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# Turkey's mediatory endeavours: Facilitating dialogue in the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Wysiłki mediacyjne Turcji: pośredniczenie w konflikcie Rosji z Ukrainą

**Abstract:** The article explores Turkey's ambitions to assume a proactive role as a mediator in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Positioned as a middle power striving to enhance its global standing, Turkey has dedicated itself to striking a delicate balance between Russia and Ukraine in its foreign policy. This is exemplified by Ankara's engagement in an ambiguous cooperative rivalry with Russia while strengthening its partnership with Ukraine, including military cooperation in the Black Sea Region. Given these circumstances, Turkey sees itself as naturally inclined to act as a facilitator in brokering a ceasefire and bringing about peace between the two conflicting parties. Some successes have already been achieved, with the grain initiative being a primary example thereof.

**Keywords:** Russia's invasion, Ukraine, Turkey, mediation, war

**Streszczenie:** W artykule omówione zostaną aspiracje Turcji do odgrywania aktywnej roli mediatora w wojnie rosyjsko-ukraińskiej. Jako średnia potęga dążąca do umacniania swoich globalnych wpływów, Turcja równoważy relacje z Rosją bliższymi stosunkami z Ukrainą. Przykładem tej strategii jest ambiwalentna polityka kooperatywnej rywalizacji z Rosją przy jednoczesnym umacnianiu stosunków, również w sferze militarnej, z Kijowem. Biorąc powyższe pod uwagę, Turcja postrzega siebie jako naturalnie predestynowaną do pośredniczenia między zwaśnionymi stronami w celu zaprowadzenia pokoju. Odniosła już na tym polu pewne sukcesy, czego przykładem jest inicjatywa zbożowa.

## Introduction

Over the course of the last fifteen years, Turkey has strengthened its standing on the international stage. Evolving from a semi-peripheral

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nation whose foreign policy primarily aligned with the interests of the United States, it has emerged as a more self-governing participant in global affairs, endeavouring to forge an autonomous foreign policy that encompasses both regional and global leadership aspirations across various domains. Turkey has rapidly transitioned from a state that pursued a traditional secondary role in international relations, heavily influenced by its alliance with Europe and the United States, to a nation aspiring to wield regional or even global influence<sup>1</sup>. It has been diversifying its bilateral relations and bolstering those which had not been previously prioritized or which had been merely a function of its relationship with its strategic partners.

Under the Justice and Development Party's government, which assumed power in 2002 and has ruled the country ever since, the practice of mediation and offering good offices has become a distinct feature of Turkish diplomacy, augmenting the country's standing and reputation on the global stage. Ankara has institutionalized its participation in the field of mediation through the submission of initiatives to the international community. Among others, Turkey together with Finland launched the "Mediation for Peace" initiative in the frame of the United Nations. The primary objective of this initiative is to promote the importance of mediation in preventing conflicts and resolving them as well as to secure more resources to support mediation efforts. Turkey also hosts "İstanbul Mediation Conferences"<sup>2</sup>.

Turkey's aspirations to play an active mediating role in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine have brought to light its perceived policy of cautious neutrality. Since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Turkey has stood out as the most accommodating NATO country towards Moscow, having refrained from implementing sanctions or cancelling flights between the two nations. Ankara has been advocating for the Western powers not to abruptly sever communication channels with Russia, but rather to partake in a constructive

- 1 A. Zarakol, *Problem areas for the new Turkish foreign policy*, "Nationalities Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity" 2012, vol. 40, no. 5, p. 740; T. Oğuzlu, *Turkish foreign policy in a changing world order*, "All Azimuth" 2018, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 127-139; J. Wódka, *Polityka zagraniczna średniej potęgi. Turcja jako stadium przypadku*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warsaw 2018.
- 2 *Peaceful resolution of conflicts and mediation*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/resolution-of-conflicts-and-mediation.en.mfa> [17.04.2023].

dialogue with the country in order to pave the way for peaceful reconciliation. At the same time, Turkey has been committed to maintaining a delicate equilibrium between Ukraine and Russia. In a strategic move, Ankara expediently closed its waterways to military vessels in the nascent stages of the conflict, which acted as a deterrent to Moscow's efforts to augment its naval forces. It has also not refrained from delivering arms to Ukraine. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has unequivocally showcased a firm dedication to safeguarding the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. This balancing act and strategic vacillation between Russia and Ukraine preordains Turkey, as believed by the country's elite, to mediate between the warring factions and bring peace to the region.

