



Public Perceptions and Hybrid Influences in Russian-Turkish Relations

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Russian and Turkish societies in the 21st century have inherited historically negative and competitive discourses, hailing from long periods of conflict and competition. To be sure, their imperial struggles left a complex and problematic demographic structure across a vast geography from the Balkans to Central Asia, where long shadows of forced migrations and violent exchanges set the stage for more competition and conflict. This long-lasting imperial legacy was later solidified by the Cold War era ideological struggle, which left a complex and problematic geopolitical environment across their common neighborhoods and a persistent distrust and negative discourse in the post-imperial era. Added to these have been more recent experiences of intense competition across Eurasia during the 1990s for energy and influence. Some of these negative images inherited from earlier eras have been mollified and overturned by the positive turn in the relations in the 2000s. Nevertheless, recent political developments in the international arena, technological transformations, and the current nature of competition/warfare in their shared neighborhood brought new dimensions to the existing, primarily negative, perceptions. This study examines these persistent perceptions and views of the two neighboring countries in the light of historical transformations.

Introduction: Historical Foundations of Public Perceptions

With a history of over 500 years, Turkish-Russian relations are a fascinating interplay of rivalry, competition, cooperation, rapprochement, and partnership. Turkish historiography often narrates this history as one of constant suspicion, distrust, and betrayal, overshadowing the elements of collaboration and partnership (See Kurat 1990 and 1992; Oreskova 2003). This narrative mainly derives from lingering memories of the loss of large segments of imperial (Ottoman) territory directly to Czarist expansion from the late 16th century on or to emerging countries in eastern Europe with the support of Russia. Ideological rivalries and threat perceptions that emerged during the Cold War added to this. Thus, Russia and Russians have, until recently, been depicted as the primary enemy of the Turks and the Turkish state in Turkish historiography, with the corresponding public image of '*Moskof Gavuru*' ('Muscovite Infidel') reigning supreme.

In the political jargon of the Cold War, Russia was also depicted as an expansionist power with claims on a vast area stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia and constantly aiming to reach 'the warm seas' of the Mediterranean. Although this originates from Czar Peter the Great's drive to the south in the 18th century (Green 1993), as late as November 1943, the then-Soviet leader Joseph Stalin asked British PM Winston Churchill and American President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Cairo to consider the USSR's need for warm water ports and thus to revise the Montreux Convention, which regulates the passage of vessels through the Turkish Straits (Aydın 2021: 11).

Similarly, for Russians, the image of the Turk has little positive meaning. Ottoman history, which is equated with Turkish history, is portrayed as expansionist, brutal, and oppressive, and the Turks are portrayed as the

other. The later narrative is dominated by the discourse of liberating or capturing the Turkish Straits from the Turks (Şimşek and Cengiz 2015; Cengiz and Şimşek 2017). Moreover, Russian discourse and perception of enmity, enveloped by religious animosity (Orthodoxy vs. Islam) and claim for greatness ('Third Rome' bypassing or replacing Ottoman State), narrows down to Russia's 'struggle to liberate' the vast geography across Eurasia that it sees as its natural area of expansion (Strémooukhoff 1953: 87-88).

Despite the threat perception shaped by this hostile framework and the atmosphere of mistrust, there were periods of cooperation between the two sides (Aydın et al. 2024; Işçi et al. 2024). The early relations in the 1920s between the two newly emerging states exemplify this (Gürün 1991; Yerasimos 2000). Under the influence of their shared resistance against the encroachments of 'the capitalist-colonialist West,' the prevailing understanding in the 1920s and 1930s emphasized cooperation and solidarity. The Moscow and Kars agreements signed in this period, as well as the 1925 Turkish-Russian Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality, were expressions of the similar outlook of both states regarding world politics. These agreements were signed when Turkey had problematic relations with Britain over Mosul, Italy over the Mediterranean security and eastern Aegean islands, and France over the Syrian border. Thus, the agreements represent an early balancing attempt by the young Republic of Turkey utilizing Soviet support against the other great powers of the period.

There was no conflict and several cooperation projects between Turkey and the Soviet Union in the interwar period (Işçi et al. 2024). Nevertheless, public opinions and decision-makers did not envisage prioritizing cooperation to establish a shared future. In return for Turkey's refraining from the issue of the 'external Turks,' that is, the fate of Turkic people left behind in the USSR, and turning its back to Eurasia, thus essentially leaving it to the Soviets, Moscow remained silent on Ankara's restrictive measures against the emerging leftist/communist groups in Turkey. Yet, under the prevailing circumstances, the bilateral cooperation of the 1920s and 1930s lacked a specific and long-term goal other than balancing the Western powers in their vicinity.

The most obvious consequence of the failure to establish a long-term, deep-rooted cooperation in this period was the inability to prevent the severe negative impact of the developments that emerged during and immediately after the Second World War. The Soviet notification to Turkey in March 1945 that the 1925 Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality would not be extended led to strained relations (See, Bilge 1992; Aydın 2001 and 2021; Işçi 2019 and 2023). The tension increased with the Russian demand to overhaul the status of the Straits because the Montreux Convention was obsolete and to position a Soviet military detachment nearby. These demands led to a rapid spiraling down in both discourse and perception. Facing 'Soviet and Communist threat' (For the Turkish ruling elite's understanding after the Second World War, see Oran 2010: 285-343), Turkey consolidated its political, economic, and military alignment with the West through bilateral cooperation with the US and membership in NATO.

