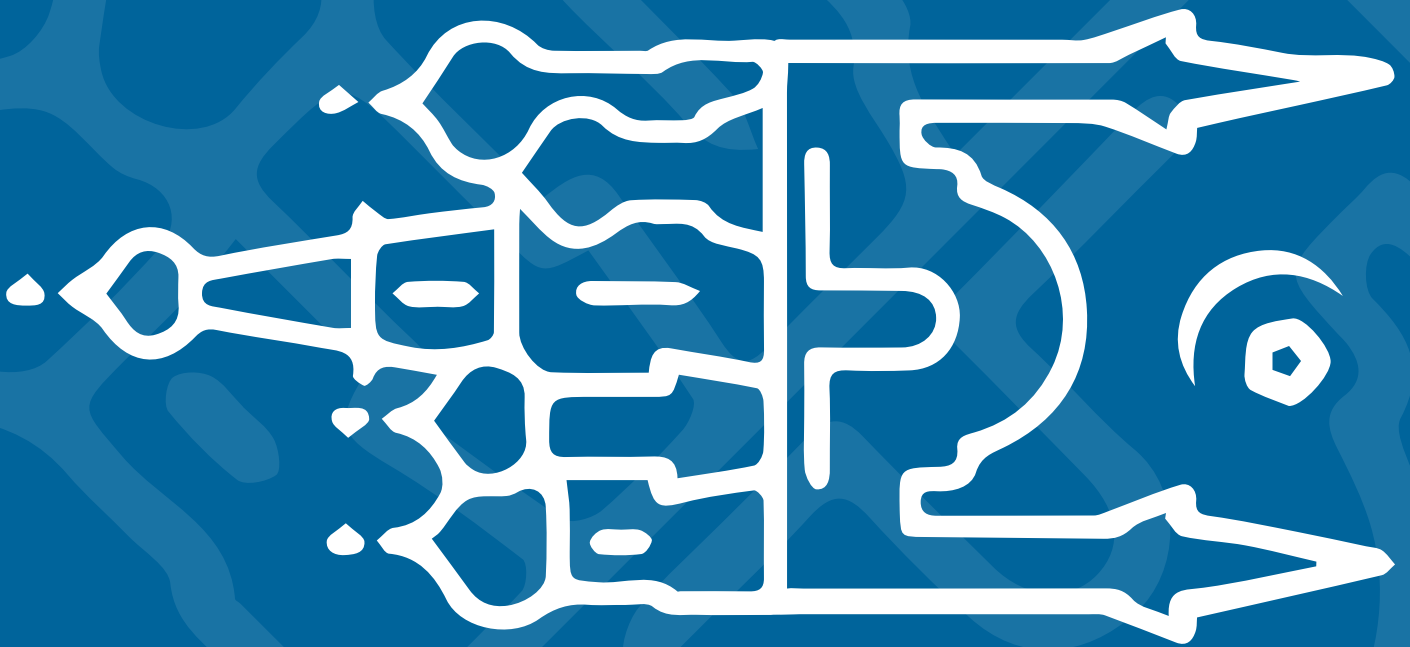


RUSSIA AND TURKEY: **ENEMIES WITH BENEFITS**



An unexpected duopoly
for the Caucasus and the Middle East

A project by



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Executive summary

Turkey and Russia are two military powers currently competing in several tense regions of the Caucasus, the Middle East and North Africa. This competition is not limited to 'the confrontations of their proxies, but has sometimes even lead to casualties among Russian or Turkish troops (especially in Syria). Despite this, and despite repeated predictions about the impending risk of serious military escalation in the relationship between Moscow and Ankara, the dialogue between the two capitals seems stronger and more predictable than ever: the fiercer the competition, the more fluid the diplomatic partnership.

In this paper, I intend to analyse the dynamics of the dialogue between Russia and Turkey in the context of several recent regional crises (Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, the Hagia Sophia) to identify a possible pattern of how the military competition between the two actors is kept under political and diplomatic control. To achieve this, I will also refer to extensive interviews with subject-matter experts.

What is the mechanism by which Putin and Erdoğan constantly ensure a peaceful atmosphere in such a competitive and confrontational environment?

My thesis is that there is an informal agreement between the two leaders to avoid any serious deterioration of relations, each of them considering that he has more to lose if he makes the other vulnerable and obtains geopolitical gains at the other's expense. This informal agreement seems to have taken shape, as I will show, in the period 2015-2016, in the interval between the downing of the Russian SU-24 plane by the Turkish army in the Turkey-Syria border area in November 2015 and the anti-Erdoğan/anti-AKP (Justice and Development Party) coup that took place on 15 July 2016. The departure of Turkey's former prime minister and foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu on 5 May 2016 is the most significant milestone marking the moment when Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan established **a communication and decision-making system**, strictly controlled by them personally, to manage the Russia-Turkey relationship.

Of course, a secret diplomatic agreement is impossible to prove beyond doubt in the absence of a written protocol. We will not be able to make such a document appear magically at the end of this paper. But, as in the case of theoretical speculations on the existence of black holes – whose empirical reality has been unprovable for decades, although their effect on surrounding objects is visible – we can still show that since May 2016, Russian and Turkish leaders have been behaving as if such a pact exists in the shadows and exerts an overwhelming gravitational attraction on every word spoken along the Moscow-Ankara axis.

As I will try to show in the paper, there are four reasons why Putin and Erdoğan are naturally oriented toward making such an **informal pact of non-aggression, cooperation, and caring for each other's sensibilities and interests**:

- *an ideological reason* (illiberal regimes avoid making each other vulnerable);
- *an electoral reason* (a Russian-Turkish military conflict would bring unnecessary electoral risks for Putin and Erdoğan, with any military defeat likely eliminating them from political life. Unlike many states in the region, with which Russia and Turkey would not be afraid to instigate clashes – such as Georgia and Ukraine, or Armenia and Syria respectively – the Russian and Turkish armies fear each other's ability to inflict major damage upon themselves);
- *a geopolitical reason* (Turkey and Russia have more to gain by entering a controlled competition in regions where such competition would eliminate the West as a power broker);
- *a political reason* (for Putin, any alternative to Erdoğan is more dangerous; for Erdoğan, any alternative to Putin could potentially be more threatening – because a new leader might be more inclined to seek confrontation in one of the many points of tension in order to define himself, in opposition to the conciliatory legacy of his predecessor).

