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Sakip Sabancı International Research Award

THE ANATOMY OF TURKISH – RUSSIAN RELATIONS

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“We are determined to upgrade relations to the highest level.”

– Vladimir Putin during his official visit to Turkey in December 2004

“By the order of the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin I am presenting you with a medal for your contribution to Russian-Turkish friendship,” Piotr Stegny, Russian Ambassador to Ankara, triumphantly announced. Speaking on December 9, 2005, at the 85th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Turkish Republic, Stegny presented Russia’s prestigious medals to prominent Turkish politicians, academics, and businessmen. Turkey’s foreign minister Abdullah Gul, members of the Turkish bureaucracy, columnists, and other dignitaries were among an enthusiastic crowd that was celebrating the new level of relations between the Russian Federation and Turkey. Indeed, given the bloody, violent, and bitter history of Turkish-Russian relations, the Russian role in the Eastern Question and the dismemberment of Ottoman Turkey as well as the Cold War, the ceremony signified a remarkable turnaround in bilateral relations between the two countries. However, over the last five years traditionally confrontational relations have given way to more recent regional developments in shaping the Turkish-Russian relationship, a bond that has grown stronger by alienation from other influential actors on the world stage.

The Politics: Deepening Multidimensional Partnership

“We do not have a policy toward Russia. We do the exact opposite of whatever Ambassador Ignatiev is saying.”

– Ottoman statesman on Turkish policy toward Russia in the 19th century

“Our views totally coincide with regard to the situation in the region, as well as to issues concerning to the preservation of stability in the world.”

– Turkish PM Erdogan to President Putin in July 2005

The deepening of political dialogue between Russia and Turkey dates back to the signing of the *Eurasia Action Plan* in 2001 between then-foreign ministers Ismail Cem and Igor Ivanov. The Plan called for increased dialogue on softer areas such as trade, culture, and tourism but also advocated regular political consultations. Since then, Turkey and Russia expanded their cooperation in the fields of energy, trade, tourism, and defense. Bilateral trade has risen at an immense rate. The energy relationship has diversified and deepened. The two sides have established regular political dialogue, which was described by a Turkish diplomat as the “most regular and substantial” the Ministry has with any country.¹ Undoubtedly, the Turkish Parliament’s refusal to allow U.S. troops to invade Iraq from the north in March 2003 helped Russia to be more forthcoming as Turkey proved its independent credentials.

The sharp increase in bilateral trade and the growing energy relationship naturally facilitated the deepening of political relations. Since 2001, political dialogue both intensified and ascended to higher levels. From a bilateral political perspective, 2005 was an *annus mirabilis* as President Putin and Prime Minister Erdogan met four times, including a seven-hour private meeting on the Black Sea. Putin’s visit in December 2004 marked a monumental event in itself as he was the first Russian head of state to visit Turkey in 32 years. The visit was crowned by the signing of a Joint Declaration on the “Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership” between Turkey and the Russian Federation. The declaration refers to a wide range of common interests and specifically accentuates the increasing confidence and trust established between the sides in recent years; calls for the diversification of actors in the quest of deepening

¹ Interview with senior Turkish Ministry of Affairs official in December 2005.

the relationship and notes that both countries are Eurasian powers which value security and stability.²

Turkey and Russia are in full agreement in their views vis-à-vis their immediate regions. Ankara and Moscow share their apprehension with U.S. policy toward Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Turkey's emphasis on "normalization with the neighborhood," a concept developed by Ahmet Davutoglu – an influential advisor to PM Erdogan and FM Gul – helped the convergence to come about.³ Davutoglu's vision, which is widely shared among AKP executives, is fully in tandem with Russia's emphasis on stability and appeals to the AKP's Muslim-sensitive outlook toward Turkey's immediate neighborhood. It also appeals to the growing Turkish urge to act independently in the region.

The two sides see eye-to-eye on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on the need to preserve the territorial integrity and political unity of Iraq, on maintaining stability in the Caucasus, and on the ensuring of Black Sea security by littoral states. On all of these four issues Turkish and Russian views are either diametrically or somewhat opposed to U.S. policy. In a clear sign that the two sides attach special significance to the Black Sea/Caucasus region the sides established a separate subgroup on the region that operates parallel to the regular political consultations.

The increasing dialogue also extended to the military/defense sector. The two sides established a regular military/defense working group which allows the two sides to exchange views on military and defense issues. The "Joint Declaration on the Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership" stipulates the special significance attached to the need to cooperate more via the Intergovernmental Commission on Military, Technical and Defense Industry Cooperation.⁴

The deepening of Turkish-Russian relations reflected upon the two countries' multilateral dealings on a variety of platforms. Turkey supports Russia's quest to join the WTO. Ankara also extended crucial support to Moscow's desire to obtain observer status at the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Russian support for Turkish initiatives in international

² Text of the *Joint Declaration on the Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership between the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation*.

³ For the theoretical underpinnings of Turkey's "normalization with the neighborhood" policy see Ahmet Davutoglu, *Strategic Depth*, (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2002).

⁴ Text of the *Joint Declaration on the Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership between the Turkish Republic and the Russian Federation*.

platforms was less forthcoming. Most notable is Moscow's reluctance to lift its veto in the UN Security Council over the Cyprus report submitted by Kofi Annan in 2004.

