

## Russia - Ukraine War and Turkish Foreign Policy

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After Russia started the war in Ukraine, Türkiye found itself in a delicate position between the two antagonists. But this challenge may very well serve as an opportunity to emancipate itself into an independent pole of power, a full-fledged regional leader.

The current dynamics of the international political system in Europe provoked by the conflict in Ukraine demands every country to take its position towards all of the main points set up by both Russia and Ukraine with very little space to remain neutral. From the point of view of the European mainstream, as a member of NATO and a state still formally aspiring to join the European Union, Türkiye was supposed to become part of the Western coalition that formed its shape somewhere between spring and winter of 2022<sup>1</sup> with the principal aim to contain Russia and not let Ukraine lose its independence and regain territorial integrity. As this conflict developed, becoming the number one factor in European political agenda, no country could stay aside and all of EU and NATO member states, sooner or later, enthusiastically<sup>2</sup> or reluctantly<sup>3</sup>, joined the common view that Russia shall not win this war (another question is whether Ukraine shall win it and what would the supposed geopolitical parameters of its victory look like) and engaged in supporting Ukraine<sup>4</sup>.

But Ankara didn't uncritically follow the West neither in its rhetoric nor in the practical activity to encourage Ukrainian war effort, taking a maximally possible neutral position expressed in its refusal to actively support sanctions against Russia on the official level<sup>5</sup> and conducting mediation activity that requires frequent and active dialogues with Moscow<sup>6</sup>. Türkiye keeps stucked to its formal liabilities (for example in refusing to engage in the conflict as neither its territory nor the one of its NATO allies was attacked) and the international law (by supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine in its full internationally recognized borders including Donbass and Crimea) but at the same time avoids antagonizing Russia.

Ankara also eludes diplomatic exacerbation by trying to avoid interpreting this conflict in ideological terms (the ones that are the most difficult to find the common denominator and thus

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<sup>1</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/29/turkey-russia-ukraine-erdogan-putin-nato-geopolitical-wild-card/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://tvpworld.com/65795950/ukraine-europe-will-win-this-war-with-or-without-germany-polish-pm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/26/russia-will-not-win-the-war-in-ukraine-scholz>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/nato-won-t-allow-russia-to-win-ukraine-war-alliance-chief/2823236>

<sup>5</sup> <https://tass.com/politics/1427365>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220922-erdogan-emerges-a-key-mediator-in-ukraine-war>

serve to fuel the antagonism and not to eclipse it) and by paying more attention to its pragmatic aspects, the ones that may be solved relatively easily. And this attitude bring its fruits: it was soon after the war started noticed, acknowledged and appreciated by both sides as well as by the international community as a whole.

Despite the moral activation in the West as well as the patriotic boost in Russia, Turkish position was acknowledged without unnecessary emotional judgement on both sides: Western commentators and politicians avoid condemning Ankara for its stance towards the conflict (although they usually have much to say about other issues concerning Türkiye) and, at the same time, unlike in the past, Türkiye is not the negative hero of the Russian propaganda. The uncontroversial reaction from both sides, including that of the official Kiev reveals the understanding of the fact, that every conflict needs a peace broker and the existence of an intermediary that is in a position to keep contacting both sides increases chances to reach an acceptable ceasefire if not the overall peace deal. And while awaiting the final settlement, Ankara engages into provisional solutions of the critically important issues created by the ongoing conflict, such as the grain exportation deal and the exchange of the prisoners of war.

But the neutral position of Türkiye towards the conflict has much wider reasons and consequences than just positioning itself as an intermediary ready and apt to solve the immediate problems created by the conflict itself<sup>7</sup>. It is a part of a Turkish grand strategy designed to define country's role between Europe and Russia in the strategic perspective, long after the end of this war<sup>8</sup>. Ankara takes advantage of the opportunity created by the conflict to present, introduce and get accepted its renewed status of an independent element of a new international order in Eurasia.

Turkish foreign policy towards the EU and Russia conditioned by the geographical, institutional, strategic, economic and cultural factors is an example of realism based on national interest. As a country that do not envisage to become part of an integration project set out by either Brussels or Moscow in any foreseeable future, Türkiye's choice is to balance between the two in a way not to let any of them attain a position that would potentially hamper Ankara's strategic objectives. This requires to keep an equal distance from both sides avoiding the forms

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/turkey-and-the-debate-on-neutrality-in-the-ukraine-war.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/deciphering-turkeys-geopolitical-balancing-and-anti-westernism-in-its-relations-with-russia>

of engagement that would put Türkiye in a situation of growing dependence from external factors.

Until the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is settled, the new order in Eastern Europe is established and the terms of balance of power between Europe and Russia appear, the strategic prudence remains the optimal conduct. The possible engagement in fixing the future peace in Ukraine represents an opportunity to promote itself as a player of continental importance, but the exact timing and forms of involvement shall be chosen in an optimal moment: not sooner than the outcome of war is clear and not later than the window for mediation is closed.

Given the internal condition of both EU and Russia as well as the external challenges both of them face, it is difficult to make a clear prognosis of the exact vectors and forms of their strategy in the years to come: the overall external activity as well as their policy towards Türkiye specifically depend on the number of factors that are currently in a state of dynamic change and thus require a strategic adjustment which in its own turn is an object of discussion both in the EU and Russia. Therefore, their vision of relations with Türkiye and thus their policy towards Ankara remain unclear in the midterm and long-term perspectives. In such circumstances of having to deal with changeable partners, the most obvious strategy of Türkiye is to formulate the agenda of its interests independently and make a tactical try to check the readiness of both partners to accept Turkish conception, if not its realization.

In any scenarios of the Ukrainian crisis's termination, it is already obvious that Russia will consequently lose its position of a dominant power in the geopolitical space previously occupied by the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. What is more, it is possible that as a result of a military failure combined with the economic and social crisis, not only the already independent former Soviet republics but also several regions of the Russian Federation itself, namely the culturally Turkic ones may seek to activate their ties with external forces autonomously from Moscow. At the same time, European Union doesn't show any readiness to address the problems of the future post-Russian space, let alone elaborating a coherent strategy towards countries and peoples left with their problems by the process of a post-Soviet and post-Russian decolonization (of which an exact scale and consequences are uncertain). This situation creates a potential geopolitical niche Türkiye will be confronted with: a one that brings massive risks and difficulties but also the one that may promote it to the ranks of a full-scale Eurasian leader.

The changeable global context as well as a number of difficult regional problems in Türkiye's immediate international environment make this prudent and pragmatic foreign policy the most rational choice for Ankara. The overall strategic aim is to avoid being influenced by the negative consequences of the conflict and take a maximal benefit of the positive ones – enlarging its own decision-making margin without antagonizing international partners. In other words: taking position towards this or that issue on the basis of national interests and not under the pressure of external factors. Until now, this tactics turned out to be productive, but given the fact that the change of internal dynamics was accelerated by the war, to become a long-term strategy, it needs a constant review and adjustment.