Consequently, the paper is divided into three sections. The first discusses Turkey-Russia relations and their ambivalent nature, reflected in both the close cooperation and areas of divergence and competition, which can be encapsulated by the term "cooperative rivalry". The second part is devoted to examining Turkey-Ukraine relations prior to the outbreak of the war, followed by a depiction of mediation efforts undertaken by Ankara in the context of Russian atrocities in Ukraine.

## 1. "Cooperative rivalry": 1. The ambivalence of Turkey-Russian relations

In the debate on Turkey's foreign policy, its relations with Russia have been described as an example of "cooperative rivalry"<sup>3</sup>. Although the interests of the two players often contradict each other in many areas, Ankara and Moscow skilfully navigate these differences. As has been noted in the literature, they effectively compartmentalize their bilateral relations, aiming to isolate problematic and contentious issues

3 Cf. J. Nye, *The cooperative rivalry of US-China relations*, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-america-relationship-cooperative-rivalry-byjoseph-s--nye-2018-11>. Marc Pierini writes about "conflictual connivance". M. Pierini, *Russia's posture in the Mediterranean: Implications for NATO and Europe*, Carnegie Europe, June 2021, p. 4, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2021-06-08\\_Pierini\\_RussiaMed\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2021-06-08_Pierini_RussiaMed_final.pdf) [19.04.2023]. Partners who share ambivalent ties of both cooperation and rivalry are referred to as "frenemies". Cf. J.W. Taliaferro, *Defending frenemies: Alliances, politics, and nuclear nonproliferation in US foreign policy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2019; T.E. Ceylan, *Israel and Turkey: Once comrades now frenemies*, "Contemporary Review of the Middle East" 2021, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 338-355; L. Haferlach, F. Tekin, J. Wódka, *Friends. foes. frenemies? Unpacking the future of EU-Turkey relations*, "Futures" 2018, vol. 97, pp. 53-62.

from their overall relationship<sup>4</sup>. This approach is particularly evident in the separation of economic and political affairs.

Due to this approach, Turkey's shooting down of a Russian fighter jet over Syria in 2015 (an event called "a stab in the back" by Vladimir Putin<sup>5</sup>), amounting to a potential *casus belli*, sparked little more than a short crisis in bilateral relations which the two countries relatively quickly put behind them, normalizing relations and restoring pragmatic cooperation. The relationship between Turkey and Russia can hardly be called an alliance; it is rather an opportunistic partnership from which both sides are trying to "squeeze out" maximum profits.

On the one hand, there is close cooperation in selected areas, and especially in trade and the energy sector<sup>6</sup>. Russia is Turkey's second-largest trade partner, while Turkey's investment in Russia exceeds USD 10 billion. In 2020, the TurkStream pipeline started to deliver natural gas not only to Turkey but also to southern European countries. From the perspective of the Turkey-Russia-Ukraine triangle, the inauguration of this pipeline holds significance as it diminishes Russia's reliance on transit through Ukraine (similar to the case of Nord Stream). Moreover, the nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, inaugurated in April 2023, is operated by the Russians.

The most conspicuous event indicating closer Turkish-Russian ties was Turkey's decision to purchase an S-400 air defence system from Russia (under pressure from its NATO allies, Ankara had previously cancelled a tender won by a Chinese vendor). This has long-term implications going far beyond the mere acquisition itself as it translates into "greater opportunities for cooperation with Russia in almost any field"<sup>7</sup>. This strategic decision created "long-lasting mutual depend-

4 Cf. R.E. Hamilton, A. Mikulska, *Cooperation, competition, and compartmentalization: Russian-Turkish relations and their implications for the West*, Black Sea Strategy Papers, Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/04/cooperation-competition-and-compartmentalization-russian-turkish-relations-and-their-implications-for-the-west/> [22.04.2023].

5 *Turkey downing of Russia jet "stab in the back" – Putin*, BBC, 24 November 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34913173> [22.04.2023].

6 Cf. Z. Öniş, Ş. Yılmaz, *Turkey and Russia in a shifting global order: cooperation, conflict, and asymmetric interdependence in a turbulent region*, "Third World Quarterly" 2016, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 71-95.

