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From foe to friend –
The volte-face in Turkish-Russian relations in the last decade

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In the last decade, relations between Turkey and Russia have confidently surpassed their former cold-war hostility and undergone immense economic and geo-political improvement. On January 14th, during a visit to Moscow, both countries' heads of state reaffirmed the blossoming relations. Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated, 'our relations with Russia have reached a high point recently'.ⁱ The talks covered the development of trade relations, easing visa restrictions and, most importantly, how to expand bilateral cooperation on major energy projects. Since 2008, Russia has displaced Germany as Turkey's biggest trading partner. The annual trade volume is set to rise to \$40 billion in this year and Turkish construction firms have investments of up to \$26 billion in Russia.ⁱⁱ The head of the Turkish Exporters Assembly, Oğuz Satıcı, has even commented that Russia is a far more important market than the European Union.ⁱⁱⁱ Turkey has also become the most popular holiday destination for Russia's expanding middle class with its Aegean and Mediterranean tourist resorts attracting almost 3 million tourists every year. Prime Minister Erdoğan and Putin engage each other in a friendly and comfortable manner and the latter has visited Turkey numerous times in the last 5 years. In fact, Putin's trip in 2004 to Turkey was the first time in 32 years that a Russian head of state had visited the country.

However, such cordial relations were hardly ever the historic norm for the two. Throughout their mutual history and up to the end of the cold war, Russo-Turkish relations were characterized by suspicion, enmity and outright warfare. For several centuries, until the end of the First World War, Russia was considered by the Ottoman Empire to be its biggest threat and both sides fought 13 bloody wars against each other. Given this historical legacy then, this recent transformation is quite remarkable. This paper will provide a brief outline of the main pillars on which the current relationship rests, its limits, weaknesses and also make a few observations concerning the long-term sustainability of this shift towards amicable relations in the context of Turkey's emergence as an upwardly mobile regional power.

Since the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1923, Kemal Atatürk took care to assure the equally nascent Soviet Union of Turkey's neutrality. Thus, in 1925 a Friendship and Neutrality Treaty was signed by both. As well as chiming with Atatürk's dictum of 'peace at home, peace in the world', this was meant to ward off any potential expansionist designs on the part of Russia. This fear was justified as Stalin insisted that Turkey permit the Soviet Union to have a military presence on the Dardanelles after the Second World War. This convinced Turkey to join NATO to protect its sovereignty in the face of possible military aggression. Due to its front-line position in the Cold War, Turkey was a vital NATO-ally securing the South-Eastern flank of Europe against the Soviet Union. In the 1960s, it allowed the deployment of American Jupiter missiles aimed against Russia along with the stationing of a large-scale US military presence of approximately 10,000 personnel for much of the decade.

Although the end of the cold war liberated Turkey from its frosty role as a Cold War warrior, a certain unease still characterized Russia and Turkey's perceptions of each other in this new and confusing era. Russia accused Turkey of sheltering Chechen rebels, while Turkey suspected Russia of secretly assisting and training the PKK.^{iv} A. Suat Bilge, a former Turkish ambassador, characterized this uneasy relationship in the 1990s as 'a sort of Cold Peace'.^v Turkey's 're-discovery', in economic and geo-strategic terms in the 1990s of the Turkic states of Central Asia, a region with whom it has long-standing ethnic and cultural relations, fuelled

this bilateral suspicion as Russia considered this to be unnecessary meddling in its backyard by a country closely linked to the US.

What then, given the traditional enmity between both countries in both past and more recent history, have been the main determinants in the recent decade upon which the current warm relations between Turkey and Russia have been built? To a certain extent it can be explained by a belated realization by both powers that the old boundaries and binary realities of the cold war no longer have any binding power in international politics. This was fuelled by a sense of neglect from the Cold war's liberal victors. Suat Kiniklioğlu, a Turkish parliamentarian and foreign policy specialist has described the bounce in Turkish-Russian relations as a 'a bond that has grown stronger by alienation from other influential actors on the world stage'.^{vi} Whilst the former Soviet super-power endured a decade of severe economic and political instability in the 1990s, Turkey, while still an important NATO ally, has been beset by successive setbacks and disappointments in the last decade in its relations with both the United States and the European Union, especially in the stagnant EU accession process. This climate then was most conducive for a holistic reformation of Turkish-Russian relations, underpinned by common regional interests and energy politics.

Turkey's ebbing relations with the US and the EU in recent years have also coincided with a serious conceptual shift in Turkey's regional and global outlook releasing it from its restrictive moorings to Europe and the United States and enabling it to adopt a much more flexible and open-minded approach to all actors in the regional and international context. On some discrete issues such as Kosovo and Cyprus, Turkish and Russian interests still differ. Moreover, although Russia was instrumental in supporting the recent process of Turkish-Armenian reconciliation although it opposes Ankara's view that the issue should be linked to progress on negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.^{vii} Overall however, Russia is quite comfortable with Turkey's new neighborhood policy as their interests concerning many regional members such as Syria and Iran overlap.

