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RUSSIA–TURKEY RELATIONS

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The Crisis in Russian–Turkish Relations, 2008–2015

By Şener Aktürk, Istanbul

Abstract

On November 24, 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber aircraft that violated Turkish airspace. This has been interpreted as the primary cause of the spectacular crisis in Russian–Turkish relations that followed. However, this incident should rather be interpreted as the symptom, not the cause, of a significant geopolitical reversal that has been underway since 2008, as Russia and Turkey have found themselves on opposite sides in military conflicts in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015).

November 24, 2015: Symptom, not the Cause, of a Geopolitical Reversal

During Russian President Putin's visit to Turkey on December 1, 2014, which was set against the background of Western sanctions against Russia that Turkey did not participate in, some thought that there was a Russian–Turkish “alliance” in the making. Thus, the shooting down of a Russian Su-24 bomber aircraft that violated Turkish airspace on November 24, 2015, came as a shock and was interpreted as the primary cause of the most spectacular crisis in Russian–Turkish relations in the 21st century. However, the shooting down of the Russian bomber aircraft was not the cause, but rather the symptom, of a tectonic reversal in the geopolitical dynamics underlying prior cooperation between the two countries.

The most remarkable feature of the crisis between Russia and Turkey is that they continued to maintain their strong economic relations, including approximately 30 billion USD in annual trade between 2011 and 2014, agreement on the building of Turkey's first nuclear power plant by Russia in 2008, and between three and four million Russian tourists visiting Turkey every year. However, despite developing strong economic ties, Russia and Turkey have continued to have significant and very consequential geopolitical conflicts of interest over Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, the latter turning into an escalating proxy war following Russia's massive military intervention in Syria, which began on September 1, 2015.

Prelude to the Rift: “Five Day War” between Russian and Georgia, August 2008

Georgia is the most critical country in Turkey's strategy in the South Caucasus, and also the only country that geographically lies between Russia and Turkey, akin to a “buffer state” moderating the potential for conflict between the two countries. Moreover, ever since its reemergence as an independent state in 1992, and especially since the “Rose Revolution” of November 2003 which brought to power Mikhail Saakashvili as the president in January 2004, Georgia has been a close ally

of the United States, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. Georgia under Saakashvili enthusiastically sought NATO membership, a pursuit that drew it even closer to Turkey, its only NATO member neighbor. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, an important objective of Turkish foreign policy that would cement Turkish–Azerbaijani–Georgian common interests and connect Caspian oil to the world markets, was finally completed and the first oil was pumped from Baku in May 2005, reaching the Turkish port of Ceyhan in May 2006. Among other cooperative developments during this period, there was also agreement in principle on building the Kars–Tbilisi railroad between Turkey and Georgia, connecting Turkish, Georgian and Azerbaijani railroad networks. Thus, tangible and significant steps were taken to bring Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia closer together.

The major disadvantage for Georgia was that it did not have *de facto* control over any of its autonomous republics, Abkhazia, Adjara, and South Ossetia, at the time of the Rose Revolution. The Saakashvili government successfully forced the pro-Russian leader of Adjara, Aslan Abashidze, to resign in May 2004, and brought this region under central government control. However, when Georgia attempted to bring South Ossetia under control in August 2008, the Russian military responded massively by defeating the Georgian army in South Ossetia and occupying several towns in Georgia proper. As a result of the “Five Day War”, as this conflict came to be known, Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. The decisive defeat of Georgia in this conflict, Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence, and the subsequent increased Russian military presence in these regions, all dealt a major blow to the process of Caucasian integration led by Turkey. The Kars–Tbilisi railroad has not been built at the time of writing, and a new Prime Minister and then President who prioritized reconciliation with Russia took power in Georgia in 2012 and 2013, respectively. Despite the significant damage to Turkish interests that the Russian victory over Georgia entailed, Turkey did not actively and vocally support Georgia during the war. This may be interpreted as a sign that

Turkey did not want to risk its much more important relations with Russia over its intervention in Georgia.

Cooperation despite Conflict: Trade and Nuclear Power Plant Deal, May 2010

Russian–Turkish cooperation continued and even increased in other areas of common interests in the aftermath of the Five Day War. Perhaps the most remarkable example of cooperation, given its economic scale and its strategic and symbolic significance, has been the Russian–Turkish nuclear power plant deal. Russia and Turkey signed an agreement in May 2010, ratified by the Turkish parliament in July 2010, according to which a subsidiary of the Russian state corporation *Rosatom* would build and operate a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, by the Turkish Mediterranean coast.

Trade and tourism were two other areas of massive Russian–Turkish interaction. Bilateral trade increased from around 23 billion USD in 2009 to around 33 billion USD in 2012, remaining above 30 billion USD in 2013 and 2014. The number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey gradually increased, surpassing three million in 2010 and four million in 2013.¹ Turkey has been the second biggest customer of Russian natural gas after Germany in Europe, and the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey has been second only to German tourists. Thus, in both bilateral trade and tourism, Russia and Germany consolidated their status as Turkey's two major partners.

Beginning of the End? The Arab Spring, December 2010

The string of anti-authoritarian protests and rebellions that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and came to be known as the “Arab Spring” arguably constituted a critical development for the geopolitical dynamics that decisively pitted Turkey and Russia against one another, leading to their eventual clash, most spectacularly over Syria in Fall 2015. However, this interpretation also contains a degree of retrospective bias. First, the three North African countries in which the Arab Spring began, namely, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, are geographically remote from Russia and Turkey, and are not immediately considered as key countries of Russian–Turkish competition. Second, there could have been a mutual accommodation of Russian and Turkish preferences, if the two sides pursued such reconciliation. However, this otherwise plausible counterfactual scenario did not materialize.

As the protests gained momentum, Turkey sided with the revolutionary movements in Egypt and Tunisia, and after a brief hesitation, also in Libya, whereas Russia resolutely sided with the ousted Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the military dictator who ousted the first democratically elected President of Egypt, Mohammad Morsi. While Turkey has been perhaps the most vocal supporter of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood government in the world, Russia has been one of the most explicit supporters of Sisi's military dictatorship that followed. Thus, Russian and Turkish preferences became polar opposites even in the North African countries where the Arab Spring began.

The Critical Juncture: Russian Annexation of Crimea, March 2014

While regime change, civil conflict, or military takeover in Egypt, Libya, or Tunisia, did not pose an immediate threat to the national security or territorial integrity of Turkey or Russia, the momentous developments that engulfed Ukraine since November 2013 had direct consequences for both countries individually, as well as for Russian–Turkish relations more specifically. The immediate cause of the mass protests that began at Independence Square in Kyiv, Ukraine, was a geopolitical choice: The Ukrainian government led by President Yanukovich and Prime Minister Azarov suspended preparations for signing the Association Agreement with the European Union in favor of seeking closer ties with Russia.

This critical and evidently pro-Russian decision provoked people who favored a pro-European course for Ukraine. This led to mass protests between November 2013 and February 2014, which combined with his removal from the presidency by the Ukrainian parliament, forced Yanukovich to initially flee to Kharkiv in Eastern Ukraine, and then to Russia. The coming to power of an avowedly pro-Western government in Ukraine, in what Russian policy makers depicted as a “coup” and decried as being illegitimate, was the pretext for Russia's swift occupation of Crimea in February 2014. This was followed by a dubious referendum held under occupation, which allegedly resulted in a popular endorsement of the peninsula's annexation by Russia in March 2014.

The annexation of Crimea was a critical juncture for Russian–Turkish relations. Crimea has a central position in the Black Sea, akin to the location of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. Prior to the annexation of Crimea, Turkey had naval and strategic superiority in the Black Sea. Russia's annexation of Crimea dramatically changed the strategic balance in the Black Sea, making Russia the emerging hegemonic power with an

1 Habibe Özdal and Kerim Has, “Türkiye Rusya: Derin Ayrışma (mi?)”, *Analist* 60, February 2016, p.40.

offensive capability that threatens all the littoral states of the Black Sea, including Turkey. As I argued in my interview with the Turkish–Armenian newspaper, *Agos*, in March 6, 2014, “with the annexation of Crimea, Russia became the greatest immediate military threat to Turkey” once again, as it was during the Cold War and in the previous two centuries.² Crimean Tatars, the indigenous population of the peninsula, have been historically persecuted by the governments in Moscow, and hence vociferously opposed the annexation and boycotted the referendum. While there are a quarter million Tatars remaining in Crimea after centuries of persecution and deportations, there are up to one million descendants of Crimean Tatars in Turkey, including many among the academic, business, and intellectual elites. There have been numerous protests in Turkey against the Russian annexation of Crimea. The reemergence of the Russian military threat with the annexation of Crimea, in part, reversed the geopolitical dynamics that had sustained relative peace and a high level of cooperation between Russia and Turkey since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Increased Cooperation despite Conflict: Turkish Stream, December 2014

Despite seemingly irreconcilable differences between Russia and Turkey over Crimea, economic cooperation continued unabated. Turkey did not participate in the Western embargoes imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea, hence benefitting from the rerouting of some Russian goods to Turkey. Meanwhile, construction began at the site of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant in April 2015, with plans for the first reactor to be operational in 2020. After years of discussion, during his visit to Turkey on December 1, 2015, Putin announced a plan for a new natural gas pipeline named “Turkish Stream,” which would replace the South Stream project that was canceled following the Western embargoes placed on Russia in relation to Crimea. The announcement of the Turkish Stream project surprised most observers, and fed overblown speculations about an emergent Russian–Turkish axis. Combined with Turkey’s alienation from the Western alliance, some groups such as the Turkish Eurasianists, which have been advocating a Russian–Turkish axis as the new geopolitical orientation for Turkey for many years, became even more vocal.

The Last Straw: Russian Intervention in Syria, September 2015

Turkey, along with the United States and France, has been supporting various opposition groups fighting

against the Assad regime in Syria since 2011, mostly grouped together as the “Free Syrian Army”. Also known as the “moderate opposition,” these groups have their stronghold in northwestern Syria, around the cities of Aleppo and Idlib, which are very close to the Turkish border. After the Assad regime’s encirclement of Aleppo failed in February 2014, these opposition forces registered rapid and significant gains, and the Assad regime seemed to be gradually collapsing during the Spring and Summer of 2015.

Baathist Syria had been a pro-Soviet state during the Cold War. Russia’s only military base in the Mediterranean is the naval base in Tartus, Syria, which it inherited from the Soviet Union. Russia has supported Syria diplomatically, most importantly in the UN Security Council, especially shielding the Assad regime from international criticism after its use of chemical weapons in the Gouta attack in August 2013. Nonetheless, Russia’s massive military intervention in Syria that began on September 1, 2015, came as a surprise to many observers. The Russian Air Force began bombing Syrian opposition forces, including Turkmen fighters, many of whom are directly supported by Turkey, and over the course of several months violated Turkish airspace on numerous occasions, with a Russian Su-24 bomber aircraft finally shot down by Turkey on November 24, 2015. This incident should be interpreted as the result of a significant geopolitical reversal that has been underway since 2008, as briefly explained above.

The Next Red Line: Russia’s Military Support for the PKK and the PYD

Russian–Turkish relations hit their nadir on November 24, 2015, but I would maintain that the 1990s, the Cold War, and the Tsarist–Ottoman relations were much worse. The key difference is a critical turning point in late 1998, when Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)—which is recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the EU, and the United States—was forced to leave Syria under Turkish pressure, and fled to Moscow where he sought political asylum. On November 4, 1998, the Russian Duma voted in favor of granting asylum for Öcalan. Despite this Duma decision, the Russian government denied Öcalan’s request and forced him to leave Moscow. This was a critical turning point in Russian–Turkish relations. For decades, Moscow had supported numerous terrorist groups and armed insurgencies against Turkey. By denying Öcalan’s request, Moscow signaled that it would respect Turkey’s territorial integrity by not supporting terrorism or armed insurrection against Turkey. In return, Turkey signaled that it would not support terrorism or armed insurgency against Russia, which was

² Şener Aktürk, “Kırım’ın işgaliyle, Rusya Türkiye’nin en büyük tehdidi olur”, *Agos*, 7 March 2014, p.3.

important for Russia given the very strong separatist insurgency in the North Caucasus at the time. Russian support for the PKK or its Syrian affiliate, PYD, is the

next red line in the relationship, the crossing of which could lead to a further deterioration in relations to level not seen since before the 1998 status quo took shape.

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ANALYSIS

Russo–Turkish Relations: Completely in Tatters for the Time Being

By Toni Alaranta, Helsinki

Abstract

During the last decade, Russia and Turkey developed a formal strategic alliance based on strong economic ties, joint energy projects, and mutually shared anti-Westernism. In addition, presidents Putin and Erdoğan developed a personal relationship, always downplaying political disagreements. After Turkey downed a Russian fighter jet in Syria, Russo–Turkish relations are in tatters for the time being. Even though economic interdependence would point to the normalization of relations, this is nowhere in sight due to completely opposing long-term strategic goals in Syria and perceptions of betrayal and humiliation among the Russian leadership. To put it frankly, Turkey and Russia now seem to be on the brink of war.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that after Turkey downed a Russian fighter jet on the Syrian–Turkish border on 24 November 2015, the era of the Russo–Turkish strategic alliance is inevitably over. The incident sparked a rather lively debate regarding what kind of decision-making process caused this incident. Others argued that Turkey, whose foreign policy priority since 2011 has been the ousting of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, used the jet downing as a tool to break up the emerging Russian–Western anti-Islamic State coalition, which in all practical terms seemed to totally marginalize the fight against Assad (Shlykov 2015). The same kind of interpretation was more recently given by Patrick Cockburn (2016), who asserts that the downing seemed to be a pre-planned ambush by Turkey, in order to make Russian involvement in the Syrian war costly and unpopular. On the other hand, at least one prominent Turkish analyst argued that the fighter jet incident was in fact a pre-planned Russian ploy to isolate

Turkey and force the AKP government to abandon its vehemently anti-Assad stance (Gürsel 2015). What most commentators seem to agree upon is that the end result of the jet incident is not only the more or less total bankruptcy of Turkey's "actorness" in Syria—which could now be restored only by direct military intervention—but also an abrupt end to the decade-long rapprochement between Turkey and Russia.

From Strategic Cooperation to Sudden Animosity

After presidents Putin and Erdoğan had met in a seemingly cordial manner in December 2014 in Ankara, where the Russians came with a massive delegation, 2015 started with the assumption that the tricky, but at the same time mutually beneficial, relationship would continue and even further develop, at least in terms of intensified economic ties, joint energy projects and solution-oriented dialogue regarding international conflicts

(Tarasov 2015). It was widely considered that the two countries had managed to “compartmentalize” their obvious disputes, especially in terms of the Ukraine crisis, the Crimean Tatars and, most of all, in Syria. Beyond the strong economic base, the evolving personal relationship between Putin and Erdoğan has been widely noticed and publicized, with headlines “Putin and Erdoğan made for each other” frequently seen in Western media (see, for example, Tharoor 2014).

However, in one sense the Russo–Turkish strategic alliance became the victim of this individual-centred mode of communication. What really seemed to infuriate Putin was that rather than immediately seeking to communicate with the Russian leadership after downing the fighter, Turkey instead turned to its NATO allies. Further, there are indications suggesting that Putin’s angry statement that “Turkey stabbed us in the back”, expressed his genuine feeling of being betrayed by someone who was supposed to be a personal friend. This component is perhaps the most significant in those evaluations that see the relationship as irreparable as long as Putin and Erdoğan lead their respective countries. As ex-FSB chief Sergei Stepashin recently characterized, Putin “never ever forgives those who have betrayed or insulted him” (Sputnik Türkiye 2016). Thus, if these two narratives are put together, one gets a picture of a Russian President (Putin personifying Russia) who never forgives somebody who allegedly stabbed him in the back (Erdoğan personifying Turkey).

On the other hand, within Turkey both the general public and the AKP state elite have recently demonstrated two long-term reflexes, both attached to the traditional conception of a unitary “father-state” (*devlet baba*): internally in confronting the Kurdish separatist PKK and, in external terms, the historical “grand enemy”, Russia. In this context it is noteworthy that not a single day goes by without someone from the Turkish leadership asserting that Russia directly supports the PKK (Munyar 2016). It seems that the old fears of Russian expansionism have now been drawn to the surface from a collective memory in fast-track mode after the Syrian-bound crisis. Thus, whereas the PKK is perceived as the major domestic threat, Russia is now the foremost external threat (Hürriyet Daily News 2016). Framing the national threat conception in Turkey through these two actors may, however, become highly problematic in the long-run, at least if they obstruct taking the jihadist threat much more seriously. Many experienced commentators point out that especially after the Islamic State’s suicide bombing in central Istanbul (on January 12, 2016), it is crucial that Turkey prioritizes eradicating the IS threat (see, for example, Taşpınar 2016). This revision, however, is not in sight.

Geopolitical and Geocultural Confrontation

It is very important in this context to understand that the AKP regime’s anti-Western, pro-Islamist stance is not a rhetorical device, but an essential element defining the party as a political movement. From these premises, one gets to the complicated relationship with Russia. The Russian regimes’ anti-Western state ideology that reproduces images of ancient and authentic Russian-Orthodox imperial civilization struggling against an “immoral West” bares striking similarities with the Islamic-Conservative state transformation project implemented by the AKP. The domestic drive for recapturing the Turkish state from “despicable Kemalist westernizers” has its foreign policy extension, within which Turkey is predestined to become the leader of the Sunni Islamic world. An idea of the world as divided into ancient civilizations that have their contemporary manifestation in the form of Turkish and Russian national states is explicitly asserted in Ahmet Davutoğlu’s seminal work *Strategic Depth*, a book that has had a profound impact on Turkish foreign policy during the AKP era. In the book, Davutoğlu clearly sees not only the West, but also Russia as a “natural” adversary for Turkey, whereas countries without deep-rooted imperial past, such as Syria, are second-order states lacking genuine actorness (Davutoğlu 2001). From these premises, one can argue that Andrey Kortunov’s (2016) evaluation according to which the recent “strategic alliance” between Russia and Turkey was always more rhetorical than real, makes sense also from the Turkish perspective. The countries developed strong economic ties, agreed joint energy projects, and utilized each other’s anti-Western agenda for their own benefit, but ultimately see each other as “unnatural partners” in the context of an age-long rivalry.

Obviously, there are a significant number of third countries that feel very much disturbed by the increasing Russo–Turkish animosity. In addition to NATO repeatedly calling for Turkey and Russia to de-escalate their newly-emerged conflict, a wide array of post-Soviet states from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Georgia and Azerbaijan have come forward to express their anxiety regarding the increasing tension in the Caucasus and Central Asia, all underscoring that Turkey and Russia should as soon as possible rebuild their previously good relationship (Gottesman 2015). However, these calls that evoke the idea of “responsibility” are not enough to change the course of events.

As is well known, Turkey is heavily dependent of Russian energy (natural gas), and has now launched a vigorous campaign to find an alternative energy source, especially trying to increase the amount of gas shipped from Azerbaijan (Jones and Safarova 2016). On the other hand, it is also true that Russia needs Turkey as a major

energy buyer. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that both countries are preparing for a long-enduring animosity—this evaluation became even more pronounced after the new incident on January 29, when Turkish foreign ministry declared that there had been a new air space violation by the Russians. This incident was widely publicized in Turkey, with President Erdoğan asserting that Russia would “be enforced to endure the consequences” of such actions (Today’s Zaman 2016). These assertions were accompanied by President Erdoğan declaring that he tried to reach President Putin, with no avail. On the Russian side, this was taken as a pure bluff—parliamentarian Leonid Kalashnikov, for example, argued that accusation of another air space violation was just a desperate attempt by President Erdoğan to reestablish contact with President Putin (Cumhuriyet 2016).

No Prospects for Restored Russo–Turkish Cooperation

The general feeling one gets from all this is that the Turkish leadership is quite desperately seeking channels through which it could start restoring relations with Russia, while at the same time President Erdoğan will not abandon the regime-change policy in Syria, nor will Turkey accept the formal conditions for normalization set by Russia. That is, official apology and compensation. On the other hand, the Russian leadership possess a worldview within which the rebuilt image of Russia as a great power and thus one of the actors crucially defining the general outlines of international politics now determines its foreign-policy initiatives, whether in Ukraine or Syria. In this context, the image that Russia was publicly humiliated by Turkey (after all, the Ukrainians were cheering the jet downing and suggesting they should do the same) cannot be accepted, and this is why a formal apology by Turkey is a precondition for any further cooperation. Further, the opinion that accusation from Turkey about another Russian air space violation is simply an attempt to prevent a rapprochement between the West and Russia on Syria is by now a deeply held one among the Russian leadership.

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Toni Alaranta received his doctorate in social sciences from the University of Helsinki in 2012. He is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. His main field of interest is Turkish politics and history. Alaranta conducted his postdoctorate studies at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey, and at Tallinn University, Estonia. He is the author of two recent books on Turkey: *National and State Identity in Turkey: The Transformation of the Republic’s Status in the International System* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), and *Contemporary Kemalism: From Universal Secular-Humanism to Extreme Turkish Nationalism* (Routledge, 2014).

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In this context, Turkey’s determinacy (together with Saudi-Arabia) to continue supporting the armed opposition fighting against the Syrian regime, recently affirmed by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (Daily Sabah 2016), will obstruct any rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. Further, as was even explicitly acknowledged by US Vice President Joe Biden in October 2014, rather than financing “moderates”, Turkey has poured hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into supporting Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda) and other extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world (Al Monitor 2014). The Russian leadership knows this all too well, making ample usage of this fact in its own war propaganda. In other words, in these circumstances, it is very easy for Russia to portray itself as a benevolent actor fighting international jihadi terrorism in Syria, while it is at least as determined to make sure that its only real Middle Eastern ally, namely Assad’s regime, remains in place. While Turkey, at the same time, stubbornly tries to maintain its anti-Assad position, some prominent commentators now see Turkey and Russia on the brink of war, as both parties are concentrating groups on the Turkish–Syrian border (see, for example, Idiz 2016).

Conclusion

Economic interdependence, joint energy projects, and each following a similar conservative-authoritarian domestic political project would all seem to point towards a swift reparation of Russo–Turkish relations. However, such a normalization of ties is nowhere in sight. To the contrary, their completely opposing grand strategic designs in Syria and the view of the current Russian leadership that it is impossible to forgive Turkey’s for its humiliating act (downing of the Russian jet) at a time when Russia’s main priority is to re-establish its image as a great power, are generating a conflict-ridden trajectory whereby Russo–Turkish relations will remain strained for years to come.

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Russian–Turkish Relations In Crisis

By Dimitar Bechev, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Abstract

The downing of the Russian Su-24M bomber on November 24, 2015 led to a shift in relations between Moscow and Ankara. Formerly, Presidents Vladimir Putin and R. Tayyip Erdoğan would agree to disagree on Syria and focus on the two countries' thriving business links. In the spring of 2014, Turkey refused to join the Western sanctions imposed over the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. It was eager to boost its exports to Russia and upgrade energy ties, at a time when Gazprom was coming under fire from the European Commission.¹ That has all changed. Turbulence in the Middle East has pushed relations to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, if not before. However, just as it was off the mark to believe Russia and Turkey were allies before the Su-24M incident, one should not jump to the conclusion they are now sworn enemies. Their relations are more complex than that.

The Russian–Turkish War of Words

The rhetorical clash between Putin and Erdoğan over the Su-24 incident should not have surprised anyone familiar with the two strongmen. Lamenting “the stab in the back by terrorist accomplices”, the Russian president accused his former friend of taking a cut from the self-styled Islamic State (IS) illicit oil exports, and portrayed him as a U.S. stooge—in less than diplomatic terms: “Someone in the Turkish leadership tried to lick the Americans in a particular place, I don't know whether the Americans needed that.” Turkey has effectively replaced the decadent West as Russia's favourite bogey man. At a time when Putin is reaching out to Western leaders to unite in a common front against extremism, he has redirected his ire at a new, more convenient target.

Turkey's response has been more muted. According to Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey was not seeking confrontation, but would nonetheless defend its airspace. Later on, however, Erdoğan lashed out at Putin, dismissing his IS allegations as slanderous and calling for him to step down: “What are you doing in Syria? You're essentially an occupier”, he rebuked the Kremlin's master.² Turkey's pro-government media readily joined in. A criminal complaint was filed against Putin at the Ankara Public Prosecutor's Office for defaming the Turkish leader.

Such rhetorical outbursts have poisoned relations. Economic ties have taken a hit and fears of more armed clashes, whether direct or by proxy, have spread. On 29 January 2016, Turkey flagged up further cases of airspace violations, confirmed also by NATO and the U.S. State Department. However, for all the bad blood between Moscow and Ankara, it would be difficult to

undo or altogether freeze the extensive ties that connect the two countries.

The Crisis' Economic Fallout

Russia's leadership took a conscious decision to inflict economic punishment on Turkey. The Russian–Turkish High-Level Council, which brings together the two governments, is unlikely to meet anytime soon, after its regular sessions in December 2015 were called off.³ As of January 1, 2016, Turkish citizens can no longer travel visa-free to Russia. Charter flights have been cancelled and agents forbidden to sell holidays in Turkey, a hugely popular destination with Russian tourists. Turkish firms have been denied access to public contracts, notably in the construction sector, which comes second to only tourist services when it comes to Turkish exports to Russia. Business people and students have been expelled or forced to comply with more restrictive residency rules. Russian nationals are also prohibited from taking pilot courses in Turkey. *Rosset'khozadzor*, Russia's ubiquitous food safety agency, has barred a good deal of Turkish agricultural imports, from tomatoes and apricots to poultry and salt, making life difficult for entire farming regions off the country's Mediterranean coast.⁴ Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek estimates the potential loss at USD 9bn, or 0.3 to 0.4% of Turkish GDP.⁵ In the meantime, Turkey is considering anti-dumping

1 Dimitar Bechev, ‘Russia and Turkey—What Does Their Partnership Mean for the EU?’, *European Policy Centre*, 13 February 2015.

2 *Bloomberg*, 7 February 2016.

3 The Council was established in 2010. At its last meeting held in Ankara (December 2014) the two governments agreed to triple trade flows to USD 100 bn by 2020. See Turkey, Russia to seek new ways to deepen economic ties despite disagreements in Syria, Ukraine, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 1 December 2014..

4 Selin Girit, ‘Turkey faces big losses as Russia sanctions bite’, *BBC*, 2 January 2016.

5 ‘Turkish economy risks losing \$9 billion over Russia crisis: Deputy PM’, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 7 December 2015.

duties on Russian rolled steel—but, significantly, not the EU sanctions.⁶

What will be the impact on the gas trade, the backbone of the two countries' economic relationship? The cancellation of the Turkish Stream project by the Russian government has been the most visible sign of a shift.⁷ However, Moscow's decision to pull the plug on the ambitious pipeline has to be taken with a grain of salt.⁸ Originally, the plan was unveiled in December 2014 by Putin himself, much to the surprise of both Turkey and the Gazprom management. Turkish Stream did not make much progress thereafter. Moscow and Ankara are locked in a protracted dispute over pricing. In late October 2015, BOTAŞ, the state-owned natural gas utility, announced it was taking Gazprom to international arbitration. Russia had already backtracked on its original commitment, scaling down the pipeline's annual capacity from 63 to 32 billion cubic metres (bcm). Turkish decision-makers were taken aback when Russian Energy Minister, Aleksandr Novak signed a memorandum of understanding with Panagiotis Lafazanis, his Greek counterpart, in June 2015 to extend Turkish Stream into a trading terminal in Greece, across the border with Turkey.

The doomsday scenario stipulating that Russia will use its famed "energy weapon" has therefore been proven wrong. Turkey, which currently covers about 60% of its needs with Russian gas, continues to be a major customer of Gazprom. In the winter months when demand is at its peak, shipments of gas to Turkey have proceeded largely uninterrupted.⁹ It is easy to understand why. Gazprom has every incentive to continue selling to Turkey, its second largest market after Germany. Turkey takes about one fifth of Russian deliveries to Europe and, unlike the EU, demand is growing robustly thanks to factors such as demography, industrial growth and the expanding gasification of households. That will remain the case at least until 2030.

However, the crisis pushed Turkey to double down on its effort to diversify gas supplies. The opening of Iran, already the second largest source of energy for Turkey, provides opportunities, as does Iraqi Kurdistan and perhaps the Eastern Mediterranean, should Cyprus reuni-

fication talks end in success. In 2019, 6bcm of Caspian gas will start flowing through the Transanatolian Pipeline (TANAP). If the price is right, larger imports of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from Qatar and Algeria will also put pressure on Gazprom in the Turkish market. Davutoğlu's trip to Baku and Erdoğan's visit to Qatar at the close of 2015 were a clear message to that effect. However, these policies are geared towards the long-term. Turkey has sent a clear signal, yet Gazprom will remain the dominant player, even if it loses some market share.¹⁰

Another aspect of Russian–Turkish energy relations concerns the fate of the Nuclear Power Plant built by Rosatom at Akkuyu. The \$20bn project has never had a smooth ride, because of the financial model it is based upon and its sheer scale. The Turkish government has been reluctant to provide financial guarantees or tax breaks to Rosatom, which owns 100 per cent of the company that will build and operate the facility. If the project is cancelled, the party in breach would need to pay hefty compensation of up to \$15 bn. Turkey and Russia are therefore playing cat and mouse; neither wants to be the spoiler and face indemnity. Rosatom has made a substantial investment in Akkuyu, having already spent \$1bn—or considerably more, according to Turkish officials. At the same time, contrary to its rhetoric, Turkey might struggle to find another company to take over the project. In other words, it is too early to write the deal off. There is an ironic twist, too, that the nuclear energy it would produce will reduce demand for electricity from power stations burning (Russian) gas.

Looking beyond energy, there are signs that the Russian government is quietly scaling down the sanctions, conscious of the boomerang effect. Even pro-Kremlin analysts like Sergei Markov have acknowledged the cost for Russian consumers: "Sanctions are not very well thought-out, because their adoption was mostly driven by emotions, but what's there to do? Russia had to respond on the go."¹¹ For instance, certain agricultural products, such as lemons, have been excluded from the import ban. The same applies to Turkish firms already carrying out construction projects in the Russian Federation—especially those linked to the 2018 World Cup, such as the Sheraton Hotel in Rostov.¹² While the visa requirements for crew members forced some low-cost airlines, such as Pegasus Air and Onur Air, to temporarily halt flights, national carrier Turkish Airlines, a leader amongst foreign companies servicing the Russian mar-

6 Reuters, 28 January 2016.

7 Gazprom announced that it is calling off the 10.25% discount it offered Turkey in early 2015, as an extra to the Turkish Stream deal. Yet, the six private companies which buy gas from Gazprom, in addition to state-owned BOTAŞ, stated that they are still in negotiation with the Russian supplier. *Daily Sabah*, 29 January 2016.

8 'Russia halts Turkish Stream project over downed jet', *RT*, 3 December 2015.

9 'Russia's Gazprom says exports up 3.4% in January', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 2 February 2016.

10 'Turkey Hunts for Alternatives to Russian Energy', *EurasiaNet*, 27 January 2016.

11 Mansur Mirovalev, 'Russians pay the price of new anti-Turkish measures', *Al Jazeera*, 28 December 2015.

12 Gazeta.Ru, 10 January 2016.

ket, has encountered no problems.¹³ In defiance to the Kremlin, the president of Tatarstan declared that Turkish companies are to remain in the autonomous republic.¹⁴ In sum, even after the downgrade, business ties between Russia and Turkey will keep some of the old momentum.

Strategic Implications

Will the squabble between Putin and Erdoğan, coupled with economic sanctions, alter the long-term security policy calculus in Ankara and Moscow? Turkey's posture in the Black Sea and post-Soviet Eastern Europe has traditionally been risk-averse. While Russia, for its part, has been trying to drive a wedge between Turkey and U.S./NATO, welcoming the ruling Justice and Development (AK) Party's pursuit of strategic autonomy in foreign affairs.¹⁵ Thus, in recent years, Ankara and Moscow have been quite successful in managing conflict in cases when their interests diverge. Tensions over Syria might change that, but there as yet few signs of a spill-over to other regions, such as the Caucasus.

Turkey has long pursued a policy of non-interference in Chechnya or other Muslim-majority republics in Russia's south, disregarding public opinion at home. Erdoğan shunned calls by the numerous Circassian diaspora to boycott the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic, raising the issue of the 1860s ethnic cleansing by Russian imperial authorities. In return, Russia has been adhering to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs with regard to the Kurdish issue in Turkey. As early as 1998, it clamped down on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) infrastructure on its soil and did precious little to help its ally Syria when Turkey threatened an all-out invasion to dislodge Abdullah Öcalan, the nationalist movement's founding leader.

In the aftermath of the Su-24 episode, Russia has moved closer to the Democratic Union Party (PYD), stepping up its support for the PKK's offshoot in Syria, which also benefits from ever stronger links to the U.S. Moscow favours PYD's inclusion in the Geneva talks on Syria—

which Ankara opposes.¹⁶ There is a high probability that Russia, as well as Iran, will continue to court nationalist Kurds in order to gain leverage in both Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, Turkey's capacity to influence politics in the Northern Caucasus is limited. Its proxies on the ground in Syria are a more reliable instrument to put pressure on Russia. There is talk that the Russian–Turkish rivalry might play out in other regions—e.g. in case war breaks out between the Azeris and Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh. Some knock-on effects are felt even in the Balkans, insofar as countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Bulgaria have parties or groups with strong links to either Moscow or Ankara. Yet, it would be off the mark to expect a domino effect of proxy conflicts. Faced with multiple challenges, Turkey has no sufficient resources of its own to mount a challenge to Russia. Putin, for his part, is mostly interested in Turkey as a smokescreen to divert attention from his effort to forge a tactical alliance with the West over the fight against IS and other extremist militias.

As status quo powers, Turkey and Russia have enjoyed a fairly productive relationship in the Black Sea as well. Ankara consistently opposed giving NATO a larger role in maritime security, preferring multilateral platforms such as BLACKSEAFOR, which include Russia too. Turkey have been as keen as Russia on keeping the restrictions on naval ships from outside the region entering the sea, imposed by the 1936 Montreux Conventions on the status of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. During the August 2008 war in Georgia, a friendly country, Ankara delayed the entry of U.S. navy to provide humanitarian relief, a concession to Russia. Later on, in March 2014, Turkey did not react harshly to the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which clearly tipped the balance of power to its disadvantage. While Ankara's views on NATOization are evolving as a consequence, there is little evidence that a more robust balancing/containment strategy is taking shape. After a surge, by a factor of ten, in 2014, U.S. naval presence in the Black Sea was actually reduced in 2015.¹⁷ Russian media have speculated that Turkey would use the Straits to slow down Russian traffic to the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁸ But, thus far that is not corroborated by facts. As a side note, it is worth mentioning that the opening of an oil terminal at Ust-Luga in the Baltic the Black Sea has progressively lost its importance as an export route for Russian crude.

13 *Kommersant*, 27 January 2016.

14 *Kommersant*, 27 January 2016. A "white list" of 64 Turkish companies has been approved by Russia at Tatarstan's insistence. Kathrine Hille, Putin's Fury with Erdogan takes toll on Tatarstan's trading links, *Financial Times*, 2 February 2016. Elsewhere in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev met with Davutoğlu on February 6 and, stated his country was "putting every effort to make our brotherly people closer". *Tengrinews.kz*, 6 February 2016.

15 In late November 2013, during the session of the Russian–Turkish High-Level Cooperation Council, Erdoğan hinted Turkey might seek observer status at the Russia- and China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). 'Turkish PM Erdoğan to Putin: Take us to Shanghai', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 23 November 2013.

16 PYD has now unveiled plans to open its office in Moscow, the first one in Europe. *Rudaw.net*, 7 February 2016.

17 In 2014, U.S. warships spent a total of 207 days in the Black Sea, compared to 27 days in 2013. The count for January–December 2015 was 137.

'U.S., NATO Warships Show Support As Russia–Turkey Naval Tension Rises, *EurasiaNet*', 5 December 2015.

18 *RT*, 1 December 2015.

Conclusion

Turkey and Russia are, no doubt, living through a difficult period in their relationship. However, these two powerful states share a centuries-long relationship that has seen lots of ups and downs. What the recent crisis shows is that it was premature to speak of a strategic alignment back in the good days when everything

looked smooth. By the same token, the intensity of their rivalry should not be exaggerated. Both Russia and Turkey, as well as the U.S. and major Western European powers, have incentives to keep tensions at bay. However, the war of words between Putin and Erdoğan is far from over and might erupt anew depending on how the situation in Syria evolves.

