This project connects Russia and Turkey via the Black Sea and extends through Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and Croatia, aiming to supply gas to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe while bypassing Ukraine. Plans were underway to extend the gas pipeline to include the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

All forms of cooperation between Russia and Turkey, including diplomatic, military, and economic collaborations, particularly long-term



engagements in the energy sector, would serve to stabilise conditions in the Western Balkans. Such stability is of mutual interest to both Russia and Turkey, ultimately benefiting the countries in the region. Given such relations, there exists the potential for a pragmatic resolution of disputes between Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans, akin to their approaches in the Caucasus and the Middle East. Additionally, similar avenues for resolution could be explored for disputes involving Serbia, Bosnia, and Albania. Consequently, this approach could pave the way for resolving longstanding issues over a more extended period, particularly concerning Kosovo and Republika Srpska, which are vital national interests of the Republic of Serbia.

Turkey's foreign policy imperative in the Balkans is to foster and maintain positive relations with all countries in the region. Serbia holds a central position in the Balkans, being the largest country in terms of land area. Moreover, it serves as a crucial transit route from Asia Minor to Europe due to its geographical location. Serbia's strategic geographical location renders it highly significant for Turkish interests. Secondly, Turkey recognises Serbia's substantial political influence in the region, understanding that its involvement is crucial for resolving any major regional political issue. Serbia's soft power extends particularly to those Balkan countries within Turkey's sphere of interest. These are countries where a significant Muslim population coexists with a Serbian or Orthodox population, stretching from Bosnia and Herzegovina through Montenegro to North Macedonia. Therefore, it is crucial for Turkey to maintain positive political relations with Serbia, as it views Serbia as a key country for preserving regional stability.

Russia supports the implementation of the Dayton Agreement and the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a stance shared by Turkey, which has a vested interest in the region. At the bilateral meeting of foreign ministers at the beginning of January 2022, Turkey and Russia confirmed their support for the restoration of the internal political dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the firm basis of the Dayton principles and in the interest of all state-forming peoples, with an agreement on the continuation of constructive cooperation on these issues.

Undoubtedly, the cultural aspect of Turkey's soft power holds significant influence among the Muslim population of the Balkans, particularly among the Bosniaks. However, in Serbia, Turkish influence is generally minimal, except in the Raška-Polimlje region. While not insignificant, this influence alone is insufficient to yield a substantial impact

on political trends in Serbia. Turkey compensates for this deficiency with another component of soft power: its economy. The factor that can bring Serbia, as a developing country, closer to Turkey is precisely its economic interests. Turkey recognises this, and therein lies the answer to the frequently asked question of why Turkey favours Serbia over other countries in the region in terms of economic cooperation.

Despite the evident improvement in Serbian-Turkish relations, it should be emphasised that they are the result of the current constellation of forces, both regionally and globally. There should be no doubt that under different circumstances, if permitted or necessitated, Turkey would readily employ hard power to safeguard or advance its interests in the region. Recent history in the Balkans indeed underscores this reality. Turkey's readiness to employ force to safeguard its interests is unequivocally demonstrated by its actions in Libya, Syria, and the Caucasus. In the Balkans, Turkey is currently exerting its hard power indirectly, such as by providing military assistance to the so-called Kosovo security forces.

Russia and Turkey, despite their divergent interests in the Balkans, have thrown their support behind Serbia's "Open Balkans" Initiative, which was agreed upon by Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania. This initiative extends an open invitation for the accession of Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the temporary institutions in Pristina. The initiative aims to facilitate the movement of people, goods, capital, and services among the signatory states. Both Russia and Turkey advocate for Serbia's military neutrality. Serbia currently participates in the CSTO as an observer, although full membership is precluded by its accession to the European Union. Additionally, Serbia cooperates with NATO through its membership in the "Partnership for Peace" program. Serbia's military neutrality allows for military and technical cooperation and the procurement of weapons and military equipment from both NATO and CSTO member states, as well as from third countries. However, this cooperation has been significantly limited since the start of the war in Ukraine, as well as due to the sanctions imposed by the EU and the US against Russia and Belarus.

Delaying the accession of the Western Balkans to the European integration process creates space for a more intense and meaningful influence of Russia and Turkey in the region. In the long term, this poses a threat to the interests of the EU and the US, leading to their open concern. The West is thus confronted with a significant dilemma: whether to accelerate the European integration of this region despite its existing challenges or to prolong the process until the region meets the required

standards, which would inevitably lead to further expansion of Russian and Turkish influence. The situation is further complicated by the increasingly aligned foreign policy interests of Russia and Turkey, which may have implications for the Western Balkans.

## Conclusion

The history of Russian-Turkish relations is characterised by a long-standing geopolitical rivalry. Despite the recently established partnership, the fundamental nature of relations between the two countries has not changed. In the early 21st century, their relationship merely adapted to the challenges of the regional and global strategic environment, leading to a convergence of their foreign policy positions. The interests of Russia and Turkey continue to intersect in the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Black Sea region, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. As revisionist powers seek to regain their regional and global influence, they do not view favourably the expanding influence of the other side. Unlike past times, when geopolitical disputes were resolved through direct military confrontation, these powers now engage indirectly through their proxies. Hence, in terms of pursuing their interests in the post-Soviet and Euro-Asian space, Ukraine occupies a significant position in the strategic visions and foreign policy actions of both powers.

Following the Cold War, Ukraine emerged as a focal point for regional competition between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey. For post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine holds particular significance, serving not only as a battleground for regaining regional and global influence but also as a critical factor in ensuring the survival of its statehood. Turkey, on the other hand, strategically leverages Ukraine to counterbalance the prevailing Russian influence within the Black Sea region. Contrary to initial expectations of heightened regional confrontation between Russia and Turkey amid the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis, it instead affirmed and even fortified the pragmatic partnership between the two nations. The evolving challenges of the global strategic landscape are progressively aligning the foreign policy stances and actions of both nations, temporarily relegating their regional rivalry to a secondary position. Russia seeks to alleviate the adverse effects of Western sanctions through economic cooperation with Turkey, while Turkey endeavours to stabilise its economy by expanding trade volume with Moscow. The nature of the world order and the distribution of global power will undoubtedly continue to influence

Russian-Turkish relations. Turkey, seizing the opportunity, will seek to enhance its position in the emerging multipolar world.

In the Western Balkans, as in other regions, the interests of Russia and Turkey do not completely align. Turkey, as a NATO member, has greater latitude for economic investments and facilitating economic exchange with the European Union, whereas Russia's opportunities in this regard are more limited. Russia aims to limit NATO's influence to some extent by promoting the neutrality of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is pursued through economic, political, and military-technical cooperation with Serbia and the Republika Srpska. It is reasonable to anticipate that the shared interests of Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans, along with their established cooperation and interdependence in other regions, will foster collaboration in this area as well. Such cooperation could have notable implications for the economies of Balkan states and contribute to peaceful resolutions of security challenges that afflict the region. In the current geopolitical context, while Serbia and Turkey have experienced a degree of rapprochement, their ties remain inherently fragile and susceptible to numerous challenges. These challenges not only threaten economic relations but also pose the risk of complete separation. Serbian-Turkish relations should be analysed within the broader framework of geopolitical and security dynamics unfolding at both the global and regional levels.

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