

UDC 327

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DOI 10.29038/2524-2679-2022-03-31-43

TÜRKIYE'S STANCE ON RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: TACTICAL MANEUVERING OR STRATEGIC CHOICE?

On 16 March 2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (or rather Türkiye) issued another press release on the «anniversary» of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation [1] to decry the eight-year-old illegitimate referendum in Ukraine's Autonomous Republic. Beyond doubt, official Ankara has been consistent in supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its strategic partner – Ukraine, including on the international political fora (its UN General Assembly voting patterns are another eloquent example of this). Yet, the stance of President Erdoğan's administration on Russia's «special military operation» (reads as war), which unfolded on Ukrainian territory on 24 February 2022, has been rather controversial. In its immediate formal response to this unjust and unlawful act of the Kremlin, the Turkish MFA labelled the attack launched by the Russian armed forces against Ukraine as unacceptable and the one posing a serious threat to security of the region and the world, having condemned the very idea of «changing of borders by the use of arms» [2]. Of particular importance have been Türkiye's strong criticism of Russia's days-before decision to recognize the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, key military capabilities (namely drones) provided to Ukraine, blocked access to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits for non-Turkish warships, and peace efforts of President Erdoğan to resuscitate top-level communication between Moscow and Kyiv. It is official Ankara, however, to refuse from joining other NATO allies and EU partners in their sanctions policy against President Putin's regime, to keep Turkish air space open for Russian aircraft, and to denounce discriminatory attitude towards Russians and Russian culture in some Western countries. This article looks at whether the above refers to occasional double standards or is part of systemic trading-off policy of President Erdoğan's Türkiye in-between Russia and the West.

Key words: Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye, Erdoğan, Zelensky, Putin, peace efforts, shuttle diplomacy.

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ПОЗИЦІЯ ТУРЕЧЧИНИ ЩОДО РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ: ТАКТИЧНЕ МАНЕВРУВАННЯ ЧИ СТРАТЕГІЧНИЙ ВИБІР?

16 березня 2022 р. Міністерство закордонних справ Турецької Республіки оприлюднило чергову заяву з нагоди «річниці» анексії Криму Російською Федерацією [1], у якій зовнішньополітичне відомство засудило незаконний референдум, проведений на території української Автономної Республіки вісім років тому. Безсумнівно, офіційна Анкара залишається послідовною в підтримці суверенітету та територіальної цілісності свого стратегічного партнера – України, у т. ч. на міжнародно-політичних майданчиках (щодо цього яскравим свідченням є патерни голосування Туреччини в рамках Генеральної Асамблеї ООН). Проте позиція адміністрації президента Ердогана щодо російської «спеціальної військової операції» (читається як війна), яку розгорнуто на території України 24 лютого 2022 р., є досить суперечливою. У своїй негайній офіційній відповіді на цей несправедливий і незаконний акт Кремля МЗС Туреччини назвало атаку збройних сил РФ проти України неприйнятною та такою, що становить серйозну загрозу безпеці регіону й світу, засудивши саму ідею «зміни кордонів за допомогою зброї» [2]. Особливе значення також мала різка критика з боку Туреччини прийнятого незадовго до цього рішення Росії про визнання так званих Донецької та Луганської народних республік, постачання стратегічно важливих військових потужностей у вигляді безпілотників, блокування доступу до проток Босфор і Дарданелли для нетурецьких військових кораблів, а також мирні зусилля президента Ердогана щодо реанімування комунікації між Москвою та Києвом на найвищому рівні. Однак офіційна Анкара дотепер відмовляється приєднатися до союзників по НАТО й партнерів із ЄС у їхній санкційній політиці проти режиму президента Путіна, а також залишила повітряний простір Туреччини відкритим для російських літаків і навіть виступила із засудженням дискримінаційного ставлення до росіян та російської культури в деяких західних країнах. У цій статті розкрито таке питання: чи є вищевказані факти епізодичним проявом

подвійних стандартів або ж є частиною системної політики балансування між Росією й Заходом із боку Туреччини під керівництвом президента Ердогана.

Ключові слова: російсько-українська війна, Туреччина, Ердоган, Зеленський, Путін, мирні зусилля, човникова дипломатія.

