



# EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

## CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

### Turkey

27 October 2022<sup>1</sup>

#### Highlights

- Turkey's position on Ukraine is sometimes misunderstood as "neutral", it was said, but Turkey has been unambiguous about its full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Erdogan has said all Ukrainian lands must be restored.
- In the run-up to next year's presidential election, the Turkish opposition has expressed strong support for Sweden and Finland joining NATO (in contrast to the initial questions raised by the current Turkish government). The issue of Turkey's relations with NATO and the West will be significant issues in the election. If there is a new government, it will also be a litmus test for the EU's willingness to engage seriously with Turkey as a partner or candidate country.
- However, the election is unlikely to result in a dramatic change in Turkey's approach to Russia, even if there is a change of government. Turkey has maintained purposeful engagement with Russia over many years, based on a careful compartmentalisation of strategic interests and divergences, and there are areas where they will need to continue engaging, notably Syria where both countries have troops on the ground.
- Turkey is keen to be involved in facilitating negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, as it has already done on a number of occasions. However, prospects for a peace agreement were deemed to be low and humanitarian issues may be more of a focus in the foreseeable future.
- Turkey is hardly alone in wanting to strike a balance between having good relations with Western countries and continuing to cooperate with Russia. Western diplomats would be well advised to avoid "with us or against us" rhetoric and pay careful attention to the specific interests and positions of each country when seeking solidarity with Ukraine.

#### Summary

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<sup>1</sup> The Contact Group met virtually on 27 October. This summary note was prepared by the European Leadership Network and does not necessarily represent the views of any individual Contact Group member or any member of the European Leadership Network.

The Contact Group convened in October to discuss Turkey's current foreign and domestic affairs, with a lead speaker from Turkey along with participants from Turkey, UK, Italy, Poland, Latvia, Denmark, Belarus and Russia.

The speaker was keen to set out a nuanced picture of Turkey's relations with NATO, Ukraine, and Russia.

- Turkey's position on Ukraine is sometimes misunderstood as "neutral", it was said, but in fact Turkey has been clear about its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a NATO member it has also been part of all Alliance efforts to strengthen deterrence and defence.
- Despite Turkey's strategic decision to become part of Western security institutions, it has always maintained cooperation with Russia. At present, the bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia have been driven by a careful compartmentalisation of strategic interests and divergences. A purposeful culture of engagement has developed over the years despite deep differences on Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine.
- President Erdoğan has said that any peace deal should include provisions for the return of all territories occupied by Russia, including Crimea, back to Ukraine. Meanwhile Turkish opposition leaders have also condemned Russia's invasion and called for solidarity with Ukraine. Public opinion is increasingly supportive of Turkey's NATO membership.
- Turkey has not joined the sanctions imposed by the US and EU on Russia. This is part of Turkey's long term, principled approach towards sanctions: it fully implements all UN sanctions but does not join other sanctions adopted by an individual country or group of countries.
- Turkey's engagement with Russia on Ukraine has had some success in the form of the recent prisoner swap agreement as well as Turkey's role in [facilitating](#) the UN agreement with Russia on enabling Ukrainian grain exports. It was [reported](#) that Macron had privately argued one reason France needs a channel to Russia is so that this role is not left to Turkey alone.

### ***West should avoid "with us or against us" rhetoric***

Another participant said that Turkey's position has parallels with many other countries around the world, who don't want to be forced into a binary choice between Russia and the West. This should not be surprise to anyone who had lived through the Cold War, which many countries had not seen as a black and white issue; moreover, many non-aligned countries had found it useful in a self-serving way to exploit the tensions between superpowers for their own ends, "playing Cold War games".

In today's confrontation with Russia, the participant said, Western governments would be well advised to avoid "with us or against us" rhetoric. Instead, it was necessary to analyse the interests and positions of each country and shape the arguments of diplomacy to fit those. Geography played a role for countries that were close to the war; history and a degree of nostalgia was also an important factor, for instance in South Africa's traditional solidarity with Russia. After all, most countries have a number of vital interests that are likely to be prioritised above the war in Ukraine. If Western diplomacy did not take account of these interests, it would be unable to generate much sympathy.

### ***Turkey's mediation efforts***

If Turkey seeks to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, what proposals for mediation can it offer? It was said that so far Turkey has been more of a facilitator than a mediator. It has tried to facilitate some

limited agreements even where direct dialogue has not been possible, for instance by working with the UN to secure the grain export deal. For Turkey to be a mediator, both parties would need to ask it to work on their behalf. At present there is no clarity about what a future peace settlement would look like. For Turkey the principle of returning Ukrainian territory is vitally important in order to avoid setting precedents for future conquest of territory, whether by Russia or other actors. For now it is more realistic to facilitate efforts on the humanitarian side rather than seeing a final peace agreement any time soon.

