Moving away from the West or Normalization of Relations? Comments on Turkey-Russia Rapprochment

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Abstract

Turkey's relations with its neighbor Russia went through a rocky road after shooting down the Russian Su-24 jets in 2015. Although Turkey-Russia relations in the 1990s were characterized as "managed geopolitical rivalry" by Prof. Dr. Duygu Sezer, until 2015 Russia has been one of the main trading partners of Turkey. In November 2015, the shooting down Russian jets at the Syrian-Turkish border initiated a new phase followed by economic sanctions. Thus, the importance of political economy aspect of the relations affecting several sectors became a crucial part of domestic politics. In the last decade, the literature on Turkish foreign policy started to utilize the trading state metaphor, which was also demonstrating Turkey's soft power emphasizing political economy in revising the relations with neighbor states. Davutoğlu, even before he became the FM and PM, defended the possible increased role of Turkey in its region via increased economic, political and social relations. After the Arab revolts, Turkey's relations with not only Middle Eastern neighbors but also with Russia started to be challenged as the "zero-neighbor policy" rhetoric took the place of "zero-problem with the neighbors" rhetoric. The stranded relations with all the neighbors has been a significant challenge and as the migrant deal with the EU being questioned, Turkey needed to redefine its relations with the West and the East. After Davutoğlu's resignation, there has been several drastic changes observed in the foreign policy including Israel and Russia. Rapprochement with Russia was perceived as an alternative to Turkey-EU relations by some, while the others perceived it as normalization of relations to get out of the stranded position that Turkey found itself. This paper aims to examine these perspectives through comments from public opinion leaders such as academics, businessman and think tanks.

Keywords: European Union, Russia-Turkey rapprochement, Turkish foreign policy, neighborhood, perception

Özet

2015 yılında Türkiye'nin Rus Su-24 jetlerini vurması ile Rusya ile ilişkilerde hızlı bir gerileme görüldü. Her ne kadar 1990'larda Prof. Dr. Duygu Sezer Türk Rus ilişkilerini yönetilen jeopolitik rekabet olarak tanımlasa da 2000'li yıllarda, 2015 yılına kadar Rusya önemli bir ticaret ortağı olmuştu Türkiye için. Kasım 2015'den sonra ekonomik yaptırımlar yeni bir sayfa açılmasına ve iç siyasetin ve ekonominin birçok alanının etkilenmesine sebep oldu. Türk dış politikasında literatür son on yılda özellikle ticaret yapan devlet metaforunu kullanmaya, Türkiye'nin yumuşak gücü ve komşu ülkelerle politik ekonomik ilişkilerini revize ettiğini anlatmaya başlamıştı. Davutoğlu, dışişleri bakanı ve başbakan olmadan önce dahi, Türkiye'nin bölgesinde ekonomik, siyasi ve sosyal ilişkilerini artırarak rolünü artırmasını savunmaktaydı. Arap ayaklanmalarından sonra ise Türkiye'nin Orta Doğu komşuları ve Rusya ile ilişkileri zor günler geçirmiş, komşularla sıfır sorun söylemi ise sıfır komşu söylemine evrilmişti. Hem komşularla sıkıntılı ilişkiler hem de göçmen anlaşması çerçevesinde sorgulanan AB ilişkileri Türkiye'nin Doğu ve Batı komşuları ile ilişkilerinin yeniden tanımlanmasına ihtiyacı ortaya çıkartmıştır. Davutoğlu'nun istifası ile birlikte Rusya ve Israil ile olan ilişkiler de dahil olmak üzere dış politikada önemli değişimler gözlenmiştir. Rusya ile yeniden yakınlaşma Türkiye-AB ilişkilerine bir alternatif olarak görülürken bazılarınca, diğerleri bunu Türkiye'nin sıkışmış pozisyondan kurtulmak için ilişkilerini normalleştirmesi olarak görmüştür. Bu çalışmada bu algılar kanaat önderlerinin görüşlerine yer verilerek incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği, Rusya-Türkiye yakınlaşması, Türk Dış Politikası, komşuluk, algı

Ups and downs[1]