7 K. Strachota, A. Wilk, *S-400 dla Turcji. Eskalacja kryzysu w stosunkach turecko-amerykańskich*, "Komentarz OSW", 12 April 2019, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2019-06-12/s-400-dla-turcji-eskalacja-kryzysu-w-stosunkach-turecko> [23.04.2023].

encies” between Russia and Turkey<sup>8</sup>. Ankara’s move frustrated the U.S., which excluded Turkey from the F35 program and triggered the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Although the sanctions imposed on Turkey are of limited scope, the mere invocation of CAATSA against an important NATO ally exposes widening rifts in Turkish-Western relations, indicating a process of *de-Atlantization* in Turkey’s foreign policy and a shift towards forging alliances with new partners. Moreover, Russian-Turkish cooperation in the realm of security is also expanding across various other domains<sup>9</sup>.

On the other hand, it should be noted that Ankara’s and Moscow’s interests diverge in hotspot regions such as Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In the first two cases, Turkey and Russia are on opposite sides of the “barricade,” treating them as *de facto* proxy conflicts. While Russia is the main “sponsor” of Bashar al-Assad’s regime, Ankara’s strategic goal is to topple it. However, the two countries can sit down at the table despite these glaring discrepancies: the initiation of the Astana process with the participation of Iran and the 2019 Sochi agreement created a framework for a Turkish-Russian *modus vivendi* (but not without some tensions such as the fighting between Turkish and Syrian/Russian forces at the end of February 2020).

Also, in the energy sector, Turkey has diversified its sources of natural gas supplies with the TANAP and TAP pipelines passing through its territory; in addition, it has increased both LNG imports and domestic natural gas extraction. The share of Russian gas in Turkish imports has been on a decline (in 2019 it was 33%, down from more than 50% two years previously)<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, Turkey’s overarching goal to become an energy hub makes it necessary to break the Russian monopoly.

Another arena of rivalry in the shared neighbourhood of Turkey, Ukraine, and Russia, which is of existential importance to Ukrainian security, is the Black Sea. As noted by Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, the emer-

8 Cf. G. Dalay, *After the S-400 purchase: Where are Turkish-Russian relations heading?*, Point of View, SWP, 3 September 2019, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/after-the-s-400-purchase-where-are-turkish-russian-relations-heading> [23.04.2023].

9 Cf. O. Dursun-Özkanca, *Turkey-West relations: The politics of intra-alliance opposition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, pp. 113-125.

10 M. Temizer, *Russian share of Turkish gas imports falls as LNG rises*, Anadolu Agency, 5 April 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/russian-share-of-turkish-gas-imports-falls-as-ling-rises/1866403> [24.04.2023].

gence of an independent Ukraine in 1991 upended the centuries-old regional order, which over the past 30 years has been shaped by “two sets of dyadic relationships: Ukrainian-Russian and Turkish-Russian”<sup>11</sup>. Thus, it appears that the Ukrainian-Turkish partnership may also increasingly affect the balance of powers in the Black Sea basin.

Traditionally, both Turkey and Russia pursued a policy of “regional ownership” of the Black Sea. As noted by Mustafa Aydın, they created a Turkish-Russian “condominium,” preventing non-littoral actors from establishing a presence or conducting substantial activity in the region<sup>12</sup>. This policy manifested itself in excluding NATO and Western countries from the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR) formed on the initiative of Turkey in 2002 and consisting of Ukrainian, Russian, Turkish, Bulgarian, Georgian, and Romanian navies. This was also the case with Black Sea Harmony, yet another project initiated by Ankara in 2004, perceived as an alternative to NATO’s Active Endeavor mission. This promoted a closer dialogue about Black Sea security between Turkey and Russia<sup>13</sup>. What is equally important is that by strictly adhering to the 1936 Montreux Convention on the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, Ankara strove not to antagonize Moscow. This approach was in turn criticized by the United States as the Convention imposed restrictions on foreign ships entering the Black Sea.

While up to 2014, Turkey had been the dominant naval power in the Black Sea basin (the ratio of Turkish to Russian warships was 44 to 26)<sup>14</sup>, the balance of power in the region radically changed as a result of the annexation of Crimea, which became a Russian “stronghold.” Pursuant to a new version of its naval doctrine adopted in 2015, Russia began to intensively militarize the peninsula. Between 2014 and 2017,

11 D. Bazoğlu Sezer, *Ukraine, Turkey, and the Black Sea Region*, “Harvard Ukrainian Studies” 1996, vol. 20, p. 79.

12 M. Aydın, *The long view on Turkish-Russian rivalry and cooperation*, GMF, “On Turkey”, April 2020, no. 5, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/long-view-turkish-russian-rivalry-and-cooperation> [3.05.2023].

