

“Russia and Turkey in Global Perspective” Seminar Series

Workshop Report: Russia-Turkey-West Triangle and the Global Balance of Power

14 March 2024, Kadir Has University

I. Abstract:

As part of the “Russia and Turkey in Global Perspective” seminar series, organized by the Global Academy in partnership with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Türkiye Office, the first workshop was held at Kadir Has University on March 14, 2024. This project aims to bring analysts, academics, and policymakers together to tease out a nuanced and fuller understanding of current Russian-Turkish relations. More broadly, the workshop series encourages foreign policy debate in Turkey.

The central theme for the first workshop was “Russia-Turkey-West Triangle and the Global Balance of Power,” which brought together three speakers and a group of experts who contributed to the roundtable discussion. This report highlights the main arguments and subjects raised during the event.

II. Participants:

Moderator:

Prof. Dr. Mustafa Aydın, Kadir Has University and Global Academy

Speakers:

Prof. Dr. Erel Tellal, Ankara University

Prof. Dr. Emre Erşen, Marmara University

Assist. Prof. Dr. Samuel J. Hirst, Bilkent University

Discussants: A group of 21 scholars, researchers, and journalists working on Russia-Turkey relations from Ankara, Bilkent, Marmara, Kadir Has, Özyeğin, Bilgi, Okan, and Stockholm universities, as well as the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Türkiye Office, and media.

III. Highlights:

Professor Mustafa Aydın, the moderator, started the workshop with a brief analysis of the global connections between Turkey, Russia, and the West. Building on Prof. Aydın’s speech, the three panelists focused on the historical and political factors underlying the relationship. Overall, the meeting consisted of two parts: three presentations followed by a recess for a casual

conversation among attendees and a second, longer part for a roundtable discussion. The roundtable discussion looked beyond historical and political factors, emphasizing various institutions and geopolitical conflicts shaping the common space Turks and Russians shared. A common thread binding all these factors was identity politics and conflicting identities.

The first panelist, **Prof. Erel Tellal of Ankara University**, weighed in on the historical background of Turkish-Russian relations with an eye on the “Western factor” and circled back to present-day political and economic dimensions. Prof. Tellal reiterated the importance of the War in Ukraine, Western sanctions against Russia, energy issues, and increasing militarization in Europe.

He outlined the historical framework that shapes the relationship between the three actors - the West, Russia, and Turkey- to understand their current relations. Regarding the West, he began with the Turkish conquest of İstanbul and the diversification of trade routes after 1453. He then argued that the West's colonial and late imperial policies against the Turks left a bitter memory. After two world wars, the West's subsequent Cold War security structure was provided by NATO, which continues to play an important role. Prof. Tellal emphasized the importance of the 9/11 terror attacks, the so-called “new world order” that followed, and the colored revolutions in the former Soviet space and described the United States’ (US) emerging hegemony at that time.

Second, he divided the historical background of Russia into three periods: Tsarist Russia, Soviet Russia, and post-Soviet Russia, arguing that in each period, Russia faced invasions from abroad. During the Tsarist Empire, Napoleonic France threatened and tried to invade Russia. Later, Russia was aligned with the West during the First World War, which ended with the October Revolution and the following Civil War, when Anglo-French armies supported the Whites. During the Second World War, Nazi Germany tried to invade Russia. During the post-Soviet era, Russia first tried to be a part of the West, particularly in the Yeltsin era. However, the West spurned Russia through its policies during the dissolution of Yugoslavia, colored revolutions across former Soviet countries, and renewed US-led containment policies. The Russian Federation reacted to all these and showed its refusal of the “new world order” by attacking Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

Third, he mentioned the Ottoman period and depicted the Sublime Porte as a European Empire aligned with the West. Despite close relations with European empires, starting with the 18th century, the West marginalized the Ottoman Empire. In conclusion, according to Prof. Tellal, Russia and Turkey have a shared understanding vis-à-vis the West: They have both been refused and cast out by the Western powers.

The second discussant, **Prof. Emre Erşen of Marmara University**, started with a snapshot of the current ties between the two countries. He noted that the relationship between Turkey and Russia has variously been labeled as a “strategic partnership,” a “marriage of convenience,” “frenemy relationship,” “the axis of the excluded,” and “managed geopolitical rivalry” in the

existing literature. According to Prof. Erşen, “managed geopolitical rivalry” could be the most proper definition of the current relations between Turkey and Russia.

Prof. Erşen mentioned three pillars upon which bilateral Turkish-Russian ties rest: (1) economic ties, (2) regional conflicts, and (3) the Western dimension. He argued that economic links between Turkey and Russia are central to their relationship. While trade between the two countries constantly increases, there is also a gap between imports and exports. In other words, this is an asymmetrical relationship. Based on 2022 statistics, while Russia is the number one partner of Turkey in imports, Turkey is the number two partner of Russia in exports. Turkey also currently buys 39% of its natural gas from Russia. Furthermore, Turkey has become one of the top three customers of Russian oil, along with India and China, after the start of the war in Ukraine.

Currently, two pipelines link Turkey and Russia: The Blue Stream and the TurkStream. They are regarded as the backbones of their energy relations. Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant is also a significant project for energy relations, and its first unit is expected to become operational this year. Tourism and construction are other notable sectors of the economic ties between the two countries.

Secondly, there are many active, potential, or frozen regional conflicts in their shared neighborhood, such as the Syrian civil war, Libyan civil war, Russia-Ukraine war, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and Russia-Georgia war where Ankara and Moscow have been on the opposite sites. Most of these conflicts have a bearing on the Black Sea security due to the presence of Russia’s military forces and the long-range missiles Moscow has deployed around the Black Sea.

