

# Putin and Erdoğan – A “Beautiful Friendship” of Illiberal Presidents

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*Putin and Erdoğan’s “beautiful friendship” has been defining Russian–Turkish political, diplomatic and economic relations on the one hand, and the handling of many conflicts, including the Syrian civil war, for nearly two decades on the other. It can be said that in many cases, when the interests of the Russian and Turkish states clash with each other or there are conflicts of principle and values, it is the two presidents who, because of their similar habitus and political character, find solutions to the problems. One thing is for sure: without the personalities of Erdoğan and Putin, the recent history of the two nations would not be so diverse and full of twists and turns.*

*This article would like to give an analytical journey into the common history of the Turkish and Russian nations, as well as to the souls of the two politicians to look at the reasons and motivations behind the often contradictory political moves.*

*As relatively little work has been done on the topic in Turkish, but more in English, the study is based on scientific papers and Internet publications written in the latter language. It aims at disclosing the role of the two regional powers in a global framework.*

**Keywords:** *bilateral relations, illiberal democracy, Putin, Erdoğan*

## Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are often likened in their political character, views habits and behavior but their actual relationship is far from being ideal and harmonious. In fact, the diplomatic and political ties between Turkey and Russia have survived various modifications during the last decade and each shift and turn was provoked by different conflicts and tensions in the Mediterranean, the Caucasus region or the Middle East. This basically interest driven political game can be seen as a continuous variation of periods of collision and rapprochement. Nevertheless, Putin and Erdoğan, Russia and Turkey influence each other in many ways, and start to depend on each other more and more over time. The Turkish–Russian relations in the 21<sup>st</sup>

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century is not a regional set of conflicts and cooperation, it is a key element in understanding global politics and its local implications.

The premise of this article is that the ever-changing system of relations between Putin and Erdoğan, as well as between Turkey and Russia, despite its conflicts, points to ever closer cooperation, which in global politics may counterbalance certain Western attempts to gain influence, but neither Turkey nor Russia becomes a superpower on the world-wide level. In other words, these two interdependent countries become unavoidable in world politics, but they, alone or even together, are weak enough to control all the processes that take place in their respective regions.

## Leadership styles and personalities

In an accurate understanding of the Turkish–Russian relationship, it is extremely important to examine the personalities of the two leaders from the simple fact that both Putin and Erdoğan are strong individuals and make their mark on their country’s domestic and foreign policies. The authoritarian political regimes they administer cannot be separated from the traits that make the two presidents such a prominent figure that they are so fond of and so feared.

For some political analysts, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are like political twins who are always ready to cooperate and rival each other depending on how the situation develops. They are the ones who are honest enough with each other and in many cases motivated by the same thing: to defend the honor of their homeland and to openly oppose the West. They are brought to life by a sincere struggle, a struggle in which they are sometimes able to hit each other.

In examining the Putin–Erdoğan system of relations, it is not a negligible factor that Russian President Vladimir Putin is very fond of building personal friendships with the world’s leading politicians. This is not necessarily about Putin looking only for the company of those who think and behave similarly in world politics, but about putting more emphasis on personal aspects than other politicians. Thus, among Putin’s friends we find such convinced European Democrats as the former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Erdoğan is similarly an open and friendly type, so with enough criticism, in essence, he reciprocated and reciprocates Putin’s interest.<sup>2</sup>

Putin and Erdoğan can be described as “active–negative” leaders based on their political careers. This is true of their background, their studies, their ascension and the political methodology by which they came to power and consolidated their own position at the head of the country. Putin ran a typical post-Soviet career. He was a staunch agent of the KGB, the Soviet secret service, but he was also popular with the average Russian citizen as a successful athlete and had great results in judo. Building on this image, he concretised himself into power. Erdoğan took a similar path. He, too, was able to credibly play the role of the “simple child of the people” for a long time, as he really fought his

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<sup>2</sup> Murat Ulgul, ‘Erdoğan’s Personal Diplomacy and Turkish Foreign Policy’, *Insight Turkey* 21, no 4 (2019), 171.

