

WHEN THE SHIFTING INTERNATIONAL ORDER HITS THE DOMESTIC AGENCY: THE CASE OF TURKEY AND THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

Turkish foreign policy has been attracting ever-increasing attention in the academic literature as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has been pursuing proactive, multilateral, and flexible international relations, including many shifting partnerships, fluctuations, and contradictions. Turkey's attitude towards the recent Russian-Ukrainian conflict presents an important case to deconstruct the main components of the AKP government's foreign policy under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan towards a flashpoint in the neighbourhood. This article aims to explore Ankara's approach to the war between Russia and Ukraine based on the interaction of changes in global structure and domestic politics. It argues that the shifting global system, accompanied by the new identity construction of the AKP, has played a determining role in the formulation of Turkish foreign policy towards the conflict based on balancing and pragmatism. The article also concludes that Turkish foreign policy provides an important case study to understand how *sui generis* middle powers have been responding to global conflicts in a changing global system.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:
8 September 2024
Revised:
9 October 2024
Accepted:
13 October 2024

KEYWORDS

Turkish Foreign
Policy; Russia;
Ukraine; *Sui Generis*
Middle Powers;
Identity;
Pragmatism; Global
Conflicts; Black Sea

Cite this article as: Demirtaş, Birgöl, and Zuhai Yeşilyurt Gündüz. 2024. "When the Shifting International Order Hits the Domestic Agency: The Case of Turkey and Russian-Ukrainian Conflict". *The Review of International Affairs* LXXV (1192): 335–359. https://doi.org/10.18485/iipe_ria.2024.75.1192.2

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Introduction³

“When we strengthen our relations with the East, we will also seek ways to improve our rooted relationship with the West... Only if Turkey simultaneously improves its relations with the East and the West can it be a powerful, prosperous, respected, and influential country. Any other path will harm Turkey, not benefit it, and will take it out of the equation. Therefore, as some people suggest, we do not have to choose between the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the European Union. On the contrary, we need to develop our relations with these and other institutions on a ‘win-win’ basis”.⁴ President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s speech at the Naval War College Diploma and Flag Handover Ceremony of the National Defence University, August 31, 2024. (Akbulut Yazar et al. 2024).

“The East or the West?” That has become an important question in Turkey’s history of modernisation, starting from the Ottoman era. Which countries/regions should be the priority of the Ottoman/Turkish decision-makers? Which countries can become an inspiring role model for the country’s development and modernisation? Which countries can the Ottoman Empire/Turkey trust? What should be the orientation of its policies in the realm of domestic politics and economics? Especially from the 19th century onwards, the leading cadres of the country have been trying to find an appropriate alignment for the country and an accompanying identity for the Turkish nation.

“The East or the West?” is not just a question of finding a model for the development and modernisation of the country. It is also a question with important implications for the country’s foreign policy. With which countries can Turkey establish partnerships/alliances? Which countries are Turkey’s “true friends”? Which countries can Turkey rely upon if it faces any security threat? These questions have been answered differently by Turkey’s leaders at different periods. The answers to these questions have helped Turkish decision-makers formulate Turkey’s international relations path for many decades.

³ In deciding about the title of the article, the authors have been inspired by the following paper: “When Europe hits Home: Europeanization and Domestic Change”, published by Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse in the *European Integration Online Papers*, Vol. 14, No 15 (2000).

⁴ The original text is as follows: “Doğu ile ilişkilerimizi güçlendirirken Batı ile köklü işbirliğimizi ilerletmenin yollarını arayacağız... Türkiye, Doğu ve Batı ile ilişkilerini eş zamanlı bir şekilde geliştirirse güçlü, müreffeh, itibarlı ve etkin bir ülke olabilir. Bunun dışında her yol Türkiye’ye fayda değil, zarar verir, denklem dışına atar. Dolayısıyla biz birilerinin iddia ettiği gibi Avrupa Birliği ile Şangay İşbirliği Teşkilatı arasında bir tercih yapmak mecburiyetinde değiliz. Tam aksine, hem bunlarla hem de diğer kuruluşlarla ilişkilerimizi ‘kazan-kazan’ temelinde geliştirmek durumundayız” (Akbulut Yazar et al. 2024).

The recent news about Turkey's membership application to the BRICS+ in September 2024 revived those discussions. The international press reported that Turkey formally applied for membership at the BRICS+ "to bolster its global influence and forge new ties beyond its traditional Western allies" (Hacaoglu and Kozok 2024). The spokesperson of the AKP government, Ömer Çelik, did not deny the claim, stating that Turkey's wish to become a member of the BRICS has been clear (Çelik 2024). This new information reignited the discussion on Turkey's primary global alignment. And, once again, the question "the East or the West?" has resurfaced.

Another occasion to discuss Turkey's foreign policy orientation has been the invasion of Ukraine by the Putin regime that started on February 24, 2022. Turkey has been implementing a policy of "double balance"⁵ between Russia and Ukraine on the one hand and between Russia and the West on the other hand. Although Turkey has criticised the Russian invasion and supported Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity from the very beginning of the conflict, it has not joined the sanctions of the European Union (EU). It has maintained its dialogue with both Russian and Ukrainian leadership and tried to mediate between them to achieve a ceasefire.

