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RUSSIAN OCTOPUS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

identifying vulnerable areas - strengthening resilience

Case of **TÜRKIYE**





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Russian Octopus in the Black Sea Region: Identifying Vulnerable Areas and Strengthening Resilience. Case of Türkiye

For centuries, the relationship between Türkiye and Russia has been the one of interdependencies and conflictual cooperation. Though never trusted, Moscow has always held a special place in Turkish strategic thinking – as a rival, a partner or an adversary.

Author:

Yevgeniya Gaber, Senior Fellow, Centre in Modern Turkish Studies, Carleton University

Editor:

Hanna Shelest, Security Studies Program Director, Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



For centuries, the relationship between Türkiye and Russia has been the one of interdependencies and conflictual cooperation. Though never trusted, Moscow has always held a special place in Turkish **strategic thinking** – as a rival, a partner or an adversary.

Despite rapid advancement of military and defence capabilities in recent decades, Türkiye still has not fully overcome a “**Great Russia**” **myth** stemming from its defeats in Russo-Ottoman wars. During the Cold War era, Turkish foreign policy-making was dominated by a security mindset of a NATO’s flank country facing the Soviet threat. Nowadays, this perception of Russia as a major regional power has often determined Ankara’s acknowledgement and accommodation of Russian interests even when they have been contrary to its own. At the same time, a **deep-rooted lack of trust to the West and a historical tradition of neutrality** have largely shaped Türkiye’s current position, justifying cooperation with Russia as an alternative to the US-led unipolar world.

Ankara’s Russia policy is highly unlikely to take a U-turn in the mid-term. Whatever the outcome of the 2023 elections, a broad consensus among government and oppositional parties reflects a widely shared understanding in Türkiye that Russia is a powerful neighbour that geography dictates to get along with, if not by choice, then out of obligation. Despite the fact that Russia is Türkiye’s strategic rival in the Black Sea, Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean, a belief that **Türkiye cannot refuse from cooperation with Russia** is similarly shared by the country’s leadership, business community and people.

Besides, from a Turkish perspective, involvement in a number of **regional conflicts** where Türkiye and Russia support opposite sides (Georgia, Ukraine, South Caucasus, Syria, Libya) makes coordination, if not cooperation, with Moscow a necessary precondition for risk management and de-escalation. While in certain cases these coordination mechanisms might be helpful to avoid major crises, they also create additional leverages for Russia over Türkiye’s foreign policy decision-making, first and foremost in Syria. Oftentimes Russia has used its military presence in multiple regional conflicts as mutually

reinforcing bargaining chips in negotiations with Ankara over other issues.

Domestically, Türkiye is dependent on Russian gas (45%), oil (20%), coal (40%) and nuclear energy (with Russian “Rosatom” building Türkiye’s first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu and discussing a new deal to build the second plant in Sinop). Türkiye enjoys burgeoning trade relations with Russia covering a wide range of areas (USD 35 bn of bilateral trade in 2021, which has doubled since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022). In 2022, Russia topped the list of countries Türkiye imported from and ranked fourth as one of the main export destinations for Turkish goods and services. Russia also remains the largest source country of tourists for Türkiye.

Throughout the history, **Russia has weaponized economic dependencies against Türkiye – from agricultural embargoes to travel bans to energy blackmailing to refugee crises.** With Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which coincided in time with the economic crisis in Türkiye, the importance of two countries for each other has grown steadily. After introduction of the European and US sanctions, an increasingly isolated Putin’s regime has seen Türkiye as one of the few remaining “windows to Europe”. In its turn, Türkiye has found ways to benefit from Russia as a valuable trading partner and a source of financial support for its banking system. Besides economic benefits, Russia’s efforts to turn Türkiye into a “regional hub” for Russian gas, oil, oligarchs, financial operations and tourists aim to further undermine Ankara’s already complicated relations with its European and transatlantic partners.

The structural and conjunctural dependencies of Türkiye on Russia, both internationally and domestically, are aggravated by a highly centralized decision-making process under the executive presidency model and the vulnerabilities of a polarized Turkish society to external influences and manipulations. This exposes the country to a variety of **Russian info ops, perception management and reflexive control operations** aimed at inciting **anti-Western sentiments and Eurasianist ideas** among Türkiye’s political, military elites, and common people. The overlapping anti-Western and Eurasianist narratives of Russian propaganda and Turkish domestic political agenda have allowed (pro-)Russian commentators to gain significant popularity in Turkish media, disseminating distinctly pro-Russian views in mainstream media networks, both pro-government and opposition, right-wing as well as left-wing. An increasingly nationalistic rhetoric of the government in the wake of the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections fuels this trend.

MAIN VULNERABILITIES OF TÜRKİYE TO RUSSIAN INFLUENCES



Wide consensus across the political spectrum that Russia is a powerful state whose interests must be respected, and cooperation with Russia must be maintained



Involvement in regional conflicts backing opposing forces, from Syria and Libya to Ukraine to Southern Caucasus



Lack of defence cooperation with NATO partners, making Russia a “single option on the table” (S-400 case)



Economic dependences on Russian gas (45%), oil (20%), coal (40%), nuclear technologies (Akkuyu) as well as Russian markets, tourists, and financial resources



Wide-spread anti-Western sentiments in Turkish society and overlapping narratives with Russian propaganda

Overall, the wide-spread anti-Westernism in Turkish society, mounting problems in Türkiye’s relations with the EU and NATO, benefits of economic cooperation with Russia, current media landscape, and sensitive political environment ahead of critical elections create a fertile soil for growing Russian influence. Against this backdrop, **efforts should be stepped up** to keep the country engaged with the West, both politically and economically. Reinvigorating negotiations to upgrade Customs Union with the EU, based on clear conditionality; reviving dialogue within NATO on defence technologies, and supporting Ankara’s efforts to diversify energy supplies would help decouple Türkiye from Russia as an “indispensable” partner. Expanding Türkiye’s military and humanitarian cooperation with Ukraine to deter Russian aggression would both strengthen Türkiye’s position vis-à-vis Moscow and reinforce its role as an important NATO member in the region. Last but not least, Western partners should boost cooperation with Turkish civil society on cyber and information security, which is crucial for countering Russian disinformation, bolstering Türkiye’s resilience to external malign influences, and for the country’s own democratic future.



“Great Russia” Myths and Distrust of the West

The memory of military defeats and territorial losses in **the Russo-Ottoman wars**, as well as the decades-long confrontation of the Cold-War era, have predefined Türkiye’s modern stance vis-à-vis Russia. The Ottomans fought against the Russian Empire twelve times in the XVIII-XX centuries, the largest number of wars conducted by the Ottomans against any foe. Almost all of them ended up in their defeat, thus shaping certain dogmas in Türkiye’s strategic culture.

On the one hand, it is conventional wisdom in Türkiye that Russia is a strategic rival striving for dominance in the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Mediterranean, and overall, in the region. On the other hand, historically, Russian victories have created a “Great Russia” myth among the political elites and society. A belief that [“Russia is not an ordinary state, it is a very powerful state”](#), whose interests cannot be disregarded, is still wide-spread today in Türkiye, though largely shattered by Ukraine’s successful counter-offensives.

From the Turkish perspective, **Russia cannot be trusted but has to be accommodated**. Thus, despite being the second largest army in NATO, Turkish military and political establishment is often entrapped in this self-defeating thinking. Russia’s major failures in its war on Ukraine, which have revealed the weaknesses of the Russian army, helped to partially debunk this myth. However, many misperceptions of Russia’s assumed strengths remain. A view that [Türkiye cannot refuse from cooperation with Russia](#) is similarly shared by the country’s leadership and business community.

At the same time, the so-called **Sèvres syndrome**, a reminder of the Ottoman Empire’s defeat in the WWI and the subsequent occupation by the Entente states, explains Türkiye’s deep **distrust of the Western powers and wide-spread conspiracy theories** in Turkish society. According to the [Stockholm Center for Freedom’s poll](#), in 2018, 87,6% of population believed that “European countries still want to divide Türkiye just as they did with the Ottoman Empire”. Moreover, 73,2% of respondents said that “the EU required Türkiye to carry out reforms similar to the provisions of the Sèvres Treaty”. The [2022 Kadir Has](#)

[University survey on public perceptions of Turkish foreign policy](#)

showed that there was a much lower number of those who thought Türkiye was facing a threat of “being divided” - 25,9%. However, only 16,6% believed in the “sincereness of the European Union” towards Türkiye.

This **lack of trust to the “collective West”** as well as **historical tradition of neutrality** being instrumental to “[survive the pressure of the superpowers](#)” have halted Türkiye’s rapprochement with the NATO/EU and, on the contrary, paved the way to increasing Russian influence, both among the military-political elites and the population of the country.

For example, the above-mentioned Kadir Has University research revealed that in September 2022 (six months into the Russia-Ukraine war) 42,7% of respondents considered the United States to be a major threat for Türkiye topping the list of threats, while only 30,5% named Russia.

Countries that pose a threat to Turkey

September 2022

■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know



Source: 2022 Kadir Has University survey on public perceptions of Turkish foreign policy • Created with Datawrapper

Another survey by a leading [MetroPOLL](#) company showed, in March 2022, that 48% of Turks blamed the US and NATO for the war in Ukraine, whereas only 33,7% put responsibility on Russia and 7,5% - on Ukraine. Though with the lapse of time, the perceptions have changed towards a clearer pro-Ukrainian stance and condemnation of the war, this has not altered a general assessment of the necessity to maintain cooperation with Russia. In September 2022, [52%](#) still supported Türkiye’s “neutrality” in the Russia-Ukraine war and 50,9% defined Turkish-Russian relations as “cooperation” or “strategic partnership”.

Who is responsible for the war in Ukraine?