A natural geopolitical rivalry

Russia and Turkey are **among the states most prone to geopolitical rivalry**. The influence and interests of the two powers overlap in a fault zone that runs through Eastern Europe and much of Asia, from the former Yugoslav space to China's western neighbourhood. Here – especially in the Balkans and the Caucasus, but also beyond the Caspian Sea – Russia's expansion has traditionally clashed with Ottoman military power, but also with the cultural influence exerted by Istanbul on Turkish and Muslim peoples. The large number of Russian-Turkish wars in recent centuries ("nearly fifteen major wars"⁰¹) has been a natural consequence of this geographical determinism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and after Turkey began to dream of recovering its soft power around the Black Sea, this long succession of Russian-Turkish rivalry was discreetly reactivated. Moreover, in the last decade, this structural rivalry in Eurasia and Central Asia has been doubled by the rebirth of Moscow and Ankara's military ambitions in the Middle East and North Africa.

Since 2010, Russia has, in the manner of the USSR, been increasingly defined as a global power in search of bases in strategic areas of the Mediterranean and in the hinterland of major oil producers. On the other hand, also around 2010, Turkey rediscovered – through the ascent to power of the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, the AKP and the doctrine of Ahmet Davutoğlu ("strategic depth")⁰² – its vocation as protector of the Sunni regions in the name of the old Caliphate responsibility of the Ottomans. The confrontation for influence in the Caucasus is thus doubled by a clash of interests between Moscow and Ankara in areas such as Libya and Syria. It should be added to this picture that Russia and Turkey are the only major players in the Black Sea under the criteria of the Montreux Convention. This Russian-Turkish *Mare Nostrum* is a factor that critically exposes both Russia and Turkey as a potential 'soft underbelly' for both states in case of conflict.

All the potential for confrontation generated by the factors listed above is dramatically multiplied by Turkey's membership in NATO, where it plays the role of one of the largest and most powerful armies. Accordingly, the Russian-Turkish fault zone has the potential to be one of the hottest spots in the world. However, this has not so far proved to be the case: in the last four years, Russia and Turkey have managed to supervise their numerous regional rivalries fluently, without any real danger of escalation. No matter how unusual and contradictory it may seem, we are talking about a *competitive cooperation*, in which states continue to pursue their interests, while taking care to protect their competitor, and never violate a series of red lines that would make their *friendly-rival* vulnerable.

A similar example of *competitive cooperation* throughout history is provided by Israel and Jordan, states that have waged fierce competition over territories such as the West Bank or Jerusalem since their founding, but which have understood that the rivalry between them must stop at the point where it threatens to destabilise the other state (because its disappearance would give way to a stronger opponent).

To understand how this counterintuitive, bizarre reality is possible, we must discuss a second factor which operates separately from the natural state of competition between Russia and

Turkey: the political context. This is not the first time in recent history that we face the paradox of this *competitive cooperation* between Moscow and Ankara: it manifested itself in a relatively similar form after 1918, when Lenin and Atatürk demonstrated unexpected mutual recognition and consideration, avoiding confrontations along the Caucasus fault line, although the vulnerabilities of both sides were evident after the collapse of the Tsarist and Ottoman Empires. At the time, Turkey and Russia handled the crises in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan with shared caution, rushing to conclude a peace treaty.⁹³ Establishing why Lenin and Atatürk did so can tell us a great deal about today's relationship between Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: both leaders believed that the main threat to them came from the West. After 1918, Turkey suffered a partial occupation by Western forces (Britain, France, Greece), which raised claims to former Ottoman territories. Bolshevik Russia was in a similar situation, as it was also considered a serious threat to Western civilisation. In this context, the USSR and Turkey chose to focus all their energies on their western borders, avoiding expending resources and energy in the Caucasus's 'backyard'. The reality of domestic and international politics, in other words, counterbalanced the structural hostility between the USSR and Turkey to which geopolitical reality would have predisposed them. A similar pattern has manifested itself in the relationship between Ankara and Moscow since the spring of 2016.

Armand Goşu, an expert on the Russian space, explains in an interview conducted for this research project: "In modern and contemporary history, Russia and Turkey have collaborated only twice. After Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt, the Ottoman Empire concluded an alliance with Russia, called the 'monstrous coalition', between 1799 and 1802. And now – between Putin and Erdoğan – an alliance that is half a decade old. Just these two moments for over 300 years since Peter the Great founded the Russian Empire. Once the hostility towards the West disappears – or at least fades – the Russian-Turkish alliance will lose its *raison d'être*."⁹⁴

The expert Răzvan Munteanu agrees, emphasising the needs and disappointments of Turkey: "There is a functional balance of strategic interests, at least for the time being, between Turkey and the Russian Federation. I would say that there is a mutual understanding at the leadership level, where the red lines that the two states must respect are known. This was highlighted in Syria, where Russia responded to Turkey's demands in the Kurdish area, providing the guarantees Ankara needed. Moreover, beyond geopolitical interests, the rise of authoritarianism in Turkey and the marginalisation of Erdoğan by the West have contributed to the rapprochement between the Kremlin and Turkish leadership. At the same time, the Russian Federation is subject to international economic constraints and is embroiled in a series of extremely costly conflicts, which is why it has avoided escalating any conflicts in its relations with Turkey so far."⁹⁵

Former foreign minister of Romania and writer Teodor Baconschi proffers a more sceptical vision: "I do not think – in their capacity as historical rival empires and hereditary opponents for the exercise of *thalassocracy* in the Black Sea – that the two states have suddenly become long-term allies. However, both have the interest of internal stability in autocratic regimes, and have worked (coordinated or not) in areas like Syria or Libya, relying on the 'external' escape technique and on the relative Western disengagement following the failure of the Arab Spring. Their interventions have

not produced conclusive results on the ground, much less new legal regulations, and are rather politico-military PR exercises."⁰⁶

