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**Analytical memorandum
CCEIS, HSE University**

**Scientific seminar
«Turkey and its neighbourhood: conceptual
approaches and principles of relations»**

On November 25, 2022, a scientific seminar “Turkey and its neighbourhood: conceptual approaches and principles of relations” was held at the Faculty of World Economy and World Politics and the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies of the National Research University Higher School of Economics. The seminar participants discussed the specifics of Turkey's foreign policy activities in the post-Soviet space.

*The keynote speaker was **Adil İlter Turan**, Honorary Professor of International Relations at Istanbul Bilgi University and former President of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) in Turkey.*

*The seminar was moderated by **Fyodor Lukyanov**, Editor-in-Chief of the journal "Russia in Global Affairs", Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Director of Scientific work at the Valdai International Discussion Club, Scientific Director of the educational program "International Relations" and Professor of the National Research University Higher School of Economics.*

***Vasily Kashin**, Director of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies (CCEIS) at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Associate Professor of the Faculty of World Economy and World Politics, acted as a panellist at the seminar.*

I. Introductory speech

Russian-Turkish relations are an atypical phenomenon, and it is unusual due to historical contradictions. Nowadays *Turkish foreign policy and Russian-Turkish relations show signs of how international politics will develop in years*, maybe even decades, as the international system that existed from the second half of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century is basically disappearing now and rapidly changing. At the same time, the contradictions between the countries cannot undermine bilateral relations. The strength of these ties raises the question of whether this is due to the personal relationship between Presidents Erdogan and Putin, or is it purely the relationship between Turkey and Russia.

II. Historical background

Turkey's foreign policy towards Russia can be divided, since it was born as a republic, into five parts:

- the Turkish War of Independence;
- the interwar period;
- the Cold War;
- the collapse of the USSR;
- and finally, the period after 2010 to the present.

The War of Independence in 1919-1923 was the period when Russia and Turkey were the targets of imperialist expansion at the end of the First World War. The newly created *Soviet state actually provided valuable support to the Turkish national revolutionary movement*. Then came the interwar period, when relations between the countries developed in a positive way after the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Brotherhood in 1921. Later, the USSR contributed to the process of industrialization of the Turkish economy.

Although relations between two countries were good during this period, there were disagreements that emerged during and after the Second World War. Turkey refused to fight in support of the Soviet Union due to a lack of weapons and unwillingness to allow other countries to use its territory. As a result of the war, Turkey joined the Western camp, *fearing the alteration of its eastern borders according to the will of the Soviet Union*. Thus, from 1945 until 1980,

Turkey tried to become part of the Western camp, as evidenced by, for example, sending troops to Korea and joining NATO in 1952. Subsequently, during the Cold War, Turkey's foreign policy followed the policy of the United States, in particular in countering communism, for which the countries signed the *Baghdad Pact*.

Then, in the period from 1980-2010 Turkey's foreign policy showed trends towards strengthening its *strategic autonomy*. Turkey during this period changed its economic policy, moving from import substitution to increasing exports by improving relations with neighbours, including the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the USSR, Turkey pursued a policy of expanding its relations with Russia and the newly formed post-Soviet states, mainly due to economic considerations. From an economic and political point of view, Turkey aspired to become a member of the European Union. Meanwhile relations with the United States have suffered since Turkey refused to allow US forces to use Turkish territory to attack Iraq in 2003.

Then came 2010, when the Arab Spring began, Turkey sought to become the leader of a regional Sunni bloc, which improved its relations with religious countries, while the erosion of its democracy moved away from European integration. At the same time, *Turkey's relations with Russia in Syria deteriorated slightly* because Turkey wanted Syria to become part of the Sunni bloc. Nevertheless, Turkey tried to maintain good relations with Russia, based on the importance of developing close economic ties with Russia in a changing world order.

Turkish foreign policy strategy during the reign of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)

There has been much talk that since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, the foreign policy concept of "*Strategic Depth*" has not received sufficient development. However, Turkey was committed to the idea of not changing the borders, as this would lead to destabilisation of the situation in the regions adjacent to Turkey. Turkey's expansion was broadly defined *in the Caucasus, the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East*, where it could have a strong impact on economic and cultural ties and gain political influence.

Initially, these ideas were illustrated in the "*zero problems with neighbours*" formula. The goal was to make Turkey proactive in the aforementioned regions. Unfortunately, this idea was also embodied in the support of the *Muslim Brotherhood* movement in 2010 in the hope that it

would make Turkey the leader of the Sunni bloc. This policy has completely failed, and the mention of it in the Turkish public has disappeared. The author of the policy left the government and joined the opposition movement.