The degree of political engagement is more evident on the Turkish side, particularly by the Turkish Government and the Euro-skeptics in the Turkish body politic. The Turkish military is also supportive of the deepening of the relationship. In 2002, General Tuncer Kilinc, the then-Secretary General of the National Security Council declared that Turkey should cooperate with Russia and Iran against the EU.⁵ Although, Turkey is increasingly seen as a friendly actor in the region, as explained by a senior Turkish diplomat, the Russians "are not quite sure to what degree a NATO member country can be trusted."⁶ This is also reflected in the domestic debate in Russia. Privately, Russian analysts underline that the strengthening of cooperation between Russia and Turkey adds significantly to Russia's international prestige.⁷ However, domestic Russian discourse is much more critical about Turkey.

Moscow is also quite wary about Turkey's EU drive. President Putin is on record warning about the potential difficulties if Turkey would join the EU. Russian diplomats have been courting Turkey's Euro-skeptics for years and frequently underline the futility of Turkey's efforts to join the prestigious club.⁸ In tandem with the Russian political thinker and politician Alexander Dugin's Eurasian vision, Russian diplomats promote a Eurasian Union that foresees a primary role for Russia and Turkey.⁹ A common Turkish sentiment about Russian overtures is that "the Russians treat the Turks with respect" – a clear reference to frustration with perennial European criticism.

The political relationship also owes much to the urgency felt against terrorism.¹⁰ Moscow has long been complaining about Turkey's support for the Chechen cause. In response to Turkey's turning a blind eye to the activities of the Caucasus diaspora in the 1990s, Moscow

⁵ Speech by Tuncer Kilinc, then Secretary-General of Turkey's National Security Council at the War Academy in Istanbul on March 7, 2002.

⁶ Interview with senior Turkish diplomat in December 2005.

⁷ Igor Torbakov, "Russia and Turkey forge new ties on security, trade," *EurasiaNet Commentary*, August 8, 2005.

⁸ A sample effort was a conference held at Istanbul University titled "Turkey's Relations with Russia, China and Iran at the Eurasian Axis" on September 3, 2005, which featured retired General Tuncer Kilinc, former Russian ambassador Albert Chernishev, the eccentric Labor Party leader Dogu Perincek and CHP Deputy Chairman Onur Oymen.

⁹ Dugin's book, titled *The Geopolitics of Eurasia* was published by Kure Publishing, a printing house affiliated with the Science & Arts Foundation.

¹⁰ The author of this paper does not wish to reduce the war in Chechnya to terrorism only.

allowed its Kurdish organizations to be more vocal. A particular thorn was the Kurdish House in Moscow which operated as a de facto PKK representation. As relations improved steadily a mutual understanding came about which translated into stricter Turkish control over pro-Chechen activity in exchange for Moscow's closing or restricting of some pro-Kurdish organizations, including the Kurdish House. However, Russian intelligence is aware of the sympathy toward the PKK among Kurdish organizations in Russia.¹¹ Therefore, Moscow is reluctant to completely lose its contacts with the Kurds, particularly in view of the growing strength of the Kurds in the Middle East. As the Kurds are increasingly becoming a factor to be reckoned in the Middle East, President Putin has to play a delicate balancing act between his promises made to PM Erdogan and Russia's geopolitical calculations in the Middle East.

Turkish-Russian relations are not developing in a void. Recently, U.S. disapproval with the deepening relationship and its potential repercussions in the region has become more vocal. In February 2004, former Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke retorted that Russia was "engaged in a little-noticed charm offensive to woo our all-important (but deeply alienated) ally Turkey into a new special relationship."¹² American criticism is particularly evident on issues pertaining to the Black Sea/Caucasus region as well as democracy promotion in Turkey's immediate neighborhood. Eastern Europeans, Baltics, Romanians, Ukrainians, and Georgians also have difficulty in understanding the new situation. International attention to the growing Turkish-Russian partnership has grown exponentially.

The Economics: The Sky is the Limit

"There are no longer blocs that limit Turkish-Russian relations similar to the Cold War years. Turkey and Russia can accomplish what Germany and France accomplished in the past."

– Rifat Hisarciklioglu, TOBB Chairman

"Economic and commercial relations between our countries are similar to a locomotive heading the diverse, good neighborly and friendly cars of a train"

– Y.M. Primakov, President of Russian Commerce & Industry Chambers

¹¹ Alexander Reutov, "Terrorism Deal," *Kommersant*, July 19, 2005.

¹² Richard Holbrooke, "The End of the Romance," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2005.