Professor Dragoş Mateescu offers a broader perspective on the Putin-Erdoğan cooperation: "We are talking about relations between two regimes rather than between two countries: the Putin regime in Russia and the Erdoğan regime in Turkey. Both are suffering from deep delegitimation processes, facing massive declines in popularity amid poor management of their economic problems. Thus, both regimes have gradually become authoritarian, even dictatorial, using current technologies to control and oppress their populations in the manner of twentieth-century totalitarianism. **Putin's Russia and Erdoğan's Turkey are forced to work together to serve each other as pretexts for their own foreign policy actions. Both Russia and Turkey need each other in Nagorno-Karabakh, Libya and northern Syria to justify their actions there.** The benefits are great for now. Both Putin and Erdoğan are taking advantage of this situation (1) to feed with illusions the nationalist elites who support them in power and (2) to perpetuate (in their perception) their presence and influence in the region we are talking about: the eastern Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean."⁰⁷

The presumed existence of a personal pact between Putin and Erdoğan does not mean, of course, that Moscow and Ankara are not considering the other camp's moves from positions of political realism, and that they are not taking preventive measures in the event of an uncontrolled diplomatic escalation. Turkey's discreet cooperation with Ukraine, for example, was quickly counterbalanced by a growing alliance between Russia and Egypt. This fact proves that the two countries' diplomats are continuing to do their job according to the old rules of balance of power, providing Putin and Erdoğan with options for the moment when the pact between them is broken.

The crisis of 2015-16 and its lessons for Putin and Erdoğan

To understand the current relationship between Russia and Turkey, we must go to its sources: the moment when Presidents Putin and Erdoğan significantly reset their mutual approaches, making a strategic choice that endures until today. Until then, the relationship between Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had a sophisticated and unstable chemistry: it was clear that Turkey spared Russia for military and economic reasons (tourism and energy, for example, are areas in which Ankara cannot afford to antagonise Moscow), but Erdoğan was willing to react extremely aggressively – relying on the umbrella of NATO – when he perceived that Russia had underestimated his force.

The reset moment of the new relations between Ankara and Moscow was, in fact, a major military crisis: the downing of a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft on 24 November 2015 by an F-16 Fighting Falcon of the Turkish Air Force. According to independent evidence, the incident took place just inside Turkish territory, at a distance that leads military experts to believe that the Russian pilot was performing a mission to test the Turkish military reaction to a challenge on the border.⁰⁸

Significantly, the incident did not just come out of nowhere: it was actually the final element of an escalation that had started in October 2015, when Russian military aircraft began bombing the positions of anti-government troops (including Daesh) in northern Syria. Turkey and NATO had repeatedly denounced the usual border provocation as being specific to Russia's intelligence strategy.⁰⁹ A squadron of F-15 aircraft was sent to Incirlik in early November 2015 precisely to discourage Russia's manoeuvres. In parallel, after using various diplomatic channels to warn Moscow, the Russian military attaché and the ambassador to Ankara were summoned by Turkish decision-makers to a final mediation attempt, but with no effect. Under these conditions, on 24 November 2015, Turkey responded militarily to the border violation, shooting down the Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft.

Given the solidarity shown by the US and its allies after the incident and the American involvement in the initial attempts at conciliation, the decision to offer Russia a firmer response would not have been unusual for the US military or political leadership. At that point, although Turkey had already become an independent and capricious player, military coordination with the US and NATO was still at a satisfactory level. Not coincidentally, Vladimir Putin unceremoniously pointed to the US in December 2015, saying: "If someone in the Turkish government decided to lick the Americans in a certain place, well, I don't know then, was that the right decision or not?"¹⁰

To understand the subsequent metabolism of the relationship between Russia and Turkey, it is essential to note how after the downing of the Russian Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft, **a genuine and uncontrolled crisis** between Ankara and Moscow unfolded between November 2015 and May 2016:

- The previously established bilateral visits were cancelled immediately (Lavrov to Ankara, Erdoğan to Moscow);¹¹

- President Putin blocked imports of goods from Turkey, banned charter flights and tourist packages, free visas, and the right of Turks to work in Russia;¹²
- Prime Minister Medvedev announced the suspension of joint economic projects;¹³
- The Russian parliament criminalised denial of the Armenian Holocaust;¹⁴
- Russia accused Turkey of illegally importing ISIS-controlled oil products, and began destroying them near the Turkish-Syrian border;¹⁵
- Russian aircraft continued to approach the Turkish border;
- Clashes and harassment at sea included Russian craft opening fire on Turkish fishing vessels in the Aegean Sea, and Turkish forces pursuing a Russian submarine in the Bosphorus;
- Military contacts between Ankara and Moscow were suspended;¹⁶
- Both states started deploying aircraft and anti-aircraft systems in the contact areas on the Syrian border and in the Caucasus (Armenia);¹⁷
- In a completely atypical intervention to keep the West away from the Black Sea – and explicitly threatening Russia's interests in the region – President Erdoğan said before the NATO summit in Warsaw that “we should enhance our coordination and cooperation in the Black Sea. We hope for concrete results from the NATO summit in Warsaw on July 8, 9... The Black Sea should be turned into a sea of stability. I told the NATO secretary general that you are absent in the Black Sea, and that is why it has nearly become a Russian lake. We should perform our duty, as we are the countries with access to the Black Sea. If we do not take action, history will not forgive us.”¹⁸

This diplomatic confrontation lasted for about five months, and only began to ease in May 2016, when it became apparent that Putin and Erdoğan were communicating discreetly and preparing to resume diplomatic relations. In May, Turkey indicted the killers of the Russian pilot who had crashed in the November 2015 incident. Then, on 27 June 2016, President Erdoğan apologised on behalf of his country for shooting down the plane that had entered Turkish airspace.¹⁹ The Turkish pilots who shot down the Russian plane were apparently detained in July over alleged links to the coup attempt.

