



HAS THERE BEEN A RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE WEST AFTER THE INVASION OF UKRAINE?

It has been more than a year since Russia has invaded Ukraine and no one knows where this war is heading to. According to Fiona Hill², most probably the World will face an unstable stalemate in this case. We are neither sure about how it might end in the battlefield nor the conditions that might lead the parties – especially Russia – to the negotiating table. Russia seems to have maximalist demands like the recognition of all the annexed territories, while Ukraine, backed by the West, wants to take back most of its occupied land. These two are obviously uncompromising.

After the invasion we have witnessed two major developments: First “the invasion disproved the founding assumption of the post–Cold War order, namely, that Russia—unlike the Soviet Union—would be no longer a threat but instead a partner in common security challenges”³. The second and probably more important than the first one is that the fate of Ukraine has started to be regarded as a test of the “West”’s authority/power in the World. These two factors have rendered the Ukraine war an existential one for the West. Furthermore, in time, Ukraine has started to be considered to represent the universal values like democracy, human rights, rule of law and separation of powers against Putin.

In addition to the aforementioned developments, it would not be wrong to claim that the West has clamped together to a great extent against Putin’s Russia, notwithstanding the

¹ <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1139/Nilgun+Arisan+Eralp>

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² TÜSİAD, TÜSİAD Küresel Siyaset Forumu Fiona Hill’i Ağırıyor, 15 Mart 2023

³ Council of Councils, The Invasion That Shook the World, 22 February 2023

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possibility that this unity might be fragile in line with the unfolding developments. This has been achieved not only between United States, United Kingdom and the European Union (EU) but also among the member states of the EU with the exception of Hungary. At the beginning of the invasion, there were differences of opinion between West European countries and Baltic States and Central and Eastern European members of the EU regarding the nature of the Ukrainian war. The latter considered the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a serious threat that can lead up to their invasion, while for the former the serious threat was the possibility of a nuclear war. Hence while the latter was for the total exclusion of Russia, the former led by France and Germany thought diplomacy can be given another chance. Today, we can state that these differences of view have been alleviated to a great extent. Furthermore there are few voices in the West (like in Italy and Romania) that support a cease-fire now, more and more countries are willing to see the defeat of Putin's Russia, though not to crush it.⁴

According to the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), a highly respected and reliable think-tank in Europe, three factors have been influential on the unity of the West.⁵ Ukrainian successes in the first year of the war; the way the war has united the political left and right and the perceived return of a strong West led by the US.

Apart from the "Global South" which suffers a lot because of the war and which is categorically against the West due to the legacy of the colonialism, it would not be wrong to talk about a bipolar World regarding the war in Ukraine without neglecting the multi-dimensional complex relations. Hence we can state that there are mainly two parties regarding Ukrainian war: On the one side there is Russia, China and Iran, on the other side there is NATO. For the moment the West has not decided where to situate the NATO member Turkey. Also it is not easy to understand where Turkey situates itself, when the security architecture is being reframed and NATO is right in the centre of it.

Invasion and Turkey

Before the invasion of Ukraine, the determining factor in the relations between Turkey and the West was the lack of mutual trust. There has been a limited co-operation in a few areas like migration and trade. Both the EU and US have been waiting for the results of the 2023 elections to decide about where to situate Turkey.

After the invasion, the first prominent factor regarding Turkey that has become visible has been the geostrategic importance of the country. It is fair to say that Turkey has managed to use its geostrategic strength rationally and tried to pursue a balanced policy. First and foremost Turkey, right from the start, stated that the invasion is actually a war and expressed its loyalty to NATO in discourse and in action.⁶ Furthermore, in line with the Montreux convention, the country has closed the straits to all the battle ships, has been one of the countries who

⁴ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/russia/article/2023/02/19/macron-wants-russia-to-be-defeated-but-not-crushed_6016429_140.html

⁵ ECFR, Fragile unity: Why Europeans are coming together on Ukraine (and what might drive them apart), Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, 16 March 2023

⁶ As stated by Serhat Güvenç at Medyascope, Turkey approved all the decisions of NATO, including the 2022 Madrid Summit Declaration that referred to Russia as the primary threat. <https://medyascope.tv/2023/02/26/serhat-guvenç-yazdi-rusya-ukrayna-savasinda-ilk-yilin-bilancosu/>

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condemned Russia in the United Nations General Assembly. These were all considered as pro-Western decisions.