In the following period, the perception of the Russian threat deepened with an added ideological dimension as the Turkish state narrative associated the external threat perceived by Russia with the internal threat perceived by Communism (Bilge 1992; Çelikpala 2019). As such, the Soviets/Russians 're-defined' during the Cold War by Turkish decision-makers and public opinion as the ideological other and an existential threat with destructive ambitions on Turkish territory and sovereignty. The othering, which gained an ideological dimension by combining anti-communism with perceived Soviet threat, brought Turkey closer to the US and Euro-Atlantic security institutions, which at the time adopted the 'Containment Policy' with Turkey becoming one of its instruments.

For the Soviet side, Turkey was perceived as a front line with the Western/American/NATO world, and the idea of cooperation was shelved until the Detente. As discussed in our previous report (Işçi et al. 2024), Détente ushered in an era of positive developments between Turkey and the USSR, especially in commercial relations (Hirst and Işçi 2020). Interestingly, this period also saw the emergence of problematic relations between Turkey and its Western allies in a manner reminiscent of today's developments.

The Soviet Collapse and Changing Perceptions

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, the emergence of new nation-states and the changing borders gave rise to different geographical imaginations in Turkey as in the rest of the world (Öniş 1995; Aydın 2003; Larrabee and Lesser 2003; Aktürk 2004). For Turkey, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant the elimination of the historical threat and the emergence of a historical opportunity that would open the way to reconnect with the Turkic world 'from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China' (Aydın 2004). For Russia, this was a period of 'post-traumatic stress disorder,' during which it lost an empire and stood losing more (Sakwa 2019: 1-17).

With the end of the bipolar world order, Turkey's Russia-centered threat perception was suddenly transformed, which signaled a fundamental change in bilateral relations and the structure of the international system. Turkish decision-makers believed they had the opportunity to rewrite Turkey's geopolitics as the Soviet threat disappeared and new opportunities emerged. Accordingly, they tried to redefine Turkey's relations with its neighborhood (Yanık 2007). The Russian Federation was not the USSR and this new actor's position in regional and global balances needed to be recalculated and redefined. For Turkey, this meant new opportunities on the one hand and new threats on the other.

The main question to be answered in the transition period was whether gains could be achieved against the new actor, the Russian Federation, which ceased to be a heavyweight player in the international arena. In the thinking of the period, 'competition' was the catchphrase; to open a more significant space for Turkey, Russia needed to be pushed further. There was little argument to further a friendly relationship with Russia, prioritizing cooperation. As a result, the dominant theme of the early post-Cold War era throughout the 1990s was utilizing geopolitical and strategic advantages against Russia and developing relations with the newly independent Turkic Republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Aydın 1996 and 2004; Öniş 1995; Aktürk 2004). Besides, Turkey was defined as a 'model' for the former Soviet countries of Central Asia and the

Caucasus (Mango 1993; Sander 1994; Dal and Erşen 2014; Robins 1993).

As far as the Turkish public was concerned, it immediately adopted the new discourse with an overriding emotional aspect. Russia was Turkey's biggest -for some only- rival in implementing policies for transforming the Turkic countries. Yet, it differed from the Soviet Union in that it was seen as a 'manageable' rival for influence, not a threat to Turkey's existence. As a result, Turkey took an active and sometimes anti-Russian stance in Central Asia and the Caucasus, not only in emerging energy and economic competition but also in regional conflicts such as Chechnya, Karabakh, and Abkhazia. Turkish public opinion supported this approach, and the anti-Russian atmosphere solidified, especially in supporting the pro-independence initiatives of Turkic/Muslim communities (Çelikpala 2005 and 2006).

The result was an open competition for regional influence with Russia in the broader area extending from the Balkans to Central Asia (Aydın 2003). This determined the general framework of Turkish-Russian relations throughout the 1990s and shaped Ankara's relations with its Western partners and the Turkic world. Russia responded quickly from the mid-1990s onward with a new 'Security Doctrine' and a new 'Foreign Policy Doctrine,' which called for reasserting Russian dominance and influence in the 'Near Abroad' (Dick 1994). The dominant Russian discourse in these doctrines was based on defending and maintaining Russia's influence in former Soviet regions by preserving the old order or, at the least, revamping it with Russia in the center. In contrast, Turkey aimed to create a new order that put it in the center with the West backing it. This led to a perception in Russia that Turkey was an instrument of Western influence in Eurasia and, thus, needed to be countered (Aydın 2004).

In the 2000s, Turkish perception centered on 'rival/competitor Russia,' which dominated most of the 1990s, started to change gradually. First, it was observed that Turkey did not achieve the expected political benefits from the competition/struggle with Russia, especially in the Eurasian geography. Second, developing trade and economic relations with Russia became more attractive as the Russian economy recovered, and Turkey's trade with

former Soviet countries in Eurasia remained below its trade figures with Russia (Aydın 2003: 136; Çelikpala 2019: 6; Aydın forthcoming). At the same time, in Russia, relations with Turkey were beginning to be seen with less suspicious lenses, with the possibility of Turkey taking a different stance on regional issues from its Western partners. This was aided by Russia becoming more confident of its regional footing as the Chechen uprising wound up and energy competition with Turkey winding down, with both countries getting pipelines from the Caspian reaches (Aydın 2003: 136).

As a result, while the two countries still competed politically and perceived each other as such, commercial and economic relations started to grow and dominate the agenda, creating rapprochement, cooperation, and positive mutual perceptions. Economic relations improved, supported by Turkish construction companies' tenders in Russia and tourism. The shuttle trade of the early 1990s rapidly developed into a lucrative official trade, growing seven times and reaching 38 billion US dollars by the end of 2008 (Çelikpala 2019: 13-14). At the same time, the combined total tenders received by Turkish companies in Russia touched 30 billion USD, which constituted 22% of all works Turkey contracted abroad back then, and the number of Russian tourists traveling to Turkey increased to 2.8 million.

