

WORLD ORDER IN CONVULSION:
THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND BEYOND



Introduction

Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul hosted a roundtable meeting titled **“World Order in Convulsion: The War in Ukraine and Beyond”** with a diverse group of stakeholders to discuss the geo-political and socio-economic dimensions of the military conflict in the broader region. Led by Soli Özel, a faculty member at Kadir Has University and scholar in residence at Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul, the roundtable discussion focused on the war in Ukraine and explored its future ramifications for regional actors with a particular emphasis on Turkey’s foreign policy. Compiled by Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul, this briefing note provides a summary of the discussion.

Discussion

The war in Ukraine is not a breaking point but has led to the cracking of major fault lines. Even though the center of gravity of global affairs is now leaning towards the Indo-Pacific, the shaping of the new world order seems to originate from Eurasia – as in the last 30 years, most of the political and military conflicts emerged in this distinct geography. A regional actor, Turkey

willingly or unwillingly found itself amidst these conflicts and had to adapt itself to this fast-changing and often unstable political landscape by shifting its regional alliances in the international arena.¹

The war in Ukraine deserves an in-depth analysis with regards to Turkey’s foreign relations and policy orientation. Turkey is on the verge of strategic decision-making, reminiscent of “a 1945 moment,”² between neutrality and active engagement in international affairs. The completion of accession talks for Finland and Sweden’s NATO membership is a case in point as it demonstrates a monumental shift for the two countries with a long history of wartime neutrality. The Western hegemony is no longer as absolute or unchallenged, and the war manifested the weaknesses of Russia’s military power.

A Historical Trajectory

The first panel focused on the current wave of immigration of Russian and Ukrainian citizens to Turkey after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. A century after the arrival of White Russian³ émigrés to Istanbul, this current wave was somewhat

¹ Balta, Evren & Çelikpala, Mitat & Özel, Soli & Güvenç, Serhat. (2022). Rusya’nın Ukrayna’yı İşgali ve Türkiye’ye Yansımaları: Tarih Yol Alırken // May 2022.

² Leffler, M. P. (1985). Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO,

1945-1952. *The Journal of American History*, 71(4), 807–825. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1888505>

reminiscent of a brief moment in history, when Ottoman Istanbul became a center for the Russian elite, White Army officials, and many others escaping from the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing Civil War. Even though one dares to speculate on the similarities between the two waves of immigration, the discussants agreed on the need for a rather nuanced understanding of the underlying connections between these two catastrophic events occurring a century apart from one another. Arguably, one can see the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the massive wave of emigration that followed afterwards in relation to Russia's ongoing imperial ambitions and unresolved political conflict in the broader region since the turn of the 20th century. At this point, a historical background might be necessary to enrich our understanding of the current conflict and its evolution in a continuous trajectory.



Historically, it is estimated that about one to two million people fled the Russian Empire after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. For many refugees, Istanbul was their first stop en route to other countries in Europe. Contrary to the general assumption, these refugees belonged to diverse ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic groups. They were left without a nation and lost their citizenship in their host countries. During their brief stay, White Russians in Istanbul tried to preserve Russian culture and tradition. Many refrained from acquiring Ottoman nationality as they feared assimilation. They considered the Bolshevik rule as a temporary situation and anticipated a return to their homeland. These émigrés were politically active; they formed unions

³ White Russian émigré is a term to denote Russians who emigrated from the territory of the former

and committees and engaged in political resistance and propaganda against the Bolsheviks.



A comparison between the two waves suggests that it is difficult to come up with many similarities. One discussant argued that refugees from Russia and Ukraine today are not driven by ideology; they fled from the war, they fled from mobilization, and they fled from the economic crisis. They are more pragmatic and bear no allegiance to an all-encompassing Russian identity. On the contrary, the political groups that emigrated in the 1920s displayed varying tendencies under the influence of socialist as well as fascist movements in Europe.

One interesting example mentioned in the discussion was Eurasianism, a political movement developed by Russian émigrés in the 1920s. Eurasianists believed that Russia belonged neither to the East nor to the West but constituted a civilization composed of ethnic Russians and Muslims of various ethnic origins. In the post-Soviet era, when the borders between the newly independent states remained transparent, Eurasianism became an important component of political imagination. On a discursive level, Eurasianism provided an ideological pretext for Russia in its reluctance to recognize the sovereignty of post-Soviet states and further its interests in the region. Eurasianism also informed Putin's political rhetoric of Russian civilization and a shared Orthodox identity, all coming together under the rule of a unified Russian state. In July 2022, when asked about Russian-Ukrainian relations, Putin asserted that "Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole," and that they essentially belonged to the same