Traditionally, Turkey's foreign policy line has been based on the following patterns:

- the *consensus* of the country's political establishment, which usually includes the opposition;
- the *absence of significant disagreements* between the government and the opposition regarding further actions in foreign policy;
- *until 2010*, this seemed to be the natural pattern of policymaking.

But after 2010, the *management style has changed* and the pattern seems to have been broken. The government considered the Foreign Ministry and the military to be too conservative to pursue a dynamic foreign policy. Politics has increasingly been handled by an armed group of political advisers *under the strong leadership of first the Prime Minister and then President Erdogan*.

In fact, because of this particular foreign policy methodology, there are five shortcomings:

- First, it is the adoption of an *ideological orientation* – the government attaches great importance to the development of relations with Islamist movements and does not want to change this approach;
- Secondly, the *personalization of foreign policy*, which is carried out and modified under the leadership of the president without any participation of foreign policy institutions;
- Thirdly, it is the *deinstitutionalization* of foreign policy, which is a natural consequence of personalization;
- Fourth, there is *unprofessionalism* in foreign policy. Previously, people who did not receive ranks in the Foreign Office usually did not receive important diplomatic posts. Now this has changed, diplomats are appointed on the basis of loyalty to the party and the president;
- Fifthly, foreign policy has become an *instrument of domestic policy* and is used as its resource.

III. Post-Soviet space

In the context of Turkish foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, the following three spaces are distinguished:

- The first is *Eastern Europe and the Baltics*. The three Baltic countries after gaining independence became members of the EU and NATO. At the same time, the European part of the post-Soviet space also consists of countries that are not currently integrated into NATO and the EU, such as Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine.
- Secondly, it is the region of the *South Caucasus*, consisting of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.
- Thirdly, this is the *Central Asian* region, which includes four Turkic countries, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Black sea and Ukrainian events

Turkey's foreign policy towards the non-NATO Soviet states is more subtle and not aimed at confrontation with Russia. Firstly, Turkey is interested in keeping the Black Sea out of the field of global competition, so that Russia does not feel threatened and does not show interest in changing the status quo in this area, including modifying the *Montreux Convention*:

- Turkey insists on strict adherence to the rules of the convention and tightly *controls the passage of warships in and out of the Black Sea*;
- These rules equally apply to both NATO member countries and Russia;
- Turkey did not welcome the efforts of the EU to increase its presence in Bulgaria and Romania, and also limited the presence of NATO in the Black Sea;
- *Turkey wants the Black Sea to remain an area where Turkey and Russia are the two key players*. In this direction, the positions of Russia and Turkey are generally similar.

Turkey, unlike its other NATO partners, believes that *sanctions pressure on Russia is not conducive to peace in Ukraine*. Turkey is also not interested in depriving Russia of its multifaceted economic relations, which include the energy, agriculture and tourism sectors.

Thanks to its specific position, Turkey was able to act as a channel of communication between the conflicting parties. Turkey's mediation efforts have resulted in a *grain deal* that has enabled secure grain supplies from Ukraine, and now also from Russia. Turkey has also made efforts in the *exchange of prisoners* between Russia and Ukraine, as well as in organising recent contacts between the leaders of the Russian *Foreign Intelligence Service* and the *CIA (USA)* in Istanbul.

South Caucasus and Central Asia: Ideological Narratives of Turkish Policy

The Ottoman Empire was essentially a multinational empire, and when faced with the challenge of *nationalism*, it tried, among other things, to develop an ideological formula to hold the empire together.

Then came the idea of *pan-Islamism*. Since most of those ethnic groups that initially broke away from the Ottoman Empire lived in the Balkans, the Empire tried to keep the rest together by promoting the idea of Islam, but again, this did not work. Muslims living under the rule of other states of that time were not going to revolt and join the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire were already beginning to be saturated with the ideas of nationalism: Turkic, Arab, for example.

And the final form was *Turkism*, the expression of which was the emergence of a pan-Turkic movement that could arouse the interest of the intellectual elite of other countries where Turkic peoples lived (mainly in Russia). But this movement enjoyed limited popularity within the Ottoman Empire itself. First of all, the Ottoman elite did not consider themselves to be Turks. They reserved the term "*Turk*" for the Anatolian presence. But on top of that, the so-called Turkic peoples shared little consciousness of their common origins or culture. Moreover, some regions of Central Asia still lived in the case of nomadic life.

But the *pan-Turkic intellectual tradition* presented a real challenge to the founders of the *Turkish Republic*, who wanted to confine Turkic nationalism to the new Turkish state. The founders of the republic realised that the allocation of resources to realise the dream of unifying the Turkic world would endanger the existence of the newly established republic. They understood that the pursuit of a *pan-Turkic goal* would lead to problems with the Soviets, under whose rule most of the Turkic peoples lived.