way to the top of the political elite with hard work and diligence by the late 1990s, when he even was imprisoned for his political views. By 2010, however, by the time of the constitutional referendum, he had already reached the point where it was not the service of the people that was his first interest, but the convulsive clinging to power.<sup>3</sup>

It is true of both politicians, but Putin in particular, that stability is at the heart of their policies. There are several reasons for this, but one essential element is that the two presidents strongly believe that rules and laws should govern human life in general, and this is especially true of human societies. For them, stability is synonymous with order. They expect themselves and their environment to be orderly and think orderly. The other reason Putin and Erdoğan appear explicitly as partisan politicians in domestic and foreign policy is that they are convinced that only stability and political certainty will provide a sufficient basis for looking to the future. Erdoğan and Putin do not think in the present, but have large-scale plans that require everything to work well in the present. In fact, they see the present as the given, the safe foundation on which to build their grandiose plans.<sup>4</sup>

In Putin and Erdoğan’s interpretation, this order and stability is threatened by “anarchists” and they brand as an anarchist anyone who is seen to have the potential to bring about radical change in society. An excellent example of this is, when protesters came up with demands that they wanted to radically change the whole of society during the Gezi Park event, Erdoğan said he would not give up his long-term plans because of three or five bandits (*uc-bes capulcu*). In this case, Erdoğan not only downplayed the demonstrators against him, but – by using this term – also called them enemies of his system. At that time, 2013, Erdoğan was politically strong enough and with so many supporters behind him that it was not a serious challenge for him to crack down on these protesters at that time.<sup>5</sup>

What Putin and Erdoğan have in common in their political characterisation is that both are in many cases critical of globalisation itself and do not hide that they are disturbed by the fact that the word of Western powers is decisive in world politics. As Erdoğan’s system of relations changes dynamically with Putin, similar processes can be observed with respect to Erdoğan and the West. In relation to Turkish immigrant communities and other affairs, Erdoğan became embroiled in a sharp conflict with Germany and the Netherlands, and in America, the brutality of his bodyguards caused a serious uproar. However, he has remained a loyal partner of the West and NATO in several global games, such as intervening in Afghanistan or dealing with the refugee crisis. Similarly, Putin regularly whips the West and tries to put it in a difficult position, as he does now with regard to Europe’s gas supply, but there are also cases where he shows a more cooperative attitude.<sup>6</sup>

Putin and Erdoğan and their political allies play well on the fears of the average person and appeal well to their desire for the Russian and Turkish nations to finally regain their long-lost historical lustre. Erdoğan’s foreign policy ambitions have benefited from the former foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu’s innovative foreign policy view, the Neo

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<sup>3</sup> Abdulmelik Alkan, ‘Barber’s Typological Analysis of President Erdoğan and President Putin’, *Psychology and Education* 58, no 4 (2021), 1029.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 1028.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 1028.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 1028.

Ottoman mindset, which has shone a hope in the Turkish people that even if their country is unable to regain the territories it had dominated for centuries, serious influence in the leadership of the countries operating there today is still possible. The relative failure of the Syrian intervention has shown that it is not so simple, but it has also reinforced the fears of the Turkish people, as the Syrian civil war, the escalating terrorist activities by various factions such as Kurdish separatists or Islamists, and the influx of refugees together are still a major source of uncertainty in Turkish political life.<sup>7</sup>

Both Putin and Erdoğan, after consolidating their power and naturalising an authoritarian leadership style, began to take on the role of a father in a psychological sense. This has a long tradition in both Russia and Turkey in terms of the country’s leaders. Suffice it to say that the Russian ruler was referred to by the people as “Tsar Father”, while the founder of the modern Turkish Republic also took the name Atatürk, meaning “Father of the Turks”, when he made it obligatory for everyone to have a surname. The paternalism of Putin and Erdoğan is not just a role with historical roots, but also an opportunistic political stance. These two father figures masterfully exploit people’s easily controllable emotions: admiration and fear. Putin and Erdoğan are the traditional father who rewards and punishes at the same time, and is unpredictable enough in terms of reward and punishment.<sup>8</sup> Putin and Erdoğan are not only paternalistic figures, but in different political contexts, they represent a strong nationalist position, and this nationalism noticeably strengthens their masculine traits.<sup>9</sup> The right-wing populism of the two presidents also introduces a kind of masculine leadership style in their countries, which goes beyond putting men in a position and giving women less room, and in many cases also conflicts with democracy. Putin and Erdoğan’s paternalism and male chauvinism thus not only marginalise women, but also destabilise democracy in the Western sense, which is slowly being replaced by an illiberal democracy in Russia and Turkey.<sup>10</sup>

