

## TÜRKIYE – NAVIGATING ROLES AS AN UNCOMFORTABLE ACTOR OR REGIONAL “BALANCER” –

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*This article aims to explore two roles assumed by Turkey in the international environment: the one of uncomfortable state actor for the West and the neighbourhood, even problematic at times, and the one of regional “balancer”, interested in identifying the appropriate course of action to end the war of Russia against Ukraine. Capitalising on its imperial heritage as well as its geographical location, Turkey has over time had a number of strengths which it has exploited in its international relations to achieve its interests. The year 2023 brought with it the reconfirmation of a new mandate of President Erdogan, aspect seen as decisive in the configuration of the mentioned image – of an inconvenient actor – of Turkey. However, this Turkey, considered by many to be inconvenient, has remained extremely consistent in its relation to the Russian-Ukrainian war, manifesting itself as a “balancer” by attempting to create favourable premises for its conclusion.*

*Keywords: balance of power; war; political system; international relations; regional power;*

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, Türkiye presented itself as an interesting actor, even an intriguing one, as a result of its decisions on both domestic and foreign affairs. This posture is owed to the fact that, in some cases, the country seemed to head towards the West, while in others, it was accused of paying lip service to Russia.

Ever since the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine broke out, Türkiye was extremely active as far as ending the war is concerned, both by vocally and pragmatically advocating in favour of the Ukrainian integrity and sovereignty, as well as through the military support provided to Ukraine. Despite the fact that Türkiye seems to have a “*special relationship*” with Russia – a fact that resulted from the bilateral relations in terms of foreign policy, its support to Ukraine saw no step back.

The present article explores a current issue and question at the same time – *Is Türkiye an uncomfortable actor or rather a significant regional “balancer”?* In order to provide an answer, the article shall undergo a review of recent political events within the country, their reflection on the domestic level, followed by the analysis of foreign intended actions, meant to restore the state’s reflection on an international level. In order to illustrate these evolutions, and to prevent this article from becoming a book chapter (given the impressive academic analysis existent on the topic), the attention shall be focused on the result of the 2023 Turkish Presidential elections, followed by Türkiye’s attempt to mediate the negotiations that would put an end to the Russian war against Ukraine. Although there is no evident causality relationship between the two, they remain important to illustrate and justify the current Turkish standing within the Black Sea area.

### MAIN EVOLUTIONS IN THE FUNCTIONING OF THE CURRENT TURKISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

2023 was an important year for Türkiye, as a result of the stakes riding on it. The February earthquake was an alarm call on the state’s capacity to deal with crises of such magnitude. Moreover, government popularity was down as a result of economic difficulties – in 2022, inflation rates hit 72.3% (Focus Economics, 2022). As a result, given the fact that presidential elections were scheduled to be held in May 2023, the international public opinion was tuned to those evolutions. The main question was whether the elections would bring along political change,

or the Justice and Development Party (AKP) – the party of the current president – would remain in power.

Currently, the question has been answered: on 3 May 2023, Recep Tayyip Erdogan entered his third mandate as President of Türkiye. Furthermore, the May 2023 elections did not only reconfirm Erdogan as president, but were also a reflection of a series of evolutions since 2016 onwards, many of them highly criticised by the international community. The most important of these evolutions shall be explained below.

The attempted Turkish coup d'état of July 2016 resulted in the creation, on the level of the Turkish leadership, of an alarming perspective with regard to internal and external enemies. Thus, as a result of the July 2016 action, the Turkish government established a state of emergency within the state, which led to a restraint of the freedoms set by the Constitution. At the time, approximately 40,000 government workers were laid off, then arrested, and several educational facilities, associated with Fethullah Gulen (the exiled Islamist leader who orchestrated the coup d'état) were shut down (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

The April 2017 referendum led to the changing of the political system, from a parliamentary republic (dating back to 1923) to a presidential one (based on the US model). In January 2018, the very legislation that provided the President with unlimited powers and removed the Prime Minister position, was enacted.

Although the Turkish political system has always been an etatism-based one, the new Constitution allows the President to leave aside the Parliament in the exercise of its ruling function. Consequently, the main critique verbalised internationally on the Turkish political system is that democracy is not inclusive and serious violations of human rights are likely to occur.