Russian Empire during the Russian Revolution (1917) and the Russian Civil War (1917-1923).

historical and spiritual space.⁴

Similarly, Putin often quotes Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954) and General Anton Denikin (1872-1947), a commander of the Tsarist White Army in Southern Russia and Ukraine during the Russian Civil War. Both Ilyin and Denikin opposed the Soviet government and the Bolsheviks. Ilyin believed in the peculiarities of Russian Orthodoxy and Russian identity. Denikin arrived in Istanbul after the defeat of The White Army and died in exile in the U.S. in 1947. In 2005, Denikin was reburied in Moscow's historic Donskoy Monastery. Visiting Denikin's grave in 2009, Putin advised all to read Denikin's diary, specifically the part about Great and Little Russia, i.e., Ukraine, and stated that "nobody should be allowed to interfere between Russia and Ukraine, that is only Russia's right."⁵

A War of Choice: The Reasons Behind the Conflict and Its Uncertain Future

A lot has been written about the causes of Russia's war on Ukraine. One explanation discussed during the roundtable was Russia's security concerns vis-à-vis the West. The official statements from Russian authorities put emphasis on an "existential threat" Russia came to face due to NATO's eastward expansion. The discussants agreed that NATO's expansion alone cannot be seen as a sufficient cause for the war and defined it as a "war of choice." NATO is now expanding further and faster as Finland and Sweden are about to join the alliance and the rearmament expenditures and military investments all around Europe are increasing. Moreover, participants expect the war to reshape the entire security structure of the region, with the rifts between various Western forces becoming trivial, whereas the discrepancies with Russia becoming more apparent. They also predict that many countries in the region, including Turkey, might soon be forced to decide about their respective geopolitical positions. Even the traditionally neutral countries, like Sweden and Finland, might now be inclined to be party to international alliances. It is also suggested that it would be hard to find economic motivations behind the war. In fact, Western sanctions against Russia have resulted in both Russian big capitalists and the Russian people ending up worse off than

they were. With increasing economic pressures, the interests of the Russian capitalists are being sacrificed to the war by the Russian regime and it is underlined that no Russian business can benefit from the ongoing hostilities. This economy-based explanation was thus seen as unfounded.

Having by and large dismissed NATO's expansion as a sufficient condition to explain the invasion, the discussants agreed that the war in Ukraine started mainly as a result of Putin's expansionist ideas. The Russian government seems to be taking on a historical task for this cause, i.e., the "Greater Russia" by "solving" the centuries-old "Ukraine question" for many generations to come. A bleak outlook was drawn by one discussant, who suggested that the war has no end in sight. It was argued that the Russian regime has invested a lot in this war, and it is impossible to take a step back at this point. Russia's military aggression on the Ukrainian border might continue for years to come or turn into a frozen conflict with temporary borders. Another point was that the role of Turkey in peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine was exaggerated, which brought up the question of Turkey's role as a negotiating power in this conflict.



Photo Credit: Unsplash / Imad Alassiry

⁴ Burbank, J. (2022, March 22). *The grand theory driving Putin to war*. The New York Times. Retrieved January 10, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/opinion/russia-ukraine-putin-urasianism.html>

⁵ Zurzenko Tatiana Urievna. (2010). *Borderlands into bordered lands: Geopolitics of identity in post-Soviet Ukraine*. Ibidem-Verlag.

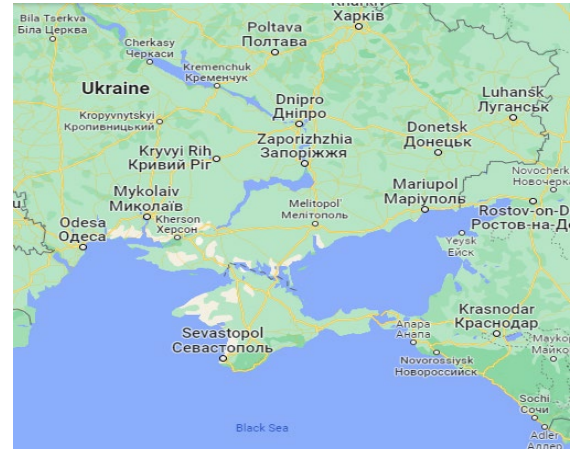
The Role of Turkey, Informal Positions, and Shifting Geopolitical Alliances

In the first decade of the 21st century, Turkey shed its national security state attributions, and started pursuing a foreign policy that focused primarily on economic interests. Being a trading state was conducive to a “zero-problem” foreign policy with neighbors and the pursuit of economic interests.⁶ Turkey then changed its game towards the “balancing act,” when its problems with the European Union intensified in the 2010s. Turkey’s geopolitical alliances were then diversified, no longer relying on the West alone. Turkey now positions itself as a “bridge” between Russia and Europe, or more broadly, the East and the West, trying to maintain a difficult-to-achieve balance among major global powers, while also attempting to pursue independent pragmatic maneuvers in the international arena.