Perhaps the ritual of rapprochement between the two countries would have been more difficult – given the importance of ‘national dignity’ in Putin and Erdoğan’s speeches – if a serious terrorist attack had not taken place at Istanbul’s Atatürk Airport just one day after the Turkish leader apologised. The bombing at the airport by three Russian citizens from Central Asia killed 45 people, including 23 Turks. (Although attributed to Daesh, the attack was not claimed by the jihadist group, which does not fit in with its appetite for media visibility). In this context, Putin was able to accept Erdoğan’s outstretched hand, calling him on 30 June to express his solidarity after the terrorist attack, but

also to announce to the Turkish leader that he was lifting a series of the sanctions imposed after November 2015.²⁰

On 5 May 2016, when this accelerated process of reconciliation began, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was asked by President Erdoğan to step down. He had been his chief advisor between 2003 and 2009, his foreign minister until 2014, and his prime minister between 2014 and 2016. Davutoğlu had been the architect of Turkey's foreign policy since 2000, and an independent actor in foreign relations.²¹ His removal during the Russian-Turkish normalisation was probably a symbolic sacrifice requested by Putin, but above all it offered the **possibility that all the important decisions regarding Russia and foreign policy could be centralised with Erdoğan and the team designated by him.**

The last decisive piece in the puzzle of the rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara was, of course, the anti-Erdoğan/anti-AKP attempted military coup on 15 July 2016, just two weeks after the resumption of dialogue between the two capitals. In that context, Putin was the first major leader to express his support for Erdoğan. Western leaders, on the other hand, called the Turkish president only three days after the coup, when it was clear that it had failed, reinforcing Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's suspicion that the West had accepted – if not supported – the attempted anti-Islamist coup. The Erdoğan regime arrested several American citizens for their alleged involvement in the coup. Ankara also accused the United States of hosting Fethullah Gülen in Pennsylvania and refusing to deport him to Turkey.²² On the other hand, several converging sources – which Erdoğan has never denied – claim that Vladimir Putin provided him with vital information during the military coup – in quite possibly a literal sense, as it may have saved Erdoğan's life.²³

New diplomatic procedures in the Turkey-Russia relationship

The Syrian crisis

Although its signs have been visible for some time – as Russia cannot project power in the Mediterranean region without some complicity from Turkey in the Black Sea – the existence of a new approach in the Turkey-Russia relationship became publicly visible on 9 August 2016, when President Erdoğan chose Russia for his first visit abroad after the failed coup. Putin and Erdoğan held talks at the Konstantinovsky Palace near St. Petersburg; the Russian leader stressed that the Erdoğan regime enjoys its full support, and that Russia will once again privilege bilateral relations between the two countries.²⁴

Erdoğan's decision to purchase the S-400 missile system, in contravention of NATO's basic principles, was a signal that he had begun a policy of balancing his formal relationship with the West with his *de facto* partnership with Russia. Erdoğan's desire to use the S-400 missile system was fundamentally incompatible with the desire to have access to advanced F-35 technology, the two options being mutually exclusive. However, despite all the warnings and sanctions issued by Washington, the Turkish president went along with Putin all the way in the S-400 missile system deal: between 2019 and 2020, the system was installed in Turkey with Russian technical support.²⁵

The existence of a new set of diplomatic procedures between Ankara and Moscow became more evident and formal in January 2017, when Moscow and Damascus signed an agreement by which the Russian army received the right to deploy troops in Syria for the next half-century, while receiving guarantees for the use of the port of Tartus and the airbase near Latakia – both of strategic value in the Middle East. Turkey's reaction was indirect – and extremely reassuring: at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Simsek indicated for the first time that Turkey would accept a peace agreement allowing Bashar al-Assad to remain in power.²⁶

In parallel – illustrative of their new strategy of clarifying their problems through negotiations without any Western influence – Russia and Turkey involved Iran in the negotiation process for Syria in Astana (Kazakhstan), which also began in January 2017. The diplomatic ritual for launching the Astana process was characteristic of the decision-making circuit in the new Moscow-Ankara relationship:

- in December 2016, Putin and Erdoğan jointly proposed launching talks in Astana;
- a few days later, on 20 December, the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran officially proposed the start of the negotiations in Astana;
- on 28 December, Russia and Turkey sponsored a ceasefire agreement to support the Astana process.²⁷

The way in which Turkey and Russia coordinated this peace process was difficult to understand given their completely divergent interests. While Erdoğan had been one of the strongest supporters of removing Bashar al-Assad, arming and sheltering his opponents for six years, Putin saved the Damascus regime. While Turkey sees a vital threat in the Kurdish forces on the Syrian border, which could aggravate the old Kurdish problem within its own borders, Russia has a traditionally strong relationship with the Kurds, and could only gain from the Kurdish fight against ISIS. (In fact, Erdoğan saw the US decision to provide the YPG with military assistance and air support as an unacceptable betrayal of Turkey's security interests – and probably hastened his decision to move closer to the Kremlin). On the other hand, Erdoğan has long closed his eyes to the actions of the Islamic State, given that the jihadist group had the potential to overthrow the regime in Damascus.

We can still understand this paradoxical agreement if we notice that the Astana process was obviously meant to delegitimise the attempts by Western diplomatic channels to resolve the Syrian conflict (Geneva and Vienna). But the Russian-Turkish plan succeeded; from that moment these two states, together with Iran, became the most relevant diplomatic and military actors in Syria.

After several rounds of negotiations during 2017, in November 2017 Putin received the presidents of Turkey and Iran in Sochi.²⁸ Then in April 2018, Sergei Lavrov hosted bilateral talks with the Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Iran's then foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Again, despite disagreements on the ground, the diplomatic atmosphere was perfectly controlled: Çavuşoğlu praised the "atmosphere of trust that has grown between us."²⁹

In October 2019, Presidents Putin and Erdoğan met in Sochi, agreeing on a 10-point memorandum for the future of Syria that offered a solution to the extremely thorny issue of the Kurdish YPG forces' presence near the Turkish border. According to the agreement, Kurdish troops were to be withdrawn (with Russian and Syrian support) about 18 miles from the Turkish border.³⁰

Shortly afterward, in March 2020, Erdoğan and Putin met again, this time in Moscow, to discuss calming the situation in the Idlib area, which had become the refuge and last stronghold of jihadist groups. Among the delegations involved in the discussion were Russia's deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, Turkish envoy Mehmet Samsar, Turkey's foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and defence minister Hulusi Akar.³¹

In November 2020, in Ankara, deputy foreign minister Sedat Önal and Russia's Presidential envoy for Syria Aleksandr Lavrentyev chaired a meeting in which they discussed the latest developments in the Syrian crisis: the situation of the Kurdish YPG militants, and the refugee issue.³²

Side by side with ayatollahs from Tehran, Vladimir Putin emerged as the most important political and military player in Syria. In the context of the collapse of the Islamic State and the division and defeat of the Syrian opposition, Putin will coordinate the peace and reconstruction process. However, he will do so – as all his actions so far show –while taking the sensibilities of Ankara and Tehran into consideration. Most likely, moreover, the process of pacifying Syria would have gone even faster if the only political and military players in the region had been only Russia and Turkey; however, the

presence of Iran, interested in perpetuating its own 'Shiite corridor' to Lebanon, and the real Sunni-Shia cleavage in Syria and in the region more widely have prolonged the state of conflict.