1. INTRODUCTION

These days the Ukrainian people have to endure the greatest sufferings since the end of WWII. The conflict that sparked back in 2014 and has costed thenceforth thousands of lives turned into a great Russia's war against Ukraine and an unprecedented in the modern history of Europe humanitarian crisis. In the very heart of the continent, millions of civilians, including elderly people and the ones with chronic diseases, pregnant women and children, have found themselves in the epicenter of hostilities, suffering from shelling, in need of food, drinking water and medicines. Following weeks of threats and failed diplomatic attempts, this is what a broad Russian military offensive has brought to Ukrainians since launched at 4 a.m. of 24 February 2022. In his concomitant television address (reads as declaration of war), Vladimir Putin announced a «special military operation» to «demilitarize» and «denazify» Ukraine [3]. Since then the latter, including the capital city of Kyiv, has been heavily attacked by the Russian armed forces with international humanitarian law not merely ignored but tossed aside.

According to the Prosecutor General's Office, 8183 crimes of aggression and war crimes have been registered in the two months only¹, whereas the military action against Ukraine claimed the lives of thousands of civilians, including 215 children [4]. Meanwhile, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has so far recorded 5,718 civilian casualties in the country: 2,665 killed and 3,053 injured amid shelling of peaceful cities from heavy artillery and multiple launch rocket systems, and also indiscriminate missile and air strikes. Apparently, OHCHR believes that the actual figures are considerably higher due to complicated receipt of information from some locations where intense hostilities have been going on [5]. Let alone some indescribable human tragedies, particularly in the besieged city of Mariupol in southern Ukraine, where the lives of tens of thousands including women, children and older people are at stake, or Bucha and Irpin war-torn towns outside Kyiv, with dozens of

¹The article covers a two-month time framework since 24 February 2022.

apartment blocks and houses destroyed, burned-out cars in the street, and mass graves of innocent civilians.

Türkiye, *de jure* recognized and *de facto* known strategic partner of Ukraine, remains consistent in decrying the hard stance of the Kremlin towards its neighbor, having never endorsed both the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Donbas. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu participated on 23 August 2021 in the inaugural summit of the Crimean Platform – an ambitious consultation and coordination format initiated by Ukraine to improve the international response to the ongoing occupation of the peninsula [6]. In the same vein, Turkish MFA Spokesperson Tanju Bilgiç said the results, in so far as they relate to Crimea, of the Russian State Duma elections, held on 17–19 September 2021 also in Crimea, did not have legal validity for Turkey [7]. This goes in keeping with Türkiye’s continued support for the Crimean Tatar community in Ukraine, dynamic military-political interaction between Ankara and Kyiv, including in view of the recent deal paving the way for the joint production of Turkey’s highly rated Bayraktar TB2 armed drones in Ukraine² and brand-new Quadriga foreign and defense ministerial sessions mechanism, strong trade ties³ to breathe new life with the long-awaited free trade agreement of 3 February 2022, and also massive investment presence of Turkish enterprises in Ukraine.

Not in word but in deed, official Ankara and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself have responded accordingly to the ongoing massive war against Ukraine. First and foremost, this refers to the armed drones Turkey started selling to Ukraine in 2019. Turkish officials have refused to disclose how many, but independent estimates report Ukraine has up to 50 Bayraktar TB2s [8]. Following a request made to President Erdoğan by his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky, Türkiye has now closed the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits to foreign naval ships, taking advantage of its rights under the 1936 Montreux Convention in cases of war. This generally symbolic move, as Russia’s Black Sea Fleet is already deployed, still prevents the Russians sending extra ships from the Eastern Mediterranean [9]. Turkey was the one to have voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution of 7 April 2022 calling for Russia to be suspended from the Human Rights Council in response to the violations committed by its armed forces in Ukraine [10]. Not to speak of trucks of Turkey’s humanitarian

²On 29 September 2021, the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine and Baykar Savunma signed a Memorandum of Cooperation on the construction and technical provision of a joint training and testing center for maintenance, repair, modernization of UAVs and training of personnel related to the use of Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicles.

³Trade turnover between Ukraine and Turkey increased to some USD7.4 billion in 2021, according to official data, from around USD4.6 billion in 2020.

assistance supplies to Ukrainians in need and those who fled the country [11] and offers to provide ship support for the evacuation of civilians and injured Turkish and other nationals in Mariupol through the sea [12]. The question is whether Türkiye, NATO member state and EU candidate country, does everything in its power to help Ukraine resist Russia in this war and more to the point – whether President Erdoğan’s administration has not gone too far with its delicate balancing act between its two partners – Kyiv and Moscow.

