

The Russian-Turkish Reset

 fpri.org/article/2016/08/russian-turkish-reset/

August 8, 2016

E-Notes

[Gallia Lindenstrauss](#), [Zvi Magen](#)

Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss is a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies.



Zvi Magen is a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies and former Israeli ambassador to Russia and Ukraine.



As Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin are set to meet face to face on August 9th for the first time since the downing of the Russian jet on November 24, 2015 by the Turkish Air Force, attention needs to be given to how this relationship managed to bounce back from the point of nadir. Both sides attribute much importance to the visit, and it will be monitored closely by other international actors and specifically the United States. More than the issues on the agenda, the significance of the visit is in its very existence. For the Turks, it is important to demonstrate improved relations with Russia both to its domestic audience and to the West. For the Russians, it is a good opportunity to show the West that it has once again achieved the political gain of getting close to a NATO ally—one with which it has had diverging views on the Syrian issue. Russia is approaching this issue in a similar manner to which it had approached other issues in the Middle East and beyond—namely, it has tried to play on the disagreements of certain states within the West and even create de facto alliances of “outcasts.”

The downing of the jet was an unusual interlude in Russian-Turkish relations, as the Turks had exercised a great deal of caution in the past with regard to the Russians. After the downing of the jet, Russia reacted harshly, imposing, for example, restrictions on the import of agricultural and food products from Turkey; halting charter flights between the two countries; and placing restrictions on Turkish firms operating in Russia. Moreover, Moscow voiced some harsh rhetoric regarding Turkey’s cooperation with the Islamic State, including even lobbing personal accusations against Erdogan’s family in this regard. While the gradual cessation of tensions

between Turkey and Russia began shortly before the attempted coup in Turkey on July 15, the failed coup not only gave a boost to this development but has also in many respects ensured the durability of their rebuilding of relations.

Prior to the failed coup attempt in Turkey, as part of Ankara's attempts to reset its foreign policy (that also included the signing of a normalization agreement between Turkey and Israel), Erdogan sent a letter of regret to the Russian President on June 27 over the downing of the jet and expressed his desire to do everything possible to repair the relationship. The first manifestation of the improved atmosphere was the resumption of charter flights from Russia to Turkey. Indeed, the sharp drop in the number of Russian tourists coming to Turkey (Turkey experienced a 92% decrease in Russian tourists in May 2016, compared to May 2015), alongside a more general drop in the number of tourists coming to Turkey, was likely a main driving force for Turkey to ease tensions.

More fundamentally, however, were Turkish fears regarding Russian support of the Kurdish minority both within Turkey and in Syria. Specifically, Turkey was worried about Russian support to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which operates in Turkey. The opening of the PYD office in Moscow in February 2016, as well as reports of Russian military support to the group, added to the Turkish frustration that the U.S. was also assisting the PYD. Moreover, this assistance by these global powers not only contributed to the PYD advances in Northern Syria, but also exacerbated Turkish fears that the Kurds may succeed in gaining full control over the land strip adjoined to the Turkish-Syrian border.

The reset of Ankara's foreign policy may also include a reset of its relations with Syria, which would be a positive development from the Russian perspective. Russia is interested in reaching understandings with Turkey in the immediate future with regards to developments in Aleppo, which can have a crucial impact on the Syrian Civil War. Specifically, the Russians want Turkey to stop supplying the Syrian rebels and the Nusra Front. In addition, the Russians want to cooperate with the Turks in the struggle against the Islamic State and other Islamist terror groups that Russia sees as also endangering its own territory. Moreover, the recent setbacks Russia has encountered in its own foreign policy—the fact that the sanctions imposed on Russia by European countries and the U.S. following the events in Ukraine remain intact, and that NATO decisions in the Warsaw Summit in July 2016 were considered harsh from the Russian viewpoint—has made it even more attractive to draw Turkey closer to Russia and to encourage the burgeoning wedge between Turkey and NATO.