Turkish opinion poll, March 2022



Source: MetroPOLL • Created with Datawrapper

The [2020 RAND report](#) analysing Türkiye's **increasingly nationalistic course** emphasized that "Moscow has been adept at exploiting and amplifying these fissures within Türkiye and among allies – including through an active media influence campaign – to cast itself as a more reliable political and security partner". Thus, by utilizing vulnerabilities of Turkish strategic thinking – a lack of confidence to the US and European allies, and a fear of assertive Russia in the neighbourhood, the Kremlin has been successfully feeding the anti-Western, isolationist, and Eurasianist sentiments in Türkiye.

While the ideology of the **Turkish Eurasianism** deserves a separate detailed analysis, its main idea was summarized by one of the concept's masterminds [Mehmet Perinçek](#) back in 2009: "*A number of intellectual and political actors together with sections of the military have started to articulate Eurasianism (Avrasyacılık) as a new geopolitical discourse for Türkiye and as an alternative to Türkiye's pro-Western foreign policy orientation*". The threat posed by the Eurasianism stems from the massive support of Russia, which uses this concept to consolidate its grip over Turkish elites as well as hearts and minds of common people.

Unlike in previous years, when it used to be a theoretical construct of a marginal group on the sidelines of Turkish politics, Eurasianists have expanded their influence by capitalizing on the anti-Westernism inside Türkiye and Moscow's generous financial and informational support. Experts [argue](#) that this became possible because these sentiments are largely shared across the political spectrum in Türkiye: "*Nationalist-Islamism and Eurasianism overlap as they both despise Western dominance in the international order, feel threatened by the liberal cultural-civilizational siege of the West and thus have a common counter-hegemonic view of the world*". For example, Turkish leadership often refers to the Russia's war in Ukraine as attempts to question the "unfair" system and redesign global governance in a fundamental way, engaging with other non-Western powers like Türkiye. "*The West, especially the US, is attacking Russia almost with no limits. Of course, Russia is showing great resistance when faced with this,*" – president [Erdogan](#) was quoted as telling reporters before the G-20 summit in November 2022.

Analysts [stress](#) that unlike the early forms of Eurasianism in the early 1990's, which advocated just for a stronger regional role of Türkiye, Ankara's recent turn to its ideas is largely driven by rejection of Europe, a deepening discontent with the US policies and efforts to build closer relations with Russia. This estranges Türkiye from its European and transatlantic partners and drags it into an increasingly asymmetric relationship with Moscow. As [Galip Dalay](#) put it, "*While closer relations bring several benefits with little cost to Russia, it is difficult to say the same for Türkiye, particularly when it comes to the costs of these relations*". However, after the 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye, [Eurasianism](#) has significantly gained ground among the military and political circles, helping to shape country's foreign and security policies in line with the Russian interests.

VULNERABILITY IN HARD SECURITY



Powerful Military with Political Strings Attached

Türkiye has been a NATO member since 1952 and is a dominant military power in the Black Sea region. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' "[Military Balance Report 2021](#)", the Turkish Armed Forces had an estimated strength of 781,800 military and paramilitary personnel (425,000 active; 200,000 reserve). This makes it the second largest standing military force in NATO and eleventh in the world, [according to the 2023 Global Fire Power Index](#).

In 2021 [Turkish military spending](#) reached USD 15.5 billion (2,1% of GDP), ranking Türkiye the 18th in the world. Turkish military spending grew by 63% between 2012-2021, which coincided with Türkiye's expanding military engagement in the Middle East and North Africa.



Türkiye is one of the five NATO member states which are part of the [nuclear sharing policy](#) and hosts several military bases used by the US for the overseas operations, including the [Incirlik Air Base](#). A Force Command of the [NATO Response Force](#) at high readiness level is established in Istanbul. Other significant military installations open for NATO use are based in Izmir (NATO LANDCOM), Konya (air base) and Malatya (radar station). Türkiye has been a major [contributor to](#)

[NATO's operations](#) in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo as well as Operation Sea Guardian in the Mediterranean. In its turn, NATO's collective defence mechanism remains crucial for Türkiye's own security, not least against Russia.

Nevertheless, despite being a NATO member, Ankara has opposed expanding NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea region, rereferring to the 1936 Montreux Convention provisions. As a result, this has turned the Black Sea into a predominantly "[Turkish-Russian condominium](#)". On the other hand, Ankara's decision to close the Straits for Russian warships after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine proved that Türkiye can also use the Montreux Convention to deter Russian military presence. By doing so, Ankara has also cut off the so-called "[Syrian express](#)" – Russian logistical supplies from the occupied Crimea to its naval base in the Syrian Tartus, thus weakening its posture there.

[Türkiye's Navy and Coast Guard forces](#) operate more than 300 ships, with about 230 built by national military and commercial shipyards relying on homegrown technology. This figure includes submarines, frigates, corvettes and amphibious assault vessels, most of them are more advanced than those of Russia. In [recent decades](#) Türkiye's naval force has been quickly expanding and modernizing. According to [Turkish media](#), a total of 24 new ships, including four frigates, will be float out by 2023. In October 2022, the first out of three corvettes to be built for Ukraine's navy was [inaugurated](#) in Istanbul – a move largely welcomed in Ukraine to the discontent of Russia.

Türkiye's **indigenous defence capabilities**, though significantly enhanced, are yet not enough to meet the country's security needs, especially in the air defence area. At the same time, the US and European sanctions imposed against Türkiye in recent years restrict new arms supplies and modernization of the existing park. These sanctions include various packages that have been implemented in response to Türkiye's military operations in Iraq and [Syria](#), purchase of the Russian [S-400](#) air defence systems, [unauthorized drilling](#) in the Eastern Mediterranean or use of Turkish drones in the [Nagorno Karabakh](#) armed conflict. Most of them directly target Turkish defence sector. This often makes Russia an alternative option to consider when Türkiye's demands are not met in the West.

This was also the case with the [S-400 deal with Russia](#), which most analysts call an "anomaly" in military, technical, operational and political sense. However, a failure to agree on "Patriots" with NATO has caused Ankara's rapprochement with Moscow and further estrangement from the West. As Can [Kasapoglu](#) explained, militarily, Türkiye needed strategic defensive weapon systems and capabilities to mitigate its vulnerabilities vis-à-vis burgeoning missile inventories in the immediate neighbourhood. Politically, "the procurement of a multibillion non-NATO system mark(ed) Ankara's uneasiness with its

NATO allies due to lack of cooperative defence industrial opportunities and on-going political strains”. Russia stepped in to exploit both.

After February 2022, with Russia being bogged down in Ukraine, regional dynamics have significantly changed. Türkiye has strengthened its positions in the South Caucasus, Central Asia and, to a lesser extent, in Syria. [Shusha declaration](#) signed after the 2020 Karabakh War, de-facto signalled creation of a defence and military alliance with Azerbaijan, and expanded Turkish influence in the Caucasus, mostly at the Russian expense.

With the gradual decline of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Ankara has also strengthened its foot in the Central Asia – not only as a traditional “soft” power, but also as a “hard” security actor. In recent years, Türkiye has increased military technical cooperation with [Kazakhstan](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#), [Uzbekistan](#), and [Tajikistan](#); it has also played a key role in expanding the agenda of the [Organization of Turkic States](#) far beyond the cultural and humanitarian issues. Experts [assessed](#) these developments as an evidence of Türkiye’s “expanding its footprint in Central Asia” by “offering the region’s leaders a welcome alternative ... to balance their ties with Russia, the West, and China”.

At the same time, a number of **unresolved disputes and ongoing conflicts in close vicinity to Turkish borders** exposes Türkiye to multiple threats, weakening its stance vis-à-vis Russia. Both countries’ involvement in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and South Caucasus, where Moscow and Ankara are backing opposing parties, increase the risk of direct confrontation but also enable new patterns of adversarial cooperation. Besides that, escalating tensions with Greece, and in the Eastern Mediterranean overall, increase Türkiye’s sense of insecurity and complicate relations with the NATO allies.

For example, Washington’s ongoing military cooperation with **Greece** while suspending the F-16 and F-35 deals with Türkiye was perceived in Ankara as the US move to tilt the regional balance in Athens’ favour. As a result, Turkish government “[strongly condemned](#)” Washington’s decision to fully lift arms embargoes against **Cyprus** and blamed the US and Greece for violating non-military status of **Aegean Greek islands**.

Similarly, providing arms to the **PYD/YPG** Kurdish fighters in Syria, which Türkiye claims to be used by the **PKK** inside Türkiye, has caused a major blow in the US-Türkiye relations. Though the PYD [opened its office](#) in Moscow and has close connection to the Kremlin, it is mostly the **US** and European countries like [Sweden](#), but not Russia, who get under the fire of public criticism for supporting **Kurdish terrorism** in Türkiye. Meanwhile, Russia has been arming Kurdish militants in Syria and building ties with [Iraqi Kurdistan](#) regional authorities, playing up Turkish fears of Kurdish **separatism**.

The overall divergent threat perceptions and security priorities of Türkiye and NATO allies has helped Russia to weaponize the threat of Kurdish terrorism in Türkiye. Back in [2019](#), Ankara had refused to back the NATO plan to bolster the defences of Baltic states and Poland against Russia until it received more support for its fight against the YPG in Syria. In [2022](#), Türkiye has used the Sweden and Finland's NATO membership bid to share its "[accumulated grievances](#) concerning Sweden's stance toward the Kurdish question in general and the separatist PKK in particular" as well as to renegotiate the previously imposed arms embargo. Ankara's prioritization of threats coming from **Syria and Kurdish terrorism** on Türkiye's eastern borders over the Russian threat that dominates NATO's eastern borders in the Baltics and the Black Sea makes Russian factor an important issue in Türkiye-NATO dialogue.