Relying on social network theory as a general scope of analysis, discussants referred to the networks Turkey is currently trying to adjust to in the international area, underlining that the country’s attempts to act as a bridge are visible in all these networks.⁷ Turkey does not feel constrained to the rules of the economic networks to which it belongs. This is, for example, how Turkey overcame the sanctions against Russia and benefited from a remarkably increased trade with Russia. A similar position in energy networks allowed the country to transfer Caucasian and Russian natural gas to Europe. However, it was also among the livelier debates that security networks were radically different from the rest. The denser ties between actors of this network complicates Turkey’s efforts for an informal position. Discussants concluded that Turkey’s moves in this network require careful thinking.

⁶ Kirişçi, K. (2009). The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state. *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, 29-56.



One discussant stated that Turkey benefits from multiple identities in various matters. It can act as an Atlanticist, pro-NATO figure on some affairs, or turn to anti-Western rhetoric on others. Turkey’s present foreign policy, participants affirmed, was based on shifting alliances between major powers of both the West and the East, without relying on a dominant ally. And yet, discussants also agreed that Turkey’s capabilities are exaggerated. It was stated that Turkey is still a “middle power” with moderate influence and recognition in the international arena with limited resources. Therefore, Turkish foreign policy should avoid opportunistic drives and its foreign policy moves should remain rooted in international law.

Currently, Turkey appears to be a swing player between Russia and Ukraine by leveraging its position in the international arena. In 2022, the trade between Turkey and Russia reached \$50 billion and Putin has been giving booster shots to the Turkish banking system amidst Turkey’s economic crisis. On the other hand, Turkey delivers weapons to Ukraine with Turkish drones playing a critical role in Kyiv’s defense against the Russian invasion. Even though Turkey is clearly receiving remarkable economic benefits from the conflict, it does not hesitate to pull back when it finds itself under the pressure of retribution. The recent suspension of the Mir System in Turkey is a good example demonstrating how Turkey maintains a “one step forward, two steps back” approach to the conflict without a compass for the long-term consequences of the war. This also implies, according to the discussants, how

⁷ Hafner-Burton, E. M., Kahler, M., & Montgomery, A. H. (2009). Network Analysis for International Relations. *International Organization*, 63(3), 559–592. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40345947>

Turkey's respective relations with NATO and Russia might take shape in the future.



Ankara has long sought to leverage its strategic position at the intercontinental crossroads between Europe and Asia. Functionally, Turkey serves as a vital transit corridor for key resources like energy and food supplies, and this corridor has become even more important given the economic and trade disruptions of Russia's war in Ukraine. Institutionally, Turkey is a vital member of the NATO security bloc, but one that operates independently from—and sometimes counter to—the position of its American and European partners, including in its relationship with Western adversaries like Russia and Iran. Lastly, an expert on Syria talked about the future of Turkey-Russia relations with a special focus on developments in the field. As a result of the gradual military retreat and withdrawal of Russia from Syria after the war on Ukraine, Turkey is attempting to fill the void and have more control in the region. But building on the abovementioned thesis about overstretching of Turkey's capabilities, the discussion concluded with an emphasis on Turkey's partnership with Russia as guarantors of various agreements in the region and the importance of building relative stability. However, keeping in mind that this partnership is becoming more and more difficult due to Russia's war on Ukraine, participants also proposed that Turkish foreign policy should look for other partnerships to resolve regional convulsions.

Russia - Turkey Relations

2010-2014 was a highly dynamic period for the relations between Russia and Turkey. The

⁸ PernatyZmey. (2015, November 19). *Putin's famous Munich Speech 2007*. YouTube. Retrieved January 10,