In the early hours of July 16, Putin called Erdogan to convey the message that he was staunchly against the acts of the coup-plotters. Shortly after, Turkish President Erdogan voiced his hope that the two leaders would soon meet face to face. In an obviously related development, the two Turkish pilots who were involved in the downing of the Russian jet plane in November were detained following the failed coup attempt. This gives the two states even more room to maneuver, as the Russian side is satisfied with the fact that these individuals have been arrested and the Turkish side can add the blame for the downing of the plane to the long list of accusations against the Gulen movement it claims is behind the failed coup attempt. It should be emphasized that Moscow was equally discontent over the years with the Gulen Movement's activities in Russia and in the former Soviet Union, as it encouraged Islamist and pan-Turkish tendencies in the area.

During the crisis between Turkey and Russia, the area of energy cooperation remained relatively isolated from the tensions between the states. Beside sporadic disturbances, Russia did not halt its energy exports to Turkey. However, the idea of building the "Turkish Stream" pipeline (for the future transfer of natural gas from Russia to Turkey, and from there to Europe) was put on freeze. At that time, pundits pointed to the fact that the project was problematic to begin with. Still, following the Turkish-Russian rapprochement, Russia's Energy Minister reported intentions to resume the feasibility tests of the Turkish Stream project. In terms of cooperation in the civilian nuclear realm—Russia's *Rosatom* is currently constructing Turkey's first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu. While there were no reports that the project was halted during the crisis between the states, *in April 2016, the Russian company announced its plans to sell 49 percent of its ownership of the reactor—a step that was to occur in any event but took place sooner than expected.* Following the rapprochement, the Russian side has voiced its satisfaction with the fact that all legal obstacles to the construction of the power plant have been removed.

Growing criticism from the West regarding Erdogan's post-coup purge of supposed plotters in all sectors of the

country is likely to make Turkey more adamant in patching up its relations with Russia. Turkish officials decry the fact that Western leaders and media were not empathetic to the trauma that Turkey endured, and that instead of focusing on condemning the coup they were mostly occupied with criticizing Ankara's policies in response to it. Erodgan's warming of relations with Putin does not reflect his desire to completely break away from Turkey's Western allies, but rather are meant to show that he has other options, and specifically, a "Russian Option." This is important in light of growing criticism against his authoritarian tendencies, and in order to strengthen Turkey's position in the global arena. The tendency toward a more independent Turkish foreign policy is not new, but is rather a reflection of both Turkey's growing capabilities and ambitions as well as deeply rooted anti-Western and specifically anti-American feelings. Accusations that the U.S also had a hand in the failed coup have intensified these anti-American feelings. While the U.S has adamantly rejected these claims, several actors, including Russia, have an interest in keeping these allegations alive in the public discourse.

Still, Russian-Turkish relations are far from being streamlined. Even if some inexplicit deal has been reached and Turkey has changed its basic stance toward the conflict in Syria, it is questionable whether Russia can indeed deliver in restraining the PYD from further advancement in Northern Syria. Moreover, the dire humanitarian situation in Syria, and specifically in Aleppo, will put pressure on Turkey to re-open its border to refugee flows. Increase in refugee numbers as well as the likelihood for continued terror attacks on Turkish soil by Islamic State operatives, will make it difficult for Turkey to limit its criticism on Assad specifically, and the continuation of the civil war in Syria in general.

The Erdogan-Putin August meeting is likely to be a beginning of a new phase in Turkish-Russian relations. While the U.S. and other NATO members are concerned this new phase could even lead to the withdrawal of Turkey from NATO, this is not likely. Still, there needs to be a greater understanding in the West of the magnitude of the impact of the failed coup on Turkish domestic and international policies. It was a watershed event and hence the U.S. should be well attuned to Turkish policies following the coup. The new independent line in Turkey's foreign policy, in which at times it will be aligned with Western policies, while at others it will be closer to Russian positions, is likely to be a feature that is here to stay.