

TÜRKİYE'S MEDIATION IN THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA WAR

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Analysis No : 2024 / 16

23.09.2024

Since the beginning of Russias full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Türkiye has made significant efforts to maintain its stance that protects the stability in the Wider Black Sea Region and Türkiyes security. This has meant joining the West in the condemnation of Russia for the invasion and defense cooperation with Ukraine, but also refusing to join Western sanctions against Russia and maintaining regular economic ties with the said the country. Despite this, Turkish officials and public are keenly aware of the fact that Ukraine has been caught in the middle of a ruthless power competition between the West and Russia and that the country is fighting for its survival as a result.

Türkiyes policy of walking the middle path in terms of this conflict has drawn criticisms from Western circles who view the Ukraine-Russia war as an unmissable chance to humiliate and cripple Russia in the international arena. Achieving this objective requires pursuing a brutal war of attrition that could last for years to come, and more than a million people in Ukraine and Russia have already died since February 2022.[1] Knowing political history allows us to assume that, in the hopes of definitively defeating Russia, these pro-war Western circles do not in any way care that Ukrainians are suffering, so long as Russians suffer as well.[2]

More balanced evaluations on this topic have recognized that Türkiye has established itself as one of the few reliable actors that can serve as a point of contact between the West, Ukraine, and Russia at the same time. Türkiye has made it clear that it wants this war contained, de-escalated, and ended sooner rather than later.[3]

This is more important now than ever as Western countries are supplying increasingly advanced weapon systems to Ukraine and giving their consent to the use of these systems against targets deep inside Russia. Ukraine has become so emboldened by this support that it has made an incursion into Russias Kursk region to disrupt Russias invasion efforts[4] and probably to strengthen its hand at the negotiation table. Russia, meanwhile,

has drawn a new red line, threatening the West with war [if Ukraine is given] more leeway to use Western long-range missiles to strike inside Russia.[5] Russias red lines rhetoric is being continuously challenged by Western commentators, who argue that Russia has a habit of bluffing and can be forced into accepting an outcome that favors the Wests geopolitical goals.[6] This has been echoed even by NATOs outgoing Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who argued that Russia is aware that NATO is the worlds strongest military alliance and Russia cannot risk engaging in direct war with the Wests military alliance. Russia replied by indicating that Stoltenbergs assessment of the situation was completely short-sighted and unprofessional and such calls to push Russia into a corner are "extremely provocative and dangerous."[7]

So, is it wise to attempt to push a major power armed to the teeth with the highest-level military equipment to a corner? Can we be absolutely sure how Russia will react in such a scenario? As succinctly put in one commentary; We [the West] are likely to discover that we have gone too far only after we find ourselves in a direct confrontation with Russia, not before.[8]

Ultimately, what the West thinks about the Ukraine-Russia war does not matter that much, because they have no personal stake in this war. The only thing that matters is what Ukraine, the defender fighting for its existence and the right to choose its foreign policy direction, and Russia, the attacker who is fearful of Ukraine being used for Western encirclement, think. In this dangerous scenario, Türkiye has made an earnest effort to find a formula that can satisfy both Ukraine and Russia and bring an end to the war. So far, to ease tensions between the West and Russia and deescalate the confrontation between Ukraine and Russia, Türkiye has taken the following steps:

1) In March 2022, Türkiye organized a tripartite meeting with Ukraine and Russia at the level foreign ministers (the first of its kind in the war) in Antalya, which was followed by a meeting of delegations in İstanbul. Although a positive momentum was reportedly gained in the negotiations, the meetings produced no concrete results. There are persistent rumors that the interference from Ukraines Western backers derailed the negotiations.[9]

2) In July 2022, with the mediation of the United Nations and Türkiye that brought Ukraine and Russia to table, the Black Sea Grain Initiative (Grain Deal) was put into motion (lasting until July 2023),[10] allowing the safe passage of Ukrainian grain and food-related commodities and pushing back soaring food prices.

3) In September 2022, Ukraine and Russia were able to make a prisoners of war exchange (the largest since Russias invasion began) through the mediation of Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.[11]

4) In July-August 2024, through complicated multi-lateral negotiations in which Türkiye played a key role, a major prisoner swap took place in Türkiye between Western countries and Russia,[12] providing a much-needed easing of tensions between the two sides.

5) In the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Türkiye continues to diligently enforce the provisions of the 1936 Montreux Convention, thereby controlling the flow of military

ships in and out of the Black Sea through the Turkish straits. Türkiye thus acts as a safety valve against escalation that can directly pit the West against Russia in the Black Sea.[13]

6) In June 2024, Türkiye attended the Ukraine Peace Summit in Switzerland despite its reservations about the fact that Russia, one of the two sides of the war, was not invited to the event.[14] The summit has been considered a failure[15] and was mired in controversy because one of the invitees, Patriarch Bartholomew (head of the Fener Greek Patriarchate of İstanbul), used the title of Ecumenical Patriarch. This was in clear violation of the compromise reached during the adoption of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that the Patriarchate has jurisdiction solely as a Turkish public institution.[16]

7) Türkiye has repeatedly indicated that it is willing to bring together Ukrainian and Russian officials again to bring an end to the Ukraine-Russia war through addressing the concerns and interests of both Ukraine and Russia.[17] This offer is being resisted by both certain circles in the West, who probably do not want Türkiye to acquire the diplomatic prestige such a move would bring, and by Russia, who probably considers Türkiye to have become too close to Ukraine for Russias liking.

Despite the 2.5 years that have passed since Russias invasion and the death of more than 1 million people, the Ukraine-Russia war seems to be going nowhere and only promises more misery for Ukraine and the region. The West is intent on achieving total victory against Russia to put Russia back in its place, Russia is trying to dominate Ukraine to feel secure in its region, and Ukraine is fighting for its survival and to guarantee its future. It is a situation that can quickly spiral out of control and lead to severe consequences. It for this reason that the Ukraine-Russia War requires actors like Türkiye that can talk to all the sides involved and can thus serve as exit points for the conflict. The recent appointment of Andrii Sybiha, Ukraines former ambassador to Ankara with whom AVİM has co-organized events in the past, as Ukraines Minister of Foreign Affairs[18] provides an important opportunity in this regard. We hope that Mr. Sybihas appointment will bring fresh perspectives to Ukraines foreign policy that will pave the way towards an end to the destructive Ukraine-Russia war.

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To cite this article: TULUN, Mehmet Oğuzhan. 2026. "TÜRKİYE'S MEDIATION IN THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA WAR." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Analysis No.2024 / 16. September 23. Accessed November 22, 2026. https://www.avim.org.tr/public/index.php/en/Analiz/TURKIYE-S-MEDIATION-THE-UKRAINE-RUSSIA-WAR

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