

RUSSIA AND TURKEY FIND A COMMON CAUSE IN CONFRONTING THE SPECTER OF REVOLUTION

Despite their sharp disagreements over the civil war in Syria, Russia and Turkey have managed to strengthen bilateral ties, primarily through top-level diplomacy executed by President Putin and Prime Minister Erdoğan. Energy matters, which used to constitute the central element of the relationship, have lost much of their urgency as new supply sources have transformed the global energy market. Bracketing out disagreements, Turkey and Russia seek to use their cooperation for achieving a more prominent status in the evolving international system than their economic performance would warrant. It is the escalation of domestic discontent that drives the two leaders closer, as urgency in opposing revolutions becomes their common ideological platform. This unity will be tested by the inevitable new spasms of turmoil and increasingly probable elite splits.

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The irregular trajectory of Russian-Turkish relations registered a new high in 2013, despite many factors that were pulling it down. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asserted at the meeting of the High-Level Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council in St. Petersburg that other countries could envy the dynamics of these bilateral relations.¹ The unique cordiality of this top-level political dialogue has been apparently preserved, notwithstanding sharp disagreements on the Syrian civil war. While President Vladimir Putin presented his initiative on Syria's chemical disarmament as a paramount foreign policy success in his annual address to the Parliament, for example, Erdoğan has every reason to see that initiative as an unfortunate *coup* that prevented a U.S. missile strike and derailed the plan for a multilateral intervention. Both leaders found it opportune, nevertheless, to bracket this clash of interests and instead focus on upgrading their partnership, which they value too highly to allow it to erode.

This high valuation cannot be explained just by the volume of trade and investments or by energy ties, important as they are; Erdoğan and Putin see great benefits in sustaining their special relations for advancing their respective geopolitical visions. These high ambitions have come under threat from internal discontent, which comes into resonance with external shocks from Cairo to Kiev and makes the two autocratic leaders –whatever differences they might have regarding particular conflicts– natural allies in confronting the tide of turmoil and exorcising the specter of revolutions. This analysis aims at assessing the balance of augmenting and abating forces in this unique partnership.

The Breakdown of Old Energy Geopolitics

For both Russia and Turkey, oil and natural gas have greater meaning than just supply and demand, export revenues, and transit fees. The Russian leadership used to imagine and exploit (albeit with questionable success) its position of a major exporter of gas to Europe as a heavy-impact foreign policy tool, and is now struggling to find an appropriate form of behavior in this depressed and saturated market.² For the Turkish leadership, the proposition for establishing a “gas hub” promised so many tangible dividends that Ankara found it hard to accept the fact that it never had a chance to come true. Both countries saw energy flows as a major advantage for their respective geopolitical positions, most prominently in relations with the EU,

1 As presented in the official records of this meeting at the Russian presidential website <http://president.kremlin.ru/news/19676>; on the relaxed atmosphere at the joint press-conference, see: Andrei Kolesnikov, “Talks at the high level of humor,” *Kommersant*, 23 November 2013, <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2351430?isSearch=True>

2 My more elaborate analysis of this shift in political behavior can be found in: Pavel K. Baev, “How Russia's ‘Energy Weapon’ Turned into an Oil Pillow and Gas Rattle,” *PONARS Eurasia Memo 294*, George Washington University (September 2013),

<http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/how-russia%E2%80%99s-energy-weapon-turned-oil-pillow-and-gas-rattle>

and are taken by surprise by the disappearance of this advantage in the course of the fast-moving global revolution in energy affairs. Moscow, for that matter, cannot internalize the fact that its central role as energy supplier –which for decades was the main stabilizing factor in its uneasy partnership with the EU– has become a major source of tension, which is set to escalate even further with the conclusion of the European Commission probe into Gazprom’s monopolistic abuses.³

This reconfiguration of the familiar energy landscape affects Russian-Turkish oil-and-gas relations, which have never been entirely harmonious, despite the fact that Gazprom supplies more than half of Turkey’s gas demand and has an impeccable track record of reliability *vis-à-vis* Turkey.⁴ The fact of the matter is that Putin’s master-plan for constructing the South Stream gas pipeline

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across the length of the Black Sea has always clashed with Turkey’s desire to host a “gas corridor” on its territory. With the collapse of the Nabucco project, the design for this “corridor” has been reduced to the TANAP-TAP route that will deliver to Southern Italy some 10 bcm of gas from Azerbaijan by the end of the decade. However, the Russian project still faces opposition from EU authorities.⁵ Erdoğan has succeeded in cultivating a perfect accord on energy matters with Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev, which constitutes only a minor irritant for Putin. Putin’s main priority is to disallow any trans-Caspian pipeline, which in theory could bring significant volumes of gas from Turkmenistan to European market *via* Turkey.