The Libyan crisis

In December 2019 – when Turkey's involvement in the Libyan crisis in support of the Fayez al-Serraj (GNA) government in Tripoli became inevitable – Russia and Turkey began to cautiously manage the potential military clash between them through their proxies (Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates supporting the Libyan National Army [LNA] led by Khalifa Haftar, based in eastern Libya). President Erdoğan chose to get involved in the Libyan conflict in order to secure Turkey's energy interests in the Mediterranean area; in exchange for its military support, the Tripoli-based GNA agreed to offer Ankara a delimitation of maritime jurisdiction that promotes the interests of Turkey over those of Greece and Israel.

The Russian president's spokesman said in reaction to Turkey's preparations: "Russia supports any efforts and individual countries in terms of finding solutions to the crisis."³³ At the same time, Putin and Erdoğan discussed the Libyan crisis by telephone, publicly communicating that this conversation had taken place. The two also agreed to meet in January in Turkey to continue and develop the talks. Later, at the meeting scheduled for January 2020 in Istanbul, Erdoğan and Putin called for a ceasefire in Libya, even though at the same time Turkish troops were deployed in the conflict area.³⁴

Following talks between the two presidents, contacts were to be held at the foreign ministry level to ease the situation in Syria and Libya. These were postponed in June 2020, given that no consensus could be reached and that both sides preferred to allow the military situation to evolve to a point where diplomatic negotiations would be more advantageous. Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said, in respect to our research: **"The two countries' deputy ministers will continue contacts and talks in the period ahead. Minister-level talks will be held at a later date"**.³⁵ **This indicates that, if Russia and Turkey are not in a position to announce a diplomatic success and to communicate a positive image, the defining leaders (Erdoğan, Putin, Lavrov, Çavuşoğlu) will withdraw from the foreground and refuse to communicate, to avoid any rhetorical escalation along the lines of 2015. However, at times when the conflict through proxies is allowed to take place, communication between the two camps will continue at the level of deputy foreign ministers.**

In July 2020, the Turkish foreign ministry publicly reiterated the idea that Russia and Turkey would continue the dialogue in the working group at the deputy foreign minister level. In a joint statement, the two states announced that they would continue their combined efforts for a lasting armistice. Following these discussions, a ceasefire was reached between Tobruk (the House of Representatives) and Tripoli (the Government of National Accord) in August.

On 31 August 2020, **a Turkish delegation led by deputy minister Sedat Önal visited Moscow for a new round of technical negotiations on the conflicts in Libya and Syria. The Russian delegation was led by the Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Vershinin.**³⁶ A new meeting of the Turkish-Russian working group on Libya took place in Ankara in mid-September.

Subsequently, the situation reached a point of relative balance, with both Russia and Turkey appearing satisfied with the results of the military clashes, and encouraging the establishment of an east-west division in Libya.

The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis

In the 2020 conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia – in the analysis of which we must not ignore Vladimir Putin's interest in giving a lesson to Armenia's pro-Western Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on his country's military dependence on Moscow – we can observe three phases of this (apparent) regional conflict between Moscow and Ankara:

a. **In the first phase, each leader positioned himself, pushing the message he wanted to convey to his own public. Erdoğan and Putin 'armed' the conflict in the Caucasus without sparing the interests of the other leader, but avoiding direct public attacks.** Thus, on 27 September 2020, Erdoğan said that "it is time to end the crisis in the region which started with the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh".³⁷ The Turkish president also criticised the format of the OSCE Minsk Group (the US, France, and Russia) dedicated to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, thus suggesting to Moscow a direct dialogue, modelled on those in Syria and Libya, which would exclude Western diplomats. Russia obviously favoured any approach that ensured the elimination of France and the United States from diplomacy concerning the Caucasus. Moreover, Russia was not bothered by the weakening of Yerevan government's position after it appeared to be trying to shift from Moscow's to Washington's camp. However, to promote his own image of strength, Putin refused to invite Turkey to the first round of the direct negotiations held in Moscow on 9 October between the foreign ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia.

b. **In the second phase, after staking out their negotiating positions for their own public (and for international public opinion), Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initiated the dialogue.** On 14 October 2020, Erdoğan telephoned Putin, stressing the importance of Turkey in the decisions of the OSCE Minsk Group. Putin expressed the hope that Turkey would "make a constructive contribution to the de-escalation of the conflict."³⁸ Putin and Erdoğan spoke again by telephone – and officially announced this – in November, marking their decisive involvement in the 10 November 2020 ceasefire agreement.

c. **In the third phase, following the procedure established in Syria and Libya, the foundation of a Russian-Turkish joint centre for monitoring the truce agreement in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan was announced on 12 November 2020.**³⁹ We can also observe here the pattern noted above: after Putin and Erdoğan reach an agreement and communicate it, a working group (coordinated by their deputy foreign ministers) takes over the task of implementing and monitoring the implementation of their decisions.

The Hagia Sophia crisis

The most dramatic example of the controlled and prudent way in which Russia and Turkey have managed moments of tension between them is the episode of the return of the Byzantine Hagia Sophia museum to mosque status on 10 July 2020. This status had been conferred to the Byzantine church by Mehmet the Conqueror immediately after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, but was annulled by Mustafa Kemal in 1931 as a gesture of courtesy to the Europeans. Given that Putin's Russia aimed – through the new ideology promoted by thinkers such as Aleksandr Dugin⁴⁰ – to revive its credentials as protector of the Orthodox world in order to justify its expansionist orientation, the status of Hagia Sophia was of essential importance for the Kremlin. If Moscow had not exercised its function as the protector of Orthodox civilisation at such a critical moment, it would have relinquished its position as the nucleus of Orthodox civilisation – a major imagological sacrifice, counterbalanced perhaps only by the implicit advantage of diluting Turkey's pro-Western Kemalist past in favour of a militant Islamist orientation.