dominant paradigm at that time was neither a balancing act nor a defensive stance towards a Russian danger. Economics and energy were dominant concerns. Although the Samsun – Ceyhan oil pipeline didn't find much place in the agenda as a pure fantasy project, it was a feasible, calm period without any radical conditions. Russia was placid until 2014. Despite Putin's 2007 speech in Munich⁸ and the outbreak of the conflict in Georgia in 2008, stability prevailed between Russia and Turkey. The summits between NATO and Russia still worked, functioning. Russia, now, has drawn further away from NATO. As for Turkey, one participant argued, the country's place in NATO was much clearer. Its leeway for wobbling wasn't this wide. Turkey's stance was stable and known; it wasn't a country that created crises and that found its nourishment in crises. Turkey was the strongest power in the Black Sea. The Arab Spring, which was perceived as a democratic wave, derailed Turkey's foreign policy and drew it to a more hegemonic line. At the time, Russia's president was Dmitri Medvedev, who still wielded some, although not much, power. Medvedev's presidency was a comparatively relaxed environment – both socially and politically. He was more amenable to improving relations with the West. The NATO bombing in Libya in 2011 was traumatic for Russia. The Russians who have been closely following the events were deeply disappointed. Although there were some street protests that later fizzled out as expected during the 2007 Duma elections, the real breaking point was Putin's reelection in the 2012 presidential elections. The United Russia Party had stepped up its nationalist discourse. Symbolic values and relevant historic narratives became increasingly valuable. Challenging the West and looking for confrontations became much more common.



Starting in 2017, the Russia Today newspaper became a sharp propaganda tool. However, relations between Russia and Turkey were improving with reasonable speed as the two countries have a special bilateral relationship and the ongoing crisis in Syria was no exception to this.

2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ58Yv6kP44>

It wasn't a relationship of extreme interdependency, and the two countries didn't let the events in Syria disrupt the bilateral relations. Turkey's biggest mistake was thinking that persuading Russia not to do something was possible at any time. Because Russia's expertise in Syrian matters dwarves that of Turkey, Turkey received warnings from Russia that it will not be easy to contain PKK, and that Iran's influence will be felt strongly in the area. However, Turkey's foreign policy at the time didn't give these matters enough consideration. Somehow, Turkey managed to maintain working relationships with Russia – even after the downing of the jet immediately after the G20 summit where bilateral promises were exchanged⁹.



Most participants agreed that the two countries share a common trajectory and that the two countries must hold on to each other. As a NATO member, Turkey provides considerable help to Ukraine, which is not only limited to drones. Yet, at the same time, Turkey takes risks and provides Russia with huge opportunities everywhere. Considering all this, the participants noted, it is hard to envisage a better policy than this now. However, it shouldn't be forgotten that personal interests are key at this juncture.

As for the future, the participants agreed that Russia faces a huge task in keeping its unity and integrity in the mid to long term. Also, it was noted that the world is not ready for something

catastrophic like this, such as disintegration. In this respect, the name of the United Russia Party signifies something crucial. The political regime cannot continue like this – either it will be less authoritarian or more authoritarian. However, some participants were in agreement that no matter what happens, Russia will not use tactical nuclear weapons – as doing that might invigorate nationalist views.

The participants also noted that while examining history is crucial, the new paradigms should be taken into account. It wouldn't be off the mark to claim that Turkey will adapt itself to the new Russia. Another crucial point made in the roundtable discussion was that the relationship between Turkey and Russia is not only based on leadership, but also on autocratic tendencies. Therefore, the democratization of Turkey will not be well received by Russia.

With regards to the topic of immigration during and after the war, the participants stressed that more time needs to pass to understand the situation of Russian and Ukrainian immigrants in Turkey, as they are just trying to settle at the moment. For participants, it is also crucial that the average Russian does not pay attention to politics right now. Maybe they will start paying attention in time. It was noted that, if Putin's strategy did not turn out to be a miscalculation and the Russian army managed to capture Kyiv, then the majority of these immigrants would stay in Russia. It is not off the mark to claim that they left for pragmatic reasons – ideology does not have the upper hand here.

Another discussion point in terms of immigration was the treatment of Ukrainian refugees by the European Union. It was stressed that an internal displacement took place and that many Ukrainian refugees ended up in Russia – sometimes due to forced migration from Ukraine to Russia. It was noted that this is the largest mass displacement in Europe since WW2, encompassing around 14 million people, of which 6 million have been displaced internally, while 8 million left the country.¹⁰ The numbers keep changing, but almost 4.8 million Ukrainians are registered in the EU now. On the other hand, a participant emphasized that this is a massive and mass injustice. According

⁹ BBC. (2015, December 1). *Turkey's downing of Russian warplane - what we know*. BBC News. Retrieved January 10, 2023, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>

¹⁰ For most recent numbers please see: *Operational Data Portal*. Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation. (n.d.). Retrieved January 10, 2023, from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

to another participant, while it is important that Ukrainian refugees are finding a place to live, it was also a crucial point to acknowledge that the EU now has two different refugee regimes: one for

Ukrainian refugees and one for others. Sooner or later, this unequal treatment may backfire and have negative consequences for Ukrainian refugees in their host countries.

Further Reading

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