Nevertheless, the main transformative commodity was energy. Turkey's preference for natural gas as the primary energy source for the country's increasing household and industrial demand and the emergence of Russia as a reliable gas provider has turned energy from a competitive issue of the 1990s into a positive and contributing factor in the 2000s. Added to these was the increasing number of mixed marriages between the Turks and Russians. This aspect of developing the human side of the relations contributed to the emergence of new mutual positive perceptions among the public on both sides (İçduygu and Karaçay 2012; Karaçay 2023: 33-39).

This emerging web of relations paved the way for a change in discourse that has enabled the two countries to move rapidly from hostility to 'virtual rapprochement' to 'mutual cooperation' and finally to a 'multidimensional partnership' within a decade (Sezer 2000 and 2001: 151-152). The constructive understanding of

rapprochement and the avoidance of political leaders from rhetoric that could cause tension also led to a gradual transformation of the negative perceptions that dominated public opinion on both sides. In this new era, the parties seem to mutually recognize the importance of cooperation in advancing common interests. In his official visit to Turkey in October 2000, the then Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Mikhail Kasyanov, said, "Russia and Turkey are not competitors. We are partners, and our governments are working on this principle and will develop bilateral relations." (Doğan 2000; Bila 2000). In line with this, the parties decided to keep communication channels open to ensure the continuity of relations in case of possible crises. This period also witnessed the revitalization of joint economic and trade-based organizations, such as the Turkish-Russian Business Council, established in 1991.

Developments in the international arena and the disappointments experienced by both countries in their relations with the Western world also catalyzed this turn. Russia's first major disappointment was when the former Eastern Bloc members Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland took their final steps towards NATO membership in December 1997. At the same time, Turkey was excluded from the EU membership at the Luxembourg summit. Again, in 1997 and 1998, the two countries faced difficulties due to economic crises. These developments, on the one hand, alienated both sides intellectually from the West, which was seen as the primary partner to cooperate with, and on the other hand, gave rise to the idea that there could be close cooperation between the two countries in political, commercial, and economic fields.

In short, the mutual perception and discourse based on rivalry and competition that dominated the relations between the two countries gradually transformed from the late 1990s under the influence of developing trade and economic relations, the perception of common interests in Eurasia, and the fight against terrorism. As such, three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the bilateral relations between Russia and Turkey have reached a level with the perspective of developing a 'strategic partnership' in the new century (MFA 2024). The first concrete step was taken during Russian Foreign Minister Igor

Ivanov's visit to Turkey on 7-8 June 2001. Putting aside their contentious issues, the two sides developed a relationship centered on economic cooperation. In the end, the 'Eurasia Action Plan 2001' entered the agenda simultaneously with then Foreign Minister İsmail Cem's proposal to establish a working group in the Moscow-Ankara-Central Asia triangle, the so-called 'Strategic Triangle' to cooperate in political and economic areas.

This transformation paved the way for further political and economic cooperation. The change has been sharp: For the first time, the two sides expressed that they saw a region they had consistently defined as their strategic priorities and competed with as an area of cooperation (Acar 2001; TDN 2001a and 2001b). The Action Plan brought to the agenda the Eurasia-centered constructive discourse that still dominates bilateral relations: "The fundamental changes taking place in the world have opened a new era in which Turkey and Russia will develop their bilateral and regional cooperation in a spirit of friendship and mutual trust in all areas, and in this framework, the two countries are determined to bring their existing relations to the level of strengthened constructive partnership" (Kohen 2001).

As such, the relations were raised to a 'strengthened constructive partnership' level by 2001 and were elevated to 'multidimensional' bilateral relations by 2004 (Radikal 2004). Finally, establishing the High-Level Cooperation Council in 2010 raised Turkish-Russian ties to a 'strategic partnership' level. Since then, the perception of competing rivals/enemies in hostile camps image has been replaced by a perception of partners that can cooperate economically and pursue political relations based on mutual understanding. The impact of this transformation on public opinion has been quite visible (Aydın et al. 2016 and 2017), and the ambassadors and political leaders made more frequent statements to mainstream media outlets, and more constructive, cooperation-oriented language dominated public opinion.

Turkey became Russia's sixth, and Russia became Turkey's second-largest trade partner. Presidents Erdoğan and Putin set the trade volume target to 100 billion US dollars and mutually abolished visas between the two countries (See Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2019). Through mutual visits, tourism,

and mixed marriages, it was believed that an irreversible path had been taken between the two countries but, more importantly, between the peoples. Yet, more turns and twists were in the making.

Deteriorating Relations and Russian Hybrid Threats to Turkey

Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet that violated Turkish airspace on the Syrian border on 24 November 2015 put a sudden end to the narrative of promising cooperation between Turkey and Russia; 15 years of effort was in tatters overnight (Özcan 2017). Russia quickly imposed comprehensive sanctions against Turkey, leading to a period of distrust. The first effects of the sanctions were felt in the tourism and agriculture sectors, where 2016 turned into a year of loss. Other sectors followed as Russia expanded sanctions. As a result, bilateral relations took a nosedive, and public perception of Russia in Turkey underwent a rapid transformation. While Russia did not appear high previously among the list of countries that pose a threat to Turkey in the 'Public Perceptions of Turkish Foreign Policy' surveys conducted regularly since 2010, after the 'the plane incident,' Russia followed the US in the list with 34.9 percent of the respondents (Aydın et al. 2016). The results indicated the fragility of rapprochement and that the legacy of history cannot be easily overcome.