2. RESULTS OF RESEARCH

Shuttle Diplomacy

So far, Turkey’s high-table diplomacy remains a mixture of keeping Ukraine «calm» and Russia «appeased». On March 16th Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu paid a visit to the Russian Federation and met with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov to discuss the top-priority issue of «ending the war in Ukraine as soon as possible» [13]. The very next day he arrived in Lviv to meet Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and reiterate Türkiye’s support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine [14]. Earlier the «Recoding Diplomacy» Antalya Diplomacy Forum was held under the auspices of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to bring together *inter alia* the heads of Ukrainian and Russian foreign offices for the first time since the start of the full-scale hostilities [15]. On its sidelines, on March 10th Minister Çavuşoğlu hosted the Türkiye–Ukraine–Russia Trilateral Meeting [16]. With this tripartite format meeting at the level of foreign ministers at a time when the need for peace was greatest, official Ankara articulated its commitment to diplomacy between Russia and Ukraine, and also cemented its ambitions for mediating the conflict settlement.

Along with Foreign Minister, President Erdoğan’s Spokesperson İbrahim Kalın has been closely engaged in the diplomatic push for the Russia-Ukraine war resolution. On March 5th he hosted U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman at the Dolmabahçe Presidential Office to discuss mainly the Ukrainian case [17]. Both agreed that the hostilities should stop before bringing on any further destruction and that joint efforts should be intensified in order for the ongoing talks between the sides to yield results. A few days after the Russian military offensive unfolded, Spokesperson Kalın had two consecutive phone talks with U.S. President National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [18] and President of Russia’s Aide on Foreign Policy Yuri Ushakov [19]. Both calls addressed the war in Ukraine and the situation over the Russian-Ukrainian negotiations. To the former, President Erdoğan’s *confidante* reaffirmed Türkiye’s support for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political unity of Ukraine, whereas to the

latter – underscored the need of putting an immediate end to the atmosphere of conflict and tension, in another display of Türkiye’s dual diplomatic effort.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself has been in the very heart of intensive diplomatic efforts aimed at reaching peace between Russia and Ukraine. This war has been an item «number one» on the agenda of his latest in-person meetings (with Chancellor Scholz of Germany and President Duda of Poland) and phone talks (with Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Netherlands, Chancellor Nehammer of Austria, President Pahor of Slovenia, Prime Minister Kishida of Japan, President Vucic of Serbia, President Tokayev of Kazakhstan, President Iohannis of Romania, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, President Biden of the U.S., President Sandu of Moldova, Prime Minister Johnson of the UK, President Michel of the European Council, President Lukashenko of Belarus). The meeting of the Russian and Ukrainian negotiation delegations in Istanbul, hosted by President Erdoğan personally on March 29th, has added positive momentum to the hopes for peace. Through the delegations, the Turkish leader conveyed most heartfelt greetings to both heads of state, each of whom is a «dear friend of him», and called on the parties to put an end to this tragedy [20]. This is how the so-called Istanbul process favoring a peaceful resolution of the conflict has been formalized.

Official Ankara remains constantly in contact with the sides and stands ready to host the peaceful talks. Since February 24th, President Erdoğan spoke by phone with Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin four times each in line with Türkiye’s desire to crown the peace efforts. The former stands unequivocal in his resolve to host the two leaders for the top-level (and probably the consensus-reaching) negotiations in Istanbul or Ankara. In the meantime, President Erdoğan believes that the Istanbul process continues to preserve its status as the most reliable and shortest way out among the efforts aimed at stopping the war in Ukraine and overcoming the crisis [21]. Yet again, the very day the military action against Ukraine unfolded, addressing the Union of International Democrats delegation, the Turkish leader was cautious in his rhetoric: «We find the military operation Russia has launched against Ukraine unacceptable and we reject it. We are sincerely saddened by such a confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, both of which we consider friendly countries we enjoy close political, economic and social relations with» [22]. This is very much in line with Türkiye’s foreign strategy in the recent decades with its high sense of foresight.