Besides, while significantly weakened on the battlefield, Russia is still capable of creating problems for Türkiye in **Syria** by destabilizing the area with mass attacks on civilians or disrupting the humanitarian corridors to cause a **new wave of refugees**. The country is now hosting more than 5 million refugees, and new influx of forced migrants can further increase pressure on the economic system just months ahead of the critical nation-wide elections.

Syria also remains an area of **direct military confrontation** between Turkish and Russian armed forces. The lack of a strong reaction from Ankara to a [2020 incident](#), where 34 Turkish soldiers and officers were killed by Russian forces in Syria, is indicative of the "red lines" which Türkiye is not ready to cross. The introduction of "de-escalation mechanisms" and regular consultations with Russian military and political leadership is seen as crucial to avoid uncontrolled spiralling of tensions in the region. The same patterns of "conflictual cooperation" and "[adversarial collaboration](#)" have been seen in other conflicts as well, from Syria and Libya to Karabakh and Ukraine, adding to the complexity of bilateral relations.

Russian naval presence in the region has also expanded in recent years with the increased military build-up in the occupied Crimea, Syria, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Until Ankara's decision to close the Straits amidst Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, [Russian warships](#) sailed almost daily through the Bosphorus, sometimes [brandishing arms](#), carrying personnel and weapons from Sevastopol to Syrian port of Tartus. Russia has also [deployed](#) so-called anti-access/area denial capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean that could effectively shut down Turkish airspace. Even after March 2022, Russian military were spotted using civilian merchant ships to [circumvent the ban](#) and supply weapons for their activities in Ukraine via the Bosphorus.

Since **Türkiye's national security and defence documents** are not made public, it would be difficult to say whether Russia is officially recognized as a threat or a partner. One can assume, though, that it

would be perceived as a competitor to be engaged in a cooperative way, rather than an enemy to be challenged in an open confrontation.

It is also important to understand the **role of military in the foreign policy making and their stance on Russia**. Though traditionally regarded as Türkiye's "Western anchor", the [marginalization of the "Atlanticists"](#) in the armed forces after the 2016 coup attempt has left more space to the groups sympathetic with pro-Russian and Eurasianist ideas. The July 15 coup attempt, which is widely believed by Turks to be orchestrated with the help of the US, has resulted in a rise of distrust and enmity not only against "Gülenists" but generally against any advocates of further cooperation with the US and Europe. On the contrary, Russia has become a [major beneficiary](#) of the crisis, which paved the way to a [full normalization](#) of relations between Moscow and Ankara. As explained by Turkish scholar [Aktürk](#), by seeking closer cooperation with Russia in a post-coup environment, Türkiye was "balancing against two major internal threats" – PKK/PYD and the Gülenists – "both of which were increasingly perceived as proxies of other great powers, namely, the United States". This has in effect made Russia part of Türkiye's domestic agenda, strengthening its hand in Turkish political processes.

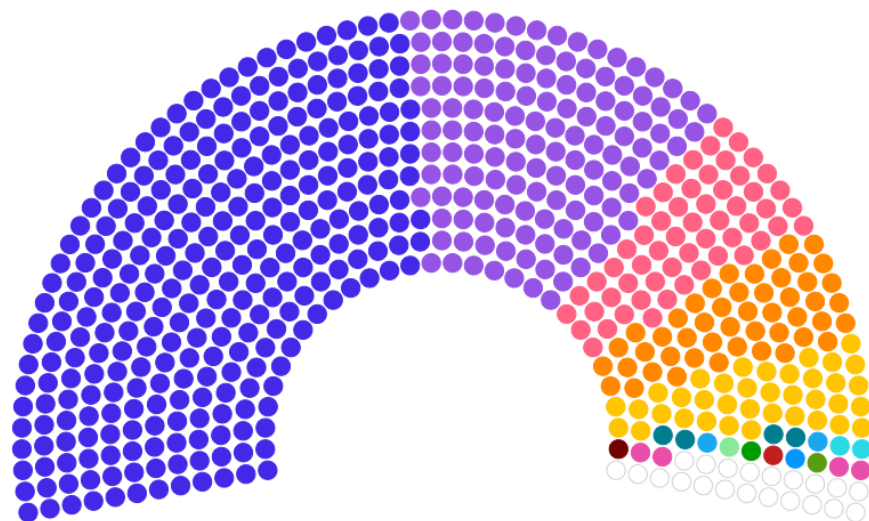
VULNERABILITY IN POTENTIAL INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL ELITES



Russia As A Factor In Türkiye's Domestic Politics

All major parties across the political spectrum in Türkiye generally share a view that cooperation with Moscow is a “must”, though the reasoning can differ from perceived commonalities with Russia to divergencies with the West. A closer look at the parties' programmes and their leaders' rhetoric provides a more nuanced picture.

27th Parliament of Turkey
7 July 2018 –



	Seat change
● AKP	286 0
● CHP	134 0
● HDP	56 0
● MHP	48 0
● İyi	37 0
● TİP	4 0
● DP	2 0
● Memleket	2 0
● DEVA	1 0
● DBP	1 0
● SP	1 0
● BBP	1 0
● YP	1 0
● ZP	1 0
● Independents	4 0

The ruling **Justice and Development Party (AKP)** (286 out of the 600 parliamentary seats), has never officially abandoned the idea of Türkiye's European integration and has often stressed Ankara's key role in NATO. However, it has also been vocal in its criticism of the Alliance policies and advocated for gaining more "strategic autonomy" in a post-Western world order. [Oniş and Kutlay](#) argue that this discourse "constitutes a framework for the Turkish ruling elite to align with the non-Western great powers and balance the US-led hierarchical order". However, experts warn that in reality it often leads to Türkiye's "isolation", decoupling from the West and the "emergence of new forms of dependence on Moscow and Beijing".

Aslı [Aydıntaşbaş](#) calls this delicate balancing act of the AKP government between Russia and the West a "*Sonderweg*", Türkiye's "special path": "in a multipolar world characterized by increasing geopolitical competition, Türkiye wants to be a standalone power with a foot in each camp. Neither East nor West, transatlanticist nor Eurasianist – Türkiye's current leaders hope to forge a non-aligned power on the periphery of Europe". While the reason behind tactical coalitions with Russia or other non-Western actors may be a desire to have a stronger say in regional politics, in practice the concept of a "New Türkiye" taking its "special path" plays into Russia's hands. Indeed, President's spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin often [refers](#) to the reasons of the Russian war in Ukraine as an attempt to question the West's supremacy and build a more inclusive global system: "There has been a world order under the US hegemony. Now Russia calls to build an order, based on egalitarian justice".

[Aydıntaşbaş](#) notes that the Turkish-Russian rapprochement in the recent years is "perhaps the most glaring manifestation of Türkiye's *Sonderweg* and its desire for an independent course on the world stage. Türkiye's ruling elite and mainstream media often cite their skilful use of this relationship as an illustration of the benefits of non-alignment". In fact, AKP's "regional ownership" policies based on diminishing the role of NATO, and particularly the US, in Türkiye's immediate neighbourhood often serves Russian interests more than allows Türkiye's emergence as an independent global power. Ankara's quest to come up with "regional solutions" for regional security often limits the possibilities for cooperation within NATO and paves the way to alternative coordination mechanisms with Russia and Iran, like the Astana Platform for Syria or the [3+3 format](#) for the South Caucasus.

These views are shared by the AKP's coalition partner – **the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)**, holding 48 seats in the parliament. Though less supportive of Russia and often seeing it as a competitor for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the MHP leadership is rarely vocal about Moscow's genocidal policies and repressions against the Turkic and Muslim groups both in the Russian Federation and on the occupied territories of Ukraine and Georgia. Despite Russia's mass human rights violations of Crimean Tatars,

Chechens, Circassians, and other kin communities, the MHP traditionally opts to bandwagon with the AKP majority votes, echoing strong anti-American sentiments and staying silent on Russia's crimes.

The [SWP report](#) on Türkiye's perceptions of the war in Ukraine gives multiple examples of how "Türkiye's rise against the West is a common theme among different actors within the ruling alliance". For instance, the MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli held both "Russian aggression" and "provocations by NATO and Western countries" responsible for the "Ukrainian crisis". He also claimed that Türkiye "should not sacrifice its relations with friendly countries and neighbours" because of the NATO's interests in the region, and that it would neither "be a frontline state" nor "get into war on behalf of the West".

The same argument of Ukraine being "an arena of competition between NATO and Russia" is common for the AKP officials as well. Foreign Minister [Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu](#) told national broadcaster CNN Türk that "some NATO member countries want the Russia-Ukraine war to prolong so that Russia gets weaker". Minister of Defence [Hulusi Akar](#) expressed suspicion over the possibility of a NATO country "intentionally leaving mines [in the Bosphorus] within a plan for NATO minesweepers to enter the Black Sea". President Erdogan himself accused the West of "[provoking](#)" and "[attacking](#)" Russia on numerous occasions while [defending](#) Russia's right to fight back.

The oppositional block "Nation Alliance", represented by the Kemalist **centre-left Republican People's Party (CHP)**, 134 MPs, and the **centre-right Good Party (İyi Party)**, 37 MPs, traditionally use a softer tone vis-à-vis the European partners. However, the CHP's [historical connection to the Soviet Union](#) as well as the admiration of the Russian culture among the left-wing intellectuals, have shaped a special attitude towards modern Russia – as a successor of the USSR, a model of a "social state", or a country of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. This has created an image of Russia as a well-established state with long statehood traditions whereas the "new democracies" like Ukraine and Georgia have often been [perceived](#) as sources of instability and countries with weak governmental institutions under the external control.