The letters sent by President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Yıldırım to their Russian counterparts on 12 June 2016 on Russia Day to improve relations was followed by President Erdoğan's visit to Russia on 9 August to thank President Putin's quick reaction to the 15 July coup attempt in Turkey. Though negative perceptions remained, these efforts successfully ushered in a new understanding between the two countries (Oğuzlu 2020). Eight months of hiatus in relations after the shutdown showed that the basis of bilateral ties established in the previous three decades was insufficient to contain a political/security crisis. The downing of the plane revealed that the two sides did not have a mechanism to avert a crisis, even though they had created an institutional structure at the highest level, i.e., the High-Level Cooperation Council. This was mainly due to

focusing on economic and commercial relations while mostly trying to ignore differences in security-related issues.

This period also marks a time when Russia's hybrid war on Turkey in the shadow of the Syrian crisis started. The severe effects of unresolved regional and global issues and the diverging interests of the two sides indicate that the era of furthering bilateral relations by focusing only on economic and commercial ties with a 'half full glass' approach was over.

Hybrid Threat/Warfare

The hybrid threat is an umbrella term encompassing various adverse circumstances and actions, such as terrorism, migration, piracy, corruption, and ethnic conflict (Hoffman, 2009: 37 & Ferrag et al., 2024). What is new, however, is the possibility of the state and international actors facing the adaptive and systematic use of such means singularly and in combination by adversaries in pursuit of long-term political objectives, as opposed to their more random occurrence, driven by coincidental factors.

The period when Turkish-Russian relations almost hit the bottom was also the period when a new body of literature on hybrid war and threats emerged. It also coincided with NATO's designation of Russia as the main threat using hybrid means against allies (See <https://natolibguides.info/hybridwarfare/documents>). In addition to its military activities, Russia employed hybrid actions against NATO Allies and partners, sometimes through proxies, by interfering in elections and democratic processes, political and economic pressures and intimidation, disinformation campaigns, malicious cyber activities, economic sanctions, and ignoring cyber criminals operating from its territory, including those who target and disrupt critical infrastructure in NATO countries (NATO 2024a). As a result, NATO members have developed strategies to respond to these threats and counter hybrid influences since 2015. This was the same period when Ankara faced an intense Russian hybrid threat due to diverging interests and the downing of the fighter jet.

In fact, Russia had developed the 'non-linear war' concept, essentially a hybrid threat/war

concept, and introduced it into its military doctrine in 2014 (Kasapoğlu 2015). It aims to defeat the adversary with fierce attacks against strategic economic and military targets. They use military, financial, and diplomatic mechanisms to pressure a nation or group to elicit desired reactions and responses. Thus, Russia's hybrid operations aim as a first choice to destabilize and subdue the adversary without invasion and annexation of any territory. In addition to diplomatic, economic, and political pressures targeting decision-makers and public opinion, Russian strategies include the usage of covert operations, bribery, and blackmail to corrupt officials.

Turkey's political and social environment during this period was favorable for the use of hybrid tools by Russia or another actor: high level of polarization, marginalization, multi-dimensional conflicts, radicalization, and instability around the regions. Energy, technology (critical military equipment and military systems), information, and research dependency heightened the fragility (Bingöl 2017: 120).

Use of Economic Instruments

Economic relations, including the energy trade and the driving force of Turkish-Russian relations, stand out as the area where Russia has the most leverage over Turkey due to its asymmetric structure. The trade figures, developed under the heavy influence of energy, have always favored Moscow. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the aircraft incident, this was the first area, except energy, that Moscow used effectively to impose sanctions against Turkey. The 6-article sanctions imposed by Moscow in January 2016, designed to put Ankara under pressure, included the prohibition of companies headquartered in Turkey but legally affiliated with Russia from carrying out activities in Russia in areas related to security, the ban on Turkish citizens from being employed in Russia, the prohibition of certain products manufactured in Turkey from entering Russia, strict control and inspection of vehicles transporting to Russia, the suspension of all charter flights between the two countries, the request from Russian tour operators to refrain from selling tours to Turkey, and the suspension of visa-free travel (Çelikpala 2017: 210).

Although the focus in Turkey during this period was on the effects of Russia's sanctions, especially on food exports and tourism, the most pertinent question was whether Moscow would use Turkey's energy dependence on Russia as a 'weapon,' perhaps due to a 'technical failure' (Çelikpala 2017: 212). Especially with the approaching winter months and Turkey's dependence on Russian natural gas for electricity generation, whether Russia would follow a similar policy it had previously pursued towards Georgia and Ukraine, where it used energy to exert pressure, was a salient concern for Turkish decision-makers. President Erdoğan's response to a question about the issue reflected this concern: "You know, we have not lived with natural gas all our lives. It is known how long it has been since we used natural gas. This nation is used to suffering. If we do not have Russian natural gas, ...we will [not] burn out...we buy natural gas from countries other than Russia" (Özer 2015).

One of the most striking aspects of the popularization of the issue was how ordinary people reacted when questioned about it: 'We will burn dung if necessary' was the answer given in Erzurum in Eastern Turkey to the question 'What will you do if Putin cuts off the gas?' It indicated the bravado propagated by the government and perhaps the public's simplistic approach to the issue. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's response to a similar question that '[we will] treat Russia's sanctions as an unexpected disaster' gives the impression that it was something the decision-makers had not anticipated or planned for (Birgün 2015). In the event, Moscow did not use the energy card against Ankara. The reasons for this include Turkey being the second-largest market for Russia and Moscow needing hard currency from Ankara. Additionally, Turkey started buying gas at the spot market, albeit at higher prices.