13 M. Çelikpala, E. Erşen, *Turkey’s Black Sea predicament: Challenging or accommodating Russia?*, “Perceptions. Journal of International Affairs” 2018, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 75.

14 P. Shlykov, *Russian-Turkish relations in the wider Black Sea region: Cooperation and competition*, “Perceptions Journal of International Affairs” 2018, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 98.

as many as 60,000 Russian troops were moved there<sup>15</sup> to bolster the country's anti-access ability and prevent NATO activity in the region. In addition to deploying an S-400 anti-missile system in Crimea, Russia radically strengthened its Black Sea fleet, also as a result of taking over Ukrainian resources.

Shifts in the Black Sea basin have begun to raise Turkish concerns and prompted a gradual reversal of its "regional ownership" policy. In 2016, at the time of tensions caused by the downing of the Russian plane, the Turkish president called on his NATO allies to become more active in the region; noting that due to NATO's absence, the Black Sea had turned into "a Russian lake," he said "We should enhance our coordination and cooperation in the Black Sea. We hope for concrete results from the NATO summit in Warsaw . . . The Black Sea should be turned into a sea of stability"<sup>16</sup>. The joint manoeuvres of NATO and Ukrainian navies in 2021, the largest in the 25-year history of the *Sea Breeze* exercises, demonstrated the growing involvement of non-littoral actors in this basin.

## 2. Turkey-Ukraine rapprochement

Before 2014, the strategic Turkey-Ukraine partnership, which had been initiated in 2011 with the establishment of the High-Level Strategic Council, was more of "an attribute of diplomatic rhetoric" rather than "a meaningful format of bilateral relations"; among the Ukrainian decision-makers, references to the prospect of closer cooperation with Turkey were "sporadic" and "declarative" in nature<sup>17</sup>. As a result of the dramatic change in the regional order after 2014, bilateral relations between the countries gained new momentum, with Turkey becoming a key partner for Kyiv. The national security strategy approved by President Volodymyr Zelensky in September 2020 featured not only Turkey but also Azerbaijan among Ukraine's second-

15 K. Åtland, *Redrawing borders, reshaping orders: Russia's quest for dominance in the Black Sea region, "European Security"* 2021, vol. 30, no. 2, p. 317.

16 *Erdogan: NATO'nun yüzünden Karadeniz Rus gölü oldu*, soL, 11 May 2016, <https://haber.sol.org.tr/toplum/erdogan-natonun-yuzunden-karadeniz-rus-golu-oldu-155577> [4.05.2023].

17 M. Vorotnyk, *Foreign policy audit. Ukraine-Turkey*, Discussion Paper, Kyiv 2016, p. 4, [http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Aud\\_Ukr\\_Turk\\_01\\_32\\_eng-2.pdf](http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Aud_Ukr_Turk_01_32_eng-2.pdf) [1.05.2023].

tier strategic partners with which the country intended to cooperate in the area of regional security.

The strengthening of Turkey-Ukraine ties has been reflected in an intensive exchange of top-level visits. The schedule of meetings after 2014 indeed looks impressive<sup>18</sup>. This sent a clear signal that at a critical moment in Kyiv-Moscow relations, Turkey will not shy away from extending “soft support” to Russia’s adversary, even if only in a verbal, symbolic way. At the time, Gennady Petrov entitled his article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* “Erdoğan turned to influencing Moscow via Kyiv: Turkey is playing the Ukrainian card in its grand game with Russia”<sup>19</sup>. At the end of 2020, bilateral consultations started to be held in a new format called the quadriga, involving meetings of the foreign affairs and defence ministers of the two countries as well as some lower-level meetings<sup>20</sup>. Although Erdoğan declared that diplomatic interactions with Ukraine were “not in any way a move against third countries”<sup>21</sup>, the Turkish president’s verbal support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine offered during Zelensky’s visit in April 2021 (Ankara reiter-