The Russian aggression in Ukraine has largely shattered these illusions. At the same time, the strong pro-Western identities of the liberal constituencies of the CHP and Good party demand to mend ties with the Western partners, engage in closer cooperation with NATO and get back on track in Türkiye's dialogue with the EU. The CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu has [criticized](#) president Erdogan's Russia policies for increased energy dependency on Moscow and almost turning Türkiye into a "Russian colony". He has also [called](#) "to take the side of Ukraine" in the Russian-Ukrainian war instead of maintain a balancing policy. The Good party leader Meral Akşener, in

her turn, has been vocal in [condemning](#) Russia's invasion of Ukraine, calling to nationalize the Rosatom-owned Akkuyu nuclear power plant in Türkiye, get rid of the S-400 air defence system and minimize Türkiye's dependency on Russia in other spheres threatening national security.

The **left-wing pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP)** (56 MPs), has its own long record of cooperation with the Kremlin. In the recent history, Selahattin Demirtas, the former leader of the HDP, became the first Turkish politician to [visit Moscow](#) in December 2015 where he reportedly criticised Ankara for downing the Russian Su-24 jet. In February 2016, the deputy head of HDP attended opening of the Moscow bureau of the "Western Kurdistan Representative", which was meant to serve as a liaison office between the Kurdish forces and the Kremlin. The Turkish [Anadolu Agency](#) reported that the office was located in the same building as the Kurdish business association inaugurated by Demirtaş. The visits of the HDP leadership to the Russian capital amid Moscow-Ankara rift [fuelled speculations](#) that the Kremlin was seeking to exploit Türkiye's Kurdish minority as a lever over official Ankara.

Ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections, the HDP has been joined by five other parties of the **leftist camp** to form an alternative oppositional block "[Labour and Freedom Alliance](#)". Traditionally, Turkish socialists and communists consolidate around a desire to decouple Türkiye from the "Western imperialists" – and bring the country closer to Russia, which is often portrayed as an alternative to the Western capitalism and a defender of the working class.

Besides Türkiye's structural dependencies on Russia in security realm, energy, and economy, the current hyper-centralized presidential system with a **highly personalized decision-making process** prioritizes the role of "[leaders' diplomacy](#)" over an institutionalized relationship with embedded bureaucratic checks-and-balances. A [common claim](#) of the oppositional forces in the country has been "the little scope for other state institutions, including line ministries, to influence policymaking". It has also affected the conduct of foreign policy. Ambassador Erozan, a deputy head of the Good Party, shared the criticism [noting](#) that "the Foreign Ministry can no longer act as a counterweight in the decision-making process and cannot correct the mistakes of the presidency". This structural change leaves the country exposed to the risks of decisions taken in a personal dialogue behind the closed doors. As James F. Jeffrey, a former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, [put it](#), "Erdogan and Putin are enemies, but they're enemies who deal with each other and are more comfortable dealing with each other than with anyone else".

ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY



Türkiye as a regional hub for Russian trade, tourists and energy

Close economic ties have traditionally played a role of [“shock absorber”](#), which serves to minimize the impact of occasional political or military crises. Both Türkiye and Russia have viewed “compartmentalization” as a basic principle for maintaining economic cooperation despite conflicting interests in other areas. With Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which coincided in time with an economic crisis in Türkiye, the importance of two countries for each other has further increased. After the introduction of European and US sanctions, an increasingly isolated Putin’s regime has seen Türkiye as one of the few remaining “windows to Europe”. In its turn, Türkiye has found ways to benefit from Russia as a valuable trading partner and a source of financial support for its banking system.

In 2021, Russia was among the [top trading partners of Türkiye](#) with **bilateral trade volume** nearing USD 35 bn and ambitious plans to reach USD [100 bn](#) of turnover within the next ten years. Being the 2nd largest partner in imports (USD 29 bn) and 10th destination for Turkish exports (USD 5,8 bn), Russia caused [the second biggest trade deficit](#) for Türkiye (USD -23,2 bn) and became a leader in the pace of the deficit growth (up 74% from 2020 to 2021).

Since February 2022, Turkish-Russian economic ties have reached a historic high. The countries [registered](#) a **198% increase in trade turnover**: Türkiye’s **imports** from Russia increased by 213%, Türkiye’s **exports** to Russia grew by 113%. Thus, by November 2022, Russia has [topped the list](#) of Türkiye’s import partners and [ranked fourth](#) as one of the main export destinations for Turkish goods and services.

Türkiye is also interested in expanding access to **Russian markets, tourists, energy, and financial resources**. According to [Türkiye’s state statistics agency](#) the January-July 2022 shortfall was USD 62,2 billion,

a 143,7% increase from a year earlier. Türkiye's official reserves rose the most in [August](#), following money transfers of unknown origin. According to the Turkish geopolitical analyst [Yörük Işık](#), "the country logged a record high of USD 28,3 billion in "net errors and omissions" in the first eight months of this year". Turkish government claimed that reserves were rising thanks to transfers from another country without naming one. Many [experts](#) argue, though, that these capital flows are likely to involve Russian money.



Besides, in a bid to ease currency deficit in the country president Erdoğan [suggested](#) switching to national currencies in bilateral trade with Russia and China. Economists [warn](#), though, that "linking the Turkish economy to the declining Russian economy and the Turkish lira to the Russian rouble ... could potentially drag Türkiye into an economic disaster, due to the further strengthening of dependence". Thus, **switching to national currencies** in bilateral trade, mainly in energy resources, would be primarily in the interests of Russia. In October 2022, Turkish Minister of Energy [Fatih Donmez](#) reported that Ankara started partially paying for the Russian gas in roubles.

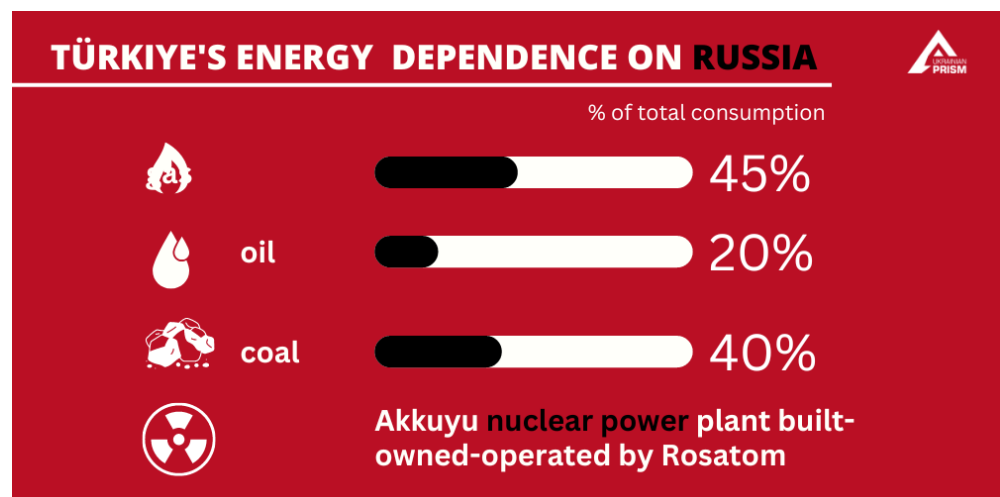
The skyrocketing [inflation rate](#) and financial crisis in Türkiye have also increased expectations of the **relocation of Russian businesses** to the country, which has become a safe haven for [Russian oligarchs](#). According to the [Turkish Association of the Chambers of Commerce](#), since February 2022, 729 new Russian companies have been opened in Türkiye with a total capital of TRY 360 million. (The number of Russian-owned companies opened in 2021 was only 177).

The mounting evidence that Ankara might be involved in the **circumvention of sanctions** have already raised concerns in the West. In October 2022, a high-level US Treasury delegation headed by the Assistant Secretary for terrorist financing and financial crimes, visited Türkiye to discuss "the [sanctions](#) and export controls imposed on Russia, energy security, anti-money laundering policy, and countering the financing of terrorism" with the Turkish Treasury and Finance

Ministry as well as business groups. The EU foreign policy chief [Josep Borrell](#) also cautioned that the deepening economic ties between Türkiye and Russia and Ankara's continued policy of "not joining the EU's restrictive measures against Russia" were "a cause for great concern in the EU".

Another source of concern is a recent Russian-Turkish agreement to boost **energy cooperation** and set up a [regional "gas hub"](#) in Türkiye largely relying on Russian gas supplies. As presidents Erdogan and Putin discussed the "energy hub" idea, Türkiye's Treasury and Finance Minister [Nureddin Nebati](#) reiterated his request for a discount on Russian gas and deferral of payments for its supplies. Türkiye is due to pay USD 100 billion next year for imported Russian energy resources. To avoid a balance of payments crisis Ankara will need [Russian help](#). The discount for Russian gas could decrease pressure on the lira and stabilize Turkish economy.

In recent years Türkiye has made progress in reducing its gas purchases from Russia, due to the [increased share of liquified natural gas \(LNG\) imports](#) and diversifying its energy mix. However, it still remains heavily dependent on Russian energy supplies: Gazprom provided [45%](#) of Turkish domestic gas demand in 2021. Türkiye also imports between 10% and 30% of its [crude oil](#) from Russia each year. Turkish imports of Russian oil have grown significantly since the February invasion of Ukraine, doubling in [August](#). According to a new [report](#) by the Ukrainian Black Sea Institute for Strategic Studies, Türkiye became the leading Russian crude oil importer in October 2022.



[Experts](#) are warning that this mounting reliance on Russian oil and gas supplies leaves Türkiye vulnerable to energy blackmail of the kind Europe has experienced through Russian gas cuts. In fact, Türkiye is familiar with Moscow weaponizing gas. By building **TurkStream** – a gas pipeline that connects Russia to Türkiye, bypassing Ukraine – as a geopolitical rather than an economic project, Gazprom deepened

Ankara's dependence on Moscow and caused tensions in Türkiye's relations with Ukraine.