Despite Russia not imposing sanctions on energy, trade relations were severely affected, and the volume, which reached 37.8 billion dollars in 2008, declined to 16 billion dollars in 2016. Especially Turkey's exports to Russia, which reached \$7 billion in 2008, fell to \$1.7 billion by 2017 due to the sanctions. Even though the sanctions were removed in 2017, the bilateral trade could only recover to \$30 billion in 2021 (Özel and Uçar 2019). The crisis clearly showed that the asymmetric structure of

bilateral trade created vulnerabilities for Ankara and made it suitable for use as a hybrid tool. The fact that Ankara quickly abandoned its initial challenging position and sought ways of finding a compromise solution attests to that.

More recently, the asymmetry in trade volumes between the two countries reached the highest point following Western sanctions on Russia due to its invasion of Ukraine. While Turkey's trade volume with Russia increased in 2023 by more than 50 percent due to Ankara's non-compliance with the sanctions, Turkey's energy imports from Russia played a significant role in this increase. The amount of petroleum products Ankara bought from Russia doubled in 2023, making Turkey an alternative energy market and supplier for Russia. While this positively aided the struggling Turkish economy, it has not created corresponding hybrid capabilities for Turkey to balance Russia if necessary (Siccardi 2024).

Moreover, with the operationalization of the TurkStream Pipeline in 2022, Turkey's gas purchases from Russia continued to increase, with statements suggesting that Turkey could become the leading transit country, replacing Ukraine to transmit Russian gas to the West (Vladimirov 2024). President Putin's further statements about turning Turkey into a 'gas hub' (Twidale and Buli 2022) play to the latter's long-lived ambition and public favor without making a move.

Another long-term instrument of influence is the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, which is being built, owned, and will be operated by Russia on Turkish soil. While it solidifies and expands on Turkish-Russian energy cooperation for the future, it undoubtedly creates another vulnerability for Turkey in its dealings with Russia (Tol 2024).

Information or Digital Influence Operations

Another critical pillar of Russia's hybrid threat against Turkey is information or digital influence operations. Although there are not enough comprehensive/detailed studies on the subject, existing literature (Costello 2018; Devlen 2018; Ünver 2019; The Economist 2019; Ünver and Kurnaz 2021) helps us understand the framework. They indicate that Russia adopted a

revisionist approach after 2010, carrying out activities toward target countries, including Turkey. The activities against Turkey increased from the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 onwards. They peaked just before the November 2015 'plane incident,' primarily due to rivalry in Syria and Libya, and finally observed during and after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. Although their intensity decreased with the easing of relations afterward, they followed the spirit of the time.

The contemporary Russian approach to information operations aligns with the increased number and diversity of communication channels. Contrary to typical communication strategies, Russian information campaigns do not commit to consistency among narratives. Instead, they focus on the volume and repetition of themes, seeking acceptance from familiarity with the message (Kelley 2024). Beyond the near-total control of media within its borders, Russian outlets such as *Sputnik* and *Russia Today* own or influence proxy outlets around the world that are not explicitly branded as Russian. In addition to these Russian outlets, some Turkish media outlets, ranging from newspapers to blogs to YouTube news channels, repeat pro-Russia talking points, with each medium using its unique style to appeal to specifically targeted audiences (Devlen 2018: 44-45). False social media personas and think tanks are created to sow discord among adversaries, and fabricated sources often strike a chord with non-mainstream media outlets in target countries, echoing the messages and unintentionally promoting Russian causes (Kelley 2024).

In this context, *Radio Sputnik News Turkish* was established at the end of 2014 before the fighter jet incident happened when bilateral relations were promising. Since then, Moscow has been effectively *Radio Sputnik News Turkish* and *Russia Today's* Turkish language outlet and varied social media channels for propaganda or disinformation (Costello, 2018). Their intensity increases in line with the ups and downs between the two countries and generally aims to impact Ankara's relations with Western countries. Although Russian media efforts adopt varied propaganda strategies in line with events and expectations, Costello (2018) emphasizes that Russia uses three primary methods: amplifying uncertainty, creating opportunistic fabrications, and using multiple

contradictory narratives. Although these vary depending on the developments and objectives of Moscow, Russian media outlets, by using these primary strategies, support overall Russian foreign policy aims as related to Turkey:

"The principal Russian foreign policy objectives that media efforts have supported include undermining NATO and fomenting mutual suspicion between Turkey and its Western allies, particularly the US and the EU. Enlisting Ankara's support and impeding its opposition to Russian actions in Eurasia and the Middle East influencing Turkish internal political developments to make Turkey a more compliant partner" (Costello 2018: 1).

For example, these outlets disseminated negative information about the Turkish government and its decision-making processes immediately after the fighter jet incident. In addition to news reports aimed at affecting Ankara's relations with its Western allies, news reports that would negatively affect its relations with its neighbors were also widely reported and disseminated. In this context, news that Turkey condoned oil smuggling in Iraq and Syria to provide resources to ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and that Turkish political figures were part of this smuggling were widely reported and disseminated. In the assessment of Ünver and Kurnaz (2021: 84-85), this distraction tactic, crafted initially and disseminated by the Kremlin (based on its first appearance and subsequent diffusion patterns on X), soon got picked up by international news and media agencies, including those of other NATO countries. In response, Ankara blocked Turkish internet providers' access to Sputnik's website on 15 April 2016 and denied Sputnik's Turkey General Director Tural Kerimov's entry to Turkey on 20 April 2016 (Bianet English, 2016). Nevertheless, it could not control the dissemination of the information to international outlets.

Similarly, the Russian propaganda apparatus was actively working during and after the 2016 coup attempt and aimed to steer Turkish and Western public opinions. Pro-Russian accounts disseminated news aimed at damaging Turkey's relations with its Western allies. They tried to orient Turkish public opinion that the coup was planned and executed by NATO member states (Devlen 2018: 48).

