

Turkey and Russia, Erdoğan and Putin

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By the summer of 2016, it had become relatively commonplace in Western policy circles to wonder if Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was following in the footsteps of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and, if so, how far down that path he would take Turkey. The failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 15 changed many dynamics within Turkey in unpredictable ways. Many questions that have been raised can now be answered more definitively. In the Turkish leadership's race toward full-blown authoritarianism, the country has now caught up with Putin, even surpassing the Russian regime on many measures.

The Coup

The botched coup attempt seemingly came out of nowhere and was indiscriminate in its violence. Fighter jets terrorized Ankara and Istanbul through the night. The parliament building and several other sites were bombed, a first in Turkish history.² Like his Russian counterpart, the Turkish president has the ability to turn almost any political crisis to his advantage. The narrative he pushed immediately after the coup started was that followers of Fethullah Gülen in the army were the perpetrators.³ This storyline is still the orthodoxy in Turkey. Gülen is a Muslim cleric who lives in exile in Pennsylvania and heads a global movement (or a cult, according to some) that includes a network of schools and businesses. Gülen and Erdoğan were close allies until 2013. It is partly because of this former alliance that many Turks, even those who typically oppose Erdoğan, find the accusations of large-scale infiltration of state institutions by Gülenists very credible, and have rallied behind Erdoğan.⁴

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² For more about the coup attempt, see Ayşe Zarakol, "[The Failed Coup Attempt in Turkey: What We Know So Far](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 433, July 2016.

³ Many of the arrested officers are known to be Gülenists and some have confessed, but it is not clear who else was involved.

⁴ For more about this dynamic, see Ayşe Zarakol, "[Turkey through the Looking Glass](#)," London Review of Books blog, August 3, 2016.

The great gap between Western and Turkish perceptions of what happened (and is happening) in Turkey caused anti-Western sentiments to surface among large segments of the public. Given that in the preceding months there was no anticipation of the coup and no build-up of support for such an intervention (unlike previous coups in Turkish history), the first reaction of the Turkish public was shock. Once the extent of the civilian casualties and the damage from the aerial bombings became clear, societal trauma followed. Erdoğan deftly exploited the situation. He cast Western powers as enemies of the Turkish people, practically accusing the United States of sponsoring the coup, and began to neuter the Turkish opposition.

The Counter-Coup

On July 18, a three-month state of emergency was declared that gave Erdoğan the power to issue emergency decrees. In October, the state of emergency was extended for another three months. These are some of the measures Erdoğan pushed through, with no legal recourse for those affected:

- Thousands of institutions and businesses associated with Gülenists (and others) were shut down. The land, buildings, and other property of these institutions were transferred to the state.
- The military was reorganized. The army, navy, and air force were brought under the authority of the Ministry of National Defense.⁵ The gendarme and the coast guard were placed under the authority of the Ministry of Interior and separated from the military chain of command. Thousands of military personnel were dishonorably discharged.
- A broad purge began at all state institutions. Tens of thousands were detained and/or arrested with tens of thousands more fired from state jobs, including many teachers. (A large number of the purged were not associated with the Gülenist movement, but rather with particular teachers unions.) All university deans were forced to resign and thousands of academics came under investigation.
- Numerous independent media organizations, including television outlets, were shut down. Many journalists were arrested, with some facing charges as far-fetched as having supported the coup via “subliminal messages.”

⁵ They were previously under the authority of the Chief-of-Staff, who was technically under the authority of the president; they functioned relatively autonomously as a result. Without the de facto powers bestowed upon the presidency by the state of emergency, the office is mostly ceremonial, at least under the current constitution.

At least initially, these measures enjoyed broad support from the Turkish public. Because of the trauma of the coup, they were generally fine with the collective punishment of the Gülenists. The Turkish people's bunker-like mentality and their heightened distrust of foreigners in the wake of the coup bears striking resemblance to the kind of attitudes observed among Russians during the Crimea crisis.

In the month after the coup, Erdoğan successfully neutralized the Kemalist opposition by holding a mass rally for "Democracy and Martyrs" on August 7 that deployed all the Turkish symbols of nationalism, even those traditionally associated with Kemalism. The most prominent opposition leaders (with the exception of those from the pro-Kurdish HDP) felt compelled to attend and since then have found it difficult, if not impossible, to challenge the new "national consensus," which equates Erdoğan's well-being with that of the nation and democracy. Since the coup attempt, Erdoğan has also used other aspects of Kemalism as a legitimizing precedent, particularly its paranoid vein about "enemies of the state," both domestic and foreign. Now, when Erdoğan denounces the West, he is able to mobilize support not only from his own base but from the Kemalist opposition as well. These accusations fit nicely with older Kemalist readings of World War I, which point to the West as always conspiring to undermine Turkish independence and which caused the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, Erdoğan and his followers are calling the current situation the "New Independence War," drawing a parallel with Turkey's 1919-1922 "Independence War" when militia forces under Mustafa Kemal fought to establish the Republic of Turkey.