The true engine behind the deepening of Turkish-Russian relations is the ever growing trade dimension. Bilateral trade started in 1984 through a natural gas deal. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, tens of thousands of Russians started to flock to Turkey's large cities and began the illustrious "shuttle trade." Over the years, the trade relationship developed steadily and is currently at an all-time high with \$11 billion in 2004 and \$15 billion in 2005. The trade volume is expected to reach \$25 billion in 2007. As a consequence, Russia has become Turkey's second largest trading partner after Germany. Much of the growth is due to Turkey's growing energy imports from Russia. However, trade is uneven. Last year Turkey registered a trade deficit close to \$7 billion with Russia. Pressed to address the imbalance, Moscow points to contracts awarded to Turkish construction companies over the years. Indeed, Turkish construction companies completed over 700 projects worth \$14 billion in Russia over the last 16 years.¹³ That said, there is an increasing awareness by Turkish authorities that the imbalance must be dealt with.¹⁴

Turkish investments in Russia are close to \$2.5 billion and are concentrated in the construction, foodstuff, retail, glass, and electronics industries.¹⁵ The recent trend among Turkish investors is to penetrate the regions of Russia as business opportunities in Moscow and St. Petersburg have saturated.¹⁶

Russian investments in Turkey are also growing. The growth has been spurred by recent high profile deals which saw the Russian Alfa Group buying a share of Turkey's premier GSM operator Turkcell.¹⁷ Russian investments, which are concentrated in the energy, tourism and telecommunication sectors are said to approximate \$4 billion. Turkish privatization tenders also have attracted considerable Russian interest. Russian energy giants are eager to buy Turkish energy infrastructure. However, Turkish analysts have drawn attention to the risks involved in

¹³ Some of these projects include high profile works such as the restoration of the Russian White House in Moscow and the 46,000 housing units for Russian soldiers returning from Eastern Germany.

¹⁴ Some Turkish officials argue that Moscow must allow Turkey to pay for its energy imports with goods and services similar to the 1984 natural gas agreement.

¹⁵ For more detail see the Foreign Economic Relations Board's October 2005 Country Report on Russia.

¹⁶ Interview with Turgut Gur, chairman of the Turkey-Eurasia Business Council in December 2005.

¹⁷ The deal envisages the sale of 13.2 percent of Turkcell to the Alfa Group for \$3.3 billion. According to the Russian daily *Vedomosti* the deal constitutes the highest Russian share purchase of a foreign company. Turkish investments are concentrated in construction, retail, beer, glass and electronics.

awarding critical privatization tenders to Russian companies.¹⁸ Hence, many Russian investors prefer to operate through Turkish partners in unofficial joint ventures.¹⁹ Some of these ventures are concentrated in tourism and appear to have shady connections in Russia.

Lastly, as Hill and Taspinar recently argued “Russian-speaking Israelis have become an important cultural and political force in the country, and now facilitate an expanding trade relationship between Russia and Israel that could soon directly include Turkey.”²⁰

The Energy Dimension: Streaming Dreams

“Turkey is Russia’s fat gas customer.”

– Turkish media outlet commenting after the recent gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine

Undoubtedly, the energy dimension constitutes the most significant aspect of the Turkish-Russian relationship. Turkey is a net energy consumer. Also, Turkey is an integral part of the global energy market and Russia’s presence in Turkey has the potential to provide Moscow access to markets in Greece, Spain, Italy, and even North African countries. Turkey likes to portray itself as an energy transit country and an energy hub for Europe. Conscious about Turkish aspirations Russian officials are not shy to make liberal use of language that would confirm Ankara’s ambitions.

The Blue Stream natural gas pipeline project which crosses the Black Sea undersea and thus circumvents the ecologically risky Turkish Straits is the primary element of the energy relationship. Turkey imports 65 percent of its natural gas and 20 percent of its oil from Russia.²¹ Should current trends continue Turkish dependence on Russian gas may reach up to 80 percent

¹⁸ Meliha Okur, “The Strategy of ‘deep’ privatization is different,” *Sabah*, August 4, 2005. Okur argued in her column that “what was not feasible to do politically is being done via privatization deals – hence via the back door.

¹⁹ A key example for such unofficial partnerships is the prominent Rixos Hotels chain in southern Turkey. For more detail see, “I am one of the few men who understands tourists,” *Hurriyet*, April 26, 2004.

²⁰ Fiona Hill & Omer Taspinar, “Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus: Moving Together to Preserve the Status Quo?,” *IFRI*, January 2006.

²¹ Figures according to Turkey’s Petroleum Pipeline Corporation (BOTAS).

in coming years.²² Russia is interested in building a north-south pipeline from Samsun to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan parallel to Blue Stream and export oil as well as electricity to Turkey via the Black Sea. Russia is also interested in Turkish privatization deals in the energy sector; providing Turkey with nuclear energy as well as buying stakes in Turkey's gas distribution company. Turkey and Russia have agreed for the construction of an LNG terminal and oil refinery at Ceyhan where Russian, Azerbaijani and Iraqi oil and gas will end up before being shipped to international markets. Moscow also expressed interest in the construction of another undersea pipeline, this time under the Mediterranean, that would carry Russian gas exports from Turkey to Italy, Greece and Israel.²³ Turkey's Energy Minister underlined recently that Turkey will soon sign a protocol for improving energy cooperation with Russia, including natural gas pipelines, the construction of a natural gas reserve area under Lake Tuz Golu and the distribution of natural gas in Turkish cities.²⁴

Until recently Turkish energy dependence to Russia was not a public issue. However, the recent row between Russia and Ukraine over the price of gas rudely reminded Turkish decision-makers about their own vulnerability and has precipitated a new debate on Turkish energy dependency.²⁵ Public jitters increased when during the midst of the row Alexei Miller, Gazprom's CEO revealed the price Turkey pays for Russian gas. Turkish public opinion turned critical about Turkey's dependency and was angered to find out that Turkey is consuming the most expensive gas in Europe.²⁶ The disclosure of the high price also explained the attitude of Turkish energy authorities who until recently treated the price as a state secret.