Earlier this year, Russia declared a ten-day maintenance shutdown of the **Blue Stream** pipeline, which carries around 60% of Türkiye's Russian gas imports, with just a two-day notice. Experts say that occasional maintenance shutdowns of [TurkStream](#), which delivers the rest of Russian gas to Türkiye, as well as Putin's unjustified allegations about expected [terror acts](#) on the TurkStream pipeline, may signal difficult times for Ankara ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections planned for 2023.

Finally, growing energy collaboration between Türkiye and Russia exposes Ankara to more pressure from the EU and the United States over increasing concerns that Russia could use this **collaboration to circumvent sanctions**. In January 2023, Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Donmez confirmed plans to hold an international conference in Istanbul to discuss the creation of an energy hub on Turkish territory for the natural gas supplies to Europe. He also [noted](#) that Türkiye "does not intend to impose any restrictions or control over transactions that will be concluded within the hub".

Meanwhile, "Rosatom" is building the Akkuyu nuclear power plant on a build-own-operate model in the Mediterranean province of Mersin, which Russian authorities are calling "the first Russian NPP outside of Russia". There are reasonable fears that this strategic facility, which is constructed and owned by the Russian state enterprise, and will be run by Russian operators in a NATO-member country in a close vicinity to the Incirlik air base and Russian military build-up in Tartus, may become the next bargaining chip in **Moscow's nuclear blackmailing**. At the same time, talks are underway on a possible new deal to build a four-reactor plant in [Sinop](#) on the Black Sea coast, just across from Ukraine's Russian-occupied Crimean peninsula.

Türkiye's **nuclear dependence on Moscow** is likely to increase once the Akkuyu NPP becomes fully operational. The special status of the Akkuyu has raised serious concerns among [experts](#). Will Ankara share with "Rosatom" sensitive security information necessary for the [design basis threat](#)? Who will take care of the physical protection of facility to prevent sabotage or unauthorized attempts to remove nuclear and other radioactive material from the site? Will Russia have a monopoly in the fuel production and its supply chains? Will the Turkish side have access to all technical documents, key to the operation and maintenance of the NPP? How the safety and security of the critical infrastructure will be provided against the conventional and cyber threats? Where do the spent fuel and nuclear waste disposal go? How to deal with possible leakages and environmental threats in the touristic Mediterranean province? Finally, can Russia be relied on to provide education and training for the Turkish personnel since Türkiye does not have a well-established national school of

nuclear energy engineering? These questions are crucial for Türkiye's national security, and need clear answers.

Türkiye also remains dependent on Russian supplies of **wheat, corn and fertilizers**. Türkiye procures 70% of imported wheat from Russia and, according to the Black Sea Grain Initiative [Joint Coordination Center](#), Türkiye is among three [top destinations](#) of the "grain deal" vessels. President Erdogan has also been a [vocal advocate](#) for facilitating Russia's trade in grain and fertilizers, by providing support in logistics, ship insurance, and returning of sanctioned Russian banks to the SWIFT system.

In the field of **contracting services**, Russia is the biggest market for Turkish companies. According to the [Turkish Ministry of Trade](#), out of the USD 426 billion project portfolio performed by the Turkish contracting industry abroad, about one-fifth belongs to the projects in Russia.

Tourism, which makes up a quarter of the Turkish budget, is another sphere where Russia has maintained a [leading position](#) for many years in a row. In the last [pre-Covid](#) season of 2019, Türkiye hosted 7 million Russian citizens, who brought more than USD 3,5 billion to the Turkish budget. In the [first nine months of 2022](#), the number of Russian tourists has reached 3,9 million. In September alone, Russians [topped](#) the list of foreign visitors at 860,000 visits.

After closure of the European air space to Russian aircraft, Türkiye has become **the main gateway for Russian travellers, both tourists and transit passengers**. In June, Turkish media [reported](#) that Turkish carriers were operating 438 flights per week to Russia, while Russian airlines launched weekly 177 flights from Türkiye. By the end of the touristic season in August, Turkish airline companies, mainly the flag carrier THY, had [85 flights a day](#) between Türkiye and Russia. Later, Moscow offered to increase the number of daily flights to Türkiye to 100 and announced plans to launch direct flights to the [Northern Cyprus](#). If these plans come true, Russia will become the only nation outside of Türkiye to fly directly to the territory.

To facilitate their stay in the country, five Turkish **banks** had introduced Russia's [MIR payments system](#). After mounting pressure from the West, some of them have [suspended](#) the use of the Russian system, but other homegrown alternatives, like the Turkish [TROY system](#), are reportedly discussed to replace it. Earlier this year, Turkish Treasury and Finance Minister also [mentioned](#) such possibility.

Russians have also become the leading foreign **purchasers of residential properties** in Türkiye in 2022. In August, Turkish statistics agency [reported](#) that Russian citizens purchased on average more than 1 000 apartments per month. Demand has increased significantly since the [mobilization](#) announcement in September. Under the Turkish law, purchasing real estate worth at least \$75,000 qualifies foreigners

to apply for [permanent residence](#) up to two years whereas foreigners who pay \$400,000 or more for real estate become eligible for [Turkish citizenship](#). According to the Ministry of Interior, as of November 2022, Russian citizens constituted the [second highest number](#) of foreign residents residing in Türkiye on long term (115,365) and short term (95,431) residency permits.

This means not only a boost for Turkish real estate market but also a threat of **gradual change in the demographic situation, with Russian community growing larger in major Turkish cities**, like Istanbul and Antalya. In most cases, these are not political dissidents or opposition but government supporters, who share Russian official policies but want to escape sanctions or mobilisation. New Russian schools, cultural associations, and media are likely to follow, cementing Russian presence in the economic, social and political life of Türkiye.

Throughout the history, **Russia has weaponized economic dependencies against Türkiye – from agricultural embargoes to touristic travel bans to energy blackmailing to refugee crises**. Though Ankara is now regaining much of its strength following Russian defeats in Ukraine, the Kremlin still has economic leverages to exert pressure on Turkish government. The questions of economic stability have become even more sensitive ahead of critical elections. Besides, by trying to turn the country into a “regional hub” for Russian gas, oil, oligarchs, and tourists Russia is attempting to undermine [“Türkiye’s bridge to the West”](#). The US and EU have already shared concerns over Russia’s plans to use its economic ties with Türkiye to facilitate circumvention of sanctions. Unless necessary steps to avoid this are taken, it is likely to further complicate Ankara’s relations with the Western capitals in the future.

INFORMATION VULNERABILITY



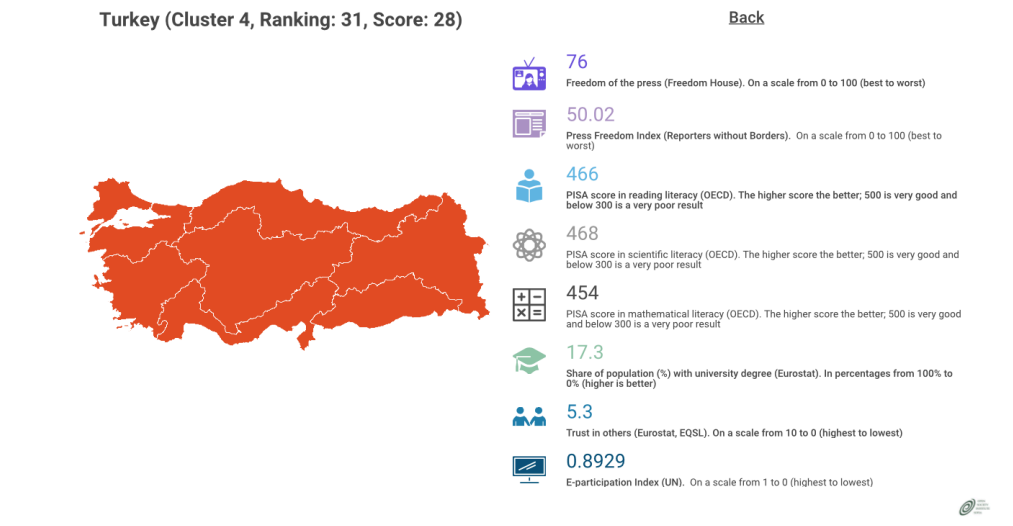
Polarization, High Exposure To Disinformation, And Anti-Western Sentiments As A Mainstream

One of the leading Turkish analysts studying the rise of dis/misinformation in Turkish media and [Russian information ecosystem in Türkiye](#) Akin Ünver argued that Russian fake news was not needed in Türkiye: “because domestic disinformation is rampant, Moscow has managed to infect both sides of the debate”. Having analysed pro-Russian information flows on Twitter, he came to a conclusion that, unlike in other Western countries, accounts or content traceable to Russia had limited influence on Türkiye’s digital information system: “This doesn’t mean Russian disinformation or information operations don’t exist in Türkiye. Rather, [...] that distinctly pro-Russian views are disseminated by mainstream pro-government and opposition media networks”. Using the empirical evidence of 173 million digital content he explained this result with the fact that **pro-Russian opinion was so dominant in the Turkish information sphere and pro-Russian sentiments were so integrated into the mainstream media that there was no big need in additional Russian or pro-Russian information operations.**

In his article “[Russia Has Won the Information War in Türkiye](#)” he elaborated on the reasons that made it possible: “**Türkiye is one of the countries most exposed to fake news**, has one of the highest ratios of bot infections in the world, and is among the countries with lowest resistance to fake digital news. Heavy government controls make the media environment more susceptible to information manipulation by removing alternative voices from the online marketplace of ideas. This makes Türkiye one of the most vulnerable countries to organized computational propaganda during international political crises”.