A new dimension in energy cooperation, to which both Erdoğan and Putin attach great importance, is opened by the 20 billion dollar contract for constructing Turkey’s first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu. It is obvious, however, that the development of nuclear industry in Turkey goes against Gazprom’s plans for expanding gas export to Turkey. It is characteristic in this respect that the Russian gas champion opted to stay away from projects on exploring gas reserves to the south of Cyprus, seeking to avoid any controversy with Ankara. One particular area where Russia and

³ On *Gazprom’s* recent settlement offer, see: Alex Barker and Guy Chazan, “Gazprom pushes for peace with Europe,” *Financial Times*, 4 December 2013,

<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/40ba595c-5d03-11e3-a558-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2oJtHm8th>

⁴ One careful examination of this connection is: Remi Bourgeot, “Russia-Turkey: A Relationship Shaped by Energy,” *Russie.Nei.Visions* 69, IFRI (March 2013),

http://www.ifri.org/index.php?page=contribution-detail&id=7593&id_provenance=97

⁵ Gazprom has started construction of some parts of this complex mega-project see: Alina Terehova, “Europeans defined the South Stream as illegal,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 18 December 2013,

http://www.ng.ru/economics/2013-12-18/1_potok.html

Turkey have discovered common interests is oil exploration and production in Iraqi Kurdistan; Gazprom-Neft is quickly moving forward with several projects there, despite warnings from Baghdad. Russian commentators have few reservations, predicting that the new oil pipeline to Ceyhan would strengthen separatist tendencies in Kurdistan and could lead to Iraq's dismemberment.⁶

Overall, energy matters have lost the pivotal importance they had at the start of the decade for both Erdoğan and Putin; they are still habitually revisited but it is the dynamic interplay of external and internal political challenges that now demand their prime attention.

The Longing for a Higher Status

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It is deepening domestic discontent that adds urgency to the desire –as inherently strong in Erdoğan as it is in Putin– to achieve a more prominent international status than the economic performance of Turkey and Russia would warrant. Both leaders are acutely aware of the uncertain transformation of the international system, but they presume that it opens interesting opportunities for upgrading the profile and impact factor of their respective

“emerging power”. What is perceived as the key to this fast-moving transformation is the weakening of U.S. dominance and the failure of the EU to forge a meaningful common foreign and security policy, which means that Russia and Turkey have little and less to gain from aligning themselves with the declining West, and thus have to pursue more self-sufficient paths. Ankara's deep disappointment in the long-prioritized political project centered on EU accession, for that matter, reveals its views on Moscow's determined effort to derail the Eastern Partnership project, and in particular to prevent Ukraine from signing the association agreement with this inept and incapacitated Union.⁷

Erdoğan cannot fail to see that Putin has taken a leadership of sorts in opposing U.S. unilateralism and in dismissing the EU claim for a value-based policy – and has

6 See for example: Evgenia Novikova, “Erdoğan splits Iraq,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 4 December 2013, http://www.ng.ru/world/2013-12-04/1_turkey.html; on Gazprom-Neft activity, see: Anna Solodovnikova, “Gazprom-neft spreads over Kurdistan,” *Kommersant*, 27 February 2013, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2135917>

7 One balanced and concise analysis of the emotional political quarrel in November-December 2013 is: Samuel Charap and Keith A. Daren, “Kiev isn't ready for Europe,” *New York Times*, 20 December 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/21/opinion/kyev-isnt-ready-for-europe.html?_r=0

scored a series of impressive successes in the second half of 2013. It was perhaps unfortunate, from the Turkish point of view, that it was the firm and resourceful stance on the Syrian war that demonstrated the new strength of Russian foreign policy. Of greater importance, however, is Moscow's emphasis on denying the U.S.—and the West more generally—the privilege of setting the global agenda.⁸ An important vehicle for establishing this emphasis was Russia's chairmanship of the G20, which is seen in Moscow as very successful (not least, because of the cancellation of the Putin-Obama summit, which proved Russian readiness to challenge U.S. conditions), and could serve as an example for Turkey's chairmanship of this group in 2015.⁹ Russia's useful engagement with several high-profile international structures, including BRICS, prompted Erdoğan to request Putin's support for Turkey's bid to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), but it is China's preferences that are decisive in the workings of this institution, so Turkey was not invited to the September 2013 SCO summit in Bishkek.¹⁰

Russia and Turkey have good reasons to be satisfied with the beginning of a compromise solution for the problem of Iran's nuclear program, presenting it as a success of their firm opposition to any military options, even if the mid-term benefits of this by no means stable solution are rather uncertain, particularly for Russia.¹¹ Concentrating on its immediate neighborhood, Turkey has been circumspect of Russia's sensitivities in the Caucasus, and the gradual de-escalation of tensions between Russia and Georgia currently provides Ankara new opportunities to strengthen its role in this turbulent region. Overall, a series of setbacks for Turkey's foreign policy since the start of the decade boosts the importance of its not-quite-alliance with Russia, which also needs support from this trusted partner (despite its membership in NATO) in order to sustain momentum in restoring its "great power" status.