History bears record of diplomatic and military conflicts between Russian and Ottoman Empires. The Russian-Turkish wars shaped relations between two empires from mid – 1500s till the end of the 1800s. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkey signed one of its first bilateral agreements with Russia, in 1925, on neutrality, non-aggression and mutual consultation. Montreaux Convention, 1936, caused friction and during the 2nd World War, Russian demands on the modification of the Convention continued. (Sadak 1949, 452) In 1952, after Turkey became a member of the NATO, its foreign and security policies started to lean towards the West more, which in return deepened the divide between Russia and Turkey until the end of the Cold War. After the Cold War, while Moscow adopted policies aimed at keeping Turkey out of Central Asia and Caucasus, (Tuncer 2000, 104) Turkey insisted on creating cultural, political and military bonds with regional countries. Although, there was a fundamental conflict of interest between these two major regional actors' foreign policy orientations and political controversies were observed, official trade between Russia and Turkey increased to 3,5 billion US Dollars and unofficial luggage trade[2] was estimated between 6 and 10 billion US Dollars. It was argued (Sezer 2000, 63), the managed geopolitical competition of the 1990s together with economic cooperation brought virtual rapprochement.

During the Cold War, larger parts of the Wider Black Sea region were under control of the powerful Soviet Union. When this control eroded in the 1990s, Russia tried to take advantage of the opportunities offered by its strategic place and political heritage (National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020 2009). Its objective was to shape events in the region and thus strengthen its international standing (Legvold 2001, 64) especially towards its near abroad – including Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – which has been one of the main concerns of Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Borrowing from its imperial past, Russia has perceived itself as the guardian of stability in the region, and a balancer between East and West, the unique moral authority. (Benes 2010) Accordingly, in 2010 Russia's military doctrine emphasised the need for a new international security architecture, since the existing structures did not provide equal security for all states. (Military Doctrine of Russian Federation 2010)

Regionally, in the political vacuum left by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey saw a window of opportunity to reach out to the newly independent states, with an aim to increase its political influence in the whole region, including the Black Sea itself. Turkey acted fast in recognising these newly independent states and in opening embassies. In the 1990s, Turkey's governments emphasised the importance of cultural, linguistic and ethnic ties with the Central Asian and Caucasus countries, in order to increase cultural ties as well as foreign policy options. (Punnsman 2012) As two regional actors, Russia and Turkey, simultaneously tried to increase their political leverage in the region, their respective interests led to conflicts regarding political and military strategies, cultural and economic ties, as well as energy needs.

In the 1990s, Russia-Turkey relations experienced some important hiccups, such as their positions on Chechnya and the PKK, and tensions over relations with neighbouring countries. Russian cooperation with Iran, and the presence of military bases in Georgia and Armenia increased the concerns over Russian-Turkish relations. Similarly, the close relations between

[1] This part of the article is partly taken from the author's original manuscript; Ç. Üstün, "Turkey's Policies in its Overlapping Neighbourhood with Russia and the European Union" in Licinia Simao and Remi Piet, *Security in Shared Neighbourhoods Foreign Policy of Russia, Turkey and the EU*, pp. 53-74, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

[2] Luggage trade is unofficial cross-border economic trade especially between Russia, CIS countries and Turkey. Visitors were called luggage traders since they were bringing goods and taking back. Laleli district of İstanbul was known to be the centre of this sort of trade.

Turkey and Azerbaijan as well as its naval superiority in the Black Sea added to the negative perception of Turkey among Russian leaders. In the Balkans, by the end of the 1990s, Russia and Turkey backed opposing sides in the wars following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia as Russia supported Serbia and Turkey sided with Bosnia and Kosovo. (Sezer 2000, 76)

While confrontations and controversies shaped relations between Russia and Turkey in the 1990s, in the beginning of 2000s Turkish and Russian Foreign Ministers drafted a common action plan including cooperation in political and economic fields and against terrorism. (Kasım 2004, 211) In the 2000s, instead of a threat factor, Russia became an ally for Turkey as Turkey started to focus more on the energy security. Since the beginning of the 2000s, Russia as a producer, Turkey as a transit and EU countries as the consumer countries redesigned their energy policies. In 2008, during the Georgia War a.k.a. 5-day war, Turkey emphasized the importance of cooperation regional countries in the Black Sea and in 2014, during the abrupt conflict in Ukraine Turkish authorities emphasised the importance of Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and political unity. However, it has been witnessed that Turkey has been reluctant to adopt an aggressive attitude. This reluctance was even seen in Crimea, home for the ethnic Turkish minority of Tatars; although Turkey raised some concerns, Turkey preferred not to disturb the relations with Russia in the region.