Nothing New

The launch of war against Ukraine in late February 2022 has met collective outrage from the international community, with the EU, the UK and the

U.S. imposing a range of economic sanctions on Russia. However, Turkey has refused from joining any restrictive measures. Soon after the massive military action against Ukraine unleashed, Turkish Foreign Minister was very open to utter this decision in his commentary to the national television channel [23]. Later this was echoed by Presidential Spokesman, who said Türkiye had no plans to impose sanctions on Russia at the point in order not to damage strong bilateral economic ties [24]. Clearly, the tough sanctions response from the West has been cratering the ruble these days that cannot but affect Turkey, which is dependent on Russia for natural gas imports, revenues from tourism, grain imports and also export market for construction services and agricultural goods [25]. Amid the runaway inflation this year, which has already eaten incomes and savings of ordinary Turks, that is the good reason why President Erdoğan seeks to work towards de-escalation between Russia and Ukraine.

Turkey – regional heavyweight and part of Euro-Atlantic community – has been consistently «abstracting» itself from the West in its sanctions policy against Russia since the illegal annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Donbas. The EU personal sanctions (asset freezing and restrictions on entry and movement within the EU member states) were first imposed by the Council Decision of 17 March 2014 against a group of Russian officials in response to their actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. The initial sanctions list, to which the United States and over a dozen other countries acceded (among them – Canada, Australia, Japan, Switzerland), included 21 names [26]. As of 28 February 2022, the EU restrictive measures have been extended to 696 individuals and 56 legal entities [27]. Recently the U.S. and European nations agreed to impose the most potentially crippling financial penalties yet on Moscow, including the central bank restrictions and cutting key Russian banks out of the SWIFT system. Even more expansive measures, i.e. the mechanics of how to spare Russia's oil and natural gas exports, are now underway.

Meanwhile, official Ankara has never joined its Western partners in their united response to the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Ukraine. Today, after any cross-border transactions with MasterCard and Visa cards became unavailable for Russians, Turkey has been on a sketchy list of the countries accepting Mir cards (the ones of the central Russian payment system). In the case of foreign trips, the Bank of Russia «kindly» advised Russian citizens to use the latter in Turkey, Vietnam, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and even South Ossetia and

Abkhazia [28]. Given the peculiarities of wartime, on the eve of the new tourist season Turkey is now looking for ways to circumvent sanctions so that more Russians can fly in, including with plans to establish a special airline for transporting them to Antalya. That is another display of the extent Türkiye's ties with Russia have long shaped its commitment to avoid confronting the Kremlin directly. The economic bounds, along with Erdoğan's close personal working relationship with Putin, their shared vision of national sovereignty and suspicions of Western intentions in the Caucasus and Central Asia, stakes in the Black Sea based on defending the status quo [29], and also reluctant partnering in operations in Syria, Libya and the Nagorno Karabakh remain an essential factor in avoiding the sanctions decision.

Stab in the Back

Amid the intensifying Russia's war against Ukraine, official Ankara has neither imposed economic sanctions on Moscow, nor has it closed Turkish airspace to Russian traffic. Flight bans placed on Russian aircraft have been part of a slate of punitive measures amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The states that have banned Russia – i.e. barring any plane owned, chartered or otherwise controlled by a Russian person – from flying over their airspace include the U.S., the UK, Canada, the EU countries and some other European nations, including Switzerland [30]. The closure of airspace and sanctions imposed on Russian airlines and companies were meant to isolate Russia and restrict its international traffic in response to the actions against Ukraine. Yet, the country remains connected to the world largely due to the enormous flow of flights with Turkey [31]. The decision of Türkiye to have its airspace open for «both strategic and humanitarian reasons» was voiced on March 4th by Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu [32]. Not to speak of its candidate affiliation with the EU, Turkey is seemingly the only NATO ally, which has not prohibited Russian carriers from entering its sky to become, instead, a major hub for Russian air travel amid global sanctions.

All about Humanity

In another unexpected move given the scale of the suffering of Ukrainian civilians at the hands of Russia, addressing his ruling AK (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) Party's parliamentary group meeting of March 9th, President Erdoğan condemned the present rhetoric against Russians in the public domain as the one fueling a climate of hatred and casting a shadow over Ukraine's legitimate struggle against Russian military. The Turkish leader warned the West of facing the malady of racism that has spread over the latter's societies like a cancerous cell: «A mentality that discriminated against the oppressed because of their religion, origin, or skin color could have no

tie with humanity or civilization. Just as we cannot accept the fact that Ukraine is being left alone, we reject the practices resembling a witch hunt against the Russian people, the Russian literature, students, or artists as well» [33]. That is another message Türkiye, a neighbor of both Russia and Ukraine in the Black Sea, sends to the world amid the crisis which has now evolved into a tragedy: well, it's apples and oranges. Just as much as official Ankara maintains its policy of supporting territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, it would never slip into a dangerous confrontation with Russia and dehumanization of its people.