The Jeopardy of Confronting Revolutions

Putin recognized early on, perhaps because of his shocking personal experience in Dresden in 1989—which led to the unification of Germany—the risk posed to his pseudo-democratic regime by the revolutionary uprisings, and has positioned himself as leader of counter-revolutionary forces in the wake of the first wave of

8 Critical evaluation of these successes is in: Sergei Karaganov, "One-sided power," *Vedomosti*, 4 December 2013, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/19601061/odnobotokaya-derzhava>

9 My take on this performance is in: Pavel Baev, "Russia attempts to gain a status boost from the G20 chairmanship," *NOREF Report* (August 2013), <http://www.peacebuilding.no/Themes/Norway-and-emerging-powers/Publications/Russia-s-attempts-to-gain-a-status-boost-from-the-G20-chairmanship>

10 See: Ariel Cohen, "Mr. Erdogan goes to Shanghai," *The National Interest*, 18 February 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/mr-erdogan-goes-shanghai-8113>

11 For an in-depth examination, see: Stephen J. Flanagan, "The Turkey-Russia-Iran nexus: Eurasian power dynamics," *Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2013), pp. 163-78.

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radicalism and sponsored by short-sighted supporters of democratic transitions in the West. Erdoğan, in contrast, has embraced the chain of uprisings as the manifestation of a rise of political Islam, expecting to gain new authority and even moral leadership through this momentum.¹⁴

These differences determined a direct clash of positions on the civil war in Syria. Putin was not that interested in the fate of this traditional but never reliable ally, and was primarily concerned with avoiding the mistake that had made it possible for the Western powers to execute a NATO-led military intervention in Libya – while also concerned with establishing a bulwark where the tide of revolutions could be stopped and turned back.¹⁵ For Erdoğan, Syria certainly was far more important as a war zone in the immediate vicinity of Turkey’s borders, but he also sought to establish a case where moderate Islamic forces could win a major victory with broad international support and direct U.S. involvement. Bashar al-Assad’s resourcefulness in mobilizing support for defending the regime against the increasingly radicalizing rebels has greatly exceeded most Western expectations and secured astounding success for Putin’s position – and, inevitably, constitutes a major setback for Erdoğan. Another –and perhaps ideologically even more profound– defeat for the Turkish leader was

“color revolutions” in the mid-2000s.¹² Erdoğan, to the contrary, came to power (only a couple of years after Putin) as the leader of a “peaceful” revolution against the entrenched and corrupt political establishment, so his attitude toward popular movements was rather neutral, if not positive. Hence the difference between the two leaders in initial assessments of the origins and consequences of the sudden explosion of discontent across the wider Middle East, which acquired the romantic label of “Arab Spring.”¹³ Putin has condemned this phenomenon as driven by Islamic

¹² I examined that stance in: Pavel K. Baev, “A Matrix for Post-Soviet ‘Color Revolutions’,” *International Area Studies Review* (June 2011), pp. 3-22.

¹³ One noteworthy multi-perspective analysis is: Kenneth M. Pollack (ed.), *The Arab Awakening* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2011).

¹⁴ Critical evaluation of these expectations is in: Timur Kuran, “Political Islam’s loss of democratic legitimacy,” *Project Syndicate*, 2 August 2013, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/political-islam-s-retreat-from-pluralism-and-legitimacy-by-timur-kuran>

¹⁵ Elaborate analysis of Russian course is in: Roy Allison, “Russia and Syria: Explaining alignment with a regime in crisis,” *International Affairs* (July 2013), pp. 795-823.

delivered by the military *coup* in Egypt, which signified a political fiasco of the Muslim Brotherhood and the near collapse of Erdoğan's vision.¹⁶

The dialectics of the revolution/counter-revolution conflict remain fluid, and the Assad regime in Syria may yet suffer a decisive defeat, but Erdoğan has already moved closer to Putin in the assessment of mass uprisings as a destabilizing factor and a major risk to domestic order. The key driver for this shift is in no doubt the mass protests that erupted in Istanbul in June 2013

– generating resonance in many other cities across the country. The similarity with the protests in Moscow in winter/spring 2012, which took Putin's court completely by surprise, stems from the nature of discontent among the urban middle classes. While these classes certainly constitute a minority of the electorate, they have an outsized impact on the regime's capacity for governing the country.¹⁷ Putin has no worry about a looming problem for Erdoğan – the possibility of an alliance between these “rebels”, discontented elites and the Turkish officer corps. However, Putin's informal “social contract” with the dispossessed classes in Russian society is severely tested by economic stagnation.¹⁸ Both regimes have demonstrated the capacity for withstanding the “carnival” of street protests and effectively deterring their escalation, but conflict with the social groups that drive modernization of conservative paternalist societies cannot be overcome.

