

**Speaking Points of George Vlad Niculescu, EGF Head of Research at  
the Romanian Diplomatic Institute Debates (13-15 January 2021)**

**Panel 1: Turkey and the West**

**Turkey' Relations with the West in the 2020's: Constrained to  
Unavoidable Ups and Downs due to Ongoing Geopolitical  
Changes?**

**Background**

- Turkey's relations with the West have been marred by significant tensions since 2003 when the Turkish Parliament rejected the access to Turkish territory of the US troops during the war in Iraq. Moreover, in the aftermath of Romanian and Bulgarian accession to NATO, the access of allied naval forces to the Black Sea and the role of non-Littoral states in regional cooperation have been subjects of contention between the US and Turkey.
- In the aftermath of the July 2016 failed coup d'état against Turkish president Recep Erdogan, Turkey's relations with the West have become most volatile and multi-layered, with repeated ups and downs triggered by specific domestic or international events.
- Turkey today has become more nationalist and inclined to assert its political and military power than in recent years. This is in part due to the political ambitions and the personality of President Erdogan, but it might have also resulted from some other factors such as past economic growth and historical heritage.
- The rapprochement between Turkey and Russia in the first decade of the 2000s was rather a result of several developments. Russia has realized Turkey's

aspiration to become a regional player and decided to offer Ankara nothing less than an equal partnership with Moscow.

- However, the current Moscow-Ankara relationship is one of convenience: the two nations must cooperate due to each other's vested though not necessarily coincidental interests in the Caspian Sea, Black Sea, and in the Middle East. In the meantime, Russia and Turkey have expanded their regional reach from the Wider Black Sea towards the Middle East and Northern Africa having set military strongholds in Syria and growing their political and military involvement in Libya.

## **Turkey Today**

- Turkey's response to the pandemic crisis has been marked by tensions between the scientific approach, promoted by the group of medical scientists under the Ministry of Health, and president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political priorities: ensuring his re-election in 2023 by saving the economy, and keeping his Islamist and nationalist power bases happy. ([nationalinterest.org](http://nationalinterest.org))
- Meanwhile, the domestic consequences of the coronavirus crisis might yield, at least in the short term, serious uncertainties regarding Turkey's ability to sustain the expansion of its regional influence. Therefore, Turkey's need to "walk on a tight rope in the attempt to play Russia against the United States and Europe" might come once again into the play.
- However, Turkey's zigzagging policy between NATO allies and Russia has been neither new nor narrowly focused on Syria or the Middle East. From this perspective, Ankara's recent openings to Kyiv and Tbilisi should be taken at their face value: tactical moves to get leverage over Russian policy in the MENA (Syria,

Libya) by pursuing active defence cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia, Russian local adversaries in the Wider Black Sea.

### **Prospects for the future**

- According to STRATFOR's 2021 Annual Forecast:
  - 1) Competition between Sunni Middle Eastern powers will stoke regional instability in 2021. While Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Qatar will paper over some diplomatic differences to ease the establishment of new relationships with the incoming Biden administration, their long-standing rivalries will remain unresolved.
  - 2) Turkey's Volatile Political Economy Will Make for an Aggressive Foreign Policy. Continued economic volatility due to global macroeconomic factors will lead Ankara to posture abroad to bolster its political position at home. A need to deflect domestic discontent over the economy will drive Turkey to intensify its aggressive regional posture.
  - 3) Turkey will steadily deepen its oil and gas exploration in the Mediterranean despite growing European and regional complaints and will advance its efforts to quash Kurdish militancy in Iraq and Syria in the name of counterterrorism despite Western pushback and the risk of clashes with other forces in the battle spaces, such as the Russians in Syria.

### **Conclusion: The European Union and Turkey: Time for a Reset of a Strained Relationship?**

- The relevance of improving the EU-Turkey relations, including within the European neighbourhoods, has been mutually acknowledged. On the other hand, Turkey has not only entrenched its fundamental values and interests away from Europe, but it

has strived for its return to a historical prominence within its neighbourhood dating back to the Ottoman rule. Driven by an Islamist agenda, Turkey has expanded its geopolitical horizons towards the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region.

- Those changes have dramatically altered the geopolitical outlook of Turkey-West relations, as they were shaped during the post-Cold War era. Consequently, Turkish interests have inevitably clashed with some of the EU member states' strategic interests.
- Albert Einstein once said: "in the midst of every crisis, lies a great opportunity". The EU should also grasp the opportunity ensuing from its currently strained relationship with Turkey to find a way to reset it on the basis of principled pragmatism.
- To that end, the EU (as the US has already started to do) should learn to leverage relations with Turkey as it is today: Islamist, more nationalistic, less democratic, but mostly authoritarian ruled; geopolitically more assertive but economically volatile; strategically essential at both the Eastern and Southern flanks, but more than a difficult NATO ally and EU partner.
- It would be probably much wiser to sync EU members states' policies on Turkey into a change of strategic tack striving to engage Ankara into "positive sum game" deals rather than quarrel for each and every point of contention.
- The starting point of any prospective reset in EU-Turkey relations should start with both sides rising above the largely regretful experience of Turkey's EU membership aspirations. Hence, in the 2020s, a new political, economic and security association/ partnership legal framework should be envisaged for being developed jointly with the new Turkey.