All in all, the energy relationship continues to be a critical element of the relationship.

²² PM Erdogan speaking to European ambassadors on January 21, 2006 in Ankara.

²³ Fiona Hill & Omer Taspinar, "Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus: Moving Together to Preserve the Status Quo?," *IFRI*, January 2006.

²⁴ Energy Information Agency, *Country Analysis Briefs – Turkey July 2005*.

²⁵ See, Ismet Berkan, "Russian imperialism and Turkey," *Radikal*, January 4, 2006 and Suat Kiniklioglu, "Russia, Ukraine and Turkish Energy Security," *Turkish Daily News*, January 1, 2006.

²⁶ While the average European price for 1000 square meter is \$135 Turkey's natural gas rate has been announced as USD 260 by Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller on January 4, 2006. See, "Russia's fat customer: Turkey" *NTVMSNBC*, January 5, 2006.

The Politics of Common Values

“Scratch a Russian and you'll find a Tatar.”

– Russian Proverb

It may seem absurd to list common values as an element explaining the rapprochement between the Russian Federation and Turkey. After all, Turkey is a member of NATO for more than half a century; is negotiating with the EU since last year, and is a member of all major western multilateral organizations, including the OECD and the OSCE. In the last three years Turkey has accomplished unprecedented democratic reforms which transformed it into a more open and transparent country. In contrast, Russia has been undergoing strict centralization policies; the Russian media has lost its independence and potential opposition to Putin has effectively been removed from politics. In 2005 Russia has been downgraded by Freedom House from “partly free” to “not free.” Yet, there is an apparent convergence between Turkish and Russian decision-makers which makes it easier for them to engage. As one Turkish politician noted when it comes to work with each other “the Russians speak a very similar language.”²⁷ In both countries the political culture assigns a central role to the state. Both sides dwell on the existence of a centuries-old statehood tradition. Politicians underline that the two sides deliver on their promises and are easy to work with. In both countries civil society is a new phenomenon and has not been fully legitimized in the eyes of the state and public. What is more, in stark contrast to European and American attitudes, Russian officials treat their Turkish counterparts with respect. Decades-long criticism by the European Union seems to have bred a sense of exclusion which facilitated such a mutual understanding to come about.

Strategic Considerations: The Black Sea/Caucasus Region

“The Black Sea is an inner sea – an Ottoman lake.”

– Ottoman statesman in the 17th century

“We are going to deepen our relations with Russia on the Eurasian plan.”

– Ahmet Davutoglu, Advisor to the Prime Minister²⁸

The Black Sea/Caucasus region has traditionally been a geography where Turkish-Russian competition dates back centuries. Traditionally, the region has been a battleground between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. Following decades of imposed-stability the Caucasus became once again a region of competition after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Turkey and Russia became opponents in the struggle to project influence over the Caucasus. Turkey was supportive of the independence of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia and extended assistance to the Chechen independence struggle until the Second Chechen War. Ankara was particularly active in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Turkey extended military support to both countries; established military academies in Tbilisi and Baku. Turkey’s Caucasus policy strongly favored the consolidation of the new states’ independence and territorial integrity. The United States and Turkey collaborated closely in Georgia’s post-Soviet quest to consolidate its statehood.

Concrete cooperation between Turkey and Russia on regional affairs coincided to the rise of Vladimir Putin. In 2001, only one month after September 11 the two sides signed the *Eurasia Action Plan*.²⁹ Among other things, the Action Plan stipulated the mutual willingness to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. Ankara began to limit the activities of the Chechens in Turkey. Moscow responded by limiting the activities of the Kurds in the Russian Federation.

The next critical milestone was the U.S. decision to occupy Iraq despite strong Turkish objections. Turkey and Russia found themselves on the same side in Iraq. Turkish concerns about the emergence of a Kurdish state in Iraq; the instability the war brought to its southeastern region coupled with an increase in PKK violence disturbed Turkey substantially. The subsequent traumatization with Iraq gave rise to an extremely mistrustful outlook to U.S. initiatives in Turkey’s neighborhood, including the Black Sea/Caucasus region. President Bush’s stress on bringing democracy to Iraq reflected extremely negatively on the administration’s democracy

²⁸ Ahmet Davutoglu on NTV’s *Karsi Gorus* broadcasted on December 21, 2005.

²⁹ For a Turkish version of the *Eurasia Action Plan* see http://www.turkey.mid.ru/relat_2_t.html.

agenda elsewhere. In Turkish eyes, democracy promotion became a suspicious pursuit and was above all viewed as a policy tool to further U.S. influence in the world. Similar to Russian attitudes and coupled with the war in Iraq, the Rose and Orange revolutions created a strange atmosphere of encirclement in Turkey.

Political dialogue on the Black Sea/Caucasus region intensified when it became clear that the U.S. is pushing for a larger role for NATO in the region. The revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine added to the sense of Turkish 'encirclement' as Romania and Bulgaria were admitted to NATO in 2004. Troubled by the growing uncertainty vis-à-vis its European aspirations Turkey responded to insistent Russian overtures to collaborate in the region. Turkish opposition to extra-regional penetration of the region is mostly explained by two factors: First, that there is no need for NATO to enter the region as existing regional structures are adequate and in concert with NATO operations; second, that any regional initiative must include Russia.