The findings of the 2021 [Media Literacy Index](#), which assesses countries’ resilience potential to fake news and misinformation, prove this fact. Türkiye ranked 31st among 35 European states, mainly due to underperformance in media freedom and education. This makes **media literacy and critical thinking** a vulnerable point, and can lead to

the easier spread of any conspiracy theories popular among the Russian propaganda methods. **Polarization** of society and **securitization** of domestic and foreign agenda further increase the scope of manipulation and disinformation. According to the [“Polarization, misinformation and fear: insights into Turkish media”](#) report, Turkish respondents showed the highest level of exposure to “stories that are completely made up for political or commercial reasons” among 37 countries surveyed (49% with an average of 26%).



2021 [Media Literacy Index](#)

According to the [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism 2022 report](#), only 23% of Turkish citizens think that “media are independent from undue political or government influence”. Indeed, Türkiye ranks among the leading countries in terms of **using social media for political communication purposes**. [Reports](#) show that successive crises, such as the 2016 coup attempt, assassination of the Russian Ambassador, S-400 deal, terrorist attacks, and protests have been heavily “digitally mediated”. For example, one of the studies on [“Russia’s Use of Media and Information Operations in Türkiye”](#), which analysed Turkish media responses to major crises in the Turkish-Russian relations, concluded that Russian media strategies primarily sought to 1) undermine the NATO unity and instigate mutual suspicion between Türkiye and its Western allies by “exacerbating mutual scepticism and highlighting policy differences”; 2) enlist Türkiye’s support and impede its opposition to Russian actions in Eurasia and the Middle East; 3) influence Türkiye’s internal political developments to make Ankara a more compliant partner. It summarized that in Türkiye, Russian media have largely contributed to anti-American discourse, especially when it reinforced Turkish government’s domestic discourse.

The overlapping anti-Western and Eurasianist narratives of Russian propaganda and Türkiye's domestic political agenda has made it similarly easy for (pro)Russian "talking heads" to assess Turkish **pro-governmental and oppositional, both right-wing and left-wing, media**.

The popularity of these ideas in Turkish conventional and social media has become more obvious after the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Turkish political analyst Ragıp Soylu [observed](#) that on most of the Turkish TV shows, "secular Turkish-nationalist retired generals and military officers regularly attack[ed] the West" while "criticism of Russia and China [was] almost non-existent". In his overview of the Turkish media coverage of the "[Russia-Ukraine War: Talk Show Generals Sway Public Against NATO](#)", he shared multiple cases of "mainstream media featuring retired generals and commentators who blamed the war on Washington and NATO's eastward expansion" and saluted the Russian "military operation" in Ukraine as "a step to end the imperialist Atlanticist age".

Retired army and navy officers have appeared so frequently in Turkish media to comment on the Russian war in Ukraine that the phenomenon of "[Talk show generals](#)" and "[Talk show nationalists](#)" has drawn attention of many analysts as a well-planned coordinated effort to incite anti-NATO, anti-US, and anti-Ukrainian sentiments. Not only have they tried to legitimize Russian invasion of Ukraine as a justified move but also used every opportunity to highlight the threat of the West's "[campaign](#) to destroy Türkiye or, at the very least, bring it to heel".

The [limited scope of alternative voices](#) makes the information space more vulnerable to manipulations. Experts who are regularly invited to the mainstream media are often chosen based on their ideological views and loyalty, not on their subject matter expertise or merit. Thus, depending on the context, **far-right nationalists or leftist sympathizers of Russia can equally become the "stars of the show" voicing similar messages from the Kremlin's playbook**. Some of the most wide-spread ones include discrediting Ukrainian, European and American leadership; accusing official Kyiv of racism and misconduct with Muslim students during evacuation from a war-torn Ukraine; blaming the EU for applying double standards in treating Orthodox Ukrainian refugees and migrants from the Middle East; highlighting NATO's role in provoking / prolonging the war in Ukraine and a wider region; producing fake news on Nazi battalions and fascists in Ukraine; emphasizing inequality between the "rich North" and poor Global South; making an argument of the unfair unipolar world suppressing emerging regional powers etc. All of these narratives play directly into Russia's hands as they incite further anti-Westernism and portray Russia as a more attractive and "fair" partner.

For example, a former lieutenant general of the Turkish Air Force, who is now head of the [Retired Officers Association](#), has established himself as a military expert and regular contributor to the news shows

talking about [“US attempts to turn Ukraine into another Syria”](#) and [“NATO’s struggle to seize the North Pole from Russia”](#). Another officer, rear admiral Cem Gürdeniz, has got fame as the navy’s chief strategist and a mastermind of the [“Mavi Vatan”](#) (“Blue Motherland”) naval doctrine. In recent years, Gürdeniz has been active on Turkish TV and in the press, mainly as a contributor to the Patriotic Party’s newspaper, [“Aydınlık”](#). There, he wrote extensively on the necessity to build a [“Eurasianist alliance”](#) and “inevitability of the Turkish-Russian, Turkish-Chinese, and Turkish-Iranian rapprochement”.

The Patriotic (“Vatan”) party is a marginal political party with an anti-Western and Eurasianist agenda. It usually gets less than 1% of votes in nation-wide elections but is widely present in press, television, and social media. The twitter accounts of its [Aydınlık](#) newspaper and [Ulusal Kanal](#) (People’s Channel) retranslate Russian narratives in full. In fact, the party itself is serving as a “range extender” of the Russian propaganda, fake news and info ops in Türkiye. This is also the only political force in the country that has [called](#) on the government to recognize Crimea as a Russian territory. It has also suggested a [“Black Sea – Mediterranean Plan of Peace and Friendship”](#), according to which “Abkhazia Republic and self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus had to be recognized as independent states”, Crimea – as a “Russian territory”, and “US and NATO bases in the region had to be shut down”.

The same Turkish Eurasianist mouthpieces played a key role in bringing Daria Dugina’s assassination to the top of Türkiye’s agenda, with many nationalist media joining them. [“CIA games! US leaked Ukraine again: behind Daria Dugina’s assassination stands Ukraine”](#) said one of the right-wing media’s headlines. Patriotic Party’s leader, Doğu Perinçek, has a long record of political partnership with Russian ideologist Alexander Dugin, and both played a key role in the Turkish-Russian rapprochement after the coup attempt. His son, Mehmet Perinçek, who is now carrying on his father’s work, has shared stories of a childhood friendship with Daria Dugina in numerous [interviews and blogs](#).

Many of the Turkish experts who commented on the car incident with Dugina are frequent contributors in the [United World International](#) (UWI) – a bilingual English-Turkish web-site, where she had worked as an editor-in-chief. In March 2022, the US Treasury [sanctioned](#) this site as a Russian intelligence-directed disinformation outlet, closely related to the media influence organization “Lakhta”, owned by Yevgeniy Prigozhin. The [press release](#) said it was serving Russia’s “efforts to promulgate disinformation and influence perceptions”. The main narratives promoted by the Patriotic Party and the UWI platform in Türkiye include [a need to build a new world order](#) and the idea that Ankara should support Russia in its war on Ukraine, because [“if Russia falls, Türkiye will be the next one to be partitioned by NATO”](#).

The left-wing media, such as [OdaTV](#) (1,7 million followers on Twitter), equally serves as a mouthpiece of Russian propaganda sharing disinformation and fake stories, like the one about “Nazi General of the Ukrainian Armed Forces [Zaluzhnyy with a swastika bracelet](#)”. Co-founder of the [OdaTV news website](#) [Soner Yalçın](#) (1,8 million followers on Twitter), in March 2022 [criticized](#) Turkish media for being too pro-Ukrainian: “Our media have raised the President of Ukraine Zelenskyy to the level of a “hero”! This is someone who trusted the US and took decisions that dragged his country into a war... How easy is it to get the title of “valiant soldier” for someone who caused the bombing and mass destruction of his country and the death of his people?” Later, he [wrote](#) extensively about the role of the “American empire” in the “proxy war in Ukraine”, which “used Ukrainians” for its own purposes “just as it had done with the Kurds and Fethullah Gülen’s organization”.

Finally, both “**Sputnik Türkiye**” and “**Radio Sputnik**” (RS) are still active in Türkiye though their popularity has recently decreased (1 million subscribers on [Twitter](#)). Part of the problem is that Russian media in Türkiye have positioned themselves as a safe haven for “independent” Turkish journalists, where they would be “protected from the Turkish government’s control”. Recent history knows several cases when formerly reputable writers joined Russian media outlets for this reason. Since their names had been well-known and generally trusted before, by joining Russian propagandist resources they often added to their credibility with the very fact of their presence. This has created a dangerous mixture of truth and lies, which made it difficult for the wider audience to distinct one from another.

One of the examples include [Ceyda Karan](#), who started her career in nationalist newspapers, then moved to the main oppositional mouthpiece “Cumhuriyet “ (Kemalist, left), and ended up in “Sputnik Türkiye” sharing [stories](#) about “Ukrainian Nazis drinking blood of Russian babies”. Another example of a journalist’s journey from respected media outlets like “Sabah” and “Hürriyet” to Eurasianist “Aydınlık” and later [Tele1 TV](#) is [Merdan Yanardağ](#). On February 24, 2022 he was explaining on TV that “[Ukraine is a country that has never existed in history](#)” and ever since has polluted Turkish media space with stories of “[Ukrainian Nazis openly wearing their Nazi symbols](#)” and “[a gang of bandits](#) in Kyiv who forbid people to speak any language other than Ukrainian” and “discriminate against the Crimean Tatars”. The Tele1 TV, where Merdan Yanardağ is a founding editor-in-chief and a co-host in “[18 minutes](#)” program, has been present on all [major satellite TV platforms](#) since 2017, has 1,2 million followers on [Twitter](#) and 621 thousand subscribers on [YouTube](#).