However, the Kremlin opted for a measured and discreet position, characterised by Greek minister Giorgos Koumoutsakos as being “almost hostile” to Eastern Orthodoxy.⁴¹ The only openly hostile remarks came from Patriarch Kirill of Russia, although he avoided attacking Turkey directly, saying only that he was “deeply concerned” and that “a threat to Hagia Sophia is a threat to the whole of Christian civilisation, and therefore to our spirituality and history.”⁴² Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Turkey's decision to reconvert Hagia Sophia to a mosque was an internal affair that would not harm relations between Russia and Turkey. Deputy foreign minister Sergey Vershinin, the Kremlin's most important diplomat for Turkey, declared: “We assume that we are talking about Turkey's internal affairs, in which of course neither we nor others should interfere. At the same time, we pay attention to its significance as an object of world culture and civilisation.”⁴³

The discussion was settled, as always, through a conversation between Putin and Erdoğan, when the Turkish President called President Vladimir Putin on 13 July 2020 to discuss the decision to change the status of Hagia Sophia. Putin spoke about the “considerable public outcry in Russia”, but President Erdoğan assured him that access to this unique monument of world civilisation would be guaranteed for all wishing to visit it, including foreign nationals, and that “the safety of the items sacred to Christians would be assured.”⁴⁴ As Armand Goşu explains, “the two presidents discuss each issue as soon as it arises, to avoid any potential crisis. The intensity of the talks can be seen on the website of the Russian presidency, where there is a record of the telephone talks between Putin and Erdoğan.”⁴⁵

The potential Hagia Sophia crisis between Russia and Turkey resolved after only a few days on the public agenda, without any risk of escalation, with minimal and perfectly controlled communication.

Comparison: Russian–Turkish relations before and after 2016

If we compare the bilateral relations between Moscow and Ankara in the period 2015–2016 and 2016–2020, we can observe a significant procedural change:

Before summer 2016. Multiple actors expressing positions on bilateral relations (prime minister, parliament, ambassador to Washington, politicians).

After summer 2016. Limited number of actors authorised to speak (only the president, the minister of foreign affairs, the deputy minister of foreign affairs)

Before summer 2016. Leaders overlap in communication (Erdoğan and Davutoğlu or Putin and Medvedev communicate at the same time).

After summer 2016. When the presidents communicate, all other political actors are silent.

Before summer 2016. Public communication in times of crisis is accepted.

After summer 2016. Public communication in times of disagreement is strictly limited, as it could jeopardise the bilateral relationship.

Before summer 2016. Bilateral communication is interrupted in the event of a major political conflict.

After summer 2016. Channels remain open on a permanent technical level.

The permanent channel of communication and negotiation between Russia and Turkey

Research into Russian–Turkish bilateral contacts during the crises in Syria, Libya, Nagorno–Karabakh, and regarding the issue of the resacralisation of Hagia Sophia, highlights that **the centre of continuous communication between the two countries on tense issues is at the deputy foreign minister level.** These officials collaborate contextually with the presidents' special envoys.

The two officials involved here are the Turkish deputy foreign minister Sedat Önal and the Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Vershinin. If we look at their CVs, we will understand why: both are diplomats specialising in the Middle East. Önal worked in consular positions in Germany and the United States, and was head of mission in Tehran and ambassador to Amman. In the Turkish Foreign Ministry, he headed the North Africa & Middle East and South Asia Affairs Department.⁴⁶

Sergei Vershinin worked at the Russian embassies in Tunisia and Algeria, then headed the Middle East and North Africa Department. Both were promoted to Deputy Foreign Minister in 2018: Vershinin in March and Önal in August of that year.⁴⁷

Research on relations between Russia and Turkey since 2016 shows that diplomats from the two countries meet on average once a month. Putin and Erdoğan may hold six meetings a year and talk on the phone at least once a month, separate from the similar number of talks which their foreign ministers hold. Working meetings in working groups chaired by the deputy foreign ministers are practically permanent.

Why Putin and Erdoğan are umbilically bound

After verifying the hypothesis of a discreet agreement between Putin and Erdoğan after the summer of 2016, it is worth understanding why this is so. Are there sound reasons to justify such an agreement? Is this agreement more profitable than a more direct but potentially anarchic confrontation?

The strength of the *competitive cooperation* between Russia and Turkey after 2016 shows us that during the 2015-16 crisis Putin and Erdoğan understood that they are more vulnerable to the West when they find themselves in diplomatic conflict. There are four different reasons – each extremely solid – why the two presidents do not want to make their positions mutually vulnerable:

1. The ideological reason

Illiberal regimes avoid making each other vulnerable. A major conflict between Putin, Erdoğan, Viktor Orbán or others would be proof that the conservative-populist authoritarianisms on the eastern border of Europe are naturally prone to confrontation through their nationalist and imperialist orientation. **In the international system, any authoritarian leader is a legitimization and a justification for another authoritarian leader.** Ideological currents rise and fall in waves and counter-waves of democratisation or authoritarianism, as demonstrated by Samuel Huntington.⁴⁸ Italian fascism inspired and made possible fascism in Germany, Spain, Portugal, etc., and Nazism promoted anti-Semitic movements throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Putin and Erdoğan understand that they are part of the same wave of authoritarian leaders, and that the collapse of one of them would be a bad omen for the other, and for others like them.⁴⁹

2. The electoral rationale

A Russian-Turkish military conflict would pose unnecessary electoral risks for both leaders. Despite their strict control in domestic politics, in recent history Russia and Turkey have shown (Yeltsin's years in Russia, the numerous coups in Turkey after 1945) that they can quickly become super-competitive political systems, to the point of anarchy and violence. If faced with a crisis of confidence in leadership, Turkey and Russia could experience revolutionary episodes much faster and easier than consolidated democracies, where the opposition is better tolerated and more deeply integrated into the political system.

And nothing is more sensitive to leaders who legitimise themselves through imperial ideologies, such as Putin and Erdoğan, than a military defeat abroad. Throughout their history, Turkey and Russia have never been able to digest military defeats or setbacks, and have almost always experienced profound and thorough revolutions as a result. The collapse of the USSR – a bankrupt, uncompetitive, dying empire – was hastened by the humiliation in Afghanistan; the Yeltsin regime was shattered by the embarrassing episodes in Chechnya. The revolts during the last century of the Ottoman Empire were generated – without exception, including the Atatürk episode – by defeats on the front (especially against Russia).