On the other hand, Ünver and Kurnaz (2021) show that for the cases of the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Ankara on 19 December 2016 and the buying of Russian S-400 missiles, a different direction was carried out by Russian outlets to create a positive atmosphere supporting bilateral cooperation. As a result, in this and the following period, *Radio Sputnik News Turkish* disseminated fabricated news in line with and as part of a Kremlin strategy to foment suspicion between Turkey and its NATO partners and to enlist the country's support for Russia's policies (Ünver and Kurnaz 2021: 85). Accordingly, the share of Turks who identified Russia as a threat to their country dropped from 34.9% in 2016 to 18.5% in 2017 (Aydın et al. 2017).

Perhaps, like many other actors, Russia is active in Turkey to create public opinion and disseminate information on specific issues, either favorably or unfavorably. Depending on domestic political developments, tensions, and ups and downs in Turkey's relations with its Western allies, pro-Russian views are disseminated by mainstream media networks (Devlen 2018). However, Ünver (2019: 44) emphasizes that "given the scale and directness of both disinformation and election meddling in Western democracies, Russian digital media presence in Turkey is minimal." The reasons for this include Turkey's and Russia's similar approaches to regional and global developments, which have developed under the influence of Ankara's problematic relations with its Western allies and turning a blind eye to Russian activities in the country to cultivate it as a counterbalance to the West. The natural consequence is that pro-Russian sentiments and opinions are integrated into the mainstream media without the need for pro-Russian information operations (Ünver 2019: 44-45).

It has also been alleged that Moscow tried to influence the elections in Turkey, as it did in many Western countries. According to published reports, in the run-up to the second round of the 2023 presidential elections, 12,000 Russian and Hungarian-speaking accounts on X were reactivated (Soylu 2023). They began posting in Turkish, alongside other reactivated Turkish-speaking accounts, with multitudes of bot followers to amplify the reach of their posts. As a response, opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu, with his X message on 11 May 2023,

both in Turkish and Russian, accused Russia of carrying out disinformation operations against voters in Turkey, attributing "montages, conspiracies, deepfakes, and tapes" to Russian state-linked actors (Medyascope 2023). These comments were followed by the presidential candidate Muharrem İnce's withdrawal from the race on the same day after claiming he was subjected to a slander campaign (Işık 2023). Kılıçdaroğlu also raised concerns over election interference from officials in Turkey's Directorate of Communications and 'dark websites' propagating deepfake content before the 14 May vote (*Gazete Oksijen* 2023).

Political/Diplomatic and Humanitarian/Cultural Tools

Assessing the political and diplomatic dimension of Moscow's post-2014 hybrid tactics can only be possible by understanding the bilateral relations, characterized by such terms as 'frenemies,' 'conflictual cooperation,' and 'transactional cooperation' (Isachenko 2021; Cheterian 2023). These dichotomies and the increasing use of hybrid tools are closely related to the nature of bilateral relations, which have been analyzed in detail above and in our two previous reports: [Triangulating Russia, Turkey, and the West](#) and [A Precarious Interdependence between Russia and Turkey](#). In the Black Sea, Caucasus, and Middle East/Mediterranean triangle, which both countries consider to be their immediate neighborhood, there are cases where the regional developments have almost simultaneously created a spiral of cooperation/competition and where the transition from cooperation to competition between the two countries has been rapid (Aydın forthcoming).

The most striking example of this was the contradictory stances taken before and after the downing of the Russian warplane and the Syrian issue that brought the two countries almost to the brink of war. To recap, Ankara mobilized NATO in 2015 after Russian warplanes increased their border violations along its Syrian border and intensified the tone of criticism against Moscow (Özcan 2017). Ankara's stance against the Syrian regime and Moscow's preference to keep the regime in place signaled the impending jeopardy. Erdoğan's words reflected this:

“There are those who are sensitive about the Syrian crisis, about the end of the war, about Assad’s leaving this place and going away, and there are those who are not. A person who has caused the deaths of 350,000 people and has committed state terrorism is now in charge of Syria, but some are trying to protect him. Iran is one of them. Russia is one of them. Russia established a base in Syria and violated our borders from there. NATO responded to this...with a harsh ultimatum yesterday. Of course, it is not possible for us to be patient with this. As a matter of fact, yesterday and the day before yesterday, unfortunately, some steps that we do not desire have to be taken. Accepting this is not only unworthy of Turkey but also completely out of NATO’s own principles, and therefore, NATO has taken its stance against this, and I firmly believe that it will do so in the future. Because an attack on Turkey is an attack on NATO, this should be known. Our relations with Russia on this issue are well known, but Russia will lose a lot if it loses a friend like Turkey, which has cooperated with Russia on this issue” (TRT Haber 2015).

The downing of the plane on 24 November was quite significant as it was the first incident since 1953 that a Russian fighter plane was downed. Putin’s description of the incident as “we were stabbed in the back by the collaborators of terrorists” reflected his frustration. Putin warned Ankara with these words: “Today’s tragic event will have serious consequences for Russian-Turkish relations” (Osborn and Astakhova 2015). As such, the incident ended the spring that had prevailed in bilateral relations for decades, resulting in a two-year-tension between the two countries.

During the period from the downing of the plane to the normalization of relations, diplomatic connections were tense, and the leaders often used harsh rhetoric against each other, especially in the early period. But comparatively, Ankara was under heavy pressure from Moscow. It drew Ankara to its side by effectively utilizing Turkish domestic political developments as well as regional and international developments.

