

about \$33 billion in 2012, and then came down to \$30 billion in 2013 and 2014.<sup>84</sup> Turkish Airlines' business in the Russian Federation was booming, while Turkish contractors completed projects to the tune of \$1.6 billion during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. Erdoğan attended the opening ceremony, ignoring protests by Turks of Circassian descent whose ancestors were uprooted from the region by the Tsarist authorities in the 1860s.

In order to avoid conflict with Russia, Turkey kept a low profile during the takeover of Crimea in 2014. It showed plenty of sympathy to the Tatars, a kindred community that, for historical reasons, stood on Ukraine's side in the dispute. President Gül even gave a state award to Tatar leader Mustafa Dzhemilev (Mustafa Abdülcemil Kırmıoğlu) in April 2014. Right after the Crimean referendum, Davutoğlu held a joint press conference with Dzhemilev to declare that Turkey would never recognize the legitimacy of the vote. Yet Ankara refused to side with the Western sanctions, pledging to protect the rights of Tatars with "determined diplomacy."<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Turkey had a muted reaction to the war in the Donbas. "The U.S. has itself to blame," a Turkish diplomat remarked, "it gave Russia a *carte blanche* by not intervening in Syria."<sup>86</sup> But behind the scenes the AKP government was changing its position. First, it joined NATO's missile-defense program, hosting a radar in the Kürecik base in the southeast of Turkey. Second, Russia's militarization of Crimea made Ankara accept, in incremental steps, that the alliance could play a larger role in Black Sea naval security, a reversal of its traditional stance.

The aftershocks of the Russian-Turkish collision were felt across Southeast Europe. In December 2015 the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), a Bulgarian party drawing votes from the country's Turks and Muslims, ousted its leader Lütfi Mestan who had taken sides with Ankara. The MRF founder Ahmed Doğan led the charge, accusing Mestan of pitching Bulgaria into the crossfire between Turkey and Russia ("its rise is an irreversible process," he claimed). The Greek prime minister, Alexis Tsipras, underscored Turkish violations of Greek airspace in the Aegean, prompting an angry exchange on Twitter with his opposite number, Ahmet Davutoğlu. But, all things considered, such repercussions amounted to little more than a storm

in a teacup. Contrary to all the doom and gloom, there was no spiral of proxy conflicts across the region. "We would like that all problems between Russia and Turkey are solved the best possible way," commented Serbia's prime minister, Aleksandar Vučić, after hosting Davutoğlu in Belgrade at the end of December 2015.<sup>87</sup> "Bosnia is not taking sides," commented the foreign minister, Igor Crnadak.<sup>88</sup>

It is hardly surprising that Turkey and Russia worked to find a way out of the crisis and turn the clock back to the time before November 2015. The stand-off served no one's interest, once the Kremlin painted Erdoğan as the arch-villain of the Middle East to deflect domestic attention away from diplomatic efforts to strike a deal with the United States on Syria. What is truly remarkable is that Erdoğan and Putin managed to make a 180-degree turn so quickly.<sup>89</sup> Events in June-July 2016 developed at breakneck speed. On 5 May, Prime Minister Davutoğlu, classified as a hardliner on Russia, tendered his resignation following rumors of a rift between him and his erstwhile patron, Erdoğan. Foreign policy effectively moved to the president, who demonstrated a degree of flexibility. On 14 June, celebrated as a national day in Russia, Erdoğan sent a conciliatory letter to Putin. Then, on 27 June, he expressed "sympathy and condolences" for the death of Oleg Peshkov, the Su-24M pilot. Describing Moscow as a "friend and a strategic partner," Erdoğan added, "We never had a desire or a deliberate intention to down an aircraft belonging to Russia."<sup>90</sup> But the critical point came with the failed military coup d'état in Turkey on 15 July. Two days later, Putin called the Turkish president to express support. While the West criticized the heavy-handed clampdown in the wake of the putsch, the Kremlin clearly aligned itself with Erdoğan. Putin made a point of condemning "anti-constitutional acts and violence," a subtle reference to Moscow's portrayal of Ukraine's Maidan uprising and "color revolution."<sup>91</sup> The Putin-Erdoğan summits on 9 August and 10 October put rapprochement on a solid footing. As Russia accepted Operation Euphrates Shield launched by the Turkish army in northern Syria, along with allied factions of the Free Syrian Army, to fight Islamic State but more importantly the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitiya*