Specifics of Turkish foreign policy in Central Asia

After the republics of Central Asia became independent, Turkey faced the problem of not having a clear understanding of the domestic political context in these countries. This was largely due to the fact that almost all sources of information about the ongoing processes in the Turkic republics of the USSR had an *ideological tinge*. As a result, Turkish experts of the 1990s gave inaccurate and, consequently, ineffective recommendations when formulating Turkey's policy in Central Asia. So these experts expected that after liberation from the Soviet yoke the Turkic peoples *would rush to have closer relations with Turkey*.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of new states in Central Asia, Turkey immediately wanted to establish stable ties with this world. But at the same time, there were inflated expectations that the new states would naturally gravitate towards Turkey as the leading Turkic state. This was unrealistic, since each of these states developed a different sense of identities that were often in conflict with each other.

Russia, for its part, continued to view these countries as being in its own *backyard* and tried to prevent other actors from entering the region with varying degrees of success. And Russia was trying to develop means of maintaining its dominance in the countries of Central Asia. Starting with the *CIS*, over time Russia has developed other mechanisms, including new defence agreements, as well as more expanded cooperation within the framework of the *CSTO*.

Nevertheless, *Turkey has sought to strengthen its ties with the Central Asian States*. Initially, the societies received significant support in the development of their diplomatic service. Programs were also initiated to attract a significant number of students from Central Asia to study at Turkish universities. In addition, Turkish schools were opened in these societies with the teaching of both Turkish and English. Along with this, assistance was provided to the development of trade in Central Asian countries. Moreover, plans to replace alphabets with the Latin alphabet were welcomed, and Turkey promised to support such a reform. But Turkey subsequently found that the promises it had made exceeded the funds it had at its disposal to help these countries change their alphabet. Nevertheless, these reforms gradually took place, and some countries switched to the Latin alphabet.

At present, there is an institutional framework *emphasising cultural relations and the development of economic ties* between Turkey and the Turkic states of Central Asia. But Turkey's policy in Central Asia is not to drive Russia out. It is recognized that this is a region where Russia has both legitimate security interests and economic interests. Turkey's goal is to help Asian states develop *greater self-sufficiency*, as well as establish closer relations with Turkey. Therefore, the intention is to develop them not at the expense of Russia, but together with Russia.

Specifics of Turkish foreign policy in the South Caucasus

Turkey is interested in this region for a number of reasons. For example, *Azerbaijan* is a source of energy which Turkey needs, and this is an additional source, besides Russia. Turkey also offers a transport route for Azerbaijani and possibly Turkmen gas and Kazakh and Azerbaijani oil to enter the European market via the *Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan* oil pipeline, which is intended for oil, as well as through the *Southern Gas Corridor*.

The South Caucasus also represents the main corridor for Turkey, connecting it with Central Asia. Now there is a connection with Central Asia through the Russian port of *Novorossiysk*, but the road through Georgia and Azerbaijan is another important connection. And now there are hopes that after the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a new Zangezur corridor can be opened between Azerbaijan and Nakhichevan near the Turkish border. This would shorten the route and add another option to reach Central Asia. In this case, Turkey will have hopes that the *Chinese Belt and Road Initiative* will pass through the South Caucasus and Turkey, which can become one of the major terminals connecting China with Europe.

Turning to country cases, it is worth mentioning about Georgia, which experienced difficulties with integrating other ethnic groups into its political community. And in this regard, Russia twice intervened in the conflict, acting on the side of ethnic minorities – Abkhazians and Ossetians. This created the basis for problematic relations with Georgia. On the other hand, *Turkey has unusually good relations with Georgia*. In this direction, Turkey will continue to maintain a positive trend in bilateral relations, but will *keep the Georgian-Russian problems outside the framework of its relations with Russia*. Moreover, Turkey maintained neutrality in

the Russian-Georgian conflicts, and also did not allow NATO ships to enter the Black Sea when the conflict was ongoing.

Summarising

The dissolution of the Soviet Union created a new geography to which Turkish foreign policy had to respond. In addition to Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, which quickly integrated into the EU and NATO, Turkey tried to pursue a balanced policy between the post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe and Russia. Turkey is trying to maintain good relations with both Russia and those countries and prefers to help resolve conflicts through negotiations.

As noted earlier in Central Asia, Turkey's interests are economic and cultural in nature. Turkey anticipates that these countries will gradually strengthen their independence and work to reduce their ties with Russia. But Turkey will actively work to improve its relations with these countries. However, it is *unlikely* that they will include a major security dimension. Turkey cannot aspire to be involved in Central Asian security issues. It seems that this is an area where *Russia has a greater role*. Nevertheless, Turkey hopes that the Turkic states will develop some capability to act together and support each other in international politics.