The most concrete example is Syria (Köstem 2021; Cheterian 2023), where Russia created a space for Ankara to act or limit its maneuver

area depending on the circumstances. As Turkey’s Western allies were not on the same page as far as Syria was concerned, the Russian position effectively drew Turkey towards Russia, impacting even its relations with its allies. Russian behavior in the aftermath of the coup attempt -i.e., clearly supporting the government very early- was also decisive. Thus, after nearly two years of hostile relations, bilateral relations took a positive turn when the Astana Trio formed in July 2017 together with Iran, moving away from the Geneva Process, where the Syrian issue was dealt with together with Western countries, establishing a new and independent mechanism (Cheterian 2023: 1275-77). This increased Ankara’s flexibility by creating a new mechanism to pursue its interests in Syria. Still, it also meant that Moscow obtained an opportunity to control and direct Ankara’s expectations, policies, and practices. In the end, even though Ankara managed to create a ‘security zone’ in parts of northern Syria, it had to make fundamental revisions in its overall Syria policy in line with Moscow’s expectations. Considering the current efforts to rapprochement with Syria and re-establish relations with the Assad regime, it can be said that Moscow has achieved a fundamental transformation in Ankara’s policies. Thus, the Astana mechanism was a useful diplomatic/political tool created by Moscow, playing to Turkey’s dissatisfaction with its Western allies and counterterrorism sensitivities, and achieved its desired result.

On the other hand, it also allowed Turkey to establish itself in northern Syria militarily. Russia appeared as the sole actor supporting Turkey’s fight against terrorism and opened a new window of opportunity for the Moscow-Ankara rapprochement with a promising perspective. The gain for Moscow is that Turkey abandoned its earlier aim of overthrowing the Al-Asad regime and moved closer to Russia’s stance on Syria. In short, the Astana mechanism produced Russia’s desired results -changing Turkey’s Syria policy vis-à-vis the Assad regime and further estrangement of Turkey from its Western allies, especially the US- as well as opening the way to further Russian-Turkish cooperation within the Astana Talks process, where Russia had the upper hand due to its separate close relationship with Iran. In contrast, Turkey had, at best, a tense stalemate with it.

Another development in which we can observe

the reconciliatory attitude of Russia and Turkey in the political/diplomatic arena during this period was the assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Ankara, Andrey Karlov, on 19 December 2016. Karlov's assassination was carried out by a police officer who Turkish officials identified as a member of '*Fethullah Gülen Terör Örgütü*' (FETÖ), which was widely accepted in Turkey -and incidentally in Russia- as the organization behind the July 2016 coup attempt (Daily Sabah 2023). Although there were rumors that the motive behind the assassination was Russia's military operations in Aleppo, leaders on both sides defined the main motive as creating obstacles against the revitalization of Turkey-Russia relations. While Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım argued that "this heinous incident is an attempt to disrupt Turkish-Russian relations," President Putin agreed; "A crime has been committed, and it was, without doubt, a provocation aimed at spoiling the normalization of Russo-Turkish relations and spoiling the Syrian peace process which is being actively pushed by Russia, Turkey, Iran, and others, There can only be one response - stepping up the fight against terrorism. The bandits will feel this happening" (Osborn 2016).

Thus, the leaders' moderate approach and rhetoric shaped the public discourse on both sides. It was then decided that the investigation into the assassination would be carried out jointly by the authorities of both countries (See President Erdoğan's Message, 2016). The media covered the issue on both sides in this framework, turning the assassination into a tragic but positive development that would pave the way for the rapprochement between the two countries (Ulutaş 2016). At the end of the trial, it was reported in the press that FETÖ planned the assassination with the support of Western countries, especially the US, and suspects were sentenced to heavy penalties (Özkaya and Açıl 2022). In Ankara, the name of 'Karyağdı Street,' where the Russian Embassy is located, was changed to 'Andrey Karlov Street.' Thus, the issue was handled quietly without becoming a political/diplomatic crisis.

Another tactic Moscow employs to lure Ankara can be observed in Putin's 2022 rhetoric of turning Turkey into an 'energy hub.' The Turkish Stream gas pipeline, brought to the agenda by Moscow in the fall of 2016, just after the normalization of bilateral relations, became

operational in 2020, ushering in a new phase in bilateral energy cooperation (Anadolu Agency 2022). The 'energy hub' rhetoric at this junction reflected Russia's attempt to create an alternative route around Western sanctions when its problematic relations with Western countries centered on Ukraine, and as a discourse that not only met Ankara's energy needs but furthermore caressed the long-held 'being a hub' hopes. Although this is not a place to discuss this issue in detail (See İşçi et al. 2024), energy cooperation through the Blue Stream and Turkish Stream pipelines has had an essential role in the practical grounding of Russia's hybrid discourse and policies in Turkey and are frequently used by Moscow to build favorable Turkish public opinion.

Among the topics that constitute the glass half full and where hybrid tools are used in the humanitarian and cultural spheres are the positive results of the revival of tourism, which was disrupted during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the reflections of the population mobility after the Russia-Ukraine war that started in February 2022. Due to the travel restrictions imposed within the framework of Western sanctions against Russia, Turkey emerged as the only significant holiday destination for Russians. Additionally, a new human dimension emerged in Turkish-Russian relations, with many Russians leaving their country due to the partial mobilization implemented in September 2022 and settling in Turkey. The liberal visa-free travel policy implemented by Turkey has been instrumental in this turn. As Karaçay (2023: 35) indicates, "For thousands of Russians have fled the country since the invasion of Ukraine, Türkiye has been the choice of destination." After Russia announced partial mobilization on 21 September 2022, the daily number of Russians arriving in Antalya reached 19,000, and the records of "the Ministry of Tourism indicate that [altogether] some 800,000 Russian citizens arrived in Turkey" (Karaçay 2023: 35).