- 18 In March 2015 and 2016, as part of official visits, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Petro Poroshenko met in Ukraine and Turkey respectively. The following year, in October, the Turkish President paid a visit to Ukraine. Both leaders also met on the sidelines of important international events, with the Ukrainian President flying to Turkey for the inauguration of the TANAP pipeline in 2018. In the same year, he visited Istanbul and participated in the 7th session of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council. In January 2019, another meeting between Erdoğan and Poroshenko took place, and after the elections in Ukraine, the new President made an official visit to Turkey in August. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Ukraine in February 2021 as part of the 8th session of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council. On the other hand, Volodymyr Zelensky visited Ankara in October, and later, in April 2021, he led the Ukrainian delegation at another session of the Council. For more information, please visit the official website of the President of the Republic of Turkey. <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/> [1.05.2023].
- 19 Г. Петров, *Эрдоган решил воздействовать на Москву через Киев. Турция разыгрывает украинскую карту в большой игре с Россией*, “Независимая газета”, [G. Petrov, *Erdogan reshil vozdeystvovat' na Moskvu cherez Kiev. Turtsiya razygryvaet ukrainskuyu kartu v bol'shoy igre s Rossiey*, “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”], 11 April 2021, [https://www.ng.ru/world/2021-04-11/1\\_8125\\_turkey.html](https://www.ng.ru/world/2021-04-11/1_8125_turkey.html) [3.05.2023].
- 20 *Ukraine and Turkey hold political and security consultations in the Quadriga format at the level of national coordinators*, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych Ukrainy, 24 March 2021, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/ukraine-and-turkey-held-political-and-security-consultations-quadriga-format-level-national-coordinators> [3.05.2023]; *Dışişleri Bakanı Çavuşoğlu: Kırım Platformuna desteğimizi bugün bir kere daha yineledik*, Anadolu Ajansı, 18 December 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/disisleri-bakani-cavusoglu-kirim-platformuna-destegimizi-bugun-bir-kere-daha-yineledik/2081611>.
- 21 *Turkey's Erdogan calls for end to “worrying” developments in eastern Ukraine, offers support*, Reuters, 10 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-turkish-presidents-hold-talks-amid-donbass-tensions-with-russia-2021-04-10/> [4.05.2023].



ated that it does not recognize the annexation of Crimea and endorses Ukraine's sovereignty, at the same time expressing support for Kyiv's Crimea Platform initiative)<sup>22</sup> provoked strong reactions from Moscow. In an interview, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recommended "that our Turkish colleagues carefully analyse the situation and stop fuelling Kyiv's militaristic sentiment," stating that Turkish encouragement of Ukrainian aggressive actions with respect to Crimea amounted to the violation of Russian territorial integrity and calling on Ankara to change its stance<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, Turkey broached a sensitive topic by expressing support for Ukraine's endeavours to join NATO and its application for the NATO Membership Action Plan, as stated in the joint communique issued after a meeting between the two presidents in April<sup>24</sup>.

Turkey's diplomatic involvement in stabilizing eastern Ukraine is also reflected in the fact that the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, deployed in 2014, has been headed by Turkish diplomats. In July 2021, during the Fourth Ukraine Reform Conference entitled "Strong Ukraine in a Stronger European and Euro-Atlantic Family" held in Vilnius, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that Turkey was willing to host its next edition<sup>25</sup>.

The cooperation for regional security envisioned in the Ukrainian strategy has been reflected in the recent collaboration between the defence industries of the two countries. Under a 2018 agreement, Ukraine purchased from Turkey six TB2 Bayraktar drones, which were first deployed by the Ukrainian army in April 2021 for reconnaissance flights in Donbas. Before the outbreak of the war, Ukrainians had also

- 22 "Our primary goal is that the Black Sea continues to be a sea of peace and cooperation", Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 10 April 2021, <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/en/news/542/126545/-our-primary-goal-is-that-the-black-sea-continues-to-be-a-sea-of-peace-and-cooperation-> [4.05.2023]; *Türkiye'nin Kırım politikası ve "Kırım Platformu"*, Cumhuriyet, 7 June 2021, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiyenin-kirim-politikasi-ve-kirim-platformu-1842437> [4.05.2023].
- 23 *Russia warns Turkey over ties with Ukraine*, Reuters, 24 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-warns-turkey-over-ties-with-ukraine-2021-05-24/> [5.05.2023].
- 24 *Türkiye ile Ukrayna arasında 20 maddelik ortak bildiri*, TRT HABER, 10 April 2021, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/turkiye-ile-ukrayna-arasinda-20-maddelik-ortak-bildiri-571807.html> [5.05.2023].
- 25 *Bakan Çavuşoğlu: "Ukrayna ve NATO arasında devam edecek işbirliği, güçlü ve bağımsız bir Ukrayna için çok önemli"*, Haberler.com, 7 July 2021, <https://www.haberler.com/bakan-cavusoglu-ukrayna-ve-nato-arasinda-devam-14252270-haberi/> [5.05.2023].

been trying to convince their Turkish partners that Ukrainian know-how may help Turkey with “the weakest link” in the process, that is, the production of drone engines<sup>26</sup>. In the middle of July 2021, it was revealed that Turkey purchased 14 engines for its ATAK-2 combat helicopters<sup>27</sup>.