The confrontation between the power holders and disunited but vocal “modernizers” has inevitably caused estrangement in Russia's and Turkey's relations with the EU, which remains cautious in criticizing “repressions” but takes a sympathetic stance towards the opposition.¹⁹ This political drift away from Europe increases

“(...) the gradual de-escalation of tensions between Russia and Georgia currently provides Ankara new opportunities to strengthen its role in this turbulent region.”

16 A sharp Russian view on the interplay of various conflicts is: Alexei Malashenko, “Syrian thread of the Middle Eastern tangle,” *Vedomosti*, 19 November 2013, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/18926471/blizhnvestochnyj-klubok?full#cut>

17 One thoughtful analysis of the political crisis in Russia is: Vladimir Gelman, “Cracks in the wall: Challenges to electoral authoritarianism in Russia,” *Problems of Post-Communism* (March/April 2013), pp. 3-10.

18 On the pressure from the contraction of financial resources available for corrupt re-distribution, see: Sergei Aleksashenko, “The budget option,” *Gazeta.ru*, 27 December 2013, <http://www.gazeta.ru/column/aleksashenko/5821529.shtml>

19 On the changes in Germany's course towards Russia, see: Judy Dempsey, “Merkel's Putin problem,” *New York Times*, 17 December 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/18/opinion/merkels-putin-problem.html> ; on Turkey's predicament, see: Marc Champion, “Turkey will either lose Erdogan or democracy,” *Bloomberg opinion*, 20 December 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-12-20/turkey-will-either-lose-erdogan-or-democracy.html>

“(...) *the military coup in Egypt signified a political fiasco of the Muslim Brotherhood and the near collapse of Erdoğan’s vision.*”

the importance of mutual support for the two leaders, who are keen to demonstrate their determination in defeating “radicals” and “extremists”, and to rebuff Western “interference”. It also brings them closer to China, which, in spite of the dogmas of Communist/Maoist ideology, positions itself as a major headquarters of the counter-revolutionary “International”.

Conclusions

The long-established bonds of respect and even trust between Erdoğan and Putin, who have in remarkably parallel efforts built their monocentric systems of power, have acquired a new trait as these leaders resort to experimenting with forceful measures in order to preserve their regimes. It is the need to deter and suppress domestic protest movements that is the essence of this new trait, without which no personal “chemistry” would have rescued bilateral relations from the disruptive impact of multiple controversies. The civil war in Syria forms the most acute –but by no means the most fundamental– of these controversies. For that matter, the interests of the two states diverge increasingly in the Caucasus, as Russia pulls Armenia into the Customs Union (effectively forbidding it to sign an association agreement with the EU) and Turkey cultivates and expands its *de facto* alliance with Azerbaijan.²⁰ The energy connection also generates more tensions than friendliness, so the ideological congruence now provides the main foundation of this sort-of-strategic partnership.

Suppressing street protests is only one element of a regime’s survival strategy, and a no less important effort is directed toward preserving the unity of stakeholders, which tends to erode under the impact of mass discontent. In this respect, Putin has scored far better than Erdoğan, who mobilized his supporters when facing the protests in summer but had to face splits and betrayals in his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the last weeks of 2013 (at the time writing, there is no way of knowing whether he has managed to weather this storm). Putin’s success in preventing an elite *coup* or desertion of key “oligarchs” is best explained by a fear factor, because the beneficiaries of his regime would be unable to explain the origins of their fortunes to potential newcomers to the Kremlin offices

20 This divergence is emphasized in: Cavid Veliyev, “Implications of Ilham Aliyev’s visit to Turkey,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 25 November 2013, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[swords\]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews\[any_of_the_words\]=azerbaijan&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=41679&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=933faa8018c0a106f9bd8fa3f59e5c38#/Ur6rqbR0kZk](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[swords]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews[any_of_the_words]=azerbaijan&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=41679&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=933faa8018c0a106f9bd8fa3f59e5c38#/Ur6rqbR0kZk)

of power. Corruption is indeed a defining characteristic rather than a side effect of Putin's regime, while a hard-hitting but relatively minor (by Russian standards) corruption scandal threatens to take down Erdoğan's regime.

Confronting revolutions is a consuming task and a no-win strategy, as every success deepens the pool of discontent and prevention is often synonymous to postponement, often adding fury and destructive power to the revolution in the making. Since the start of this century, both Russia and Turkey have produced coherent autocratic/populist systems of power that have proven as fact that they cannot be changed by elections. This only means that they will be changed by other means.