Parallels to Russia

Everything now seems in place for the Turkish government to become a full-blown authoritarian regime. In interviews after the coup, Erdoğan announced that neither the military high command nor the intelligence community warned him of the attempted coup. He first learned about it from his brother-in-law hours after the coup started. The official narrative credits only Erdoğan and the Turkish people with foiling the coup. This juxtapositioning of the leader and "his" masses on the one hand and the disregard of state institutions on the other is a worrying formula reminiscent of twentieth century European fascism.

In a 2012 article, Alexander Motyl [argued](#) that Russia was different from "run-of-the-mill authoritarian states." He noted that it combined elements of authoritarianism with fascism, and that a better label for it is "fascistoid." He wrote:

"Like authoritarian systems, fascist systems lack meaningful parliaments, judiciaries, parties, and elections; are highly centralized; give pride of place to soldiers and policemen; have a domineering party; restrict freedom of the press, speech, and assembly; and repress the opposition."

Turkey was already headed in this direction before the coup. What distinguishes fascist systems from run-of-the-mill authoritarianism, according to Motyl, is that they “always have supreme leaders enjoying cult-like status, exuding vigor, youthfulness, and manliness.” If you look at Turkey today, we have an apt description of the regime Erdoğan is constructing if we substitute “Turkish” for “Russian” in Motyl’s prose here:

“authoritarian institutions serve as a platform for a charismatic leader who is committed to Russian greatness, hyper-nationalism, and neo-imperial revival and who serves as the primary source of regime legitimacy and stability.”

But how sustainable is such a regime in Turkey? Motyl wrote that the Russian regime “could break down overnight or decay for years.” This same observation can be applied to Turkey. On one hand, the Turkish economy, which was already in dire straits before the coup, is now on the brink of crisis. Turkey has an ongoing conflict with Kurdish movements in its southeast and is challenged by the situation in Syria (including ISIS). Yet Putin has survived similar or worse for many years – despite analysts such as Motyl pointing out how brittle his regime is. Turkey’s ties with the West, especially the United States, have never been so precarious as they are now. As is the case with Putin’s tactics, this works to Erdoğan’s advantage.

Implications for Turkey-Russia Relations

Turkey and Russia have always had much in common: from their origins (both the Ottoman and the Russian state drew from Byzantine and Mongolian historical legacies) up to their radical modernizing regimes of the twentieth century. It seems that in Erdoğanism and Putinism, the fates of these countries mirror each other once again. Does this also mean that their foreign policy paths will converge as well? Erdoğan had apologized to Putin for the downing of the Russian jet two weeks before the coup, and on August 9 he visited Putin in Russia (his first official visit since July 15). It is understandable why Erdoğan is keen on a rapprochement with Russia—for [economic](#) and political⁶ reasons. However, given Turkey’s long-standing institutional ties with the West and its significant policy differences with Russia over Syria, most Western observers remain [skeptical](#) that this will amount to much. It is also true that notwithstanding their long history as regional neighbors and their many similarities, their bilateral legacy ultimately consists more of competition than of cooperation.

It is worth noting a moment of significant cooperation between the two countries: during and briefly after the aforementioned Turkish “Independence War” of 1919-1922, Kemal was in a genuine anti-imperialist alliance with Moscow, which provided his

⁶ Since the coup attempt, relations between Turkey and the United States have been very tense. Improved relations with Russia are seen as a powerful leverage in that relationship. See for instance [this editorial](#) in the staunchly pro-government newspaper *Daily Sabah*.

fledgling militia with much needed financial support.⁷ During the Cold War years, this fact was downplayed in Turkish history textbooks, but these days, it could be creatively incorporated into the leadership’s “New Independence War” narrative.

Conclusion

Observers who discount the possibility of a Russo-Turkish alliance underestimate the political acumen of Putin and Erdoğan—and overestimate their inflexibility when it comes to Syria. Syria is not more important to Erdoğan than staying in power, and for Putin it may be more valuable, under the right circumstances, to follow a strategy that drives a deep wedge between Turkey and NATO. This is not to say that a Turkish realignment away from NATO is definitely in the cards, but given all that has (unexpectedly) [unfolded](#) over the past few months, to discount it completely would be foolish.

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⁷ For more about this alliance, see Ayşe Zarakol, [After Defeat: How the East Came to Live with the West](#), Cambridge University Press, 2011.