At present, the ruling of Erdogan is a projection of force, which is likely to impose costs on the Turkish state, since more and more international organizations in the field of human rights protection began signalling deviations within the Turkish political system. Thus, in 2017, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly launched a monitoring procedure on Türkiye, invoking its concern on the violations of human rights, democracy and rule of law (Council of Europe, 2017). In 2018, the UN Office for Human Rights issued an evaluation report on the state of human rights post-coup d'état in Türkiye. The assessed time frame ranged between 1 January – 31 December 2017, and the results were concerning, given the fact that in the context of the state of emergency established immediately after the coup d'état, arbitrary denial of freedom of movement as well as that on the right to work occurred. Claims state that they were followed by torture and bad treatments,

and the violation of the right of association and freedom of speech. For instance, in the case of the arrests performed as a result of the coup d'état, detention was accompanied by torture, loss of jobs and social rights, including evacuation from state-owned housing. Furthermore, the violation of freedom of speech occurred in the shutting down of approximately 100,000 Internet sites and TV channels, some of which were accused of being pro-Kurdish (United Nations, 2018). In addition, the report pointed out that the changes in the 2017 Constitution affected justice impartiality and limited Parliamentary control over the Executive.

In 2021, the Council of Europe, the EU and the USA criticised Türkiye for its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on the prevention and combatting of violence against women and domestic violence. Later on, in March 2023, the Council of Europe Ministerial Council reiterated its call for the freeing of the former co-president of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, and of activist Osman Kavala, as a result of the in-favour ruling of the European Court of Human Rights.

As far as his relationship with the Kurdish minority is concerned, in the first years of his mandate, President Erdogan showed concession towards them, by providing cultural rights. However, the military operations in the south of Türkiye led to various deaths, disappearances and torture practices among the Kurds (United Nations, 2018). In addition, after the coup d'état, the political leaders of the Kurdish movement were arrested, accused of treason and several attempts to discard the People's Democratic Party occurred. Moreover, President Erdogan justified his refusal to Sweden's accession to NATO based on the allegations that Sweden was protecting Kurdish terrorists.

In the spring of 2023, Erdogan's main campaign topics featured national security, an increase in public investments and the preservation of conservatory family values, versus the opposition candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, accused of promoting the LGBT community values, against the family-related ones. It is in this framework that an election monitoring mission, jointly performed by the OSCE and the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, highlighted the national and private media biased actions (at the same time, those media channels criticising Erdogan's leadership were systematically fined), the use of public resources in favour of the ruling party, restrictions on the freedom of speech, including arrests and trials of those journalists “*unfriendly to the ruling power*” (Fella, Walker, 2023).

It is obvious, based on the international reports and monitoring missions, that the current Turkish political system is characterised by the concentration of power

in the hands of the president, and the restraint of human rights and freedoms in order to exert a firm domestic control. It is a fact that this domestic conduct has been repeatedly criticised by the international fora.

### TÜRKIYE AS AN “UNCOMFORTABLE PARTNER”

Under Erdogan’s presidency, Türkiye developed a more assertive foreign policy, featuring its direct military involvement in the Syrian civil war, the performance of military operations in northern Iraq to capture the members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the support for Azerbaijan in its dispute with Armenia for Nagorno-Karabakh, its involvement in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its interventions in the disputes in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean seas.

The relations between Türkiye and Syria have been tense ever since 1939, when the former annexed the Hatay province. Other disputes ensued, focusing on the access to water resources of the two states sharing a considerable border, the support offered by Syria to PKK and to the Secret Freedom Army of Armenia (dissolved in the meantime), which the EU and NATO considered to be a terrorist organization. The relations between the two states had their relaxed moments, but once the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, the diplomatic relations between the two have been severed, to be temporarily re-established in October 2021. Moreover, the results of the Turkish elections have been much coveted, as the Erdogan regime promoted a relaxation in its relations with the Bashar Al-Assad regime (Khalife, Waters, 2023). It was done in order to regulate the situation of Northern Syria, where Türkiye has been stationing military troops, and that of the approximately 3 million Syrian refugees on Turkish ground.