Both countries also share a mutual suspicion of efforts by the US, the EU or NATO to encroach upon the Crimean and Caucasian region which they look upon as their traditional backwater. One example of this is a joint Turkish-Russian naval defense program called BLACKSEAFOR that holds regular exercises and has prevented NATO from being involved. Another instant was the resistance shown by both when the US requested observer status in the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation.^{viii} Relations between military officials in both countries have also improved. Despite Turkey being the second-largest NATO member, there has for years been a small but vocal group of 'Eurasianist' officials in the armed forces, along with a few intellectuals in both countries, calling for stronger military relations with Russia, China and Iran as a counterweight to growing US and EU power.^{ix} Arms sales between the two are not highly significant however.

What has greatly expedited and spurred on the growing rapprochement between the two actors and reinforced their alignment on key regional and international issues in the last decade are their increased interrelations on the plane of trade as outlined, and also importantly, energy politics. On this issue, Turkey's engagement with Russia occurs on two levels, firstly the domestic and secondly the international level. In regards of Turkey's domestic needs, Russia's significance as the world's largest current producer of gas has

cemented their relations in the last decade. In fact, Turkey has become increasingly reliant on Russia as its main energy supplier and constitutes a very lucrative market. According to analyst Igor Torbakov, roughly a third of Turkey's oil needs and more than 70% of its gas currently come from Russia.^x The Blue Stream project in particular, which runs across the Black Sea, fastened this link between both countries. Completed in 2005, it transports gas to Turkey with an annual capacity of 16 billion cubic meters.^{xi} Whilst secondary sources exist in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan or Turkmenistan and the Turkish government is keen to explore and exploit them, it will take a couple of years until they have been developed to accommodate Turkey's domestic energy requirements. In that sense, Roland Götz argues that the existence of the fully functional Bluestream pipeline has allowed Russia, at least for the short-term future, to corner the 'Turkish market'.^{xii} Furthermore, on the recent state visit to Moscow, Erdoğan and Putin signed a joint statement on the construction of nuclear power plant in Turkey with the help Russian firms. This strong domestic reliance on Russian energy exports has the potential to develop into a constraint on the extent to which Turkey's foreign policy can diverge from Russia's interests regarding major international and regional issues.

On the international level, there is a far greater potential for bilateral competition and divergence between Russia and Turkey which also becomes interlocked with the energy interests of the European Union that is feverishly attempting to diversify the sources of its domestic energy needs as well. Turkey has widely publicized its ambitions to utilize its regional location to become a key energy broker between the Caspian region and consumer markets in Europe. This was well illustrated by the completion in 2005 of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline connecting Azerbaijan and Turkey. As stated, Turkey's long-term plans to emerge as a regional energy player are caught between the opposing aims and objectives of the European Union and Russia. With the North Sea oil and gas deposits in definite and terminal decline, the European Union is desperate to diversify its energy sources, especially regarding gas, in order to weaken its reliance on a Russia that has become increasingly more assertive on the international stage.

This is the sole reason for the EU's determination to build the Nabucco project despite its huge financial cost. With its construction due to begin in 2011 and to be completed in 2014, it is planned to have a carrying capacity of 30 billion m³, will source gas from Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan and run through Turkey. Russia on the other hand is intent on keeping the EU reliant on its energy reserves for the near future and has already initiated rival projects to counter EU attempts to find other sources. South Stream, a pipeline project that would bring Russian gas into Italy and Austria over Bulgaria, met with Turkish approval on the recent state visit. Nevertheless, projects like the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline and Nabucco reveal that Turkey is not binding itself solely to Russia on the plane of energy politics and that there is ample potential for future competition in this crucial field. Turkey's foreign policy has become increasingly adept in recent years in being able to juggle and reconcile relations between seemingly adversarial international actors such as Syria and Israel or the United States and Iran. This new-found skill will be in much demand in order for Turkey to manage its aim of becoming a regional energy transit hub with the mushrooming importance of Russian in its regional periphery.

These tactful balancing skills were already displayed by Turkey during the Russian-Georgian conflict in August 2008. Russia's occupation of Georgian territory reflected its resurgent military will-power to re-assert its regional pre-dominance and thwart the US and EU from

trespassing onto its own backyard. Unable to greatly influence Russia's military campaign, Turkey nimbly walked a tight-rope bearing in mind its NATO membership on one hand, and trying to diplomatically maintain good relations with Russia on the other. This was complicated further by Russia's insistence that Turkey was obliged under the 1936 Montreux convention, which regulates the ship traffic through the Turkish straits, to ensure that no war-ships entering the Black Sea through the Bosphorus could remain there for more than 21 days. Fuelled by an urgent interest in returning to the pre-crisis status quo and preserve Georgia's sovereignty as a vital energy corridor, Turkey proposed to establish the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform. This regional security forum, excluding the EU and US, would act as council involving all actors, although it has not evolved much from the initial planning stage in design and conception.^{xiii}