According to the latest figures, more than 154,000 Russians live in Turkey with official residence permits (Alanya Brand 2023). Some of these people have already established businesses and started integrating into society. The official figures show that from 2021 to 2023, Russian investors acquired over 45,000 houses as a testament to the burgeoning economic ties between the two nations (Deggin 2023). The Turkish Economic Policy Research

Foundation report indicated that Russians established more than 1,300 firms in Turkey only in 2022, a 670% increase from the previous year. This increase in investments and surge in commercial facilities by Russian nationals illustrates that Turkey has become a hub for Russian capital after it invaded Ukraine (TEPAV 2023). The investments have been notably concentrated in critical sectors such as energy, industry, and real estate, highlighting the strategic alignment of interests between Russia and Turkey. They will undoubtedly impact and contribute to the Russian image in Turkey and Turkish-Russian relations through the commercial enterprises they establish or through socializing.

In this framework, the interaction created by the increasing number of mixed marriages has various effects on the perception of Russians in Turkey and Turks in Russia. Due to these mixed marriages, new issues that were not thought of before, such as the transformation of the daily life of Russian emigres in Turkey and the status of schools and kindergartens opened for their children's education, were added to the agenda between the two countries (Gazete Oksijen 2024). Similarly, with the increasing number of marriages and new migrations, it is noteworthy that people of Russian origin living in Turkey are trying to get involved in local politics, and their mayoral candidacies are getting public attention (Akin 2019). It can be argued that these developments will impact the human dimension of Turkish-Russian relations and the perceptions and images of Turkey and Russia in the coming years.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural relations have shaped the perception of Russians in Turkey and Turks in Russia. While the public memory of both sides is decisive in this formation, it has been discussed above that current developments have created some transformation. While the change naturally occurs in tandem with the positive developments in relations, the two states try to control and direct this transformation using several political tools. One of the decisive factors affecting this change has been the interaction of the two states with the Western world. Their negative contact with the West

helped shape mutual positive perceptions despite political and economic competition.

To eliminate or at least balance the Western pressure, Russia, in particular, is increasingly using many hybrid tools. In addition to economic, political, and cultural spheres, these hybrid tools are increasingly employed to create a digital influence over Turkish public opinion. Using these tools is a part of everyday life and is increasingly on the agenda. Undoubtedly, Ankara's Western allies are also trying to counter Russia in this way and influence Turkish public opinion in line with their expectations. Thus, the intense use of hybrid tools in Turkey to create a pro-Russian or pro-Western public perception, especially during crisis periods, results in information overload and puts decision-makers under pressure.

In addition to the outlets used and controlled by Russia, the information disseminated by pro-Russian local outlets should be continuously scrutinized to challenge false or conducted news and distortions timely. This is not an easy endeavor. In this context, it is necessary to prevent the widespread dissemination of news emerging from these sources that clearly intends to damage Turkey's relations with its Western allies. The increasing intensity of these reports requires developing a common perspective and a long-term strategy. Also, building societal resistance to foreign intervention and hybrid moves is crucial. Since Turkey lacks such a strategy and preparedness, NATO's viewpoint on hybrid threats and policy recommendations on resilience building could be employed until national guides are developed.

On the other hand, preserving the positive momentum in Turkish-Russian relations is important while preventing Russia from using hybrid means to undermine Turkey's relations with its Western allies. In this, Russia needs to be kept in the equation without marginalizing it while maintaining Ankara's relations with Western countries intact. Although Ankara's Western allies sometimes criticize such an approach as transactional policymaking, it is vital to establish a balance that prioritizes Turkey's interests.

It should not be forgotten that Turkish public opinion is not the only target in this hybrid

warfare. Russia also targets Western public opinion against Turkey. The existing prejudices about Turkey in the West turn this area into a fertile one and reflect negatively on Turkey's relations with the EU and the US. Therefore, Turkey's Western allies must recognize this Russian approach in connection with Turkey and create safe areas of shared understanding.

Bilateral economic and trade relations, particularly in the energy sector, will undoubtedly continue to play a decisive role in Turkish-Russian relations. The increasing trade volume and a growing number of joint companies indicate this path. In the current circumstances, it will not be easy -nor desirable- for Turkey to abandon this connection. Ankara is at the forefront of Russia's search for an alternative partner in the face of increasing Western sanctions. This relationship needs to be leveraged before it becomes an even more significant source of vulnerability to Turkey due to the asymmetrical nature of the trade while at the same time ensuring that it does not disrupt Turkey's established trade and political relations with the EU and other Western countries.

In the political aspect, developments in the immediate neighborhood directly impact bilateral relations. Ankara and Moscow's diverging approaches to developments in the Black Sea and the Caucasus in the shadow of the Russia-Ukraine War, as well as developments in the Middle East, particularly in Syria under the intense impact of recent Israeli military operations, make these areas prone to disagreements, misunderstanding, and usage of hybrid influences. Ankara's inability to find common ground with its Western allies regarding these issues makes hybrid influences even more effective in Ankara. In this framework, it is necessary to be prepared for future influence operations that target Ankara's political agenda.

Developing relations in the sociocultural sphere can contribute to creating positive and constructive public perceptions. It should be remembered that developments in this field positively impact the permanent and human aspects of bilateral relations and should be turned into a supportive factor for the course of relations. In the long run, this could also contribute to the emergence of a robust civil society on both sides, independent of political considerations, supporting bilateral

cooperation. However, the possible emergence of local resentments against the existence of each other's citizens settled in the other country also needs to be monitored to prevent harmful conflagrations.

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