Even though Russia's military power is significantly greater than that of Turkey, the reality on the ground has shown that Turkish army drones can cause major damage to Moscow's armed forces. In asymmetrical confrontations, through proxies, Russia's clear statistical superiority is irrelevant. Both leaders are equally exposed and vulnerable.

3. The geopolitical reason

Turkey and Russia have more to gain through **bilateral controlled competition in regions where they can eliminate the West as a power broker**. Even suffering marginal losses and being forced to make concessions to one another, Erdoğan and Putin gain more from eliminating the West as a major player in the Caucasus or the Middle East. **At the moment, Turkey and Russia are strong enough to create an effective duopoly in their regions of interest**. While completely covering the belligerent camps they claim to protect (pro- Assad and anti- Assad; Armenia vs. Azerbaijan, etc.), but at the same time negotiating on their behalf, Russia and Turkey have made it pointless for other diplomatic or military forces to participate in regional conflicts and pacifications (except Iran, which is contextually accepted). "Russia and Turkey work quite closely when it comes to fighting Western interests and influence in different regions," explains Armand Goşu.⁵⁰ In addition, as Professor Dimitrios Triantaphyllou suggests, since Erdoğan is seeking to increase Turkey's strategic autonomy from the West, Russia can only discreetly encourage this process, which significantly weakens NATO's regional strength.⁵¹

4. The political reason

For Russia's interests, any political alternative to Erdoğan is more dangerous, because it could return Turkey to the pro-Western Kemalist tradition. Even if Erdoğan's successor is an Islamist, it is very possible that he (like Egypt's Morsi, for example) would not be able to withstand the long-term electoral attacks from the secular and Kemalist left. On the other hand, for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, any alternative to Vladimir Putin could potentially be more threatening, given that the Russian-Turkish rivalry in the Caucasus and the Middle East remains a structural one. A new leader in Moscow would need time to learn how to manage the rivalry with Ankara with the goodwill Putin has shown since 2016.

As Armand Goşu explains, "Their successors will position themselves differently on most issues; it is in the logic of historical evolution. In authoritarian regimes, when leaders change, policies change."⁵² Teodor Baconschi agrees: "New leaders bring about an often dramatic shift in internal and geopolitical turnaround. Especially if the successors are also tempted by authoritarianism, they are almost forced to demonise the achievements of their immediate predecessors."⁵³ In conclusion, Putin and Erdoğan have every reason to keep the other president in power, even if they cause each other marginal damage in the context of their geopolitical, military or cultural rivalry.

In his reference work *Erdoğan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, Soner Çağaptay observes that "during six centuries of Ottoman rule (1299–1922), the Ottoman Turks reigned over all twelve of their present-day neighbours, with the exception of Russia and Iran."⁵⁴ Moreover, nineteenth-century Russian expansionism decisively affected the interests of the Sublime Porte in the Balkans

and the Black Sea (Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Montenegro), as well as in the Caucasus, where waves of Circassian refugees fled to Anatolia as a result of the tsarist advance. For this reason, Çağaptay explains, "historically speaking, Ankara avoids confrontation with Russia and Iran," although it adopts a much more combative attitude in its relations with neighbours such as Greece, Bulgaria, Iraq and Syria.⁵⁵ Turkey will only try to increase its influence in Moscow-controlled Muslim territories in times of critical weakness for Russia – but while limiting itself exclusively to soft-power tools. In both the Chechen and the Crimean crises, Turkey cautiously managed the interests of its Muslim protégés, expressing only platonic, formal protests without risking irritating its powerful northern neighbour. Turkey will generally avoid being openly hostile to Russia even if it considers that it enjoys the unconditional support of the West. At a time when Turkish leaders are questioning the strength of NATO's military support – as Erdoğan did after 2016 – Turkey will resort to cultured and restrained diplomacy with Russia.

Russia, on the other hand, is not afraid of Turkey and has the mentality of the constant winner over the last few centuries because of it. In principle, Russia would not hesitate to take advantage of Ankara's moments of weakness, and will constantly attempt to expand into the latter's areas of influence. **However, as we have shown, this reality changes when Russia considers that it can unduly weaken Turkey's strength through its own actions and force it to move unconditionally towards the West. Stalin made that mistake after World War II, when he asked Turkey for bases in northern Anatolia and the Straits. In response, Turkey became one of the most active states in the North-Atlantic Alliance. Turkey's full loyalty to NATO began in 1952 and ended in the second half of Erdoğan's reign. Putin will never repeat Stalin's mistake, which pushed Turkey back into the arms of the West for six decades.**

Conclusions

Before 2000, Western political and academic elites did not sufficiently understand Turkey's significance in the containment policy against the USSR, and subsequently Russia. A quick review of several seminal books on geopolitics (Kissinger's *Diplomacy*, Kaplan's *The Revenge of Geography* and *Flashpoints*, Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*) reveals, surprisingly, that Huntington is the only one who made *minimal* reference to the fault zone between Russia and Turkey. **Turkey's pro-Western loyalty has been overestimated and taken for granted.**

Today, Russia and Turkey want the same thing: a 19th-century-style international system composed of multiple Great Powers seeking to maximise their power, influence, and resources. Recovering after a long (Turkey) or short (Russia) decline of influence in foreign affairs, they need regional crises to get back in the game as power brokers.⁵⁶ The US and the EU, on the other hand, would prefer to stick to the diplomacy that emerged after the Cold War – one that emphasises stability and cooperation within the international system.