Thirdly, the Western dimension is one of the critical determinants of the relations between Turkey and Russia. For example, 18 percent of the respondents who participated in the “Turkish Foreign Policy Public Perceptions Survey 2022” of Kadir Has University and the Global Academy stated that Russia and China could become alternatives to the US and the European Union (EU). Also, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was found attractive by 10 percent of the respondents.

Prof. Erşen also drew attention to the fact that Turkey and Russia have strong and similar-mannered presidents, which makes it easier for them to negotiate with each other directly. Turkey’s political system has also become closer to Russia’s political system in the last few years, which is another reason for the strategic alignment of the two countries.

Regarding the crisis in Ukraine, Prof. Erşen argued that Turkey has been trying to support Ukraine without antagonizing Russia since both Russia and Ukraine are essential actors for Turkey in foreign policy. This approach also complies with Turkey’s traditional *balancing policy* between the West and Russia. While the crisis in Ukraine has negatively affected the security of the Black Sea as well as Turkey’s energy security, Turkey has nevertheless been

quite active with various mediation efforts such as the meeting of Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, the meeting held between Russian and Ukrainian delegations in Istanbul and the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

The third discussant, **Prof. Samuel Hirst of Bilkent University**, looked at the issue from a broader historical perspective. He examined the changing global order and what it means for Turkish-Russian relations. He emphasized the notion of multipolarity. Regarding the Russia-Ukraine War, he mentioned the ‘effectiveness vs. efficacy’ of Western sanctions against Russia and the reflections of these sanctions on the Russian economy, discussing whether in a crisis or resilience.

To begin with, he pointed out an increasing consensus that sanctions have not been effective due to the domestic structure of the Russian Federation. And Russia has indeed shown resilience against the Western sanctions. One reason for this resilience, Dr. Hirst argued, is that President Vladimir Putin has been able to firmly and closely control the Russian economy, thus allowing the Russian government to manage every crisis so far. Nevertheless, Hirst cited Adam Tooze’s *Wages of Destruction* and argued that the Russian economy has been transforming into a wartime economy (one that resembles the German economy under Adolf Hitler), which is finite and unsustainable. This transformation makes Russia more vulnerable in the long term.

Dr. Hirst stressed that the current situation resembles the interwar period when considering multipolarity. In the interwar period, relative unipolarity during the 1920s gave way to multipolarity in the 1930s. Significantly, Turkish-Soviet relations were better during the 1920s due to a sense of the West’s marginalization of the Soviet Union and Turkey. Still, bilateral relations weakened in the 1930s as the Soviet Union transitioned towards a wartime economy.

In conclusion, he referred to Andrei Kortunov, a Russian multipolarity skeptic, who has questioned whether Turkey aspires to become an independent regional hegemon or whether recent foreign policy gambits can be ascribed to its leader's personal ambition and his domestic political strategy. For Russia, there are apparent limits to multipolarity. Although Russia’s energy exports have allowed it to withstand sanctions, it is also increasingly vulnerable due to its dependence on exports to India, China, and Turkey.

After a recess, the second part of the workshop started again with **Prof. Aydın**’s remarks, in which he labeled the relations between Russia and Turkey as co-opetition, which merges the concepts of cooperation and competition. Then, bilateral relations were discussed within the context of history, identity, institutions, crises, and the future directions of Turkish foreign policy. The participants agreed that the relations are complex, defying simple explanations. They emphasized that until 2010-11, Russia and Turkey were competing in every field, but after 2011, Turkey moved to build better relations with Russia.

Regarding identity, some participants claimed that Turkey has been a Western actor for more than 100 years, and this dynamic has not changed. That’s why Turkey and Russia have no

ideological closeness and convergence. Moreover, their perception of Eurasianism is different. In simple terms, while Turkish Eurasianism sees Turkey and Russia as parts of Europe and Asia, Russian Eurasianism sees Russia as a unique civilization in Eurasia.

Furthermore, some participants argued that Russia does not see Turkey as an ally because of Turkey's ambivalent diplomacy. Current examples of this uncertainty include the fighter jet crisis in 2015 and the assassination of Andrei Karlov, former Russian ambassador to Turkey, in 2016. At the same time, Turkey is part of the West/NATO, according to Russia, and is very unstable in its relations with the West and Russia. This situation makes Turkey unpredictable. However, others pointed out the hybrid identities of Turkey and Russia due to their Eurasian character. Nevertheless, regarding institutional ties, Turkey is still a NATO member and thus belongs to the West. Therefore, it can be said that Turkey's default position is directed towards the West.

One of the discussants approached the relations from the realist International Relations perspective. He claimed that while Russia and the West are great powers, Turkey is a middle power. He also stated that Russia lacks the capabilities of the West and is weaker in relative terms. Therefore, Turkey prefers to bandwagon in the West. Furthermore, Turkey and Russia do not have similar imaginations and joint interests, especially in their near abroad. While Turkey wants to change the political environment, Russia tries to protect the status quo in conflictual areas.

Finally, participants agreed that the two states had divergent identities, ideologies, institutional ties, imaginations, and interests, creating limitations in this "enhanced partnership." Contrarily, Turkey's relations with the West do not have these limitations. That's why most participants suggested that, unlike the perception in the West, Turkey is getting closer to the West and will not ultimately pivot to Russia.