These similarities contribute in many ways to the fact that the relationship between Putin and Erdoğan is not always hassle-free, as they are both hopeful partners and rivals. The following chapters attempt to show the depths and opportunities of this Turkish–Russian partnership and rivalry, as well as the significance of this system of relations for world politics and the world economy.

## Turkish–Russian partnership

It has already been said that Turkish–Russian diplomatic and political cooperation is in many cases determined by common interests. These interests are mostly of a geopolitical nature and relate to one or another conflict zone, and sometimes change over time. Analysts tend to believe that common geopolitical interests are also reflected in economic cooperation, whereas the objective observer finds that the volume of Russian–Turkish

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 1030.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 1030.

<sup>9</sup> Betül Eksi and Elizabeth A. Wood, ‘Right-wing populism as gendered performance: Janus-faced masculinity in the leadership of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdoğan’, *Theory and Society* 48 (2019), 734.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 737.

trade in the world economy is small and barely growing. Although Putin and Erdoğan have set a target of \$100 billion in foreign trade for the two countries in the early 2020s, the reality is less than a quarter of that, Russian exports are \$17.7 billion and Turkish exports are less than \$4 billion. These numbers have risen by only 2.5% in recent years. It is true that the coronavirus epidemic has severely slowed economic development around the world, but this relative failure goes beyond the recent global difficulties and reveals the weaknesses of Russian–Turkish economic relations.<sup>11</sup>

Incidentally, geopolitical considerations do not spare the economy either. For a long time, Russia was Turkey’s most important gas supplier, and by 2017, Gazprom had given more than half of Turkey’s gas needs, quite exactly 52%. This cooperation seemed so strong that the two countries even agreed to build another gas pipeline called Turk Stream to guarantee the security of gas supply. In 2019, however, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan decided to turn his back on Putin in this regard and do business with Azerbaijan. Today, the Muslim-majority and Turkic-speaking Caucasian state is the main supplier to the Turks, while Russian imports account for only a third of the gas coming to Turkey.<sup>12</sup> This move also demonstrates that Erdoğan is able to take surprising economic steps at the expense of its potential partner if geopolitical objectives conflict with economic interests. The escalating situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and the subsequent Azerbaijani–Armenian war forced Turkey to take a clear position. Erdoğan simply could not let down the closest relatives of the Turkish people, the Azeris, who were not only supported during the fighting but also offered economic benefits to them. In this case, at the expense of Russia.

Despite the relatively low volume of Turkish–Russian foreign trade, it can be said that Turkey is heavily dependent on Russia economically. A good example of this was the impact on the Turkish economy of the Russian sanctions imposed after the shooting of a Russian fighter jet in November 2015. Among other things, Russian travel agencies were banned from organising trips to Turkey, and Turkish companies with a similar profile were excluded from the Russian market for 2016. All this was an invaluable blow to Turkish Mediterranean resorts, where by 2015 the majority of foreign guests had arrived from Russia. The suspension of charter flights has also had a significant impact on the transport sector.<sup>13</sup>

## Geopolitical conflicts between Turkey and Russia

Russia and Turkey do not have common land borders, the only point where the two countries come into contact with each other under international law is the Black Sea, under which gas pipelines are the main link. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union and especially after Putin came to power, the Black Sea region has been appreciated by the Russians, it became a natural arena for Russian expansion where Russian and Turkish interests do not necessarily coincide. This process began with Russia interfering in the

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<sup>11</sup> Pavel Baev, ‘Russia and Turkey. Strategic Partners and Rivals’, *Russie.Nei.Reports*, no 35, Ifri, (2021), 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>13</sup> Moira Goff-Taylor, ‘Why Turkey Needs Russia’, *Wilson Center Viewpoints*, no 113 (2017), 1.

internal affairs of Moldova, which had just become independent, back in the 1990s. At that time, there were even common interests, as this intervention contributed, among other things, to the territorial autonomy of the Turkish-speaking Gagauz people. However, the fighting in Georgia in 2008 and eastern Ukraine in 2015, as well as the annexation of the Crimea, came close enough to Turkey for Erdoğan to start worrying, too. Russia has essentially reached the maximum extent of its southern expansion that the Turkish side can still tolerate, or is forced to tolerate, in the hope of successfully cooperating with the Russians in other zones and areas of interest.<sup>14</sup>

Russia’s growing influence in the Black Sea region has also been helped by the fact that, although economically and politically the country lags behind the West, its military strength remains significant. The Turkish side was particularly concerned that the Russians began to reconstruct and modernise the old Soviet military bases immediately after the annexation of the Crimea, which shortly led to the militarisation of the area, to which the Turks had no immediate response. However, Turkey did not even want to get involved in an open conflict with the Russians at that time, in 2014. It did so despite NATO’s encouragement to the Turks and its deployment of weapons in Romania and Bulgaria.<sup>15</sup>

While Russia is pursuing a well-perceived aggressive southern policy under Putin, Erdoğan has not given up on doing the same towards the north. This duality is best seen in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As early as 2016, the Azeris carried out a test attack against this territory that belongs to Azerbaijan under international law but is still partially under Armenian occupation. This offensive was enough for the East Caucasus state to assess what reactions Ankara, Moscow, and the international public could give, and what military and logistical background was needed to conduct a successful campaign. When the Azerbaijani army actually launched the attack in 2020, global opinion leaders were surprised to see that while Russia is essentially incapable of acting, Turkey hardly disguised its full-scale assistance to the Azeris.<sup>16</sup>

## The November 2015 downing of a Russian bomber in Syria

When this article connects the identities of the two leaders, Putin and Erdoğan, in examining Turkish–Russian relations, it is not only because a relationship between countries is easier to imagine if it is personified, but also because the characters themselves have sometimes personal ties and conflicts. This was most noticeable during the November 2015 crisis; when the Turkish air defence shot down a Su-24M fighter aircraft over Syrian territory, Putin felt Erdoğan flooded him. The Russian president has openly stated that his Turkish colleague stabbed him in the back. Putin infused Erdoğan’s personal involvement, and the Russian propaganda machine embarked on a global action to end not only Turkey but also the Erdoğan family. The not-necessarily-true assumption that ISIS Islamist terrorists are

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<sup>14</sup> Baev, ‘Russia and Turkey’, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Pavel Baev and Kemal Kirişçi, ‘An ambiguous partnership: The serpentine trajectory of Turkish–Russian relations in the era of Erdoğan and Putin’, *Turkey Project Policy Paper*, no 17 (2017), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Baev, ‘Russia and Turkey’, 22.

funded by Erdoğan himself and his relatives is still alive in some parts of global public opinion. The shooting of the bomber in November 2015 resulted in a multi-level crisis that pitted not only Russian and Turkish interests against each other, but also Erdoğan with Putin.<sup>17</sup> The Russian media deliberately used some information already circulating in the global press before 2015 to amplify the uncertainty that the U.S. Congress itself commemorated in April 2015 in a report. Russian propagandists assumed that Turkey was not transparent enough, did not see what it was doing to stop the passage of Muslim radicals on its territory. Nor was it possible to know exactly how the Turkish Government was trying to curb the financial transactions through which Turkish financial institutions had enriched terrorists. It has also been suggested that oil enters the world market from ISIS-dominated areas via Turkey. There may have been half-truths in these allegations and accusations, but an extensive network of false news operated by the Russian state has successfully magnified these uncontrolled crumbs of information.<sup>18</sup>