As recent as last spring a Turkish foreign ministry official noted that “without Russia we cannot fulfill our objectives. Russia needs to be on board.”³⁰ Ankara strongly believes that antagonizing Moscow would only destabilize the region and thus constantly refers to the need to involve “all littoral states” in any regional scheme. Furthermore, Ankara argues that there are not any significant threats emanating from the region.³¹ Turkey also believes that Russia is a key party to the resolution of the frozen conflicts in the region. In clear continuity with Turkey’s traditional respect for its former adversary Ankara sees Russia as an indispensable actor in the region. Such respect was amply demonstrated during a recent security address by Turkey’s Chief of Staff, Hilmi Ozkok. General Ozkok highlighted the Turkish General Staff’s view that Russia’s geography, energy resources and human capacity is likely to allow Russia to become a global power again.³²

One of the least discussed but rather significant factors in the Black Sea/Caucasus debate is the significance attributed to the Montreux Convention by Turkey. In effect since 1936, the Convention governs the passage of ships from the Turkish Straits. Besides the Lausanne Treaty

³⁰ Presentation by Turkish MFA official Osman Yavuzalp, *Harvard Black Sea Security Studies Seminar*, Bilkent University, Ankara, April 2, 2005.

³¹ Interview with Turkish diplomat responsible for NATO affairs, December 2005.

³² Speech by Turkish Chief of Staff, General Hilmi Ozkok on the occasion of his *Annual Security Evaluation at the War Academy* in Istanbul on April 20, 2005. Ozkok added in his speech that Russia would be able to make a comeback to the degree it will solve its domestic problems.

the Montreux Convention is one of the founding agreements that established the Turkish Republic and thus reverberates in the psyche of the Turkish establishment as something between a sacred cow and a Pandora's box. It is sacred because of its significance vis-à-vis the Straits regime and the confirmation about their Turkish character. It constitutes a challenge because renegotiating the Convention could open a Pandora's box as all littoral states have a myriad of interests that they wish to be addressed. This road would inevitably lead to protracted negotiations Ankara is unwilling to travel at this time.

All or a combination of these concerns has brought about a willingness to reinvigorate the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) which was founded in 1992 under Turkish leadership. Over the years, BSEC has been neglected and dilapidated. Nonetheless, BSEC has become a platform where there is clear agreement between Turkey and Russia.³³ Turkey and Russia also stress BLACKSEAFOR, a multinational naval task force which they argue does not necessitate a NATO presence in the Black Sea.³⁴ Turkish diplomats underline the cooperative and transparent operation of BLACKSEAFOR. According to a senior Turkish diplomat BLACKSEAFOR communicates regularly its findings to NATO's Operation Active Endeavor HQ in the Mediterranean.³⁵ In the same vein Turkey's Chief of Staff referred to Turkey's BLACKSEA HARMONY operation as "complementing" NATO's ACTIVE ENDEAVOR operation.³⁶ Interestingly, Turkish officials note that they found relatively minimal threats during their maritime missions and frequently stress that they cannot understand why NATO and the U.S. want to penetrate the region.³⁷ A point in case is the U.S. application to become an observer to BSEC in 2005. While Russia opposed the application Turkey abstained from the vote. The U.S. could only be accepted as an observer after the Russian demand to include Belarus as well was agreed upon.

³³ PM Erdogan's advisor Ahmet Davutoglu recently indicated that Turkey aims to reinvigorate BSEC with Russian support. The Turkish MFA's Policy Planning Directorate has invited a group of analysts and academics in January 2006 to discuss how the organization can be resuscitated.

³⁴ Founded in 2001, BLACKSEAFOR is a Turkish initiative that includes Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia.

³⁵ Interview with Turkish diplomat responsible for NATO affairs, December 2005.

³⁶ Speech by Turkish Chief of Staff, General Hilmi Ozkok on the occasion of his *Annual Security Evaluation at the War Academy* in Istanbul on April 20, 2005.

³⁷ Interview with senior admiral in the Turkish Navy, April 2005.

Although Ankara wants to avoid taking sides in any Russia versus West struggle for influence, it continues to develop its own relations with Moscow. That said, there is growing discomfort in Ankara due to the increasing pressure felt on the Black Sea/Caucasus region. Not surprisingly, Ankara finds comfort in German and French reluctance to buy in the U.S. strategy to integrate the region further into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Turkey's approach to the region has long been dominated by stability rather than democracy. In this sense, Turkey is a status quo power whose interests overlap with those of Moscow. Turkey's distant approach to the Community of Democratic Choices as well as the Rose and Orange revolutions was a lucid reflection of this preference.³⁸ That said, Ankara is troubled by the perception that Turkey does not care about democracy in the region. The Turkish MFA's press announcement critical about the Azerbaijani parliamentary election in November 2005 was an attempt to counter that perception.³⁹

The current situation in the Black Sea/Caucasus region points to a stalemate as Turkey and Russia are opposed to extra-regional powers to penetrate the region while the U.S., Romania, Ukraine and Georgia are in favor of a larger NATO role. Turkey uses every opportunity at NATO to block further NATO/U.S. penetration into the Black Sea. Also, Ankara counsels more patience for Georgian and Ukrainian membership to NATO as it sees a potential challenge to its own problematic EU drive.⁴⁰ The struggle for influence in the Black Sea/Caucasus region is between the pro-status quo powers and the U.S.-led states who want to transform the region and integrate it fully into Euro-Atlantic structures and the Wider Europe.⁴¹

³⁸ It is highly likely that Ankara will be cool toward a recently developing Romanian initiative as well.