Turkey as seen is currently on unprecedentedly close relation with its former traditional nemesis. The main ingredients that have caused the startling volte-face in Turkish-Russian relations in the last decade consist of a shared perception of having been disappointed and betrayed by the US and EU, gradual energy and trade interdependence, increasing trade relations and a common interest in regional stability. This menu may very continue to serve both actors well enough in the immediate term and increase their mutual interaction. Moreover, Turkish dependence on Russia's gas supplies will ensure convergence on strategic and regional issues until other reliable sources can be found. It is not likely however to draw Turkey away too much from its drive towards EU membership as long as this project seems feasible. The seeds for potential discord between lie in Turkey's current emergence as an upwardly mobile regional power. Should Russia overplay its hand in the Caucasus to the disadvantage of Turkey's aim to become a regional energy hub by asserting itself too forcefully, Ankara could well decide to down-grade relations and seek closer ties with US and EU interests.

¹ Today Zaman (2010) 'Turkey, Russia can carry out many projects, says Erdoğan', *Today Zaman*, Jan 14 – <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-198481-turkey-russia-can-carry-out-many-projects-says-erdogan.html>

¹ William Hale; Ergun Özbudun (2009) *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism: the case of the AKP*, Routledge, p.137

¹ Igor Torbakov (2008) *The Georgia crisis and Russia-Turkey relations*, Jamestown Foundation, p.16

¹ Graham Fuller (2008) *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a pivotal state in the Muslim World*, United States Institute of Peace Press, p.130

¹ A. Suat Bilge (2002) 'An Analysis in Turkish-Russian Relations', in Salomon Ruysdael; Vedat Yücel (editors), *New Trends in Turkish Foreign Affairs: Bridges and Boundaries*, iUniverse, p.203

¹ Suat Kiniklioğlu (2006) *The Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations*, Brookings Institution, p.1

¹ Richard Weitz (2010) 'Turkey and Russia deepen energy partnership', *Turkey Analyst*, 3(1), Jan. 18 - <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2010/100118B.html>

¹ Ömer Taspınar; Fiona Hill, (2006) 'Axis of the Excluded', *Survival*, 48(1), pp.81-92, p.82

¹ Karaveli, H.M. (2009) 'Islamic-Western embrace fuels Eurasianism in the Turkish Military', *Turkey Analyst*, 13 February, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2009/090227A.html>

¹ Igor Torbakov (2008) *The Georgia crisis and Russia-Turkey relations*, Jamestown Foundation, p.10

¹ Vladimir Socor (2009) 'Gazprom, Turkey revive and Reconfigure Blue Stream Two', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 (154) http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35394&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=456&no_cache=1

¹ Roland Götz (2008) 'A pipeline race between the EU and Russia', in Barysch, K. (editor), *Pipelines, Politics and Power: The future of EU-Russia energy relations*, Centre for European Reform, pp.93-101 (p.97)

¹ Gareth Winrow (2009) *Turkey, Russia and the Caucasus: Common and Diverging Interests*, Chatham House, p.7

ⁱ Today Zaman (2010) 'Turkey, Russia can carry out many projects, says Erdoğan', *Today Zaman*, Jan 14 – <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-198481-turkey-russia-can-carry-out-many-projects-says-erdogan.html>

ⁱⁱ William Hale; Ergun Özbudun (2009) *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism: the case of the AKP*, Routledge, p.137

ⁱⁱⁱ Igor Torbakov (2008) *The Georgia crisis and Russia-Turkey relations*, Jamestown Foundation, p.16

^{iv} Graham Fuller (2008) *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a pivotal state in the Muslim World*, United States Institute of Peace Press, p.130

^v A. Suat Bilge (2002) 'An Analysis in Turkish-Russian Relations', in Salomon Ruysdael; Vedat Yücel (editors), *New Trends in Turkish Foreign Affairs: Bridges and Boundaries*, iUniverse, p.203

^{vi} Suat Kiniklioğlu (2006) *The Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations*, Brookings Institution, p.1

^{vii} Richard Weitz (2010) 'Turkey and Russia deepen energy partnership', *Turkey Analyst*, 3(1), Jan. 18 - <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2010/100118B.html>

^{viii} Ömer Taspinar; Fiona Hill, (2006) 'Axis of the Excluded', *Survival*, 48(1), pp.81-92, p.82

^{ix} Karaveli, H.M. (2009) 'Islamic-Western embrace fuels Eurasianism in the Turkish Military', *Turkey Analyst*, 13 February,
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^x Igor Torbakov (2008) *The Georgia crisis and Russia-Turkey relations*, Jamestown Foundation, p.10

^{xi} Vladimir Socor (2009) 'Gazprom, Turkey revive and Reconfigure Blue Stream Two', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 (154)
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^{xii} Roland Götz (2008) 'A pipeline race between the EU and Russia', in Barysch, K. (editor), *Pipelines, Politics and Power: The future of EU-Russia energy relations*, Centre for European Reform, pp.93-101 (p.97)

^{xiii} Gareth Winrow (2009) *Turkey, Russia and the Caucasus: Common and Diverging Interests*, Chatham House, p.7