These steps played an important role in the West's tolerance towards some moves of Turkey like keeping its airspace open to Russian planes and not participating to the sanctions. Moreover, the country's close economic relations with Russia, its dependence on Russia in terms of energy and tourism revenues and its fragile status vis-à-vis Russia in Syria have all been important factors that have prevented serious criticisms against Turkey.

Turkey sold drones to Ukraine that have been crucial in its defence, while tripling its trade with Russia, making this country its most important trading partner. Consequently, the country presented himself as the most important mediator between Kiev and Moscow and strengthened this position via its constructive role in the grain deal and the reciprocal extradition of prisoners of war.

Have all these led the West to consider Turkey on its side regarding the war in Ukraine? The answer is no, although Ukrainian authorities have always expressed Turkey's support in different occasions.

The ECFR published a report titled "United West Divided from the Rest"⁷ on the first anniversary of the war. In this report, ECFR shared the results of a public opinion poll conducted in several countries in the world regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The report positioned Turkey together with India and China and stated that the public opinion in these countries indicate the willingness to act separately from the West. According to the results of the aforementioned public opinion poll, 69 per cent of the public in Turkey regards Russia as a partner or ally and 60 per cent of the Russian public considers Turkey as a partner. However, 40 to 50 percent of the Western public does not know how and where to situate Turkey.

The Reasons behind the West's Distrust in Turkey

The main reason of the distrust is the assessment that Russia has a serious influence and hence leverage on Turkey. Also, it is stated that the autonomous and uncertain foreign policy implemented by Turkey; a NATO member, arouses suspicion. In this context, it is frequently emphasized that Turkey's opposition to the NATO membership of Sweden is a situation preferred by Russia rather than eliminating the alleged support given by this country to terrorism. Furthermore, transferring bilateral problems into a multilateral organization like NATO has not been well received. This attitude prevents the West and especially the US from cooperating with Turkey in the field of security.

Among the aforementioned reasons, there is this claim that the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West are being circumvented by Turkey. According to the statements of the US and EU officials, the commercial relations of countries such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates with Russia hinder the efforts to stop the invasion of Ukraine. Although the USA and EU have officially contacted Turkey in order to prevent the circumvention of sanctions, it is argued that

⁷ https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/United-West-divided-from-the-rest_Leonard-Garton-Ash-Krastev.pdf

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concrete results could not be achieved. This issue is being brought to agenda more frequently via a bold language.

Other factors that reduce confidence are the agreements between Turkey and Russia to strengthen their economic ties in Sochi in August 2022, the significant increase in Turkey's trade with Russia, Russia's nuclear reactor construction in Turkey and the funds provided by Russia to Turkey which faces serious economic problems. The investments of Russian oligarchs in Turkey is also a matter of serious concern.

For all these reasons, the West hesitates to approach Turkey even for the new areas of possible cooperation (defence, strengthening the industrial infrastructure of defence, shifting supply chains energy, etc.) created by the current conjuncture. The EU also refrains from even referring to Turkey in the enlargement process revived by the occupation.

The Main Factor behind Perception of Turkey as the “Other”

Despite some exceptions, we can not neglect the fact that the struggle of democracy against autocracy plays a role in the West's response to the occupation of Ukraine. Currently, Turkey is far from giving confidence to the outside world and especially to the West in terms of its political system, lack of institutions, lack of separation of powers, questions regarding independence of the judiciary and economic policies. It is very difficult to establish confidence unless significant progress is made in the above mentioned areas.

The balanced policy Turkey has tried to pursue after the invasion has turned out to be inadequate in building the trust. Although the reasons stated above does not seem to be of primary importance, the distrust has deepened further.

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from all these was stated by Sinan Ülgen⁸ a year ago; “Without democracy, the geopolitical card is insufficient for Turkey”. This statement is still valid even one year after the occupation.

⁸ <https://www.perspektif.online/demokrasi-olmadan-jeopolitik-kart-turkiyeye-yetmez/>