

Unpacking Turkey's Non-Binary Ukraine War Policy

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Erdogan's stance has been pro-Ukrainian but not anti-Russian, enabling him to strike a delicate balance between NATO expectations, Moscow's economic lifeline, and domestic political pressures.

Ankara's Ukraine war policy could be best described as non-binary. On the one hand, Turkey supports Ukraine militarily, [providing \(https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/16/the-turkish-drone-that-changed-the-nature-of-warfare\)](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/16/the-turkish-drone-that-changed-the-nature-of-warfare) Kyiv with essential defensive and attack hardware, such as the Bayraktar drones. On the other hand, Turkey has kept ties with Russia open economically, gifting Moscow with crucial access to global trade, markets, and airspace.

What is more, politically Turkey has embraced a neutral position between Ukraine and Russia, bringing the two countries together, most recently around the [July 2022 \(https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/22/europe/ukraine-russia-grain-deal-turkey-intl/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/22/europe/ukraine-russia-grain-deal-turkey-intl/index.html) grain corridor deal, an important achievement for Ankara that has alleviated food security risks for many Middle East and African nations. This underlines Turkey's role globally and regionally as a rare (and necessary) power that can talk to Russia and Ukraine alike. In other words, in Ukraine, Ankara has been having their cake and eating it too. This policy also closely serves the interests of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who faces presidential and parliamentary elections in spring 2023.

Turkey Backs Ukraine Militarily

To put it simply, Ankara will not allow Kyiv to fall under Moscow's thumb. To this end, Turkey supports Ukraine militarily and will continue to do so as long as the war rages. This is rooted in Turkey's view of Ukraine as an important ally in the balance of power around the Black Sea. The only maritime access to the Black Sea is through the Turkish Straits (namely, the Bosphorus, along which Istanbul is located, and the Dardanelles). The 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates maritime access to the Black Sea, has set Turkey as a gatekeeper of sorts of

the Black Sea.

The Convention allows only the littoral states (Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, and Turkey) to maintain large and permanent navies on the Black Sea. Of these states, only Russia and Turkey have large navies, a fact that renders the Black Sea—effectively—a Russo-Turkish condominium per Montreux. With Russia being Turkey’s historic nemesis and a larger power militarily when compared to Turkey, Ankara cultivates good ties with the four other Black Sea nations in order to build a balancing block against Moscow around the Black Sea.

In this regard, Ukraine, the third largest Black Sea nation by population and territory after Turkey and Russia and the fourth largest by the size of its economy, looms especially large in Ankara’s strategic thinking. Ankara has maintained good ties with Ukraine since that country’s independence in 1991

(<https://www.politico.eu/article/refugee-diaries-ukraine-independence-day-celebration-past-present-future/>)

, cultivating it as a key ally against Russia.

Turkey has other reasons to support Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, including those rooted in its historic connections with Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, occupied by Russia since 2014. The Turkic Crimean Khanate was in a privileged commonwealth within the Ottoman Empire until the late eighteenth century, when Tsarina Catherine the Great annexed it. Russia subsequently expelled many of Crimea’s Tatar inhabitants. Stalin deported the remaining Tatar population on the peninsula *en masse* to Central Asia.

Of the groups deported by Stalin at the end of World War Two, Tatars were uniquely singled out by Moscow after Stalin’s death: the Soviet Union’s successive leaders refused them the right of return to their homeland. This underlines Russia’s strategic focus, from Catherine the Great to Vladimir Putin, on the peninsula as a strategic gateway to the warm seas, embellished with a deep-water harbor (Sebastopol). Only following the collapse of the Soviet Union and under an independent Ukraine were Tatars able to return to Crimea, a fact that Ankara appreciates and supports. Turkey will therefore strive to maintain Ukraine’s sovereignty while helping Kyiv undermine Moscow’s rule over Crimea and across its occupied territories in general.

Accordingly, Turkey has provided Ukraine with key military hardware, including the Bayraktar drones, which **played a role in the April 2022 sinking (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Most-read-in-2022/Turkish-made-drones-likely-involved-in-Moskva-sinking>)** of the Russian naval vessel Moskva and the **November 2022 Ukrainian drone attack (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/22/world/europe/crimea-sevastopol-ukraine-drone-strike.html>)** on the Crimean port city of Sebastopol, home to a key Russian naval base. Perhaps even more fatefully, the Bayraktars helped defeat the (initial) blitzkrieg-style Russian attack against the Ukrainian capital Kyiv during the first weeks of the war in February-March 2022.

Erdogan Keeps Ties with Russia Open Economically...

Notwithstanding its strong military support to Ukraine, Turkey has maintained economic ties with Russia since the beginning of the war. Ankara has refused to come on board with U.S. or European Union (EU)-led sanctions and is subsequently—if inadvertently—providing a lifeline for Russian president Vladimir Putin. “Inadvertently” for Ankara, since Turkey supports Ukraine militarily, whereas Turkish president Erdogan needs to keep his country’s ties with Russia open economically to win elections.

Erdogan faces overlapping parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023, likely to be held in April-May. Turkey’s chief executive since 2003 and a front-runner in over a dozen nationwide polls, he has never won elections while not delivering growth. In this regard, Erdogan now faces a challenge: Turkey’s macroeconomic stability is in question, with volatile markets and currency exchange boards and yearly inflation nearing triple digits.

In fact, Turkey’s economy has been unstable since 2018 when the country entered a brief recession. Moreover, economic indicators were in such dismal shape by early 2022 that analysts **predicted**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct1z37>) a meltdown in the country's economy—and with that Erdogan's base would disappear by the end of the year. However, that has not happened—largely thanks to substantial financial inflows from and increased trade with Russia that Erdogan has secured, all notwithstanding Ankara's military support to Ukraine in the war.

In this regard, Erdogan, an astute politician, has created an opportunity out of the Ukraine crisis. Given Turkey's advanced and diversified economy and physical proximity to Russia, as well as deep trade and business ties between the two countries since the end of the Cold War, Turkey's openness to Russia since the Ukraine war has resulted in significant financial inflows from Russia in the following areas:

Trade: When the Russian and Turkish leaders [met \(https://www.ft.com/content/afcb2732-c015-4b1e-a837-8e34e412e4b4\)](https://www.ft.com/content/afcb2732-c015-4b1e-a837-8e34e412e4b4) in Sochi in August, they agreed to strengthen their two countries' economic ties and hinted that they were close to a trade deal. Official data [shows \(https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-December-2021-45535\)](https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-December-2021-45535) that total exports from Turkey to Russia in 2022 increased to \$8 billion from \$5.7 billion in 2021.

Tourism: Turkey has refused to join EU sanctions targeting air travel to and from Russia, subsequently connecting Russian airports and citizens to international airspace and global hubs. Accordingly, streams of Russians have visited Turkey, with many others choosing the country over other destinations. Some 5.3 million Russians [visited \(https://www.dailysabah.com/business/tourism/turkiye-by-far-most-favorite-holiday-spot-for-russians-in-2022\)](https://www.dailysabah.com/business/tourism/turkiye-by-far-most-favorite-holiday-spot-for-russians-in-2022) Turkey in 2022, significantly recovering from the [pandemic low \(https://russtd.com/in-2020-russian-tourist-flow-to-turkey-decreased-by-69,7.html\)](https://russtd.com/in-2020-russian-tourist-flow-to-turkey-decreased-by-69,7.html) of 2.1 million in 2020 and closer to the pre-pandemic [record \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/2/lack-of-russian-visitors-to-turkey-contributes-to-tourism-slump#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20prior%20to%20the,on%20its%20robust%20tourism%20sector.\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/2/lack-of-russian-visitors-to-turkey-contributes-to-tourism-slump#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20prior%20to%20the,on%20its%20robust%20tourism%20sector.) of 7 million in 2019.

Russians buying Turkish citizenship: Wealthy Russians are able to obtain Turkish citizenship through Turkey's citizenship-by-investment scheme, which requires a \$400,000 investment in the country. Many choose to invest in real estate—at least 12,960 Russian nationals [purchased \(https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Search/Search?text=house%20sales\)](https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Search/Search?text=house%20sales) houses in Turkey since the onset of the war in Ukraine, according to official data from TURKSTAT, Turkey's statistics agency. Russians were also the top nationality in 2022 to own a residency permit in Turkey, according to government [data \(https://en.goc.gov.tr/residence-permits\)](https://en.goc.gov.tr/residence-permits).

Turkey has also been a [top \(https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/04/07/how-turkey-is-courting-russias-oligarchs\)](https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/04/07/how-turkey-is-courting-russias-oligarchs) destination for sanctioned Russian oligarchs who have purchased luxury real estate in the country, parking their mega-yachts in Turkish marinas in the Mediterranean to avoid their seizure by European governments who have sanctioned Russia and its wealthy elites.

Putin's gift to Erdogan: Ankara's openness to trade and contacts with Moscow—providing Russia's economy with access to global markets and Russia's citizens, including oligarchs, with connections to the outside world—has pleased Putin. Russian oligarchs, who were supposed to stand up to Putin if denied access to the French Riviera, too, are pleased with Erdogan. They can now travel to and vacation along the Turkish Riviera, perhaps equally as impressive as the French coastline. Together with Turkey's slowing down of NATO's Nordic expansion (a process driven by non-Ukraine war dynamics, but ultimately undermining NATO unity), these factors have led Putin to show generosity towards Erdogan.

In July 2022, Putin wire-transferred [\\$5 billion \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-29/russia-is-wiring-dollars-to-turkey-for-20-billion-nuclear-plant#xj4y7vzkg\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-29/russia-is-wiring-dollars-to-turkey-for-20-billion-nuclear-plant#xj4y7vzkg) to Turkey towards the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power station being built along the southern Anatolian coast. While the money was sent to the

account of Rosatom, the Russian company building the power station, Russian cash trickled across the Turkish economy, providing temporary relief for ordinary citizens from hyperinflation, while allowing Turkish banks to roll over their international debt. The sudden infusion of a lump sum of Russian cash into Turkey's fledgling economy in July 2022 helped stop the erosion of Erdogan's base. In fact, [recent surveys \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/al-monitorpremise-poll-finds-tight-race-erdogan-turkeys-elections\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/al-monitorpremise-poll-finds-tight-race-erdogan-turkeys-elections) show that support for the Turkish leader has been picking up since the summer of 2022.