This article aims to explore Turkey's approach to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Why does Turkey prefer to pursue the policy of double balance? What is the impact of the international structure and domestic agency in the formulation of AKP's foreign policy? In searching for answers to those questions, the article benefits from primary official sources, newspapers, and academic literature, as well as from interviews with Russian and Ukrainian migrants in Turkey, the representatives of Crimean Tatar organisations, and a former Ukrainian diplomat. Besides using primary and secondary literature, it is crucial to use fieldwork. Shortly after the Putin regime invaded Ukraine, the authors conducted interviews with Ukrainians and Russians living in Turkey. Some of them have been living here for years, and some have fled from the war. For the authors, it is important to listen to the voices of people affected by the decisions of these states' leaders. To obtain a more comprehensive picture, the most current interview was conducted with a Turkish bureaucrat.

The article argues that Turkey's approach to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict can be explained by the combination of international and domestic factors. The changing dynamics of the international system have been accompanied by the construction of a new foreign policy orientation by the AKP based on multiple

⁵ Isachenko uses the concept of "double balance" to refer to Turkish policy in the Black Sea. She states that Turkey implements a policy of double balance in the Black Sea between littoral and non-littoral states on the one hand and between Russia and itself on the other (Isachenko 2023, 6).

identities, flexible orientation, and sacralisation of Turkish history. An identity of exceptionalism was constructed under the AKP elite (Yanık 2023, 640-657) that also affected the parameters of Turkey's international relations.

There have been some tectonic changes in the global political and economic structure since the 2008 economic crisis. The share of BRICS countries in the global economy has been increasing. The share of BRICS countries in the international economic system was about 26.5% in 2010 and has risen to 37% in 2023 (Sputnik 2023).

In 2024, China, as a super-BRICS country, will become the biggest economy in the world based on purchasing power parity (IMF 2024). This change in the structure of the global economy has implications for international politics as well (Öniş and Kutlay 2020, 123-142).

There is extensive literature on the shifting global system. Many scholars argue that we live in a post-Western and post-liberal global order. How this change in the global economic structure will impact global politics is an ongoing debate. We argue that the current global economic order is multipolar and the political order is rather non-polar since none of the great powers makes any substantial effort to maintain order and peace in the international system.

Currently, two violent conflicts take place in the international system: the Russian-Ukrainian war and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Although some great and regional powers tried to reach a ceasefire, none of the great powers exerted any serious and persistent attempt to end the wars and reach a durable peace. In other words, there is no great power that tries to bring enduring stability back to the international system. Therefore, we argue that the current system can be labelled as non-polar since none of the poles takes care of the maintenance of order and peace in the global structure. Whether the system will evolve to multipolarity or not remains to be seen in the following years.

These tectonic changes in the global political and economic system have been accompanied by changes in the Turkish domestic agency. As the AKP came to power in 2002, it started focusing on a discourse by emphasising Turkey's multiple identities. The then architect of the AKP's foreign policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, stated that Turkey did not only have a European identity but also Asian, Balkan, and Caucasus identities. The quotation by President Erdoğan at the beginning of the article, emphasising the importance of developing relations with Eastern and Western countries, indicates that multilateral foreign policy has been an important feature of Turkey's international orientation.

The paper consists of five sections. Following the introduction, the next section explains how the shifting dynamics in the global system, accompanied by changes in the domestic structure, affect Turkish foreign policy. Then, Turkey's attitude toward the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will be explained. The following

section discusses the Turkish leadership's interpretation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict within the current international system. In the concluding section, we will explore what the Turkish case tells us about the foreign policy orientations of *sui generis* middle powers in a shifting global system.

A Shifting Global Order and a Changing Domestic Agency

As the bipolar system ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the new international structure was defined by the concept of liberal global order. The free market system, freedom of trade, multilateral institutions, and the spread of democratisation and liberal norms were considered the main components of the international system (Acharya 2017, 272-274). The US was considered the only great power in the 1990s. Indeed, a new wave of democratisation and liberalisation swept most of the world, leading to transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic systems and from socialism to neoliberalism. In addition, as the only superpower, the US tried to play the guardian of this international system by attempting to provide stability and end the conflicts. The US foreign policy towards the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the wars of Yugoslav dissolution can be given as examples.

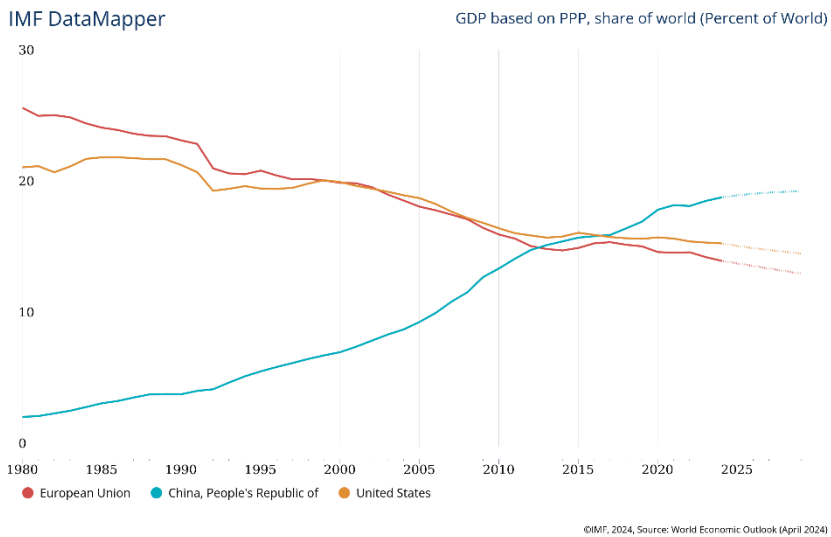
However, this system, based on liberalism and US hegemony, started to crumble after the global economic crisis that began in 2007. The collapse of the mortgage system in the US and the bankruptcy of some of the prominent financial institutions in the Western world sent shock waves to the rest of the world. Following this crisis, the BRICS was formally established in 2010 as a loose cooperation organisation among the rising powers, Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa. Its basic aim has been to increase their influence on the global political economy. It has established the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Agency to increase economic cooperation among the member states. In 2024, the BRICS admitted four new members: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. Thus, the new expanded BRICS is called the BRICS+.

The BRICS+ countries have been enjoying an increasing share of the global economy. The share of the BRICS+ in the global economy is currently about 37%, while the share of the EU is just about 14.5 % (Jütten and Falkenberg 2024, 1). Hence, the share of the BRICS+ in the global economy is twice as high as that of the European Union. The comparison of the BRICS with the G7 is meaningful as well. The G7 countries account for 31.6% of the global economy, lower than the share of the BRICS+ (Afota et al. 2024). The share of the BRICS+ countries in the global economy has been increasing, while that of the US and the EU member states has been declining.

As the biggest economy in the BRICS, China is called the super-BRICS state. In 1980, China's share in the global economy was just 2.2%, while the share of

the US was 21.31% and of the EU 25.84%. However, in 2024, China's economic share has risen to 19.01%, while the share of the US economy decreased to 15.5% and the EU economy declined to 14.17% (IMF 2024).

Figure 1: GDP based on PPP, share of world



Source: IMF 2024.

This tectonic shift in the global economic structure based on the high growth rates of emerging countries, especially that of China, has been accompanied by anti-globalisation and anti-regionalisation tendencies in some Western countries. The then US President Donald Trump's protectionist trade policy between 2017 and 2021, based on his conceptualisation of "America First", has weakened the international role of the US. In addition, Britain's exit from the European Union in 2020 was the first of its kind in the history of the EU. Fifty-two per cent of the British electorate voted for Brexit.

These changes in the global economy and domestic tendencies in some major Western countries started a new period called the post-Western global order. How this order will look is still unknown. We can say that we are still in the transition period. As none of the great powers has been trying to end the current conflicts in the Black Sea and the Middle East and to stabilise the international system, we can say that the current system is non-polar.

As the unipolar moment in the post-Cold War world weakened, middle powers and rising states became more influential. Global history provides ample evidence that middle powers have greater flexibility in their foreign policy during

periods of global system change (Giacomello and Verbeek 2024, 520). The interwar era can be an example of that. The multipolarity of the period allowed many middle powers, like Turkey, to have autonomy in formulating their international relations.

The founding of the BRICS and the MIKTA⁶ is an important development in this regard. Turkey is one of the MIKTA countries and has been considered a middle power in the International Relations (IR) literature. According to Teo, a middle power can be defined as “a state that quantitatively ranks below the major powers but above most of the rest of the states; identifies and is regarded by others as a middle power; and employs behavioural strategies such as investing in multilateralism and relying on persuasive or soft power” (Teo 2023, 5).

There are different approaches to middle powers in the literature. According to one of the categorisations, middle powers can be differentiated by their material power (position approach) or their identity as middle powers by their own and others’ perceptions or their foreign policy behaviour (Teo 2023, 14). In general, in the IR literature, middle powers have been defined as countries with more material power compared to their neighbours. They define themselves and are defined by other states as middle powers. In addition, they are supposed to support the status quo in the international system, use soft power instruments, and initiate niche areas in foreign policy. It is also assumed that they are reliable partners and have a consistent foreign policy. There is a lively discussion in the current IR literature of how Turkey has performed as a middle power in its neighbouring regions in recent years. Turkey’s greater material capabilities compared to many of its neighbours, its pro-active foreign policy, and its niche diplomacy initiatives have been comprehensively dealt with in different academic works. (Öniş and Kutlay 2017, 164-183; Parlar Dal 2016, 1425-1453; Parlar Dal 2018, 1-31).

This paper argues that Turkey can be defined as a “*sui generis* middle power”, as it has some of the characteristics of middle powers defined in the literature. However, some features of Turkish foreign policy are different from traditional middle powers. First of all, Turkish decision-makers use not only soft power but hard power as well, as seen in northern Iraq since the 1980s and in North Syria since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. That reveals a difference in comparison to “classical” Turkish foreign policy, which had been based on the principles of Westernisation (based on capitalism and democratic and secular life) and status quo for decades (based on anti-revisionism and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s famous maxim of “Peace at home, peace abroad”).

⁶ MIKTA was established by Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of South Korea, Turkey, and Australia in 2013 as a platform of consultation. For further information, see MIKTA n.d.

Most Turkish governments proceeded with a foreign policy following and adhering to international law and legality (Oran 1996). However, the foreign policy of Turkish governments since 1984 reveals a difference. Turkey's military presence and operations in Northern Iraq since 1984 and Syria since 2011 are important evidence of how Turkey has used military instruments in recent decades. The AKP government has widened the use of force in Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East through its operations in northern Syria. The Turkish army currently controls parts of North Syria, and there is no information about the exit strategy. In its relations with Greece, Turkey uses the threat of force as a foreign policy instrument.

Another *sui generis* characteristic of Turkey's international relations is its inconsistency. Zigzag(s) and quick changes become a routine of policymaking. Turkish foreign policy does not only make U-turns but turns around like a wind rose (Yılmaz 2024). The traditional principles and maxims of Turkish foreign policy seem to be forgotten. It is not easy to find the general patterns in Turkish foreign policy because it changes so fast from time to time by showing fluctuations (Yeşilyurt Gündüz 2024, 114-115). For example, Turkey has had cycles of tensions and crises in its relations with Germany, the European Union, Egypt, Syria, and Israel, among others, during the AKP period. However, after a certain period, it tried to normalise its relations with those countries. The fluctuations of the AKP leadership, from crises and high tension in bilateral relations to normalisation, have been a recurrent feature of Turkish foreign policy, especially after the Arab Uprising.

Thirdly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Foreign Minister, and other cabinet members lost their institutional autonomy under the so-called Turkish version of the presidential system, which has been in operation since 2018. Increasingly, there is a one-person rule - President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has become the main decision-maker. Baskın Oran, a distinguished professor of International Relations, uses the abbreviation "EDP" (*Erdoğan Dış Politikası* - Erdoğan Foreign Policy) instead of "TDP" (*Türk Dış Politikası* - Turkish Foreign Policy) (Oran 2024).

We argue that because of these characteristics, namely the use of hard power and inconsistency, Turkey can be labelled a "sui generis middle power". Although it carries some characteristics of middle powers, such as material power, niche diplomacy, and middle power identity, for the reasons mentioned above, it diverges from them.

Another significant characteristic of the AKP's foreign policy is its emphasis on multiple identities and multidimensionality. President Erdoğan has used the metaphor from Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi, a 13th-century Islamic scholar, to explain the multidimensionality of Turkish foreign policy.

Mevlana stated, “The needle leg of the compass is fixed; it is in my religion, but with the other leg I go around seventy-two nations” (Toğuşlu 2011, 152). The Turkish President expressed the view that they will set the fixed end of the compass to the interests of the country, as in Mevlana’s metaphor of the compass, and that they will encompass the whole world with the other end. He further stated, “We will approach the issues with a 360-degree perspective and evaluate the developments with the widest possible perspective. While strengthening our relations with the East, we will look for ways to advance our deep-rooted cooperation with the West” (Akbulut Yazar et al. 2024).

Meanwhile, the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mehmet Kemal Bozay, stated that before Copernicus, it was assumed that the planets and the sun revolved around the Earth. In the same way, the EU presumes that the dynamics of all foreign policy revolves around it, but Turkey has its own foreign policy and priorities. In this framework, Turkish Vice Minister Bozay further argues that the EU needs a Copernican revolution, which requires considering the orbits and rotations of other actors and getting rid of the approach that all foreign policy revolves around it. The EU should develop a compromised foreign policy that does not ignore the interests of actors such as Turkey (Bozay 2024). In addition, an interviewed Turkish diplomat argues that Turkish foreign policy is like a sailboat and can change according to the wind (Interview 10).

These discourses refer to the fact that Turkey tries to formulate an autonomous foreign policy without any fixed alliances or partnerships. The current shifting global order and the AKP’s construction of a new foreign policy identity provide the way for its implementation.

Turkey’s decision-makers emphasise their view that there are changing dynamics in the global order and the uncertainties are rising. Stating that there are conflicts and disputes in the world as well as increasing political and economic rivalry among countries, they think that Turkey should be strong “at the table and on the field” (“sahada ve masada güçlü Türkiye”) (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.). President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s proclamation, “We are now a country with a fundamental place both on the ground and at the table”, reflects an assertiveness in strengthening its geopolitical position and role in global affairs by diplomatic as well as military means (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2020).

According to Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, geopolitical dynamics is shifting and strategic equations are reconfigured. He further claims that globalisation did not end but has gone off the rails. He asserts that Turkey was at the centre of these dynamics and equations (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024b). Similarly, President Erdoğan argues that “the pillars of the rules-based international system are being shaken. Challenges such as terrorism,

Islamophobia and xenophobia, irregular migration, climate change, disruptions in energy and food security, as well as in supply chains, are exacerbating the geopolitical tremors” (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2024b).

These discourses show us that Turkish decision-making elites acknowledge the changes in the global system and the increasing uncertainties. Under these circumstances, they assume Turkey should have a multidimensional and flexible foreign policy and achieve partnerships with different countries.

The way Ankara approaches the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is impacted by a number of factors, including the shifting global system, how Turkish decision-makers view it, how Turkish foreign policy is defined, how much stress is placed on Turkey’s many identities, and how flexible it is.

After analysing the changes in the global context and the main characteristics of the domestic agency, the next section will focus on the evolution of the Turkish approach to the conflict in the Black Sea.

The Evolution of Turkey’s Attitude towards the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

February 24, 2022, marks the day when war returned to Europe after 23 years. What seemed impossible has happened—the Putin regime’s war against Ukraine began. While the EU and the US had a clear stance from the very beginning, the foreign policy of the AKP government was based on balancing the conflicting parties. This part will set out the AKP’s position on the Putin regime’s war against Ukraine and will address the main parameters of the AKP’s foreign policy. This section provides an overview of Turkey’s position between two chairs and its balancing act.

A Historical Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relationship: Cooperation Despite Differences

Duygu Sezer (2000, 6) emphasises that the glue that binds the regional and domestic factors shaping Turkish-Russian relations is history. For centuries, they lived together as neighbours, in rivalry and even at war against each other from time to time. With the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottomans, the Russian Empire, which represented the Slavic/Orthodox civilisation, and the Ottoman Empire, which represented the Turkish/Islamic civilisation, began forceful confrontations in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

After the end of the First World War, an unusual phase of empathy and understanding began between the young states and their heads of state, Vladimir Lenin and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The military and economic support

of the Soviet Union was important for the Turkish victory in the War of Independence, which was sealed with the Treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923. This treaty demilitarised the straits of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and placed access to and from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean under the control of an International Strait Commission. However, as the political situation in Europe deteriorated before World War II, Turkey tried to change the agreement. With the Treaty of Montreux, the Strait Agreement of July 20, 1936, which regulates the free movement of ships in the Black Sea, Turkey regained full sovereignty and control over the Sea of Marmara, the Dardanelles, and the Bosphorus.

After the end of World War II, relations between Turkey and the Soviet Union deteriorated because of the Soviet territorial claims to parts of Turkey's northeastern provinces and the demand for a Turkish-Soviet joint control regime over the Turkish straits. Faced with the escalation of East-West tensions, Turkey institutionally joined the West and became a member of NATO in 1952. Both were in opposing camps during the remaining period of the Cold War. During the *détente* era, there was a period of rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow.

Mutual negative images lasted for a long time, nurtured the negative opinions of both sides about each other, and were produced and reproduced on the social and political levels. With the end of the Cold War, the "virtual rapprochement" began in the 1990s (Sezer 2000, 62). Virtual rapprochement refers to a state of bilateral relations in which public manifestations of hostilities at the state level have mostly disappeared and the importance of cooperation for the promotion of national interests is publicly articulated. However, a hard core of mutual fear and mistrust remains in the minds of decision-makers and political elites.

A historically and regionally unique economic cooperation was established by both sides, close to mutual interdependence. However, this interdependence is asymmetrical in favour of Russia, especially regarding energy. Russia has become the main supplier of natural gas and oil to Turkey. Cooperation in the energy and gas sectors increased Turkey's dependence on Russian gas. Turkey obtains over 42% of natural gas (Temizer 2024) and 51% of oil and diesel fuel from Russia (Sağlam 2024). Turkish construction companies in Russia and the number of Russian tourists in Turkey skyrocketed. It has been a historical pattern that whenever their relations with the West deteriorated, Turkey and Russia were able to come together and thus cooperate in different realms.

Despite their conflictual histories and deep structural differences, both states were able to deepen their relations even further from 2003 onwards. That also resulted from the resentment of both countries against the internationally controversial invasion of Iraq by the US in March 2003. Besides,

Russia and Turkey also favoured stability and disapproved of potentially chaotic regime change in Iraq (Hill and Taşpınar 2006, 81-82).

Russia, the West, and the Issue of NATO Enlargement

In order to understand Russia's view, it is necessary to look back on an important day in history, February 9, 1990. On that day, then-US Secretary of State James Baker assured then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev not once but three times that NATO would expand "not one inch eastward". He agreed with Gorbachev's statement that "NATO expansion is unacceptable". Baker promised Gorbachev: "Neither the President nor I intend to extract any unilateral advantages from the processes that are taking place". Then, he added that the Americans understood that "not only for the Soviet Union but for other European countries as well, it is important to have guarantees that if the United States keeps its presence in Germany within the framework of NATO, not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction" (National Security Archive 2017).

This assurance on NATO enlargement was part of many promises regarding Soviet security given by Western decision-makers to Gorbachev and other Soviet politicians during the process of German unification in 1990. The promise was that NATO would not expand even "one inch eastward" (National Security Archive 2017). The reality was different: Whereas the Warsaw Pact dissolved in 1991, NATO survived, flourished, and doubled its members at that time from 16 to 32, with Finland and Sweden joining in 2024.⁷ It is important to keep this Western promise in mind when considering the current situation. However, the dispute on NATO enlargement does not justify the current Russian war against Ukraine. According to international law, all disagreements should be settled via diplomatic means.

One region that is important for Russia is the Black Sea. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new states emerged on the border with the Black Sea (Ukraine and Georgia). As a result, Russia lost two-thirds of its coastline after the end of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet era, almost half of its foreign trade had been via the Straits. With the NATO membership of Romania and Bulgaria, Turkey became Russia's only "partner" in the Black Sea. Bulgaria and Romania pursued policies that supported the entry of the US and other NATO countries into the Black Sea. Turkey and Russia have cooperated in opposing the entry of warships of non-littoral countries into the Black Sea. Ukraine, which

⁷ The negative impact of NATO's enlargement for Russian security has been emphasised by one of the interviewees (Interview 8).

had turned to the West in pursuit of NATO and EU membership, followed a similar policy. While Russia feared that the Black Sea would turn into a “NATO Sea”, Turkey always feared the violation of the Montreux Convention (Tellal 2010, 211).

Turkey’s Policy of Balance and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian troops showed that Russia, like the US, is an imperial power that cannot be deterred by either the United Nations or international law. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan clarified Turkey’s ambiguous position one day before the Russian invasion. He stated, “We cannot give up either of them (Russia and Ukraine)” (Işık and Gündoğan 2022). Ankara has remained true to this approach. The Turkish Foreign Ministry, on the one hand, called the invasion “unacceptable” and a “serious violation of international law” when it began on February 24, 2022 (Wheeldon 2022). However, Turkey’s leadership made an immense effort to maintain friendly relations with the Russian side.

With the increasing violence and shock of the war in Ukraine, the government expressed its criticism of Russia and its support for Ukraine, called on Russia to immediately end this illegal act, and complied with the resolutions of the UN General Assembly criticising Russia. However, in the Council of Europe, Turkey abstained from the decision to suspend Russian membership.

Meanwhile, Turkey did not follow EU and US sanctions against Russia. On the one hand, Turkey was convinced that sanctions could hardly be successful. On the other hand, the sanctions came from the EU and the US but not via a UN resolution, which would make them legally binding according to international law. That is why Turkey does not feel bound by it. However, it seems that Turkey started partially abiding by sanctions as Turkish companies prevented the re-export of Western goods to Russia (İşçi, Aydın, and Çelikpala 2024, 8-9).

On February 27, 2022, three days after the war started, then Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu described Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a “war”, which enabled Ankara to make full use of Article 19 of the Montreux Convention of 1936 and thus to block the passage through the Turkish straits to the Black Sea for warships unless they return to their home bases. (Yenel 2022). That complicated Russia’s power projection capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean and saved the Ukrainian coastal city of Odesa from major losses.

Although Turkey tries not to provoke its neighbour Russia, at the same time, it tries to cultivate good relations with Ukraine as well, including in the military field. The sale of armed drones to Ukraine can be seen as an example of this

policy. In a seminar at TED University in Ankara on the second anniversary of the war, the Ambassador of Ukraine, Mr. Vasyl Bodnar, stated that many newborn boys in Ukraine were named after the surname of the producer of the drones—Bayraktar (Bodnar 2024). It seems that the gratitude of many people is that high. However, unlike other NATO members, Turkey has neither joined the sanctions against Moscow nor closed its airspace to Russian civilian planes.

Ankara and Moscow have vastly diverging views and different stands on many international issues, from the Nagorno Karabagh to Libya and Syria. However, when it comes to energy and trade, they have deepened their cooperation since the end of the bipolar system. Putin and Erdoğan's "friendship" is surprisingly deep—perhaps also because of their similarities in political style, authoritarianism, conservatism, and their stance on patriarchy and gender (Yeşilyurt Gündüz and Demirtaş 2022, 47).

In the first weeks after the outbreak of the war, 85,000 Ukrainians and 100,000 Russians fled to Turkey. That shows not only how important Turkey is for both states but also how much many Russian opponents of the war suffer from this war.

Turkey's policy in the Ukraine war is a balancing act. Özgür Uluhisarcıklı describes Turkey's unique position as "pro-Ukrainian" but "not directly anti-Russian" (Wheeldon 2022). Thus, the AKP seeks a policy of balance towards both while supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and moderating criticism of Russia without participating in sanctions (Yeşilyurt Gündüz and Demirtaş 2022, 44-49).

Perceptions of the Russian-Ukrainian War by the AKP Elite

The first official statement of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the Russian aggression started was as follows:

"We do not accept the military operation that was started by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, and we reject it. This attack not only destroys the Minsk agreements, but it is also a severe violation of international law and a serious threat to our regional and global security. Turkey believes in respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of countries, and it is against the change of borders through arms. We call upon the Russian Federation to end this unfair and unlawful action as soon as possible. Turkish support for political unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine will continue" (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022).

This statement can be regarded as an example of the AKP's attitude towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. On the one hand, the decision-makers of the AKP expressed their full support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and

respect for international law; on the other hand, they just took the Russian labelling of the invasion as “a special operation” as it was at the beginning of the conflict. They did not question the Russian naming of “special operation” when the aggression started. Only after three days did Turkey’s decision-makers recognise it was, in fact, a “war”.

The Turkish leadership expressed “soft criticism” of Russia throughout the war. However, it should be noted that this soft criticism by the AKP leadership started in 2014 during the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁸ Turkey’s ruling political elite, in all its declarations, statements, and speeches, emphasised the violation of international law by the Russian action but was always careful about the wording and not using harsh rhetoric. In the case of Israel, we hear the criticisms of “state terrorism” and “genocide” from the AKP political elite loud and clear. But Turkish decision-makers have never made harsh criticism towards Russia, although the Turkish political Islamist leaders claimed to be supporting the victims in global politics.

On the first and second anniversary of the Russian invasion, the Turkish Foreign Ministry issued declarations that did not include the word “Russia” at all. It is worthwhile to analyse the original declarations. On the first anniversary, the following declaration was issued:

“Despite all our attempts, the war, which began in Ukraine one year ago today, still goes on. Unfortunately, the heavy cost of war is felt not only in the two countries but also throughout the world. On every platform, we emphasise the need for a just and lasting end to this war as soon as possible through negotiations. We support efforts towards a solution through initiatives such as the Istanbul Grain Deal. We will keep on extending every support and exerting every effort towards ending this war, which we have denounced since the outset, so as to restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty” (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

On the second anniversary, the Turkish Foreign Ministry made the following declaration:

“As the war in Ukraine leaves its second year behind, the devastating impact of the conflict on Ukraine is growing, and its negative regional and global consequences are deepening. The conditions conducive to the revitalisation of the diplomatic process will eventually emerge. With this understanding, we offer constructive input to both sides. Turkey’s efforts for a just and lasting solution based on Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity will continue” (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024a).

⁸ For a comprehensive discussion on the issue, see Demirtaş 2024, 342-357.

Both declarations emphasise the negative consequences of war and Turkey's attempts and hopes to reach peace. Both underline Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, none of them mention the word *Russia*. That is evidence of how Turkey has implemented its balanced policy by not confronting Russia directly. In the second declaration, it is stated that Turkey has been offering constructive input to both conflicting parties. That has been the main focus of Turkish communication with both sides.

Turkish President Erdoğan stated that the killings in Buca, Irpin, and Kramatorsk by the Russian army were "negative developments". What happened in these Ukrainian cities was called a massacre or ethnic cleansing by many observers and experts around the world (Hern 2022). However, Turkey's ruling elite refrained from using any harsh rhetoric against Russia. That is another proof of how the AKP elite did everything to criticise Russia softly and not damage ties with Moscow.

Another significant point is that Turkish decision-makers have insistently argued that, in fact, the war indicates the failure of the global order. The AKP elite claims that there are grave problems in the current international structure that resulted in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The main point of the AKP elite is that the global order established after 1945 has not been functioning anymore. Therefore, it cannot solve any important global problems. They argue that the failure of the global order is the fundamental problem. President Erdoğan has repeatedly stated that the world is bigger than five, criticising the structure of the United Nations Security Council (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2022). Erdoğan condemned the structure of the Security Council, stating that it grants the five permanent member countries undue privilege in governing the international system.

For the Turkish leadership, all conflicts ranging from Syria to Yemen, Ukraine, and Gaza are just manifestations of how the current global system lost its relevance and became dysfunctional (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2024a). The AKP elite thinks a fairer, more representative, more inclusive, and more effective global order should be established (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2022). It is interesting to note that instead of condemning and criticising Russia directly, Turkish leadership relocated their criticism to the deficiencies of the current international system.

This approach has two benefits for Turkey: First, Turkey could keep good relations with the Russian leadership. Turkey is dependent on Russia, especially regarding energy, as explained above. Besides, there is an ever-growing cooperation in the construction sector, with many Turkish construction companies working directly in Russia. Most tourists visiting Turkey come mainly from Germany, and Russia. Whenever Turkey's or Russia's relations with the West

deteriorated, they came together somehow to overcome their isolation. Still, there is a deep mistrust between these two geographically close and historically and culturally distant countries (Yeşilyurt Gündüz and Demirtaş 2022, 45).

Ankara and Moscow have differing views on many different international topics. However, when it comes to energy and gas, they fully agree. Therefore, maintaining good ties with Putin is crucial for Erdoğan. This approach allows Turkey to continue with its policy of dual balance and flexible partnerships, as seen in the compass metaphor of Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi. Second, this approach allows Turkey's decision-makers to raise their voices regarding the current international system. Since the AKP rulers want to create an image of Turkey as a rising global star, this discourse has a special meaning.

Impressions on Turkish Foreign Policy: What Do the Interviews Tell Us?

It seems that Ukraine is generally satisfied with Turkey's policy of balance towards the conflict. Former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's visit to Ukraine on March 18, 2014, just two days after the referendum, was appreciated by the Ukrainian authorities because he was the first foreign minister to visit Ukraine after the referendum (Interview 1).⁹ Turkey's importance in the Black Sea, its sovereignty over the Straits, and its second-biggest army in NATO make Turkey a special country for Ukraine. A former diplomat from Ukraine states that there is an expectation that Turkey should support Ukraine proactively and join the Western sanctions as much as possible (Interview 1). Meanwhile, Turkey's mediation attempts and its role in the grain deal and exchange of prisoners of war have been appreciated by the international community. These policies can be considered positive results of Turkey's balanced attitude.

Meanwhile, how Turkish NGOs interpret Turkish foreign policy is important to understand the public opinion on Ankara's approach to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. NGOs of Crimean Tatar origin citizens are mainly interested in analysing and interpreting Turkish foreign policy towards the war. Crimean Tatar NGOs in Turkey follow Turkish foreign policy closely. There is a general understanding that Turkey needs to follow the policy of balance. However, there are more expectations from Turkey, especially regarding the discourse. It is stated that Turkey's naming of Russian policy in Crimea in 2014 as "illegal annexation" might not reflect the whole truth and it should be named "occupation". (Interview 7) There is an understanding that Turkey's geopolitical position pushes it to pursue the policy of balance. Turkey's help for Crimean Tatars is appreciated, especially

⁹ See also Agence France-Presse 2014.

in helping the release of Crimean Tatar prisoners from Russia (Interview 7). Another interviewee stated that Turkey's political and economic interests force it to pursue its current policy. However, there is still the expectation that Ankara should work further to bring back peace to the region (Interview 6).

In addition, the general evaluation of the interviewed Ukrainians living in Turkey regarding Turkey's policies on Crimea since the Russian annexation in 2014 is mostly positive. They recognise Turkey's support for "the integrity of Ukraine's borders since 2014" (Interview 3) and the fact that Turkey "considers Crimea the territory of Ukraine" (Interview 4).

However, the evaluation of Turkish politics regarding the Ukrainian war is mixed. Although most of the interviewed Ukrainians highlight Turkey's role in the Black Sea and the support it has given to Ukraine, it becomes clear that this is insufficient. An interviewee stated: "Despite this position and all the help given to Ukraine, Turkey is still buying Russian petrol, gas, etc., which are the main income of the Russian budget. There are no sanctions against Russian politicians and oligarchs. They buy real estate in Turkey; they are welcome to flee to Turkey, and some of them do. So, is it neutrality or business?" (Interview 2).

Similarly, another interviewee said: "In my opinion, Turkey has not yet decided which country it supports. Turkey sells bayraktars¹⁰ to Ukraine and, at the same time, creates conditions for visiting Russian tourists in resort towns. Turkey seems to care more about how much money it makes. Turkey creates the illusion that it wants to stop the war, but it is clear that Turkey is showing sympathy for Putin" (Interview 9).

As a final note, one interviewee stated their hope: "We are grateful to our Turkish friends for their support, shelter and open hearts. We are refugees who have to flee the war and save our children, their future, but each of us is waiting for victory and wants to return home to Ukraine." (Interviewee 5).

As explained above, our interviews with Russian and Ukrainian refugees and the association of Crimean Tatars in Turkey put forward that, in general, there is an understanding of Turkey's balanced attitude. However, some expect more from Turkey.

¹⁰ Bayraktar is a tactical unmanned aerial vehicle. It is used to collect intelligence for surveillance and reconnaissance missions and attacks. It is produced by Baykar Company. The chairperson of the board of directors of the company is Selçuk Bayraktar, who is the son-in-law of President Erdoğan.

Conclusion: Making Sense of New Turkish Foreign Policy

While the foreign policy of the last two decades under the AKP government reveals some similarities to former governments in geopolitical terms aiming at broadening its scope, further diversification becomes apparent. The current Turkish government tries to establish the country as a *sui generis* middle power in the multipolar world order, striving for an active foreign policy and building relationships to influence international politics. In doing so, it shows growing self-confidence and, at the same time, increasing mistrust of other states. Although Turkey remains a Western state, the AKP is trying to broaden its scope. As Turkey tries to cooperate with Eastern and Western countries simultaneously, the Western anchor, the main pillar of Turkish foreign policy since 1945, has been losing its monopoly in Turkey's international relations. Turkey's new foreign policy is exemplified by its handling of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Its justified criticism of the world order established after the end of the Second World War is getting louder. Referring to the injustice of the UN Security Council, according to which the five permanent members (US, Russia, France, Great Britain, and China) have a veto right, President Erdoğan has declared consistently that "The world is bigger than five" and called for a fairer, more representative, more inclusive world order. This critique has echoed globally. At this point, Turkey, as a middle power, can contribute to bring about a change in the global system. However, Turkey's foreign policy under the AKP government, or rather under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has become increasingly unpredictable and inconsistent. Whether Turkey's balanced approach to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will remain as such in the future depends on many domestic and international factors.

President Erdoğan's opportunistic endeavour to play the West against the East and the East against the West cannot be a real and long-lasting policy. Turkey is trying to find its place in the multipolar global order. However, while increasingly turning away from the West with a supposed "balance policy", it also weakens itself vis-à-vis the East. The deeper and better Turkey's relations with the West are, the healthier its relations with other states and regions become. Erdoğan's biggest mistake is to misuse foreign policy for domestic political purposes. Thus, Erdoğan's statements and actions are those of an eager trader out for quick material gains but not those of a serious statesperson. (Yeşilyurt Gündüz 2022, 71). The primary distinction in the AKP's current policy is that - it is evident from the party's statements and actions, particularly those of President Erdoğan—the AKP government appears to be more focused on money and economic interests (Yeşilyurt Gündüz and Demirtaş 2022, 49).

This article argues that Turkey's policy of balance towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is a result of changes in the current global system, the AKP's

interpretation of these changes, and its construction of a new foreign policy for the country. Inspired by Copernican physics and Mevlana philosophy, there is a new understanding among the Turkish decision-making elite that the new foreign policy of Ankara must be centred around the interests of the country. Hence, flexibility, pragmatism, balanced approach, and multilateralism are important keywords.

Future research should focus on domestic determinants of Turkey's approach to the invasion of Ukraine. How the issue of regime survival is affecting Turkey's balanced foreign policy is an important question. Another important research question is the impact of the personal ties between Erdoğan and Putin and similar political systems on bilateral relations. In addition, the question of whether the Crimean Tatar associations in Turkey have a substantial impact on Turkish foreign policy is worth exploring further.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Part of this research was conducted by Prof. Dr. Demirtaş during her research stay at the Cologne Center for Comparative Studies at the University of Cologne, between June 20 and September 17, 2024 with a scholarship from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

The authors would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Prof. Dr. Fuat Keyman, a prominent professor of International Relations at Sabancı University, who passed away on 18 October 2024 and Şefkat Utsucarçı Tulun, a distinguished EU Expert at the Directorate for EU Affairs at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and PhD candidate at the Department of International Relations of Middle East Technical University, who passed away on 23 October 2024.

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Interview 10: Interview with a Turkish diplomat, August 20, 2024.

KADA PROMENLJIV MEĐUNARODNI POREDAK POGODI DOMAĆU AGENSNOŠT: SLUČAJ TURSKE I RUSKO-UKRAJINSKOG SUKOB

Apstrakt: Spoljna politika Turske privlači sve veću pažnju u akademskoj literaturi jer vlada Stranka pravde i razvoja (AKP) sprovodi proaktivne, multilateralne i fleksibilne međunarodne odnose, uključujući brojna promenljiva partnerstva, fluktuacije i kontradikcije. Stav Turske prema nedavnom sukobu između Rusije i Ukrajine predstavlja važan slučaj za dekonstruisanje glavnih komponenti spoljne politike vlade AKP-a pod vođstvom predsednika Redžepa Tajipa Erdogana prema kritičnoj tački u regionu. Ovaj članak ima za cilj da istraži pristup Ankare ratu između Rusije i Ukrajine, na osnovu interakcije promena u globalnoj strukturi i domaćoj politici. U radu se tvrdi da je promenljiv globalni sistem, praćen novom konstrukcijom identiteta AKP-a, odigrao presudnu ulogu u formulisanju turske spoljne politike prema sukobu zasnovane na balansiranju i pragmatizmu. Članak takođe zaključuje da spoljna politika Turske predstavlja važnu studiju slučaja za razumevanje kako sui generis srednje sile odgovaraju na globalne sukobe u promenljivom globalnom sistemu.

Ključne reči: Turska spoljna politika; Rusija; Ukrajina; Sui Generis srednje sile; identitet; pragmatizam; globalni sukobi; Crno more.