Putin and Erdoğan believe that they have more to gain from an anarchic international system, in which they face each other off in regional crises (even when they let the other leader have a marginal victory!), than from a liberal international order built around strict norms of behaviour, which would deny them any openings to obtain more power. If we look at every regional crisis in which Russia and Turkey have been involved as opponents (Libya, Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh), we will find that their rigorously controlled rivalry made them the most important players in the region, neutralising the Western powers (especially France) from the equation of influence. **This is a highly beneficial enmity.**

These strategic benefits overshadow the many tactical rivalries that Professor Dragoş Mateescu emphasises: "The aggressive actions of the Erdoğan regime in the eastern Mediterranean (Syria, Palestine, Qatar, Egypt, Libya) and in the Horn of Africa are rather uncomfortable for Moscow's policy, which has its own ambitions in those regions. The same logic applies in Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, contrary to the interests of the Putin regime, Turkey is intensely and rapidly developing a remarkably interesting cooperation with Ukraine in the military field. Since the Turkish exports of millions of dollars' worth of ammunition in 2015 and 2016, i.e. immediately after the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, more sophisticated forms of cooperation have emerged. After 2016, Ankara signed several agreements with Kyiv. They facilitate significant technological exchanges on cyber-security, radio and radar systems, as well as different types of robotic combat vehicles and drones."⁵⁷ However, considers Professor Mateescu, these elements of tactical competition will be overshadowed as long as "elites with anti-Western beliefs, the so-called Eurasianists, dominate in both Moscow and Ankara."⁵⁸

In this paper I have tried to discern a set of principles that appears to guide the *Erdoğan/Putin rivalry-cooperation relationship*:

1. In a regional crisis, it is better if the power vacuum is filled by a power which is *predictable, friendly and favourable to the same system of values* (Russia/Turkey) than by any Western power. As Oana Popescu-Zamfir points out, “the West threatens the internal stability of Turkey and Russia through its democratic system of government more than it threatens them in classical security terms. Also, the region where these confrontations are sorted out is clearly delimited, and so that makes for a less complex negotiation than with the West.”⁵⁹
2. “We can accept a controlled regional confrontation with Russia/Turkey if we thus manage to eliminate France, the USA, etc. as power brokers”: this seems to be the way in which Putin and Erdoğan think;
3. A moderate level of uncontrolled confrontation (by proxy) between Russia and Turkey is accepted;
4. If the conflict gets out of control, the problem will be constantly discussed and managed at the level of deputy foreign ministers (or special envoys);
5. Any tension will be resolved by Putin and Erdoğan personally, initially in a phone talk, but finally in a meeting in Moscow or Ankara;
6. The decisions agreed by Putin and Erdoğan will also be implemented at the level of deputy foreign ministers or defence ministers. Foreign ministers are tasked with strengthening and developing the messages expressed by the presidents. They neither take the major decisions, like Putin and Erdoğan, nor become involved in technical discussions, like Vershinin and Önal.

Based on these premises, the policy of Western states regarding the Russian-Turkish relationship in the Biden era must start from a few basic principles:

- a. The element of Russian-Turkish competition in the Middle East and the Caucasus is not good news for the West, as it will not bring about any rupture between Ankara and Moscow during the terms of Putin and Erdoğan;
- b. The element of competition is reinforced by an element of cooperation aimed at eliminating Western states from the regions that Turkey and Russia consider their area of influence;
- c. As a politician who sees himself in ideological conflict with the West, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will continue to swing between **a formal alliance** with NATO and an **informal alliance** with Russia, trying to secure his position by balancing the two camps. A policy of sanctions against him will not persuade Erdoğan to give up the benefits of working with Russia. On the contrary: given Turkey's strategic importance to NATO, Erdoğan knows he has almost unlimited room for manoeuvre;
- d. NATO has more to gain in the long run if it focuses on its good image in Turkish society. During the twentieth century secular Turks valued the defining relationship with NATO and inherited a strong distrust of Russia. In addition, as we have shown, the structural relationship between Turkey and Russia remains one of geopolitical rivalry. The end of Erdoğan or Putin's terms will naturally lead to a return to the communication crises and gaps between Moscow and Ankara which today are avoided only thanks to the meticulous mechanism established by the Turkish and Russian presidents. Răzvan Munteanu believes that “in the long run the rivalry will prevail. Comparative history, which is a useful methodology in foreign policy analysis, validates this hypothesis. Beyond this balance of interests, there are several geopolitical issues where Russian-Turkish rivalry could re-emerge. Central Asia is a good example. If we look at the Black Sea, we see a rapprochement between Turkey and Ukraine,

and even a firm position by Ankara on Crimea. At the same time, Russia is inviting Egypt's navy to the Black Sea for the first time, with Cairo being one of Turkey's harshest critics and an ally of Russia in the Libyan issue."⁶⁰ However, from the perspective of the *competitive cooperation paradigm in the Turkey-Russia relationship*, Russia will remain the dominant player in the Black Sea – with the complicity of Turkey – as long as Putin and Erdoğan remain in power.

A Turkish leader without a political background as controversial as Erdoğan's would be much more tempted to look favourably towards the West. At that time, he must enjoy the full support of Turkish society, which has not, for example, looked favourably on the US-British intervention in Iraq, on Turkey's south-eastern border. NATO will regain the soul of Turkey after Erdoğan leaves the scene, through its soft power built up over decades of effective partnership. Russia, which was the main cause of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, does not have this kind of soft power.

Postscript

In the context of this study, it is worth noting the lack of a firm reaction from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to the recent decision by US President Joe Biden to recognise the Armenian genocide during the First World War. Knowing that Erdoğan attaches huge importance to identity issues and national imagery, the restraint he has shown indicates that the Ankara leader considers himself in a position of weakness and 'need' in relation to Washington – a weakness that Biden seemed to know how to exploit when he decided to raise the Armenian genocide.

The reason for this vulnerable position seems to be the economic crisis facing Turkey, caused both by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and by the economic and military projects undertaken by Erdoğan in recent years. In addition, recent tensions in Ukraine have revealed an Erdoğan who has been willing to defend Kyiv's position, both through his own statements and through the participation of the Turkish foreign minister in the Bucharest trilateral, along with Romania and Poland, two of the NATO member states who have been most active against Russian expansionism.

We should expect – given that Erdoğan will need American and European economic support during this period – to see the Turkish leader once again become the 'good Erdoğan' we met in the early 2000s, when he sought to obtain the goodwill of the European Union. It is a role he can play convincingly – when he has no other choice. But as soon as his economic goals are achieved, Erdoğan will return – for electoral reasons and personal faith – to his basic anti-Western and anti-liberal messages. Erdoğan's respect for Western wealth has always had a tactical value, while authoritarianism and expansionism remain at the core of his regime.

About the author



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