In some cases, Russian propaganda exploits the channels of **state news agencies**. In 2017, Russia’s TASS and Türkiye’s Anadolu Ajansı (AA) agencies signed an agreement to facilitate exchange of information, photo and video materials. After the February invasion,

reporting on developments in and around Ukraine has continued from AA's Moscow office, which often led to direct messaging of Russian bullet points (for example, on [Mariupol](#) or Patriot [systems](#)). The situation has improved with another team now working on the ground in Ukraine but the lack of Ukrainian speaking journalists and editorial staff remains a problem for fact-checking and a balanced reporting.

Russian influence has been dominant in the **expert and academic circles** of Türkiye, as well. While this domain deserves separate in-depth research, a general overview shows that Russian “**hybrid analytics**” toolkit (involving monetary and non-monetary incentives for engaging with local community, instrumentalizing ideological sympathizers or “useful idiots,” etc.) have been as widespread in Türkiye, as elsewhere in the world.

Besides, there is **no academic tradition** of studying [Ukrainian \(or Crimean Tatar\) studies](#) as a separate specialization in Turkish universities or **think-tanks focusing on Ukraine** as an independent state. Instead, there are Centres of [Eurasian Studies](#), [Russian Studies](#), [Black Sea and Central Asia Studies](#) where Ukraine is analysed as part of a wider area historically dominated by Russia. This does not necessarily make experts working in these centres pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian but it often creates a different, Moscow-centric, framework for research.

“[Rossotrudnichestvo](#)” (“**Russian House / Rus Evi**”) in Türkiye, like in many other [countries](#), actively promotes Russian foreign policy narratives with the “soft power” instruments. In 2021, with the appointment of a new head of the Ankara office, [the concept of the “Russian House” in Türkiye](#) has changed. As part of its “[rebranding](#)”, traditional “balalaika diplomacy” has given place to a more sophisticated, tailor-made and, thus, more efficient content. The focus has shifted to presenting Russia as a country of nuclear technologies, advanced defence and high-tech solutions, attractive business partnerships. Big part of its daily activities is devoted to discrediting Ukraine, the West, and hosting [provocative public events](#) related to the ongoing war in Ukraine and the status of the occupied territories. These events are widely supported by members of Russian cultural, educational, and diaspora associations in Türkiye.

CASES OF SUCCESSFUL OPERATIONS TO DETECT AND LIMIT RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND MANIPULATION



Russian presence in Türkiye's public and informational spaces remains largely unchallenged. Due to the continuous, though at times problematic, cooperation between Ankara and Moscow both sides try to avoid open confrontation and criticism. Traditionally, Türkiye advocates for dialogue, peace negotiations and maintaining contacts with Russia at all levels. **Turkish government has not joined sanctions, nor has it expelled Russian diplomats or shut down any of the Russian media outlets after February 2022.**

In the information sphere, **countering Russian propaganda** and fake news is challenging due to the generally vulnerable information ecosystem in Türkiye, as has been discussed above. Though there are several fact-checking organizations, like [Teyit](#), [Doğruluk Payı](#) or [Malumatfuruş](#), which remain largely unknown to the wider public.

In August 2022, the Directorate of Communications under the Presidency of Türkiye launched a [Centre for combating disinformation](#), which is expected "to combat a systematic disinformation campaign against Türkiye". However, it is not clear what exactly the Centre will do to counter external threats. Moreover, Turkish fact-checkers [note](#) that "what the government refers to as disinformation is not necessarily regarded as disinformation elsewhere". The state approach is mostly security-focused, and [experts](#) say that while countering disinformation is important, it is also important not to compromise on the freedom of speech.

There are also several **academic and civil society efforts to build resilience against info ops in Türkiye, including those of the Russian origin**. For instance, one of the Türkiye's leading think-tanks EDAM carried out research on Türkiye's digital media ecosystem. The [study](#) provides first detailed mapping of Turkish information ecosystem, disinformation campaigns and their implications for Türkiye's national security. This series of publications includes an in-depth analysis "[Russian digital media and information ecosystem in Türkiye](#)" where selected **cases of Russian operations of influence in Türkiye** are

explored based on their “significant digital popularity” and “political impact on bilateral relations”.

Russian digital media and information ecosystem in Türkiye

Selected Cases	Percentage of Dirty Data	Clean Data
S400 negotiations (5 benchmarks – longitudinal)	3.937	44,394,129
2016 Coup attempt	21.593	27,459,214
Assassination of the Ambassador	11.353	18,667,492
SU24 downing incident	9.825	13,560,108
Discarded Cases	Percentage of Dirty Data	Clean Data
Russia's annexation of Crimea (Mar 2014)	15.024	1,901,403
TurkStream Negotiations + Signing (longitudinal)	2.079	871,031
White Helmets (longitudinal)	46.492	139,059
Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (longitudinal)	1.291	84,493
Selahattin Demirtaş visit to Moscow (Dec. 2015)	11.938	37,381

Table 1 - Selected and discarded cases based on the proportion of cleaned data and post-cleaning data size

Source: [EDAM research on Türkiye's digital media ecosystem](#)

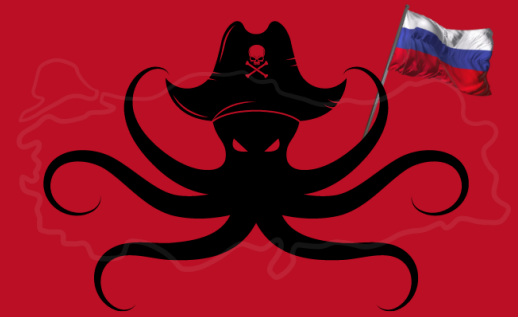
Besides this study, he also [published extensively](#) on [Russian digital influence operations](#) and [Russian information warfare in Türkiye](#).

Another name worth mentioning is **Emre Erdoğan**, who studied the [spectre of information disorder in Türkiye](#), including malign foreign influences. Apart from research, he is running the [Infodemi Training](#) project implemented by Istanbul Bilgi University with support of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation. Countering Media Disinformation project ([RDMEDU](#)) is also organising training programs for journalists.

[Analysts](#) in the field say that despite a [variety of activities](#) to combat fake news, including media literacy programs, webinars, training tools and curricula organized by NGOs and civil society, there is still no **national strategy to bolster Türkiye's resilience against external influences in the information and digital space**. The armies of Russian bots and trolls, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns and operations of influence are not regarded as a threat to national security, leaving the country exposed to potential Russian meddling. Given the upcoming elections in Türkiye in 2023, these risks are likely to increase.

Cooperation with NATO allies on countering cyber and hybrid threats does take place but it is rarely focused on Türkiye's specific vulnerabilities towards Russian strategy and toolkit. "Russian information operations in Türkiye present us with an entirely different type of information mining and handling and look nothing like the apparent cases in the US, UK, France and Germany. We need more research in Russian info ops in other frontier countries", was an [expert recommendation](#) back in 2019. In 2022, it is as relevant as ever.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROBABILITY OF RUSSIAN REFLEXIVE CONTROL OPERATIONS



The overnight change of Turkish public opinion from “Russia as a threat” (after the 2015 jet incident) to “Russia as a friend” (after the **failed coup attempt**) stands as one of the best instances of the Kremlin’s info ops in Türkiye’s modern history. The [presence of Alexander Dugin in Ankara](#) on the coup night, his [meetings with the AKP parliamentary group in the Turkish parliament](#) and a mass media campaign to discredit the West and highlight Russia’s solidarity with Turkish people present sufficient evidences for reasonable doubt regarding Moscow’s role in exploiting the putsch environment. The idea of a secret plot between the US-based Muslim preacher, mastermind of the coup Fethullah Gulen, White House, Pentagon, CIA, FBI and some European capitals, which allegedly all had a role in designing the coup, was shared exponentially for months afterwards. The anti-US narrative was especially actively manipulated by different anti-Western proponents many of whom are supported by Russia. As Nate Schenckan, project director for Nations in Transit for Freedom House, [put](#) it, “Dugin himself is not necessarily that influential in Moscow right now, but as a symbol he represents particular anti-Western ideology that could be attractive to some elements in Türkiye that are gaining influence”.

Dugin himself had written about this in his book “[Moscow-Ankara Axis](#)”, which was later translated into Turkish: “It is important that anti-Americanism unites three morally different, sometimes antagonistic forces in Turkish society: leftists, nationalists, and representatives of religious circles. Such a wide range shows that Eurasianism in Türkiye has great prospects, far beyond the level of any single political force or party.”

Molly McKew, a researcher of Russian influence and information warfare, wrote in her article “[Putin’s Sinister Role in the Failed Turkish Coup](#)” that “if Russia had wanted to design a campaign of reflexive control – using disinformation to coerce an adversary into voluntarily selecting actions that will be advantageous to Russia – against Türkiye, it couldn’t have done it any better. This may sound like the stuff of conspiracies, but the idea that Russia knows how to use fiction for political gain is hardly far-fetched”. Indeed, Russia’s handling of the post-coup environment could become a textbook example of

the Kremlin's operations of influence. If the end goal of [reflexive control](#) is "to cause an inner ideological turmoil, driving people to extremes and making it impossible for them to agree on anything", this is what Russia has largely achieved in a post-coup Türkiye.

Currently, **Turkish society remains vulnerable to reflexive control** due to its polarization, collective memory of military coups, sensitive political environment, media landscape, and exposure to external influences. Emre Erdogan [argues](#) that this environment creates avenues for foreign disruptions, because it reproduces times and again "a polarizing pattern [which] was observed in Türkiye during the pandemic, the forest fires, the refugee influx, the floods – and it will probably be observed during future crises as well".