### ***2023 elections in Turkey: how will Turkey's international relations be affected?***

Next year's election in Turkey opens up the possibility of a change in leadership. At the same time, it was said that continuity is expected in some areas of Turkish policy. There might be no dramatic change in Turkey's relations with Russia. The culture of 'agree to disagree' is very strong between the two countries: they have longstanding differences on issues including the Cyprus question, on the fight against terrorism, and a variety of conflicts in different parts of the world. There are places where the two countries will need to continue to engage, such as Syria, where both countries have troops.

Nonetheless, if the elections lead to an opposition victory, the new administration would prioritise restoring ties with the West and place more emphasis on Turkey's role in NATO. It might also create a propitious atmosphere for the resumption of the long-delayed accession talks with the European Union, even at a time when many Turks think the EU has basically forgotten about Turkey's candidacy. Some in Turkey have become very cynical about relations with the EU and felt that the present government in Turkey had become a pretext for Europeans to deal with Turkey only on a transactional basis – notably on migration – rather than as a real partner. If there was a change of government in Turkey, this would be a litmus test of whether the EU is ready to engage with Turkey more seriously and systematically.

A new government would likely also distance itself from the agreement with Russia on the procurement of the S-400 missile system. This agreement had had negative consequences for Turkey as it led to questions in the minds of Turkey's allies, even though the missile systems are not operational, being kept in hangars, it was said.

It was argued that at present the US seems to have no American appetite to engage with Turkey, because it "personifies" the relations and sees Turkey only through the lens of Erdogan. A participant said this was a strategic mistake: the CAATSA sanctions against Turkey only show Russia and China that there is disunity within the NATO alliance. They were concerned that if these poor relations persist much longer, relations will be damaged to a point that will be difficult to repair even in the long run.

### ***Turkey's stance on the NATO accession of Finland and Sweden***

Participants agreed it is a time of deep strategic change in Euro-Atlantic politics. On the issue of Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO, a speaker said that the trilateral agreement reached at the Madrid Summit was a useful framework for progress. Since then there have been a number of trilateral engagements and bilateral discussions. For example, a delegation from the Swedish Justice Department delegation came to Turkey, because Turkey is seeking the extradition of several individuals in Sweden. It

was said that it would be important for Finland and Sweden to show Turkey it was taking its concerns seriously, especially regarding arms sales [NB: Sweden lifted a 2019 arms embargo on Turkey in October 2022]. As for the extradition requests, it was noted that Turkey, Finland and Sweden are all signatories and parties of the European Convention for extradition. They need simply to follow all the stipulations of this convention, it was argued. As long as the governments had prepared all the necessary materials and information for the judiciary, then Turkey should also recognise the separation of powers in democracies.

Meanwhile it was noted that one of the main opposition party leaders in Turkey has been vocally supporting the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, for the benefit of the defence of all Allies.

### *Turkey's policy in the post-Soviet space*

Participants discussed the fact that Turkey has recently become more active in the post-Soviet space, especially in promoting its economic ties. One argued that in this sense, Turkey has reaped benefits from Russia being preoccupied in Ukraine, as Russia's presence in central Asia has been weakened. For example, Azerbaijan has been slightly more vocal on the war in Ukraine and more critical towards Russia.

Russia's operations in Syria have also been directly affected since Turkey invoked article 19 of the [Montreux Convention](#) and closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits to ships from Russia and Ukraine (in March 2022). This had the additional effect of impeding Russia's ability to [ship military equipment to Syria](#), according to a participant.

### *Turkey's position on the risks of nuclear weapons risks*

Could Erdogan act as a voice of restraint, counselling Russia not to escalate the Ukraine war to the nuclear level? It was noted that a possible use of nuclear weapons worries Turkey and the Turkish public. Any nuclear weapons use in Ukraine, the occupied Ukrainian territories or even the Black Sea would be detrimental to Turkish interests. However, it is unclear whether President Erdogan has privately highlighted the catastrophic nature of any use of nuclear weapons in his contacts with Putin. Participants agreed that the next Turkish Government should be communicating with Russia and expressing the unacceptability of any nuclear strike. But it is first and foremost up to the nuclear powers that have a stake in the conflict, especially the United States, France and the United Kingdom, to talk to Russia.

Turkey wants to help facilitate any agreement between Ukraine and Russia deal. Any future Turkish government, regardless of party affiliation, is likely to want to play a role in the mediation of this conflict, owing to geographical proximity, as well as historical and geopolitical responsibility of Turkey. "Turkey wants to be in the picture," as one participant put it. However, prospects for a peace settlement are currently dim as Russia is not respecting the fundamental principles that govern European security – sovereignty, territorial integrity, viability of internationally recognised borders. With territorial concessions, Russia will be victorious. If Russia has to leave all occupied territories, Russia will be humiliated. But, in the views of participants, there is a need for any peace deal to be durable and sustainable, and this will require respecting the fundamental principles of European security.

*Feedback? Questions? Please reach out to Jane Kinninmont – [jane@europeanleadershipnetwork.org](mailto:jane@europeanleadershipnetwork.org)*