On 24th November 2015, relations between the two countries took an aggressive tone when Turkey shot down a Russian SU-24 jet. This incident aggravated the relations, but it needs to be understood that the Russian response and escalating tension between Turkey and Russia were related to not only the two states' policies but also the other regional and international actors who were on the verge of determining their positions in the region where the political, ethnic and religious fractions are being resituated. Although Turkey's NATO membership raised questions as to whether NATO would be involved in the Russian-Turkish military contestation, responses from NATO were not perceived promising by Turkey. After the incident, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated "I look forward to further contacts between Ankara and Moscow and I call for calm and de-escalation. Diplomacy and de-escalation are important to resolve this situation." (Stoltenberg 2015)

Russian support of Assad, western countries' overt and covert support to Kurdish groups in the region in the fight against ISIS and the increasing number of migrants fleeing from the region left Turkey in a stranded position. Especially due to the PKK's terrorist activities in Turkey, any support to Kurdish groups in Syria increases the concerns of Turkey vis-à-vis an autonomous Kurdish authority in the region, which would have a direct effect on the Kurds in Turkey. The number of the migrants reaching to 3 million in Turkey, increasing security threats after the bombings in several cities including the big cities i.e. İstanbul, Ankara, Kayseri turned the Syrian issue into a domestic matter. All these security concerns, merged with the economic losses in several sectors such as agriculture, construction and tourism as a result of the tension between Turkey and Russia made Turkey vulnerable and it felt isolated, not only from the region but also from the international arena. Just in the 2000s, Turkey's motto has been zero problems with the neighbours and after the Arab uprisings it has been observed that in a very short period of time this motto lost its viability.

As some argue, the hybrid war in the region is the 3rd World War (Han 2016) happening just at the doorstep of Turkey, which directly affects not only the foreign policies regarding the neighbours, but also domestic security. The conflict, which is envisaged to continue for decades in the region, urges the states to reposition their foreign policies. Until the Arab revolts, Turkey-Russia treated each other as trading partners and good neighbours. Arab revolts in the region, Russian aims to increase its say in the conflict especially in Syria, Turkey's aim to act as the leader of the Muslim World, Russian and Turkish positions regarding Assad's power became the biggest question marks in the relations.

Shooting down the Russian jet increased the economic negative effects on not only the tourism sector but also all suppliers i.e. the agriculture. Economic sanctions that Russia included not only suspension of touristic tours to Turkey but also restrictions on certain goods. Russia's share in Turkish exports was %4.6 of Turkey's total exports in 2013. In 2014, it had fallen to %3.8. In 2015, it went down to %2.5. (Sönmez 2016) Unsurprisingly, luggage trade was affected adversely. The restricted products included poultry, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, oranges, grapes, apples, peaches and other fruit and vegetables. Russian employers were prohibited from hiring Turkish nationals (Nenov 2015) and visa free travel for Turkish citizens was cancelled. In November 2015, Davutoğlu, then the PM, said that Turkey had the right to shoot down the jet according to the rules of engagement and in July 2016 he stated "the order was not for a specific plane but a general instruction for the defence of Turkish skies. Within our state's customs, the prime minister gives the rules of engagement in a written directive to the General Staff. I gave the order on Oct. 10." (Hürriyet Daily News 2016)

After his resignation in May 2016, Binali Yıldırım became the PM and the rhetoric in Turkish foreign policy dramatically changed compared to the one under Davutoğlu. In order to increase the number of friends and decrease the number of enemies (Hürriyet 2016), priority was given to the relations with Russia and a letter from Turkey to Russia was sent in June 2016. Although the letter did not include the word apology, according to Erdoğan's spokesperson it stated "I would like to once again express to the family of the pilot that I share their pain and extend my condolences. We beg their pardon." (BirGün 2016) As this letter was expected to normalize the relations between Turkey and Russia and to elevate the pressure on sectors like tourism, construction and agriculture, on 19 December 2016, Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrei Karlov was shot dead in Ankara by a member of Turkish riot police. The first reaction from Turkey and Russia were cautious characterizing the attack as a provocation to disturb Russian – Turkish relations. The analysts' forecasts read that the assassination is unlikely to create an open rupture between Moscow and Ankara but this would not mean that Russia would forget the incident. (Han 2016) There have been some concerns raised on Russia's cautious and calm reaction. (Yalçınkaya 2016) It was also argued that "Russian and Turkish overarching and shared priority of collaborating in Syria in order to contain Iran's influence, while protecting Russia's interest in preserving the Syrian government and Turkey's interest in containing Kurdish separatism, is likely to override differences resulting from the assassination and its upcoming investigation." (Abi and Seçkin 2016)