³⁹ *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Announcement Nr. 170*, dated November 9, 2006 "On the November 6 elections in Azerbaijan."

⁴⁰ Fiona Hill & Omer Taspinar, "Turkey and Russia – Axis of the Excluded?", (paper submitted to *Survival* in October 2005). Turkish officials are somewhat surprised about increasingly vocal Georgian concerns in relation to the deepening partnership with Russia. Official Turkish discourse continues to support Georgian territorial integrity.

⁴¹ For more detailed thinking on the debate see Ronald D. Asmus, Konstantin Dimitrov & Joerg Forbrig, *A New Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region*, (Bratislava: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2004).

The Domestic Dimension

“Putin is a Kemalist.”

– The Turkish mass daily *Hurriyet*

Comparatively, the Turkish-Russian relationship is a rather new phenomenon for Turkey’s domestic scene. Its key players are evolving and diversifying at the same time. Key proponents of the relationship are the multiplying Turkish companies who have invested in the Russian Federation or have joint ventures in Turkey. These companies are organized under the Union of Russian –Turkish Businessmen (RTIB) based in Moscow, the Turkish-Russian Business Council as well as the Turkish-Eurasian Business Council in Istanbul. Recently, a Russian-Turkish Research Center (RUTAM), which propagates a closer relationship has been added to the milieu of actors in Moscow. Interestingly, RUTAM is based in a building which belongs to the largest Turkish construction company that has close ties to Moscow’s influential mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Its co-chair is Albert Chernishev, the Soviet Union’s last ambassador to Turkey and later deputy foreign minister of Russia.

The Turkish media is also an actor in the growing bilateral relationship. The quality and content of news coverage about Russia changed considerably in recent years. Current news coverage about Russia never misses an opportunity that “Putin is a Kemalist” or that he enjoys a “close personal relationship” with PM Erdogan etc.⁴² In other words, Turkish journalists and wire services based in Moscow play a key role in the rectification of Russia’s traditionally negative image in Turkey. Over the last three years the reporting of key journalists such as *Radikal*’s Suat Taspinar, *Zaman*’s Mirza Cetinkaya and *Hurriyet*’s Nerdun Hacioglu are quite sympathetic toward Moscow and have been instrumental in the appropriate filtering of news on Russia in Turkey. Magazines such as *Perspektiva*, *Kompas-Pusula* and the more intellectual but pro-Fethullah Gulen journal *Diyalog Avrasya* are circulating with the aim to cement the emerging partnership. Bilingual websites help substantiating the content of the relationship and serve as effective communication mediums.⁴³ All of these publications thrive upon the current

⁴² “Putin is a Kemalist,” *Hurriyet*, April 4, 2005.

⁴³ For instance, www.turkrus.com is run by *Radikal*’s Suat Taspinar and is both the most effective and professional website which provides daily news and commentary from Russia. Interestingly, the motto of the website is “Two nations – One website.”

upsurge of business interests on both sides. On the other hand, journalists not willing to sing the expected tune have been subject to nasty encounters with Russian authorities. For instance, in January 2003 Remzi Oner Ozkan, the representative of Turkey's official Anatolian News Agency was kidnapped by unidentified men and questioned for two hours due to his coverage about the war in Chechnya. Ozkan is also the author of a book critical of Putin and Russia's handling of Chechnya. Ozkan left his job shortly after the incident and returned to Ankara.⁴⁴

Many Turkish columnists are fully integrated with the pro-Russian lobby and have strong links both with officialdom as well as companies operating between the two countries. Pro-Russian news pieces are actively 'encouraged' by the Istanbul-based Turkish-Russian Business Council.⁴⁵ Furthermore, large sections of the Turkish media apply hidden censure to op-eds critical of Russia and a number of other post-Soviet autocratic states.⁴⁶ Consequently, it has become more difficult to publish articles which question the Turkish-Russian relationship.⁴⁷ The Fethullah Group is particularly wary of political criticism toward Russia and other post-Soviet states due to its colleges in these countries.⁴⁸

On both sides there is also a small group of intellectuals who favor the deepening of relations. In Russia, the prominent Eurasianist writer and politician Alexander Dugin is the leading ideologue. As Eurasianism has a long philosophical tradition in Russia the recent development of relations was intellectually easily adapted to the Russian debate. In Turkey, where historical perceptions of Russia are extremely negative the building of a philosophical base has proven more problematic. On the Turkish side, Alev Alatli is a less political yet influential writer whose books accentuate the similarities in the mindsets of the two peoples.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Interview with Remzi Oner Ozkan in December 2005. Ozkan's book was titled *Only Children Are Innocent: The Drivers of post-Soviet Chaos in Russia, the Putin Administration and Terror* (Istanbul: Umit Yayincilik, 2003).