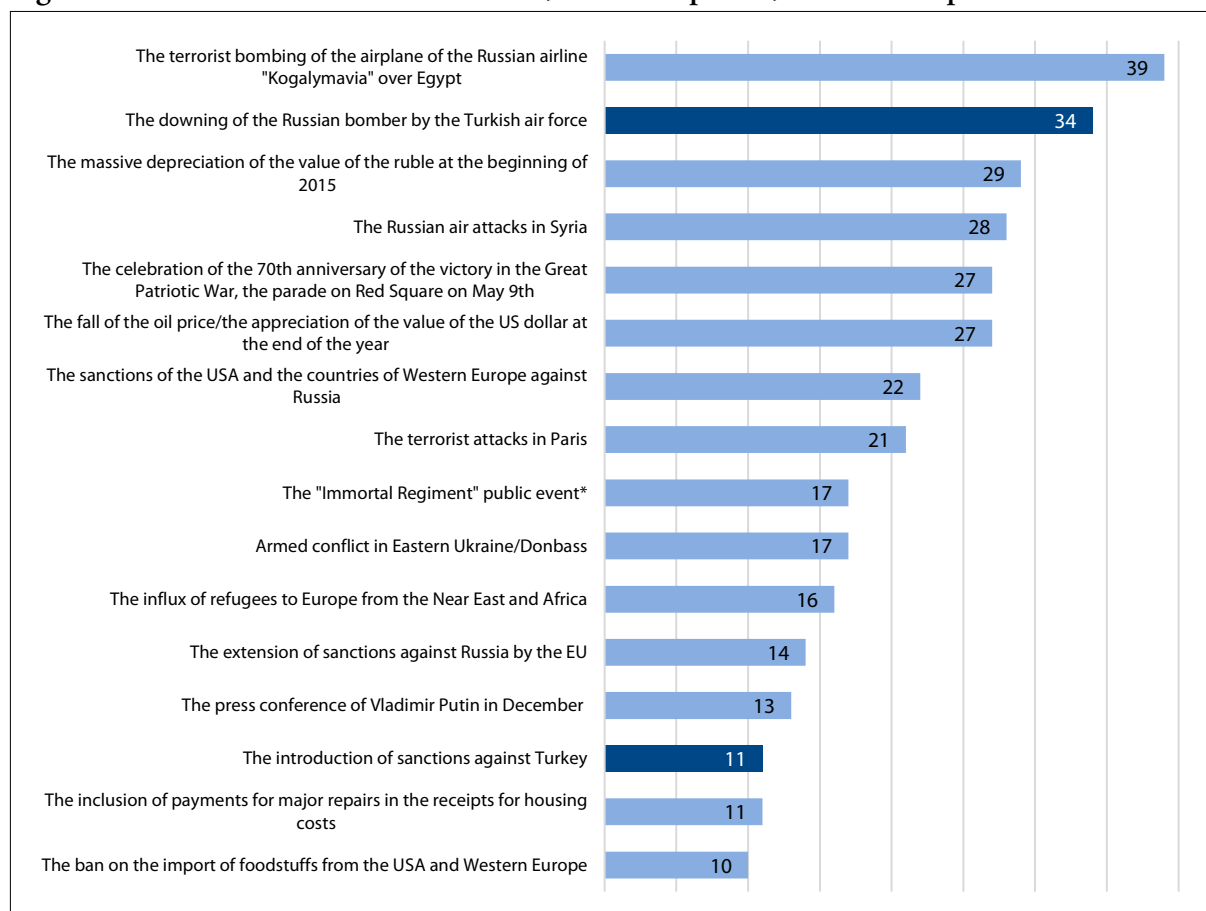
About the Author

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OPINION POLL

Russian Reactions to the Crisis in the Relations With Turkey

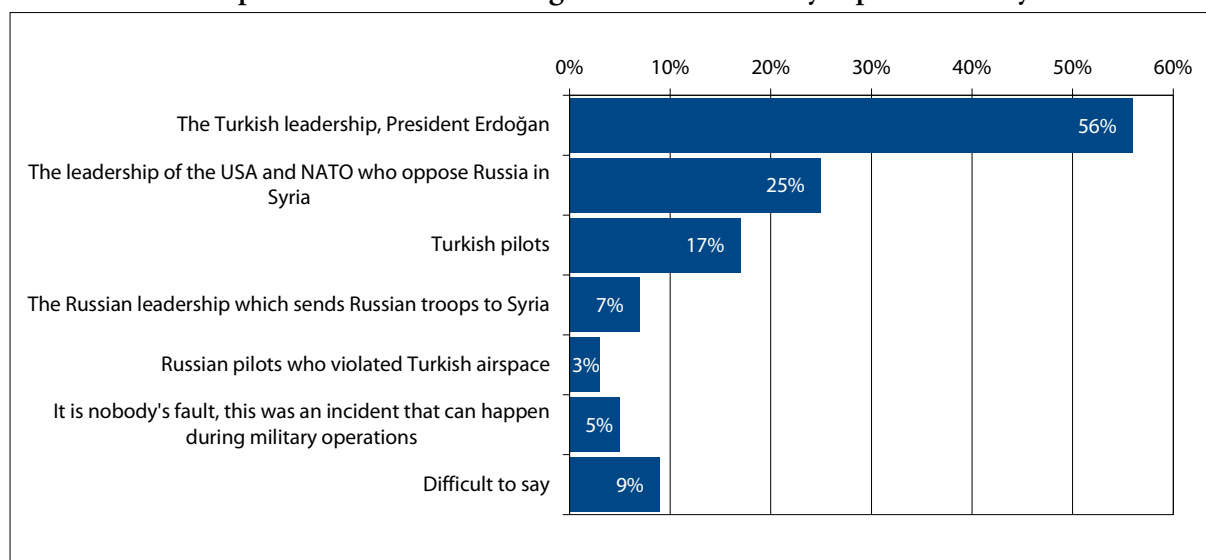
Figure 1: Which of the Events of 2015 Are, in Your Opinion, the Most Important Events?



* Public processions which in 2015 took place in 15 countries and at which the participants parade with photographs of relatives who took part in World War II.

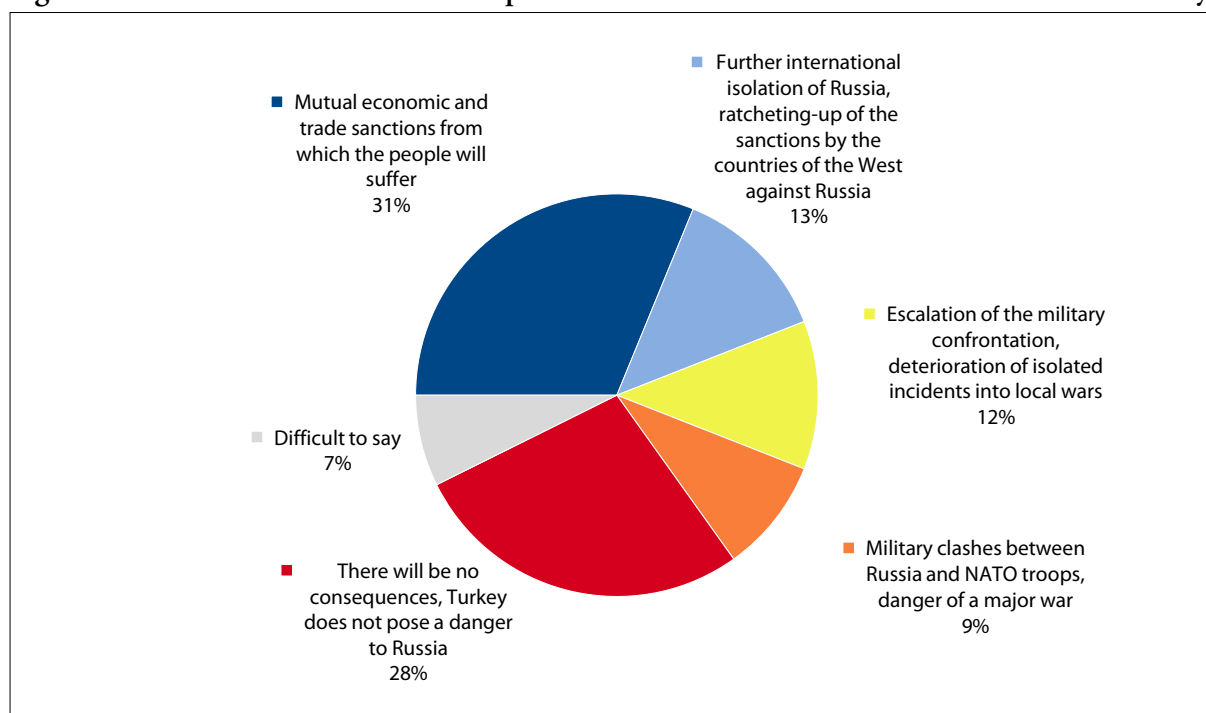
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center on 18–21 December 2015, N = 1600, published on 28 December 2015 <<http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/28/itogi-uhodyashhego-goda-i-samye-vazhnye-sobytiya-2015-go/>>

Figure 2: In Your Opinion, Who Is to Blame for the Downing by Turkish Fighters of the Russian Airplane Which Was Taking Part in the Military Operation in Syria?



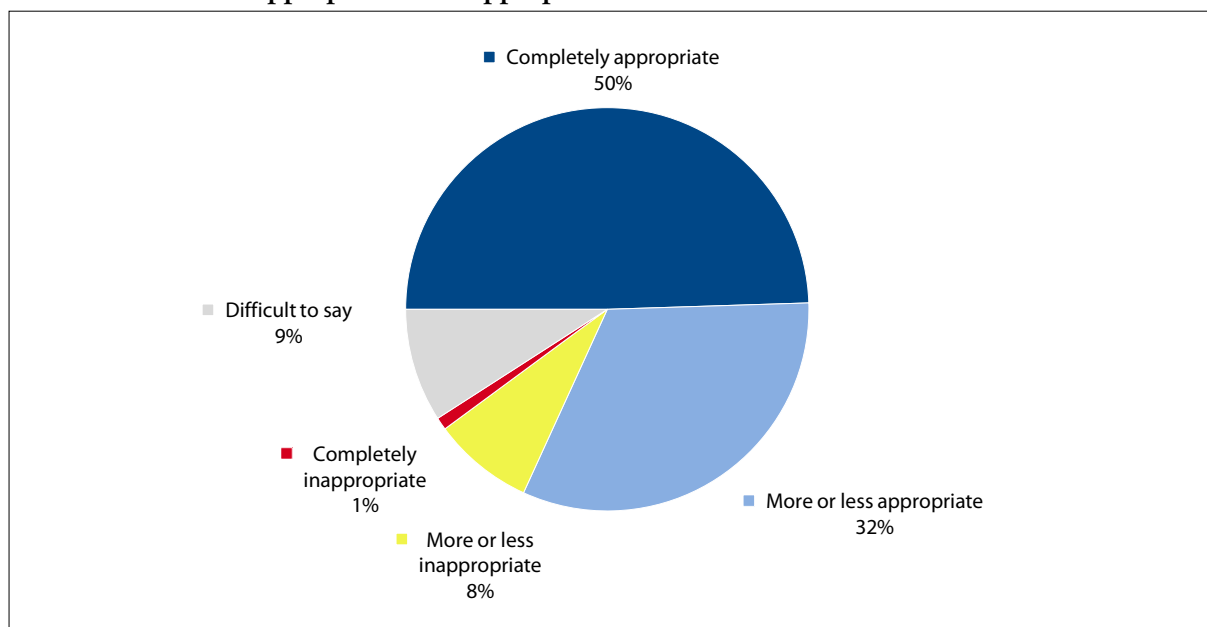
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center on 18–21 December 2015, N = 1600, published on 25 December 2015 <<http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/25/rossiyane-ob-atake-turetskih-vs/>>

Figure 3: What Are the Possible Consequences of the Confrontation Between Russia and Turkey?