Although, it is difficult to foresee the future of Turkey-Russia relations just after the assassination of Russian envoy to Turkey, the efforts of Turkey to normalize relations with Russia seems to continue since it was argued Turkey would like to use its relations with Russia to balance its position vis-a-vis the EU and USA (Güvenç 2016). On the contrary, some argued that Russia would open the way to the east and alternative alliances to Turkey's western orientation can be achieved through its close relations with Russia i.e. the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). First, president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suggested that if Turkey is in the Shanghai organization, this would make Turkey to act more flexible. (Sputniknews 2016) He stated that "Turkey must feel at ease. It mustn't say 'for me it's the European Union at all costs'. That's my view. Why shouldn't Turkey be in the Shanghai Five? I said this to Mr Putin, to Nazarbayev, to those who are in the Shanghai Five now". (Reuters 2016) After this statement, there have been several opinions proposed in the media regarding Turkey's possible membership to the SCO i.e. Turkey's membership would increase the effect of the organization in the world; Turkey's membership would be a logical step for Erdoğan but cannot replace the EU membership. (Diken 2016) Erdinç Yazıcı stated that the debate on membership to the SCO is normal since Turkey is a country trying to increase its relations with the actors in its region while Tanel Demirel suggests that these discussions do not mean changes in the axis of Turkish foreign policy. Since Turkey became an independent country which has a distinctive personality

under the JDP governments, whenever it finds necessary it challenges the Western World to protect its national interests. (Habertürk 2016) We should also remember that, suggestions to abandon the western ties and create alternative alliances with eastern countries have been made before i.e. National Security Council General Secretary Tuncer Kılınç once said Turkey never got help from EU, so Turkey should direct its efforts to establish an alternative alliance with Russia and Iran. (Sabah 2002)

It is argued that the SCO may not meet the economic and political needs of Turkey (Güvenç 2016) since mechanisms without a clear vision would not be enough to bring any positive solutions to international alliance problem of Turkey. As a NATO member and economic partner of the West Eurasianism is not perceived as a viable option for Turkey. (Balta 2016) Ünal Çeviköz, wrote that neither Eurasianist perspectives nor search for an alliance in the Middle East could help the security of Turkey. That said, he also emphasizes the importance of not ignoring the neighbours. (Çeviköz 2016) Especially the war at the southern borders make it necessary for Turkey to revise its relations with Russia and Israel. (Özkan and Han 2016) Revisions on the relations with Russia are perceived as a balancing element and historically when Turkey's relations with the USA and the EU experience difficulties the Russian card has been utilized. (Özbay 2016) From the government side, PM Binali Yıldırım's statement was emphasizing the fact that SCO would not replace the EU and "increasing relations with other countries due to Turkey's geopolitical position should not be a threat". (Diken 2016) EU Minister Ömer Çelik also states that the relations with Russia are not an alternative to the ones with the western alliance. (Sputniknews 2016)

Political Economic Aspect of the Relations

If one looks at the economic relations of Turkey, the EU has been Turkey's biggest trading partner. According to the data from Customs and Trade Ministry, EU held %48.5 of Turkish trade and in 2015 export to the EU was at the level of 64 billion USD. According to the Economy Ministry of Turkey; from 50 thousand companies investing in Turkey 23 thousand are from the EU countries and in 2015 the rise in EU's export to Turkey was %5.9. (Deutsche Welle 2016)

In 2014 foreign trade statistics show that Turkey's total export was 157,6 billion USD and 68,51 billion USD was from the EU countries. If we look at the total amount of the imports, we see that 88,78 billion USD of the total 242,17 billion USD is from the EU countries. These statistics demonstrate that EU countries constituted %53 of the exports and %52 of the imports. (Ağır and Metin 2016, 13)

When one looks at the figures regarding the foreign trade with Russia; in 2014 exports were 6 billion USD while the imports were 25,3 billion USD. In 2015 these numbers were dropped to 4 billion USD in exports and 19 billion USD in imports, in the first 8 months of the 2016 exports were down to 0,98 billion USD and imports to 10,26 billion USD. The number of tourists in 2014 was as high as 4,48 million while in the first 8 months of 2016 this number dropped to 0,3 million. (Turkish Republic Moscow Embassy 2016)

If one looks at the individual countries where Turkey exported goods between June 2014 and June 2015; Germany has been the main trade partner, followed by the UK; Iraq, Italy; France, USA; Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russian Federation. (TRT Haber 2015)

	Country	2014 June	2015 June	Change %
1	Germany	1.232.091	1.125.189	-8,7
2	United Kingdom	827.937	813.194	-1,8
3	Iraq	724.658	674.258	-7,0
4	Italy	625.466	590.057	-5,7

5	France	671.103	563.294	-16,1
6	United States	516.443	536.352	3,9
7	Spain	377.417	414.616	9,9
8	Saudi Arabia	240.694	385.515	60,2
9	Iran	294.130	332.189	12,9
10	Russia	502.612	328.490	-34,6