⁴⁵ Interview with a prominent Turkish writer and political thinker, November 2005.

⁴⁶ The author's piece titled "Turkey and Russia: Where to?" *Radikal*, published on December 6, 2005, the same day President Putin visited Turkey constitutes a true exception.

⁴⁷ Interview with a group of think-tankers specializing on regional studies. A common complaint was the difficulties they encountered in publishing critical articles on Turkish-Russian as well as Turkish-Azerbaijani relations. Op-eds sympathetic toward the 'color revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine are also extremely difficult to be approved for publication.

⁴⁸ The author was asked to be "kind" toward Heydar Aliyev when approached for an op-ed to the daily *Zaman* on Turkish-Azerbaijani relations in 2003. "You know we have schools out there and we want to make sure that they continue to operate" was noted by the op-ed editor of *Zaman*.

⁴⁹ Alatli's most recent book *World Duty* (2005) is described as an attempt to see Turkey via Russian lenses. The book is part of a series by Alatli titled "In the Footprints of Gogol."

On the cultural plane, it was decided to celebrate Turkey and Russia years respectively in 2006.⁵⁰

Tourism: People to People Diplomacy

“Russian tourists think that Antalya is Turkey’s capital.”

– Russian deputy foreign minister

“Russian tourists are coming to Turkey as if they make their pilgrimage.”

– Turkish tourism official

One of the most frequently cited facts about the Turkish-Russian relationship is the growing number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey every year and the economic impact of this trend. Some analysts note humorously that the Russians finally succeeded in reaching the “warm waters”, not by force as was envisioned by Peter the Great and his imperial successors but via tourism. Indeed, Turkey has become the primary tourism destination for Russians while Russians are only second to Germans visiting Turkey. Helped by an easy visa regime, the number of Russian tourists grew from 1.2 million in 2003 to 1.5 million in 2004 and 1.9 million in 2005.⁵¹ The Turkish tourism sector is particularly fond of Russians as they spend generously in comparison to their European counterparts. While significant from an economic perspective Turkey does not view Russian tourism purely from an economic standpoint. Turkey also attaches great value to tourists’ “people to people diplomacy” dimension. The perceptual baggage carried over from centuries-long confrontational history is slowly being revised by direct contact between Turks and Russians.⁵² There is also an exponential increase in marriages between Turks and Russians. In 2002 alone over 50.000 Russians and Turks married, which also

⁵⁰ “Blue Stream is Reaching South,” *Yeni Safak*, July 19, 2005.

⁵¹ DEIK / Turkish-Russian Business Board, *Turkey-Russia Commercial and Economic Relations*, March 2005.

⁵² Interview with Turkey’s Ambassador in Moscow Kurtulus Taskent in *Turism i Sport*, June 2005.

brought about vocal demand for Turkish schools in Russia and Russian schools in Turkey.⁵³

Defense Cooperation: The Weakest Link

“Turkey’s adoption of NATO standards limits our defense cooperation.”

– Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov

One of the areas where even the Iraq War has not been able to produce tangible results between Turkey and Russia is defense cooperation. Despite Moscow’s repeated pleas to develop the defense relationship not much has been accomplished. President Putin is on record about his displeasure in this regard. Turkey was the first NATO country to sign a defense cooperation agreement with Russia in 1994 which Ankara used for the acquisition of military hardware Turkey had difficulty obtaining from western suppliers in its fight against the PKK. A commission on military cooperation between the two sides has been established in 2000 but key Russian expectations such as winning tenders for the modernization of Turkey’s military have not been fulfilled. For instance, Moscow’s emphasis on equal opportunity to compete for Turkey’s multibillion attack helicopter tender have not yet been materialized. Despite a range of significant concessions by the Russian side the tender was eventually cancelled. According to Turkish defense officials Ankara tends to use defense cooperation with Russia as a means to put indirect pressure on European and American companies to exact better conditions.⁵⁴ Drawing attention to Russia’s unease about the subject matter, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov issued a rare public statement last fall. Referring to Turkey as a “Eurasian power” he said:

⁵³ “Turkey and Russia are becoming relatives,” *Hurriyet*, April 19, 2003. A survey conducted by the Institute of Psychology of the Russian Academy of Sciences found that there were two reasons behind Russian women marrying Turkish men; (1) the mentality of Turks is similar to that of Russians; (2) Turkish family structures do not load the woman with too much responsibility and is thus relatively easier on the female partner.

⁵⁴ Sergei Kandaurov, “Russian Arms Exports to Greece, Cyprus and Turkey,” *Moscow Defense Brief*, 2002 Nr. 2. Also see, “Russia: Analysts Say Burgeoning Arms Sales Pose Security Threat,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 12, 2003.

“I must say that Turkey’s adoption of NATO standards as well as the tough competition by western countries limits our defense cooperation. One must also admit that some political and military circles [in Turkey] are sympathetic to these [western] countries.”⁵⁵

That said, there are some processes in the region -- for example, the integration of western European defense industries or the easing of internal political instability in Turkey -- that continue to throw up roadblocks to the promotion of Russian arms and military hardware.