### **3. Turkey as a mediator in Russia-Ukraine war**

Already before the outbreak of the war on the February 24th, when the tensions between Moscow and Kyiv were escalating, Turkey proffered its services of mediating between Russia and Ukraine. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan explicitly stated his willingness to engage in such efforts, stating on January 21 – a month prior to the initiation of all-out hostilities – that “we can mediate between the parties”<sup>28</sup>.

During his official visit to Kyiv in February 2022, amidst escalating tensions between Ukraine and Russia, the Turkish president emphasised the need for restraint, reiterated Turkey’s support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and called for a de-escalation of hostilities. His dedication to finding a peaceful solution to the crisis was commended by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on February 7. Turkish media sources highlighted Erdoğan’s unwavering commitment to promoting regional peace, particularly as he strongly condemned Russia’s recognition of the independence of the “so-called Donetsk and Luhansk Republics” on February 22nd, deeming it an intolerable course of action.

- 26 *Ukraine eyes more joint defense projects with Turkey*, Anadolu Ajansı, 3 February 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/ukraine-eyes-more-joint-defense-projects-with-turkey/2132853> [6.05.2023]. Turkey faces a structural problem with its domestic production of engines for various types of weaponry, including tanks, combat aircraft, and helicopters. In this area, Turkey is heavily reliant on external supplies. Cf. B.E. Begdil, *Turkey’s ‘chronic engine problem’ is harming defense projects, warn officials*, DefenseNews, 26 April 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/techwatch/2020/06/26/turkeys-chronic-engine-problem-is-harming-defense-projects-warn-officials/> [5.05.2023].
- 27 A. Alemdar, *Ağır sınıfı taarruz helikopteri ATAK-II'nin motorları Ukrayna'dan gelecek*, DefenceTurk.net, 14 March 2021, <https://www.defenceturk.net/agir-sinif-taarruz-helikopteri-atak-iinin-motorlari-ukraynadan-gelecek> [7.05.2023]
- 28 *Ukrayna-Rusya Savaşı'nın birinci yılında Türkiye'nin arabulucu rolü*, Anadolu Ajansı, 24 February 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/gorus-ukrayna-rusya-savasinin-birinci-yilinda-turkiye-nin-arabulucu-rolu/2829905#> [7.05.2023].

On February 24th, Erdoğan unequivocally condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, characterizing it as a serious impediment to regional peace, stability, and tranquillity. He reaffirmed Turkey's support for Ukraine's ongoing efforts to safeguard its territorial integrity, emphasizing the importance of upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations<sup>29</sup>.

The Antalya Diplomacy Forum held in March 2022 marked a significant moment in the Ukraine-Russia conflict as it brought together high-level officials – Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba – for a discussion moderated by the Turkish foreign minister<sup>30</sup>. This event was followed by another significant development on 29 March 2022, when peace negotiations between Russian and Ukrainian delegations were held in Istanbul. The progress made during these talks was described by Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu as the “most significant” since the conflict began<sup>31</sup>. On the same day, the 8th, the Istanbul Mediation Conference was held<sup>32</sup>.

Ceasefire negotiations involving Russia and Turkey as mediators reached an impasse due to the disclosure of war atrocities committed by Russian forces. Despite this setback, Turkey persevered in its role as a mediator and pursued dialogue with Russia on matters pertaining to the humanitarian evacuation from Mariupol and food security.

On 22 September 2022, an unforeseen agreement on a prisoner swap was reached between Ukraine and Russia, with Turkish mediation. The accord led to the release of more than 250 detainees, comprising 215 Ukrainians and 55 Russian and pro-Russian combatants. The international community lauded the agreement, which also fa-

29 *President Erdoğan: Russia's decision to recognise the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk Republics is unacceptable*, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 22 February 2022, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-russias-decision-to-recognise-the-so-called-donetsk-and-luhansk-republics-is-unacceptable> [5.05.2023].