Source: Top export destinations of Turkey between 2014 June and 2015 June (Thousand USD), Anadolu Ajansı at (TRT Haber 2015)

According to the data taken from Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), the exports to the EU increased by %10,8 while Germany continued to be the number one trading partner. Same data shows that top import origins are China (2 billion 59 million USD), followed by Germany (1 billion 772 million USD), Russia (1 billion 189 million USD) and USA (985 million USD). (TÜİK 2016)

Balancing East and West

In the light of these; can one argue that Turkey's rapprochement with Russia be an alternative to its relations with the western countries? Should we see these steps taken as normalization efforts due to the needs in the Turkish foreign policy?

The answer lies in political economic necessities together with the historical legacies as laid out in the previous parts. History demonstrates that relations with Russia have never been easy and since both countries have different priorities in their neighbourhoods, they found themselves in diplomatic conflicts. This era though is perceived exceptional since the tension between Russia and Turkey had not been a physical one since the establishment of Turkish Republic. Turkey's shooting down the SU-24 jets on 24th November 2015 and just at the anniversary of this incident on 24th November 2016, attack on Turkish soldiers raised questions over Russian involvement as a retaliation. Turkish Armed Forces' statement pointed the Syrian regime forces behind the attack but Lavrov said "Neither Russia nor Syria, with its air force, had anything to do with this. We don't want a repetition of these sort of incidents. It's essential to discuss this issue with the United States and other institutions". (Erkuş 2016)

Turkey's neighbourhood can be characterized as chaotic while the regional dynamics and alliances are changing constantly. The uprisings in the Arab World changed the status quo while in the war in Syria the international actors, regional actors and local actors are actively and overtly searching for new positions for themselves. The war in the region, while increases the appetites of some groups to gain their autonomy, international terrorist organizations are actively threatening the whole region, bringing the conflict to the cities in neighbouring countries and Turkey is taking its share in this chaos.

It has been observed that Turkey's policies to act as the leading country in the Middle East under then PM Davutoğlu did not create the most flexible foreign policy options for Turkey. PM Binali Yıldırım's policies just after the resignation of Davutoğlu, revising the internecine relations with Russia should be read as the efforts to gain flexibility in the foreign policy realm that Turkey needed the most in such a chaotic environment. As the line between foreign and domestic politics is blurred, the security concerns at the borders turn into security concerns of citizens in cities, stabilization of relations with regional actors became a necessity.

It should be underlined that historical and political economic necessities suggest that not only stabilization of relations with Russia but also with the western actors is a necessity in the Turkish foreign policy. In 2016, Turkey's relations with the EU suffered. The unsuccessful and very much criticized migrant deal, very late response of the EU to 15 July coup attempt, the

decision of European Parliament to freeze the relations with Turkey are some of the examples of the reasons of increasing hostile attitudes at the public and elite levels.

In this environment, analysts suggest ways to put the relations back to track such as upgrading the Customs Union to meet the Turkish industry's expectations of a full market merger; increasing the dialogue; not following the advice of European Parliament to freeze the relations; rethinking the asylum policy. (Aydıntaşbas 2016) Another suggestion has been forming a task force asking their members to evaluate the state of the accession process and possible ways out of the current stale-mate while looking for different modalities of relations. (Lecha 2016) Sinan Ülgen argues, there is a need to reshape the relations with the EU involving non-governmental and non-political actors focusing on issues such as the refugee crisis, economic integration, counterterrorism and energy. (Ülgen 2016)

Conclusion

Turkey's neighbourhood is going through a serious transformation while Turkey's western partners i.e. the EU feels the need to restructure. The referendum on Brexit, the efforts of member states to reshape economic and financial relations after the economic crisis, increasing anti-establishment rhetoric in the member states, some member state government's anti-liberal democratic policies, increasing terrorist activities push the EU to redefine its policies. In the near future, it is fair to expect amendments in the institutional and bureaucratic structures of the EU. Thus, Turkey's relations with the west would need revisions based on the changes that the EU would go through.

In this instable and volatile political era Turkey had difficulties to redirect its foreign policy in a way to maximise flexibility. After the government change in 2016, efforts to increase most needed flexibility is observed. Another difficulty in conducting foreign policy is the intertwined character of domestic and foreign policy rhetoric. The effect of the public opinion on foreign policy choices may limit the flexibility. However, as a country which cherished its position as a country connecting the East and the West for so long, Turkey's need to balance its policies once again in this transformative era demonstrates itself.

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