Problematic Areas

“Russia Blocks UN Cyprus Resolution”

– Associated Press, April 2004

Turkish-Russian relations are not without problems. The problems are primarily in the political area. In April 2004, only days before the Cyprus referendum on the UN-sponsored Annan Plan, Russia used its veto to block a resolution that sought to alleviate Greek-Cypriot security concerns. Moscow’s veto had a damaging effect as the adoption of the resolution would have helped more Greek Cypriots to vote in favor of the plan. Russian complications did not cease there. Moscow continues to veto the Secretary-General’s report on the post-referendum situation in Cyprus. The report, which urges the international community to lift the isolation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), is a critical report for the Turkish Government. The adoption of the report in the Security Council would be a diplomatic victory for Turkey, for it would acknowledge the continuing intransigence of the Greek Cypriots. In clear response to Turkish pressure, President Putin recently declared that the economic embargo on the TRNC was unjust.⁵⁶ Oscillating between its allegiance toward its Orthodox brethren in the South and satisfying Turkish expectations Moscow wants at least give the impression that it is trying to do something about Turkish concerns on Cyprus. Still, the Turkish Ministry of

⁵⁵ “Let’s become partners,” *Milliyet*, September 5, 2005.

⁵⁶ “An energetic relationship with Russia,” *Radikal*, July 19, 2005.

Affairs is skeptical about Russia's motives and privately complains about the lack of concrete steps in this regard.⁵⁷

Another problematic issue has been the Russian Duma's resolution on the Armenian "genocide" in April 2005. Turkey deplored the resolution and underlined the irony of the passing of the resolution "by the Parliament of a country that should know best what occurred in 1915."⁵⁸ It was further noted that the resolution did not correspond to the level of bilateral relations which is progressing in all areas.

Frequent bans on the importation of Turkish products on health safety grounds also strain relations, albeit at a lower level. In 2005 Russia banned the importation of Turkish poultry products, fruits, vegetables and flowers. Additionally, prostitution from Russia and Ukraine – the so-called *Natasha syndrome* has become a significant social phenomenon in Turkey. There is a clear rise in prostitution-related HIV infections in Turkey which has reflected negatively on public perceptions about Russia.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Should current trends continue, the Turkish-Russian relationship is likely to become a structural factor in the region. As has been detailed in this paper, the relationship started out as a modest trade relationship but quickly evolved with the addition of the energy dimension. External factors such as the European Union's reluctance to embrace Turkey as well as the frustration with the U.S. over the Iraq War have helped the relationship to acquire a political and strategic dimension. Also, Turkey's deepening relationship with Russia should be understood within the context of a distinct sense of alienation. Turkish self-perceptions that it neither belongs to Europe nor the Middle East acquired a more ominous character by the rupture of the strong security link with the U.S. The rise of the AKP and the subsequent eminence of its

⁵⁷ Interview with senior Turkish diplomat, December 2005.

⁵⁸ *Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Release Nr: 67* dated April 26, 2005, "On the Deploring of the Statement by the Russian Federal Parliament about recognizing the so-called Armenian Genocide on April 22, 2005." The author of this paper does not define the unfortunate events of 1915 as a "genocide".

⁵⁹ According to the *Transatlantic Trends 2005* survey sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States 83 percent of Turks view the spread of AIDS as a significant threat to them.

foreign policy ideologue converged with the secular Kemalist elite's sense of frustration and produced a peculiar consensus on the wisdom to deepen the relationship with Russia.

Furthermore, Turkish foreign policy is traditionally very realist and not used to the rhetoric of democracy promotion. Seen from Ankara, the current U.S. administration's accent on "freedom on the march" is seen in complete isolation of its moral underpinnings and viewed merely as a tool to extend U.S. influence in the region. There is no doubt that the war in Iraq and the administration's stress on the need to bring democracy to Iraq has had a significant toll on how Ankara views American democracy promotion efforts in Eurasia. As Turkey is one of the primary losers of the war in Iraq, particularly in view of its domestic peace with its Kurdish citizens, democracy promotion as a concept acquired a very negative tone.⁶⁰ It is here where Turkish and Russian interests fully converge as Moscow is equally wary about the penetration of U.S. influence in the post-Soviet geopolitical space.

Furthermore, the U.S. and EU must realize that Turkey can no longer simply be a dependent appendage of the West. Turkey has become an actor in its own right that is increasingly conscious about its history and regional eminence in the past. Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Abkhazia, and Syria starkly remind Turks about their imperial past. Turkey's current government has provided the theoretical infrastructure for a new foreign policy outlook. This new outlook advocates a closer relationship with Turkey's neighborhood, including a multidimensional partnership with Russia.

In the final analysis though, the Turkish-Russian partnership is inherently defensive in nature. It is defensive against the potential for further instability in its immediate neighborhood. It is also defensive vis-à-vis the shaping of a new Europe that appears to exclude the two. Should current pressures on Turkey from Iraq as well as the EU continue, the Turkish-Russian partnership may grow into something more consequential. Ultimately, what will determine the course of Turkish-Russian relations is the quality of their relationship with the West. Their sense of alienation from the West has brought them closer. Their relationships with the West will determine how they will fare together.

⁶⁰ For instance, Turkey's state television TRT has been broadcasting a documentary series called "Between Borders", which ostensibly covers the situation of Turkic peoples in Eurasia. In reality the program is used to shape public opinion which favors stability over democracy in Eurasia.