In fact, this means that any sensitive issue on domestic or foreign agenda can potentially be securitized and instrumentalized for reflexive control, as Russian classical tactic is not to invent a crisis but to build on and manipulate with "weak" points of the local society. Some of such "trigger" topics in Türkiye may include Kurdish terrorism (PKK, PYD/YPG), rights of Kurds, Alevis and other communities in Türkiye, threats of separatism, Syrian refugees, Islamophobia, religious freedoms, FETO activities (Fethullah Gulen terror organization), anti-Turkish plots of internal and external enemies, conspiracies of the West, use of Montreux Convention, depriving Türkiye of a pivotal role in the regional/global affairs, US hegemony, "double standards" of the EU, etc.

Russian messaging strategy of the reflexive control could involve any of the potentially vulnerable social/ethnic/religious groups; far-right, far-left, and Eurasianist political forces (Vatan Party, Eurasian Union of Local Governments - [Avrasya Yerel Yönetimler Birliği](#)); anti-American/pro-Russian experts and media; Russian cultural organizations; marginal Crimean Tatar associations serving as Russian proxies in Türkiye ([Kırım Tatar Kültür Dernekleri Federasyonu](#) - Federation of Crimean Tatar Cultural Associations, [Kırım Kalkınma Vakfı](#) - Crimean Development Foundation), etc. Unlike the officially recognized [Kırım Türkleri Kültür ve Yardımlaşma Derneği](#) (Kırım Derneği, Crimean Association), which has been a vocal supporter of Ukraine from the first days of the Russian invasion in 2014, Russian proxy organizations call for the recognition of the so called "Crimean Republic" as a Russian territory and act in line with the Kremlin's illegal and illegitimate decisions. Their activities have never altered Ankara's official stance and firm support to the territorial integrity of Ukraine in its borders as of 1991. However, they have acted as disruptors in the public sphere, organizing [public events](#), [illegal visits to the temporarily occupied Crimea](#) and [violating Ukrainian law](#). In the end, what Russia seeks to achieve is not to convince everyone in its fakes, but rather to make it difficult for others to defend the truth.

It is also important to note that Türkiye remains vulnerable to **bot usage and cyber-attacks**. Combined with all above-mentioned factors, this environment creates a fertile ground for Russian operations of influence. So far, the Kremlin has refrained from “[flexing its digital informatics muscles](#)” and followed a different pattern of conduct in Türkiye compared to other NATO countries. However, this “digital peace” should not be taken for granted, as the highly personalized and often contentious relations between the two countries can quickly deteriorate. In December 2015, right [after shooting down the Russian Su-24 aircraft](#), at least 400,000 Turkish websites, including government and financial institutions, were brought down by hackers, leaving little doubt that the [cyberattack on Türkiye was a Russian retaliation](#). Similarly, in 2016 there were growing concerns about Russian cyber operations in [Syria](#) and [the southern regions of Türkiye](#), targeting Syrian opposition and Turkish government entities, private industry, aid groups, human rights organizations, and mobile networks. In some cases, the cyber assault could include cyber espionage, stealing and leaking of sensitive data, attempts to influence information flows about the situation on the ground and disruption of communication channels.

Given that Russia has widely used its cyber capabilities to achieve geopolitical objectives in other countries from Georgia and Ukraine to the US to Syria, it is rather a question of when, not if, it will want to exploit the cyber domain in Türkiye. Ahead of critical elections in 2023, the probability of Russian info ops, digital operations of influence and meddling in electoral campaign is rising rapidly.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING RESILIENCE



While a change in Turkish-Russian relations is highly unlikely in the foreseeable future, Russia's overextended military posture, economic problems and international sanctions may provide a good chance for Türkiye to decrease its dependence on Moscow in trade and energy; benefit from Russia's quagmire in Ukraine and changing dynamics in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Middle East; and decouple itself from an increasingly isolated Russia to mend ties with the West.

More precisely, some of the recommendations would include:

For Türkiye

- **Recognize Russia as a potential threat to Türkiye's national security.** Even though the current political conjuncture dictates deepening partnership with the Putin's regime and a perceived necessity to continue cooperation with Moscow, both historical record and geopolitical realities show that Russia has been Türkiye's major competitor in many regions, and a direct rival in the Black Sea and Mediterranean. Strategic documents, security and defence planning, naval doctrines, military training, and international partnerships should be developed in line with this thinking.
- **Step up efforts to define Türkiye's key vulnerabilities to Russian malign influences and bolster resilience in these spheres,** including conventional and non-conventional warfare, possible cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, safety and security of strategic facilities, supply chains, economic and other dependencies that can be weaponized by the Kremlin. Possible areas of subversive operations, agents of Russian influence, vulnerable groups, which are most exposed to Russian info ops and reflexive control, should be defined and countermeasures developed.
- **Diversify energy resources and suppliers.** Ankara should look to enhance capacities of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline and Southern Gas Corridor to pump in more [Azerbaijani](#) and, potentially, [Turkmen](#) gas. It may revive the idea of a [Trans-Balkan corridor](#) with Ukraine; tap into Eastern

Mediterranean gas resources by accelerating efforts to reach a deal with [Israel](#); explore opportunities to bring [Kurdish gas](#) from Northern Iraq; and increase cooperation on LNG with the [United States](#), [Qatar](#), and [Algeria](#). Adding Türkiye's own gas reserves and renewables to this mixture would help diversify energy supplies, bolster Türkiye's position vis-à-vis Russia and revive cooperation with the EU.

- **Crack down on sanctions evasion.** While Türkiye hasn't joined the Western sanctions against Russia, it should not allow to turn itself into a hub for Russian efforts to circumvent the export bans, especially in sensitive and dual-purpose goods. Any projects that would drag Türkiye into a dangerous economic adventurism with Russia and increase risks of secondary sanctions of the US or problems with the EU should be avoided. With the European Union as Ankara's largest trade partner, it is not a political choice but economic expedience that demands prioritizing economic ties with the West.
- **Cooperate with Ukraine and Japan on nuclear safety and security.** Both countries have immense positive, as well as negative, experience with nuclear power plants, and boast world-known experts in the field. The hands-on experience in safety and security will be useful for Turkish specialists once the Russian "Rosatom" completes construction of Türkiye's first NPP. A detailed design basis threat should be prepared for Akkuyu, state control must be ensured over its strategic facilities, and another, reliable, partner should be chosen for a new deal on Sinop NPP.
- Build resilience in cyber space and information domain, develop counter-measures against Russian strategy and tactics.
- Take hard steps to limit Russia's "soft" power. National security imperatives demand state control over Russian "invisible" presence in the country, including but not limited to civil society organizations, media, expert circles, academia, educational and cultural institutions, and information sphere. This gains even more importance with increasing numbers of Russian citizens seeking residence in the country.
- Cooperate with Ukraine, Georgia, Romania and Bulgaria to enhance maritime security in the Black Sea now and in the post-war regional environment. This will not only help to end the unprovoked Russian war in Ukraine, but also secure Ankara's central role in the future regional setting.
- Step up military support to Ukraine. Ukraine is deterring Russian expansionism in the region, and stepping up support to Kyiv is not only a partnership commitment, but investment in Türkiye's own security.

- Boost ties with NATO and EU. Though Türkiye's dialogue with the Western partners might at times get problematic, it is Ankara's long-standing membership in NATO and economic cooperation with Europe, that bolsters its position vis-à-vis Russia and rising security threats. Whatever the current moment might demand, Türkiye's long-term strategic interests lie in the Euro-Atlantic area, not in Eurasia.

For the EU

- **Keep Türkiye engaged both politically and economically.** Alienating Ankara from the West would mean aligning Ankara with Moscow. To maintain cooperation without compromising on values, the EU will have to elaborate its own delicate balancing act in relations with Türkiye.
- **Renew defence and military cooperation with Türkiye** within NATO and EU projects, based on **clear conditionality**. Unless so, Russia will seek to fill the void.
- Recognize Türkiye's sensitivities in national and regional security. A failure to do so will reinforce Russia's Eurasianist arguments and incite Türkiye's distrust of the West.
- **Engage in dialogue with Ankara on the importance to prevent violation or bypassing the sanctions regime** by the Russian companies and individuals via Türkiye.
- **Suggest viable alternatives to Russian energy resources.** In order to develop alternative routes of energy supplies, Türkiye will need capital investments from international financial institutions, technical assistance from Western companies, and political support from the EU. Türkiye's decoupling from Russia should be encouraged.
- **Accelerate cooperation with Ankara on cyber and information security.** Provide country-specific training. Boost Türkiye's resilience against malign external influences and Russian cyber-attacks.
- **Support Turkish NGOs to organize media literacy trainings** for journalists, experts, students, decision-makers; raise public awareness on the threats of Russian propaganda, misinformation and disinformation in conventional and social media.
- **Support Turkish-Ukrainian expert networking** and exchange of experience on countering Russian hybrid threats on different fronts.
- **Invest in public diplomacy** to improve the EU's image in Turkish society, come up with a positive agenda, engage with Turkish civil society.

- **Trace anti-Turkish Russian info ops** in Europe and anti-Western Russian info ops in Türkiye. Analyse and produce more Turkish-language media content.

For Ukraine

- Share first-hand experience in countering Russian malign influence in military, political, economic, nuclear, cyber, information, cultural domains.
- **Step up cooperation in strategic spheres** of security, defence, space and aviation industry, nuclear technologies.
- **Provide information** on the situation in and around Ukraine on a regular basis, brief political parties, journalists and think-tanks; work with bloggers and media influencers.
- Expand Ukraine's media presence in Türkiye, provide institutional support to Ukrainian commentators on Turkish TV and in the print media.
- Decolonize Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar studies in Türkiye. Facilitate opening of Ukraine-focused academic programs, analytical centres; promote scholarly studies and independent expert research.
- Build and expand expert networks between Ukrainian and Turkish think-tank and academic communities; organize advocacy tours.
- **Initiate discussion on a possible role of Türkiye in Ukrainian "peace formula"** and post-war regional security architecture.