30 *Türkiye-Rusya-Ukrayna üçlü dışişleri bakanları toplantısı*, T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-rusya-ukrayna-uclu-disisleri-bakanlari-toplantisi--10-mart-2022.en.mfa> [5.05.2023].

31 *Russia says it will reduce military activity near Ukraine capital*, Al-Jazeera, 29 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/29/no-handshake-as-ukraine-russia-envoys-meet-for-peace-talks> [8.05.2023].

32 *Ukrayna ve Rusya heyetleri İstanbul'da görüştü*, Seta Foundation, 1 April 2022, [https://setad.org.ukrayna-ve-rusya-heyetleri-istanbulda-gorustu/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=ukrayna-ve-rusya-heyetleri-istanbulda-gorustu](https://setad.org.ukrayna-ve-rusya-heyetleri-istanbulda-gorustu/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=ukrayna-ve-rusya-heyetleri-istanbulda-gorustu) [8.05.2023].

cilitated the release of ten foreign nationals from the United States and the United Kingdom. During a January 2023 international conference in Ankara, attended by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ukraine's human rights ombudsman, Dmytro Lubinets, met with his Russian counterpart Tatyana Moskalkova on the sidelines. Following their meeting, an announcement was made that the two sides had reached an agreement to exchange "more than 40 prisoners" each, though this was subsequently retracted.

The Turkish mediation played a pivotal role in brokering an agreement<sup>33</sup> between Turkey, the United Nations, Russia, and Ukraine in Istanbul, resulting in the reopening of a number of Ukrainian ports to release a stockpile of grain that had been stranded for several months due to the persistent conflict. Black Sea Grain Initiative has been vital in addressing an escalating global food crisis and averting a worldwide food shortage. An Istanbul-based Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) comprising officials from the three concerned nations and the United Nations has been established to monitor the implementation of the Initiative and manage the transportation of goods from Ukraine's Black Sea ports<sup>34</sup>.

The initial agreements regarding the export of food and fertilizers from Ukraine's Black Sea ports were set to last for 120 days. In October 2022, following the suspected air and sea attacks on Russian naval vessels in Sevastopol, Crimea, Russia suspended its participation in the agreement. Russia maintains that Ukrainian air and sea forces may have conducted the attacks, allegedly utilizing civilian ships to carry out the operation. It was only after Ukraine furnished written assurances, brokered by Turkish mediation, that Russia agreed to recommence its involvement in the Black Sea grain initiative – the agreement was extended for another 120 days. The successful resolution of the crisis was the result of diplomatic efforts spearheaded by the President, Defence Minister, and Foreign Minister of Turkey, who worked to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. Furthermore, on 18 March 2023, Russia announced a 60-day extension

33 [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/black\\_sea\\_grain\\_initiative\\_full\\_text.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/black_sea_grain_initiative_full_text.pdf) [8.05.2023].

34 *Tahil sevkiyatı üssü İstanbul'da resmi olarak açıldı*, NTV, 27 July 2022, [https://www.ntv.com.tr/du-nya/tahil-sevkiyatı-ussu-istanbulda-aciliyor,2Qx-5jC3woG\\_6L8lDZLOjg](https://www.ntv.com.tr/du-nya/tahil-sevkiyatı-ussu-istanbulda-aciliyor,2Qx-5jC3woG_6L8lDZLOjg) [8.05.2023].

of the grain deal, stating that this would be sufficient time to evaluate the success of the memorandum that was signed with the United Nations<sup>35</sup>. According to the United Nations, under the terms of the agreement, Ukraine has been able to export a total of approximately 28.8 million tons of agricultural products, which includes 14.6 million tons of corn and 7.8 million tons of wheat.

In January 2023, during a phone call with Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Erdogan reiterated his willingness to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the conflict through mediation. President Erdogan has made repeated efforts to convene a peace summit in Turkey, with the aim of bringing together Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

## Conclusions

Turkey finds itself in a unique position, balancing its role as a formal ally of Western states while simultaneously striving for independence and greater regional and global influence. This dynamic is evident in Turkey's proactive engagement as a mediator, aiming to facilitate a sustainable cease-fire between Ukraine and Russia. By assuming the role of mediator and maintaining open communication channels with both conflicting parties, Turkey has injected hope into diplomatic efforts towards resolving the Ukraine crisis and achieving a lasting peace. This indicates Turkey's growing inclination to assert its independence and play a more autonomous role in shaping global affairs.

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