A direct consequence of Putin’s sentiment against Erdoğan and the Turkish state was that in 2016, anti-Turkish sentiment among Russian public was palpable. According to a poll conducted in mid-2016, 29% of those surveyed said Turkey was one of 5 countries destabilising world peace.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, at the time of the above-mentioned research, easing had already begun between Turkey and Russia, Erdoğan and Putin. This was triggered by two events. On the one hand, the fact that in April 2016, the Russians decided to withdraw a significant part of their troops from Syria, which increased confidence in their direction on the part of the Turkish side. Turkey subsequently embarked on a counter-terrorism operation in northern Syria, not only displacing Islamists from the border area, but also proving that they are fighting ISIS and not supporting its rise. This point is also relevant to Erdoğan and Putin’s personal relationship, as Putin sensed that Erdoğan had tacitly apologised for shooting the fighter jet. Perhaps Putin would have been better off if Erdoğan had said that more openly, there could have been Turkish domestic political reasons for the lack of apology. After the coup attempt in Turkey on 15 July 2016, it was suggested that the organisers of the coup might have been behind the shooting of the plane, although no precise evidence was found.<sup>20</sup> Later, more precisely on 27 July 2016, Erdoğan stated in a letter to Putin that they were sorry for the plane shooting, but commentators agree that this is not a formal apology from the Turkish state to the Russian leadership, rather, it is Erdoğan’s personal condolence to the family of a Russian pilot who lost his life in the incident.<sup>21</sup> An important circumstance is that the Russian pilot did not die during the landing, only after he reached the ground and got involved in an armed battle with the Syrian insurgents. The grimace of fate is that the Russian soldier was eventually killed by a bullet from Alparslan Celik, a Turkish citizen fighting on the side of the Syrian rebels.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine Costello, *Russia’s Use of Media and Information Operations in Turkey. Implications for the United States*, 2018, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Baev and Kirişci, ‘An ambiguous partnership’, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>21</sup> Emre Ersen, ‘Suriye sorunu golgesinde Türkiye–Rusya ilişkilerinde normalleşme süreci’, *Marmara Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 3, no 2 (2016), 160.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 90.

In other words, it cannot be excluded that Turkey had a double responsibility for this case, which is why it is not surprising that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, albeit rather curtly and strangely, ultimately expressed his condolences.

While it is not really possible to know whether there is a connection between the shooting of the Russian plane and the coup attempt half a year later, it seems clear that Putin saw an opportunity to link the two events. The Russian president was already able to forgive Erdoğan when he began his campaign against ISIS in the vicinity of the Euphrates, but after 15 July, he was definitely seen as a partner again by his Russian counterpart. Putin believed that if they forget the November 2015 incident and anti-Turkish sanctions and accept the harsh interpretation of the coup attempt by Ankara, he could play Turkey against the United States, where Fetullah Gulen, who Erdoğan sees as the inventor of the coup, is hiding. Putin realised with a good psychological sense that with this move, Turkey would be both his friend and a critic of the West and the U.S. Incidentally, Putin was driven not only by geopolitical and strategic considerations, but also by the fact that the coup attempt created a good position to negotiate significant arms sales with Erdoğan. In 2016, in St. Petersburg, the two heads of state agreed that the Turks would buy from the Russians their air defence missile system called the S-400.<sup>23</sup>

The shooting of the Russian fighter jet not only provoked harsh responses from the Russian side, including sanctions against Turkish government figures and businessmen, but the Turkish public was also sharply divided by the case. It was not necessarily the people who formed an opinion according to who was pro-government and who was opposed, but on the one side were those, led by Erdoğan, who saw the situation as legitimate self-defence. Representatives of the other side, on the other hand, believed that the government was engaging in unnecessary conflicts over Syria and that Turkey should in no way start a fight with the Russians.<sup>24</sup>

## Dichotomy of escalation and de-escalation of conflicts

It can be very well observed that in the various armed conflicts in which Turkey and Russia are both involved, more intense and peaceful periods follow one another. This also characterises the situation in Syria since the shooting of the Russian fighter jet. It is true that Putin forgave Erdoğan and took advantage of Erdoğan’s distressed situation after the coup attempt, but all this does not mean that the Russian–Turkish relationship has become problem-free since then. One thing can be said: if the relationship between the two nations breaks down, the two leaders will restore it. A good example of this is what happened on 28 February 2020 in Idlib. A total of 36 Turkish soldiers were killed in an attack in which Russian-backed Syrian military units raided Turkish government troops. Huge outrage followed the incident in Turkey, where those who sharply condemn Turkey’s involvement in Syria also became louder. There was a noticeable anti-Russian sentiment throughout

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<sup>23</sup> Soner Cagaptay, *Erdoğan Will Play Biden, But Stick to Putin*, 09 December 2020, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Didem Buhari-Gulmez, *The clash between Putin and Erdoğan represents a turning point in Russian–Turkish relations*, 2015, 2.

Turkey. At the same time, thanks to their personal relationship, Erdoğan and Putin were able to settle the situation smoothly and restore Turkish–Russian relations. This is what can be called the “ceasefire” politicisation of the two heads of state. They are the ones who cool the mood in both countries after an incident.<sup>25</sup>

Putin and Erdoğan’s policy of de-escalation becomes a reality through ad hoc agreements. This was also the case in the aforementioned Idlib crisis, where Erdoğan would have preferred to support local Islamists in order to prevent another wave of refugees from leaving the area, while Putin originally wanted Assad’s troops to take control of the city. Prior to this, the Sochi Convention of 2019, in which the two countries decided the fate of a part of Northern Syria bypassing the Kurdish insurgents, fits into this logic. This agreement also made it possible for the Russians and Turks to patrol the region together. This, like other conventions by Putin and Erdoğan, contributes greatly to confidence-building between the two nations.<sup>26</sup>

Two geopolitical and geostrategic ideas were and remain an obstacle to the calming of the international and personal conflict caused by the differing views on the Syrian civil war. In other words, there are two irreconcilable differences between Russia and Turkey, Putin and Erdoğan. One is that while Putin is doing everything he can to keep Bashar Al-Assad in power in Syria, Erdoğan rejects any solution that would give Assad a role in leading the Middle Eastern Arab state. This is all the more interesting and strange since Assad and Erdoğan had a very good relationship before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. This was so true that the citizens of the two countries were able to travel visa-free and also mutually eased customs duties were practiced. The other difference of opinion stems from giving the Kurds partial and regional power, which Erdoğan cannot accept because the Kurdish separatist PKK has been waging war against the Turkish state and Turkish civilians in the southeast part of Turkey for more than four decades.<sup>27</sup>

The dynamics of the dichotomy of conflicts and reconciliations between the two parties, Turkey and Russia, Erdoğan and Putin, are sometimes influenced by external factors as well. Such was the 2017 Astana Summit, where Iran emerged as a regional power factor. Turkey and Russia were forced to include the Shiite country in the agreement, which brought a visible turn in the direction of Turkish foreign policy. As long as they stubbornly refused to see Assad as a partner, the Turkish position eased, which contributed to the normalisation of Russian–Turkish relations on the one hand, and continued to hold the hard-handed Syrian president in power on the other.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it is also worth seeing that the so-called Astana process could not end the Syrian civil war either. This is best measured by the fate of the town of Idlib, which is close to Turkey. While the Turks, in support of the de-escalation, called for the status quo to be maintained in the city, citing the Astana Agreement, the Russians branded the gunmen who controlled Idlib as

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<sup>25</sup> Galip Dalay, ‘Turkish–Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts. Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh’, *SWP Research Paper*, no 5 (2021), 10.

<sup>26</sup> Remi Daniel, ‘Turkish–Russian Relations: A Puzzle that Shakes the Middle East’, *Turkeyscope – Insights in Turkish Affairs* 5, no 3 (2021), 3.

<sup>27</sup> William Hale, ‘Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War’, *Insight Turkey* 21, no 4 (2019), 31.

<sup>28</sup> Hasan Selim Ozertem, ‘Turkey and Russia: A Fragile Friendship’, *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 15, no 4 (2017), 129.

terrorists and the Russian foreign minister Lavrov told his Turkish colleague in 2018 that this hub of resistance must be eliminated. This is the reason behind the already mentioned 2020 Idlib incident, during which local militants, also supported by the Russians, killed 36 Turkish government soldiers.<sup>29</sup>

## Personal differences between Putin and Erdoğan

The crisis of November 2015, caused by the Turkish air defence shooting down a Russian fighter jet over Syria, did not come out of nowhere, only amplified the theoretical and systemic differences between Putin and Erdoğan. Although there are serious similarities between Putin and Erdoğan’s past and career, and they try to operate their authoritarian systems in roughly the same ways, there are significant differences on several points, which give rise to mutual misunderstandings between the two parties.

The first such difference is that Putin and Erdoğan approach the world of multiparty democracy differently. Putin is pushing the opposition into the background in no doubt, not even allowing them a slight success. In contrast, in 2019, Erdoğan did not prevent the opposition from taking control of the largest Turkish city, Istanbul. All that was left of Erdoğan was to invalidate the result of the original election. At the same time, Turkish ruling party candidate Binali Yildirim suffered an even greater and even more humiliating defeat in the repeated vote. Putin expressed his confusion at the sight of his Turkish colleague’s “excessive liberalism” by letting his opposition win in such a crucial city.<sup>30</sup>

The second difference in principle between Putin and Erdoğan can be seen in the perception of Islam and political Islam. While Putin acknowledges that Islam is intertwined with Russian history and, in addition to Orthodox Christianity, it is one of Russia’s identity-forming religions, he is doing everything he can to repress radicals. In contrast, Putin sees Erdoğan as flirting with radical Islam, and the framework of the Turkish secular state is also strained by the Muslim activism that he believes characterises Erdoğan. While Erdoğan constantly and sharply criticises French President Macron for his campaign against Muslim extremists, Putin usually voices his agreement with his French counterpart.<sup>31</sup> The differing views on Islam and political Islam do not prevent Putin and Erdoğan from sometimes using Islam to build bridges between their countries. This was also the case in 2015, when the Turkish president visited Moscow, where he attended the opening of one of Europe’s largest mosques. This visit also provided an opportunity for the two leaders to discuss geopolitical issues and bring their positions on Syria closer.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Inan Ruma and Mithat Celikpala, ‘Russian and Turkish Foreign Policy Activism in the Syrian Theater’, *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 16, no 62 (2019), 82.

<sup>30</sup> Baev, ‘Russia and Turkey’, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ersen, ‘Suriye sorunu’, 155.

## Conclusion

Putin and Erdoğan met on several war scenes in different roles. Thus, they intervened in Syria or Libya, sometimes against each other or in support of each other, and as proxy actors in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At the same time, it is clear that the Putin–Erdoğan relationship system is asymmetric, always Putin is the initiator and always Erdoğan is the one who reacts to it. Nonetheless, this situation benefits Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as Erdoğan sees Putin as a kind of defender. After the coup attempt in 2016, the Turkish leader needed some sort of loyalty, and Putin plays exactly that role on the stage of world politics. Erdoğan is not the first to defend, as he has done the same with Assad and Maduro.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, it would be wrong to believe that Putin and Erdoğan’s relationship works on a superiority basis. Rather, it is about mutual respect and recognition behind the fact that they meet and talk a lot and can resolve many conflicts together. In 2018 alone, the two presidents held 13 face-to-face meetings and 8 longer telephone conversations, after which Putin once put it in 2019 that they could only resolve a certain issue because Erdoğan had outstanding work ethic and worked very hard on the matter.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Putin not only defends Erdoğan, but also acknowledges that in many cases he sees him as a truly equal partner.

Putin and Erdoğan’s “beautiful” friendship, despite all criticism, acts as a relative stabilising factor in areas where the two countries are trying to act as regional powers. Although they are unable to reach the level of influence that the West has, together they have become an unavoidable duo. The question, of course, is when will this fragile relationship end, for example, when will the two politicians be played off against each other by the West they curse on a regular basis.

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<sup>34</sup> Ulgul, ‘Erdoğan’s Personal Diplomacy’, 177.

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