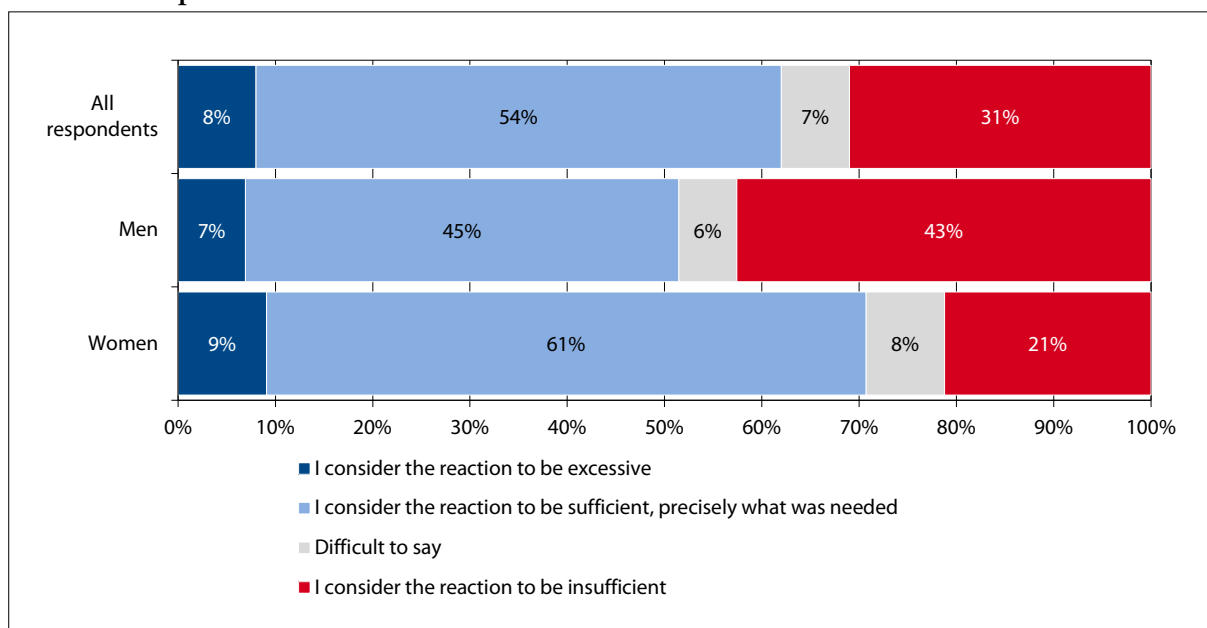
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center on 18–21 December 2015, N = 1600, published on 25 December 2015 <<http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/25/rossiyane-ob-atake-turetskih-vs/>>

Figure 4: Do You Think Russia’s Reaction to the Downing of the Russian Airplane by Turkish Pilots Is Appropriate or Inappropriate?



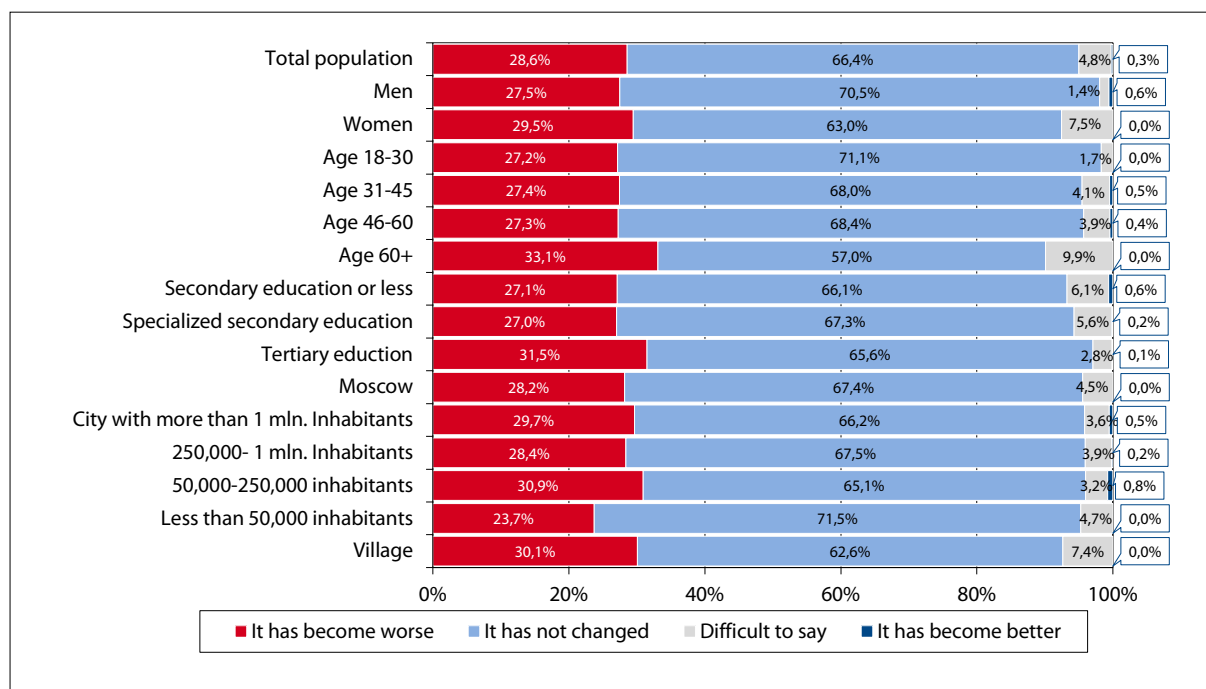
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center on 18–21 December 2015, N = 1600, published on 25 December 2015 <<http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/25/rossiyane-ob-atake-turetskih-vs/>>

Figure 5: How Do You Assess Russia’s Reaction to Turkey’s Downing of the Russian Military Airplane?



Source: representative opinion poll by VTsIOM on 5–6 December 2015, N = 1600, published on 17 December 2015 <<http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115518>>

Figure 6: Has Your Attitude Towards the Turks Lately Become Better, Worse, Or Has It Remained the Same?



Source: representative opinion poll by Fond obshchestvennogo mneniya (FOM) on 12–13 December 2015, N = 1000, published on 26 December 2015 <<http://fom.ru/Mir/12452>>

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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