As was the case in Syria, Türkiye has been stationing military troops in Northern Iraq since 1995-1997, in order to capture PKK members. While initially, Iraq expressed its agreement for Türkiye to perform military operations on its territory against PKK members, beginning with 2017 onwards, the Iraqi government protested repeatedly against Turkish military incursions on its territory, claiming it to be a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The relationship between Türkiye and Azerbaijan is essential to both, since the latter is an alternative provider to Russian gas, while the former is a well-developed source of weapons to Azerbaijan in its fight against the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Ever since the debut of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, Türkiye attempted to place itself as a peace-maker, since Ukraine is a zone of interest to Türkiye in its attempt to avoid Russian gas and nuclear dependence. This is highly

important as far as energy costs are concerned, even though, at present, Rosatom plays the lead role in building Türkiye’s first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu. Furthermore, even though Türkiye joined NATO member states in condemning the Russian invasion in Ukraine and provided the latter with military equipment, it did not impose any sanctions to Russia and even facilitated the access of Russian businessmen on its territory. At present, Istanbul is a transportation hub for flights to and from Russia. Moreover, in July 2022, Türkiye took on the mediation role, facilitating the *Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI)*.

The conclusion of BSGI provided Russia with access to the Bosphorus for the first time in history, but rather in a controlled manner, as Türkiye ably limited the access of Russian military vessels to the Straits. In light of this access and control within the Black Sea, Russia was deeply interested in the outcome of the Turkish elections. Even though Erdogan considers Putin to be “*a dear friend*” (The Economist, 2022), the Ankara leader is very shrewd in playing his cards – he tempts the West to annoyance, but not badly enough to turn it into an enemy.

Another area of interest to Türkiye is the Eastern Mediterranean, on account of its conflicts with Greece and Cyprus for marine foraging rights, in light of the energy development potential of the area. The relationship between Türkiye and Greece has been a problematic one for decades, and can be summarised in a few words: for the Greeks, Türkiye is a threat, while Türkiye perceives Greece to be an enemy (Coşkun, Ülgen, 2022). The two perspectives are justified by the sovereignty disputes in the Aegean Sea, and by the status of the Turkish minority in Western Thracia. As far as Northern Cyprus is concerned, Erdogan sided with the current political leaders, who rejected the UN solution of a united federal Cyprus, in favour of the two-state solution (Ib.).

From the point of view of the Islamic world, Türkiye is a strategic actor, having particular connections with the European Union and NATO. For Türkiye, NATO is a provider of security guarantees, while the EU is the greatest market for Turkish products. In addition, Türkiye is the main migration route from the east to the centre of Europe. In the Western Balkans, Türkiye is a competitor for Russia and the EU (Haas, 2023). For instance, in Bosnia, Kosovo and Montenegro, Türkiye exerts a manifest patronage over the Turkish minority.

Therefore, why is Türkiye considered to be an “*uncomfortable partner*” for the West and its neighbourhood? The explanation stems from the fact that any Turkish policy, including the foreign one, is based on nationalism, bearing thus significant implications for neighbouring or partner states. For instance, although a member

of NATO and a candidate to the European Union, Türkiye distanced itself from the Euro-Atlantic perspective in the Black Sea region, rejecting the internationalization process and promoting its exclusively regional role, mainly on economic grounds. Furthermore, although its political relations with Syria and Iraq are tense, as presented above, the Turkish MFA would like to retain its two pillars in the East – in Baghdad and Damascus, as any withdrawal from Syria and Iraq would be translated in renouncing its fight with the PKK.

### TURKIYE'S "BALANCER" ROLE, BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The concept of "*balance of power*" is extremely important in the field of International Relations. In a multipolar world, bearing in mind the memory of the Cold War bipolarity, the maintenance of a balance of power remains the aim of international leaders in order to maintain peace, or, should peace be compromised, in order to attain it.

IR theory often makes the difference between "*balancing*" as a type of state behaviour and "*the balance*" as a result from the perspective of foreign policy. Thus, the very essence of *balancing* is meant to develop a state's capacity to resort to military operations in order to discourage or defeat another state. State *balancing* could occur in multiple ways, either by coalescing other states' resources by alliance forging (*external balancing*), or by improving its own military abilities (*internal balancing*). On the other hand, "*the balance*" is used to describe a systemic result – the very balance of military capabilities within the international system. It is important to acknowledge that, although often operated as a distribution of resources among two or more states, the main point of interest of the concept is its ability to prevail in a military conflict (Vasquez, Elman, 2012, p. 30).

Kenneth Waltz (2006, pp. 30-45) differentiates between two types of *balancing*: an internal one, when a state relies on its own efforts, and an external one, when a state forges alliances with other states. Within bipolar systems, on the one hand, *balancing* would occur between the two superpowers, that are likely to fundament their strength on their own efforts and resources and are not likely to appreciate alliances with small states. Contrary to expectations, Waltz claims that the *balance of power*, although being a protection mechanism for the state in order to survive, does not always lead to the absence of war. On the other hand, in a multipolar system, *external balancing* spans two dynamics. Since more than one state is in the capacity to deal with a competitor, each has enough reason to "*pass on responsibility*", hoping that another threatened state will use its human

and material resources in order to stop a hegemonic power from ascending to more. The passing on of responsibility from one hegemon to another might lead to the absence of any *balancing*. Consequently, one or more of the other states might hold hegemony at a given time.

According to Christensen and Snyder, states are more likely to pass on responsibility, when they consider that the advantage resides with the defensive (1990, pp. 137-168). It means that they will not react and will wait instead for another threatened state to act. In contrast, when states consider the advantage of being on the offensive side, their response will be an active one, likely to lead to a rapid expansion of the war. Thus, Christiansen and Snyder agree with Waltz that the *balance of power* does not automatically translate in the absence of war. Should the offensive be considered a dominant one, states will rush towards forging foreign alliances and towards fulfilling their commitments within. Should defence be considered dominant, the passing on of responsibility will be widespread, while *balancing* will be rare. In a world truly dominated by the offensive, it is probable for potential hegemons to rapidly climb the hierarchic system, and leave no room for balances to occur. The two authors illustrate this idea with the example of the pre-world war alliances. The failure of alliances throughout time to prevent war from occurring shows that *balancing* was not efficient. However, most states will act in order to counter a possible hegemon. In addition, they would comprehend the probability of a systemic result in need to be avoided (another state hegemony), and would act to achieve the preferred systemic result (the very balance).

Even though the *balance of power* was consecrated in the field of International Relations and was operated by states to maintain equilibrium within the international community, its achievement requires a series of attributes such as: wisdom, initiative, perseverance and diplomatic creativity.

From the point of view of Ahmet Davutoglu, President Erdogan's foreign affairs counsellor, who, in 2016, became Minister of Foreign Affairs in the administration of the same president, Türkiye's current standing, as a successor of the former Ottoman Empire, places it, both geographically and politically, in the "*balancer*" spot. Based on its succession of the Ottoman Empire and on its spheres of influence, Türkiye belongs to the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the Mediterranean and the Black Sea (Sanchez-Tapia, 2022). It is based on this perspective and on its geographical positioning in Eastern Europe, that Türkiye assumed the "*balancer*" role in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022.

The “*balancer*” role took on by Türkiye ever since the beginning of the war, although initially considered to be risky, was, in fact, the winning strategy. Thus, Türkiye managed to support Ukraine, both politically and militarily, without alienating Russia from an economic point of view.

There are several actions that Türkiye pursued since the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, which feature it as a veritable “*balancer*”: its refusal to acknowledge the illegal annexation of Crimea and its insistence for the maintenance of Crimea’s territorial integrity within its 1991 borders. Moreover, Türkiye was the first country to provide Ukraine with drones, at a time when other states were still debating on the kind of military support to be provided to Ukraine. Within the same line of action, the Turkish decision to close down the Bosphorus and Dardanelle straits for Russian war ships prevented the escalation of the fight in the Black Sea.

Other diplomatic actions, better focused on ensuring the *balance of power* consist of: the facilitation of a meeting between Dmytro Kuleba, the Ukrainian foreign minister and Sergey Lavrov, the Russian one, in the format of the Antalya Diplomatic Forum of 10 March 2022, as well as the facilitation of negotiations at the end of March 2022, in Istanbul, in order to help identify a solution that would lead to the end of the war.

A resounding, yet temporary success of Türkiye’s *balancing* act resides in the signing of the grain agreement. Türkiye capitalized on the signing of the agreement in order to advance on the establishment of the Istanbul Common Coordination Centre that would help the implementation of the BSGI, as a means to increase the confidence between Russia and Ukraine, and thus end the war.

The BSGI is an accomplishment of Türkiye’s mediation efforts, but the implementation of the Initiative need not be regarded only in commercial terms – that of ensuring the export of Ukrainian grains, but also in humanitarian terms, as was put in the words of Turkish officials (Sofuoglu, 2022), to contribute to the softening of the food crisis on a global level. Although the BSGI rode on high stakes – as Turkish foreign affairs minister, Mehmet Cavusoglu mentioned that, once the implementation of the BSGI became effective, the next step would lead to the consolidation of a certain form of trust between Russia and Ukraine that would lead to the ending of the war (Aydogan, 2022) – the results were not the intended ones. What is more, Russia bombed Odessa the following day after the signing of the agreement, and unilaterally withdrew from it in July 2023.

As the war in Ukraine progressed, Türkiye’s *balancer* stand was confronted with criticism in international discourse. It was claimed to be guilty of its intensification of economic relations with Russian companies, allowing Russian businessmen

to escape international sanctions, while allowing Russia to use Turkish ports in order to sell the grains abusively collected from Ukraine (Gaber, 2022).

By supporting Ukraine, Türkiye enhanced its stronghold within the region, at the same time as exposing itself to risks. The greatest one emanated from Russia, which continues to be a threat in Syria, where its presence can destabilize the border and lead to new waves of immigrants (Ib.). Türkiye is also dependent on the Russian imports of energy. Yet, the relationship between the two is ampler. Despite the fact that Russia is a threat to NATO, the close relationship that President Erdogan and President Putin share, turned Türkiye (a NATO member state) into a shelter for Russian citizens and businessmen.

Despite the actions of Turkish decision-makers and the diplomatic agreements brokered by Türkiye – the grain agreement and the exchange of prisoners between Russia and Ukraine at the beginning of 2023 are considered to be successes of the Turkish diplomacy *balancing* act, and despite President Erdogan’s intense efforts, they did not lead to an end of the war. Moreover, the *balancer* act of Türkiye since the beginning of the war, need not be perceived as an unbiased one. As Russia’s strength in Ukraine would decrease, Türkiye took on the advantage and replace it in terms of influence in the Southern Caucasus. In addition, it would be a good opportunity to replace Russia’s influence in the Mediterranean and Syria, where the two – Türkiye and Russia, shared a strategic partnership for a while.

## CONCLUSIONS

A first answer to the question posed in the introduction – *Is Türkiye an uncomfortable actor or a significant regional “balancer”?* inclines towards providing a confirmation of the second part of the question. The reason stands in the fact that, despite its uncomfortable regional and international manifestations, Türkiye managed, even in the form of small and short-lived victories, to maintain a form of regional balance. Its uncomfortable feature stems from a strong historical heritage and its imperial tradition, which for centuries dominated and thus changed the fate of the European continent. Even today, Türkiye is still in a position able to influence the evolution of the continent through the extent of its relationships with regional and international actors. A deeper answer would be that President Erdogan is perfectly aware of the role that Türkiye can play, at least on a regional level, and would not forfeit it.

While in domestic terms, 2023 was the year in which President Erdogan’s etatism was defined, in foreign affairs terms, it was the year in which Türkiye advanced its efforts to lead to the end of the war in Ukraine. Despite the fact that some

of its actions did not bear fruit – see BSGI, and that it was accused of favouring Russia several times – due to their relationship in terms of energy and fuel, Türkiye was consistent in its support of Ukraine. As a result, one can claim Türkiye to be an uncomfortable, even difficult to deal with actor, due to its firm stand, but it is a *balancer* to the core, in the true sense of the word.

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