Apparently, the message had been voiced before the world community witnessed the «shameful scenes for humanity», as the Turkish MFA itself referred to the images in the press from Bucha and Irpin districts around Kyiv [34]. In its statement of April 6th official Ankara labelled them appalling and worrisome, and also called for identifying those who are responsible and bringing them to account by means of an independent investigation into the issue. Similar was the response of Türkiye's diplomacy towards the April 8th tragic event in the city of Kramatorsk in eastern Ukraine [35], where dozens of people awaiting to be evacuated have lost their lives and been injured as a result of rocket strikes against the railway station. However, the formal statement merely pointed out the «importance and urgency of establishing humanitarian corridors to ensure safe evacuation of civilians» and reiterated the call for an end to this devastating war by declaring a ceasefire immediately. Both messages, meanwhile, failed to include any explicit reference to the ones committing these crimes, in another attempt of demonstrating continued support for Ukraine while not damaging long-term relations with Moscow.

Back to S-400 Issue

One more eye-catching, though anticipated, step of President Erdoğan's administration was to reject delivering its Russian-made S-400 missile defense systems to Ukraine in order to help it fight the Russian armed forces [36]. The informal idea, put forward by official Washington in late March 2022, has triggered the old discussion over Türkiye's controversial experience of purchasing the S-400s (reportedly, having denied an alternative of U.S.-produced Patriot batteries). Back in 2017, when Turkey signed a missile deal with Russia, it became the first NATO ally to purchase big-ticket military hardware from Moscow and get sanctioned by the U.S. under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act [37]. Allegedly, should Turkey have said yes to the S-400 deal now, it would both address Ukraine's urgent need for sky defense and overhaul the U.S.-Turkey relationship, paving the way for the sale of U.S. Patriots to Turkey and also the reversal of the suspension of the latter from the F-35 program [38]. Actually, let alone technical or contractual reasons (the

S-400 sales agreement says the batteries cannot be given to a third country), there is zero chance that Türkiye ever delivers S-400s to Ukraine, as the move would disrupt its relationship with the Kremlin.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Türkiye – 70-year-old dedicated NATO ally, formally candidate for the EU membership, and regional power with beyond-regional ambitions – has long pursued a much-criticized compromising policy towards Russia. The «phenomenon» of Turkey walking a careful line between the West and the Kremlin, which drew fresh breath in the epoch of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s presidency, has been particularly manifesting itself amid the ongoing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In line with its unwavering solidarity with Ukraine, official Ankara has resolutely decried the «special military operation» to have turned into the «war» against Ukraine in its own rhetoric. Since the brutal Russian-Ukrainian escalation in February 2022, President Erdoğan himself has been at the forefront of peace efforts in-between Moscow and Kyiv eagerly anticipating to host Putin–Zelensky presidential talks. Türkiye’s stand for Ukraine has been so far accompanied with the military supplies, including the fleet of Bayraktar TB2 combat drones, implementation of the Montreux Convention’s wartime provisions to limit the crossing of Russian warships from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea through its straits, and massive humanitarian assistance to help people affected by the war in and outside Ukraine. At the same time, unlike most of the Euro-Atlantic community of nations, Turkey has refused to impose any sanctions on Russia trying to keep a sort of «active neutrality», dismissed the idea of transferring its S-400 missile defense systems to Ukraine to help Kyiv resist Russian troops, and never closed its airspace to Russian traffic. This is how the multifaceted foreign and security policy of official Ankara looks like: kind of «combining the incompatible» and defending fiercely its right to pursue one’s own strategy without looking back at both Western allies and Eastern partners. While the warfare has been still a harsh reality, Turkey – neighbor and friend to both Ukraine and Russia – is likely to keep on skillfully balancing «between the bear and the dragon».

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Матеріал надійшов до редакції 15.09.2022 р.