*Demokrat*, PYD) and its armed forces, the YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, People's Protection Units). Ankara facilitated the withdrawal of rebel factions from eastern Aleppo and the handover to Assad and the Russians in late December. Even the shocking assassination of the ambassador, Andrei Karlov, by a disgruntled Turkish police officer on 19 December 2016, at the height of the campaign by Russia and Assad against the besieged city, could not derail newly reignited co-operation between Putin and Erdoğan. A ceasefire between the regime and the moderate militias, again brokered by Russia and Turkey, went into effect. In January 2017, Russian and Turkish jets bombed Islamic State targets at al-Bab. In return, Turkey acquiesced in the fall of eastern Aleppo to the Syrian regime backed by Russia and Iran in mid-December 2016, and softened its rhetoric regarding Bashar al-Assad's future in power. In the following episode, Turkey, Iran, and Russia sponsored several rounds of peace talks in Kazakhstan's capital Astana, with the United States joining in at the last minute as an observer. Although inconclusive, the meeting gave the start to a diplomatic process led by Russia in which Turkey agreed to play a supportive role. But Ankara and Moscow remained divided on a handful of issues—including the ultimate fate of Bashar al-Assad and, even more important, whether Syrian Kurds should be granted an autonomous region as part of a future power-sharing arrangement. To the Turks' regret, Russia was reluctant to downgrade ties with the PYD/YPG, which was considered a branch of the PKK.

Despite the rapid rapprochement, in all likelihood Russia and Turkey were heading towards the time-tested mode of bilateral relations—one characterized by a blend of competition and co-operation. Turks and Russians continue to disagree on a number of issues in Syria, notably the autonomy status that Moscow offered the Kurdish community in a draft constitution and, less vocally, Assad's future role. At a NATO ministerial meeting held in February 2017, Turkey endorsed enhancing the alliance's naval and air-force presence in the Black Sea. For all the talk of Putin and Erdoğan turning into bosom buddies in the aftermath of the 15 July coup attempt, Turkey's long-standing policy of soft balancing appears to remain intact.

## Conclusion

Russia's relationship with Turkey is so rich in history, ambivalent, multifaceted, and rich in nuance that it merits a whole book on its own. The disadvantage is that it is also a relationship that does not lend itself easily to labels and generalizations. Whatever one says or writes is bound to be true only up to a point. That was as much the case in the classical era of empires prior to the First World War as it is at present, nearly thirty years since the Cold War ended. Periods of strife and war have followed moments of mutual accommodation and coexistence. The same pattern took hold after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and by the 2000s Russia and Turkey could boast a thriving economic relationship based on growing levels of economic interdependence, a partial overlap of strategic interests, and a shared love-hate relationship with Europe and the West. It is doubtful whether Moscow and Ankara could ever become true friends or allies, but clearly they have proven, time and again, their willingness and capacity to do business together. From the Russian blitzkrieg against Georgia to the roller-coaster ride over Syria in 2015–16, the Putin–Erdoğan double act has posed more than one challenge to decision makers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Built in stages since the mid-1990s, the “virtual alliance” between Russia and Turkey has suited both parties. Moscow has taken advantage of the estrangement between Ankara and its Western allies to outmaneuver both the United States and the EU. Russia's energy firms have furthermore found a lucrative and ever-expanding market. In turn, economic interdependence gives the Kremlin a powerful instrument to bind Turkey and enlist its support on a range of political issues. As far as Turkey is concerned, multiple governments in Ankara, long before the AKP and Erdoğan appeared on the scene, have worked with Russia to manage potential conflicts in regions sandwiched in between the two neighboring powers and capitalize on economic opportunities. But, as illustrated by ambivalent relations around energy and security issues—in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and more recently in the Middle East—what

exists between Ankara and Moscow is fundamentally a marriage of convenience, not an affair of the heart. For instance, Russia has not phased out all the economic sanctions slapped on Turkey at the end of 2015. Still, the bond has been tested and has proven resilient. Winning over Turkey probably remains one of the most significant achievements of Russia's policy in Southeast Europe over the past three decades.

## **PART II**

### **AREAS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE**