

Erdogan and Putin meet in St. Petersburg

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On Tuesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin met at the Constantine Palace in the Russian city of St. Petersburg. The meeting was the first between the two presidents for almost a year and the first visit abroad by Erdogan since the failed coup of July 15.

Following the shooting down of a Russian jet by a Turkish fighter over Syria last November, relations between Turkey and Russia had reached a low point. But on June 29, Erdogan sent Putin a letter of apology in an attempt to initiate a rapprochement. Since then, relations have rapidly improved.

A day after Erdogan's letter, following a phone conversation between the Russian and Turkish presidents, the Russian government lifted its ban on tourist flights to Turkey. The Turkish and Russian foreign ministers met in the Russian city of Sochi on July 1.

At a press conference on Tuesday, Putin described Erdogan's visit as "a sign of normalizing ties." He said to the Turkish president, "Your visit today, despite the very difficult political situation in Turkey, says that we all want to resume our dialogue, rapprochement, in the interests of the peoples of Turkey and Russia." Erdogan agreed, saying, "Turkey-Russia ties have entered into a very different and positive phase."

There are many indications that the July 15 coup was, at least in part, a reaction to Turkey's new rapprochement with Russia. It was the Russian government that warned Ankara about the imminent coup, allowing Erdogan to escape and appeal to his supporters. Now the visit to St. Petersburg, which was scheduled before the coup, comes as Ankara's relations with the United States and the European Union have almost reached the breaking point.

There is no doubt that Washington supported the coup, and Erdogan is openly accusing Washington of having done so. He is demanding the extradition of

exiled Islamic leader Fethullah Gulen, who resides under US government protection in Pennsylvania.

Erdogan is charging Gulen's Hizmet movement with having organised the coup. He is at the same time taking advantage of mass opposition within Turkey to the coup to forge an alliance of "national unity" with two main bourgeois opposition parties, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). He is utilizing this alliance to purge his political opponents and suppress the extreme class tensions within Turkey while he carries out a new foreign policy orientation.

In the foreground of the new rapprochement between Russia and Turkey are economic issues. Erdogan arrived with a huge delegation. Following the talks, it was announced that Turkey's first nuclear power plant, built with the aid of Russia, would be completed, and the Turkish Stream pipeline project, which is to carry Russian gas via the Black Sea and Turkey to south-eastern Europe, would be restarted.

Last year, Moscow and Ankara set the goal of increasing their mutual trade volume to \$100 billion by 2023. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, trade between the two countries had increased by nearly 18 percent to over \$30 billion between 2010 and 2014. Last year, Russia was the second-largest destination for Turkish exports and the third-largest source of imports.

In the first six months of 2016, however, after Russia imposed economic sanctions following the shoot-down of its jet over Syria, Turkey's exports to Russia dropped by 60.5 percent. Moscow also banned package tours and charter flights to Turkey after the November crisis, costing Turkey \$840 million in tourism revenue.

In the US and other NATO countries, there are mounting fears that Erdogan's visit might signal a strategic reorientation by one of the most important members of the military alliance. This could undermine not only Washington's military encirclement of Russia,

but also its attempt to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria.

The BBC web site posted a commentary that declared: “In view of the current ‘frost’ in the AKP government’s relations with both the US and the EU, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s decision to choose Russia for his first official visit abroad since the botched coup appears rich in symbolism. And Western leaders will be looking on nervously.”

George Friedman, former head of the Stratfor private intelligence service and a staunch opponent of Russia, spoke very frankly about those concerns. “The hopes that they [Turkey] would help us in Syria seem to have gone up in smoke,” he said in a video interview. “On the other side of the equation we are trying to contain Russia. When they shot down the Russian plane we were hoping we would be in a close alliance with Turkey again. Now that’s gone. So both our plans for blocking Russian expansion, our plans for blocking ISIS have been dealt a severe blow.”

Both Putin and Erdogan indicated in St. Petersburg that they might work together in Syria, where they had up to now been at cross-purposes, with Turkey siding with the US against Russia and the Assad regime.

A day before the visit, Erdogan said in an interview with Russia’s TASS news agency and state television Rossiya 24 that the Russian Federation was the “primary actor in bringing peace to Syria,” adding, “I think that we, Russia and Turkey, should resolve this [Syria] issue by taking a step together.”

He described his impending meeting with Putin as a “rebirth” and declared: “Now, I believe, we have a chance to reconsider everything, to open a new page in Turkey and Russia relations. I believe we have a lot to do as two important actors in all areas, including cultural, trade, political, military, economy. I have no doubt in this matter.”

After the meeting in St. Petersburg, Putin said Russia and Turkey had a common goal of resolving the crisis in Syria. He remarked that their views on the question had not always coincided, but said that the two states had agreed to discuss further and seek solutions. “I think it is possible to align our views and approaches,” he concluded.

There remain many unresolved differences, such as the attitude to Kurdish forces in Syria and Turkey. Erdogan has accused Russia of arming the Kurdish

PKK. Turkey, for its part, has supported Islamist groups in Syria that are also active in Russia. On the question of Crimea, Turkey is supporting Crimean Tatars who are hostile to Moscow.

One of the first responses to Erdogan’s visit came from Berlin. While the German press has generally been very hostile to Erdogan since the failed coup, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier took a more careful approach. “It is good that after the downing of a Russian warplane by Turkey last year, there is a rapprochement now,” he told the German daily *Bild*, adding, “There won’t be a solution to the civil war in Syria without Moscow and without Iran, Saudi Arabia or Turkey.”



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