Together with other financial inflows from [Saudi Arabia \(https://www.ft.com/content/ae8531c7-6a13-49a5-b24d-d9b05614f4bb\)](https://www.ft.com/content/ae8531c7-6a13-49a5-b24d-d9b05614f4bb) and [Qatar \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-final-stage-talks-up-10-bln-funding-qatar-sources-2022-11-25/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-final-stage-talks-up-10-bln-funding-qatar-sources-2022-11-25/), the inflows from Russia and Putin's "special gift" helped Turkey's economy come back from the brink in 2022, and Erdogan has survived. Overall, Erdogan has used the war well to Ankara's—and his own—advantage.

...While Ankara Plays a Balancing Game Between the Two Countries Formally

President Erdogan has ambitions that are also tied to the end of the war. He benefits from the global leader image domestically and he has accordingly decided on a policy of formal neutrality for Ankara in the war. This has allowed him to engage Russian and Ukrainian officials throughout the war. The Turkish president's mastery in foreign policy is that he is adept at turning what is good for Turkey into what is good for Erdogan. Turkey's foreign policy elites, too, appreciate a formally neutral policy towards the war, which allows Ankara to play the role of a regional power while keeping Russia, the country's historic nemesis, at bay.

Along these lines, Ankara [closed \(https://news.usni.org/2022/02/28/turkey-closes-bosphorus-dardanelles-straits-to-warships\)](https://news.usni.org/2022/02/28/turkey-closes-bosphorus-dardanelles-straits-to-warships) the Turkish Straits to Russian, Ukrainian, and other countries' naval vessels at the beginning of the war on February 28, 2022. At first glance, this ban seems to work against Russian interests. While Ukraine has no naval vessels outside of the Straits that it can sail into the Black Sea, more than half of Russia's Black Sea fleet is currently in the Mediterranean. At a second glance, however, the policy also benefits Russia: the ban prevents NATO member countries from sailing their naval vessels into the Black Sea to help Ukraine.

This ban is a textbook case encapsulating Turkey's "pro-Ukraine neutrality" regarding the Ukraine war. Turkey is neutral, but it also helps Ukraine in a robust fashion, while never directly targeting Russia as well as frequently acting as a facilitator for Moscow.

This policy has allowed Ankara to keep channels of communication open with Kyiv and Moscow alike, for instance bringing Russian and Ukrainian officials together in a near ceasefire agreement during the initial phase of the conflict in March 2002 in the Turkish Riviera city of Antalya. Although that effort failed, on July 22, 2022 Turkey [brokered \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-ports-reopen-under-deal-be-signed-friday-turkey-says-2022-07-21/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-ports-reopen-under-deal-be-signed-friday-turkey-says-2022-07-21/) the "grain corridor" deal, securing Moscow's and Kyiv's blessings alike to allow for wheat and grain exports from the Black Sea ports, through the Turkish Straits, to global consumers. This deal, which has [earned praise \(https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/us-uk-diplomats-praise-turkeys-efforts-for-ukraine-grain-shipments\)](https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/us-uk-diplomats-praise-turkeys-efforts-for-ukraine-grain-shipments) from U.S. and other NATO member officials for helping alleviate global food security risks, underlines the fine-tuned balance Erdogan has managed to achieve by placing Turkey between NATO, Russia, and Ukraine during the war.

Conclusion

All sides to the Ukraine conflict appreciate Turkey as the one country that they can talk to regarding the war. Simultaneously, no side is completely happy with Ankara's position in the war, but each has their own reason to

be satisfied with Turkey—for now.

Moscow would like to see less Turkish military assistance given to Ukraine, but is happy with the economic lifeline Erdogan has provided to Putin. Ukraine would like Turkey to cut off economic ties with Russia, but is happy with the stream of Bayraktars and other weapons flowing from Ankara to help with its defense, the most pressing issue for Kyiv now. The U.S. for its part would like to see Turkey make a binary choice regarding the war, but is content with the crucial military support Turkey is providing to Ukraine, as well as Ankara's role as a go-between country to de-conflict during the war when necessary.

Turkey has found a balanced (for its own interests) and yet non-binary spot between Ukraine, NATO, and Russia in the war: Ankara is pro-Ukrainian, but not anti-Russian. Given this delicate position Erdogan has secured, when the day comes for a ceasefire in Ukraine, any talks will likely be held in Turkey. Such a development will underwrite Erdogan's image at home as a global leader, boosting his standing with the electorate. Erdogan will win regardless of who loses the war in Ukraine.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. He would like to thank Institute research assistant Sude Akgundogdu for her help with this article, which was originally published on the Caravan website (<https://www.hoover.org/research/unpacking-turkeys-non-binary-ukraine-war-policy>). ❖

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