In the Caucasus, Turkish foreign policy is more competitive toward Russia, since Turkey pursued both higher economic goals and security issues. Russia initially treated this region as its own *backyard*. But this situation *gradually changed* over time. Turkey and Russia appear to have a competitive relationship in the region.

Although Turkey hopes to increase cooperation between the Turkic-speaking states, there are limits to this. Thus, not all states are equally interested in deepening cooperation with Turkey. *Turkmenistan*, for example, is not a full member of the Organization of Turkic States. Moreover, the economic potential of the Central Asian countries is indeed limited: *only 2% of Turkey's external trade accounts for the countries of the region*. Nevertheless, Turkey hopes for energy cooperation and the development of the transport system, also related to China's Belt and Road project.

Finally, we must recognize that Turkey's foreign policy in the post-Soviet space is *part of a broader set of relations between the two countries*. The fact that, despite major differences, Turkey and Russia have managed to develop highly beneficial relations and contain their

competition in such a way that it does not stand in the way of such relations gives us reason for optimism in the future.

IV. Continuation or transformation?

Would you see Turkey's current policy more as a continuation of what Turkey did before in previous periods, or are changes prevailing? So the transformation is bigger than expected?

There is a broad consensus that the world order developed by the United States after the Second World War is no longer sustainable. It has changed, and this is number one. Secondly, Turkey is not going to be in this new configuration because Turkey would like to maintain a more autonomous posture rather than becoming a member of just one block. This is due to the fact that these blocks will become less and less meaningful in prospect. And third, Turkey must always have good relations with Russia. This seems to be an *unanimously shared opinion in Turkey*.

Turkey and Russia are two big countries for whom it is unprofitable to be in conflict relations. Understandably, there will be disagreements, there will be competition, but *this has to be managed*. The current Turkish policy is first of all, no longer just a sort of temporary policy where Turkey's real loyalties lie with another camp. Turkey believes that changes are gradually taking place, and in the future the world will look differently, so Turkey has to keep its options open. And secondly, Turkey must have *good relations with its neighbours*, but particularly with Russia. And finally, I think that Turkey is giving more and more attention to the critical importance of economic relations.

V. Russian view on Turkish foreign policy in the post-Soviet space

Basically in Russia, Turkish politics in the post-Soviet space is a kind of politicised issue that is quite often mentioned in television talk shows with *huge exaggerations*. So it is sometimes very difficult for the general public to distinguish reality from myth. In fact, we have an obvious *lack of information* about the real goals of Turkish policy in many post-Soviet countries.

Turkish policy is extremely successful and active in the area of *soft power*, especially in the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. However, the Turkish economic presence

is not so heavy and is unlikely to grow that fast due to the size of the Turkish economy and current economic problems, especially high inflation. But at the same time, there is an obvious tendency to *expand cooperation in the field of security and the military-industrial complex* between Turkey and a number of post-Soviet countries. For example, Turkey is becoming a *major arms exporter not only to Azerbaijan, but also to Turkmenistan* and to some extent to other Central Asian countries.

What is really difficult for us in Russia is to understand *the real place of Central Asia and the South Caucasus* in relation to other priorities of Turkish foreign policy. It is known that Turkey is very active in North Africa, for example, in Libya. Turkey also gives priority to its Middle East policy. Of course, this directly affects Turkish security, and Turkey needs to conduct military operations in Syria and Iraq, but it also has extensive economic interests in the region.

As for the future, of course, Russia is watching all of the transport and economic integration programs in the region, including projects related to the Belt and Road initiative. And there has always been a lot of Chinese activity in the South Caucasus, also related to Turkey. But the Covid-19 pandemic has had a serious impact, and another factor is the huge *US pressure on a number of countries to abandon the Belt and Road Initiative projects*. This pressure affected, for example, *Georgia*, which would be a very important country for any potential project connecting Turkey and Central Asia. It seems that in the current situation, the *Zangezur corridor* project becomes especially valuable if Georgia stops any cooperation with the Chinese under pressure from the United States.

And finally, *the most pressing issue* for us in Russia is the extent of Turkey's continued cooperation and coordination with the United States and NATO in carrying out various strategies in the implementation of its policy in Central Asia. Especially in Central Asia, including military cooperation projects, because we know that there are extensive personnel training programs. But, like the Turkish presence itself, it does not pose any significant danger to Russian or Chinese interests. The Turkish presence, which is coordinated with the United States and NATO, would be perceived quite *differently* by both Moscow and Beijing.



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