

Turkey PolTrack® Series

FOREIGN POLICY: TURKISH PUBLIC OPINION ON TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS

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The Turkey PolTrack® series interprets Turkish public opinion on the basis of quantitative data compiled from Istanbul Economics Research's monthly public opinion survey.

The notes are prepared by the analyst team of Istanbul Economics Research with academic support.

For more detailed results and analysis, please contact our team at info@researchistanbul.com

Time to discuss foreign policy

This note is part of Istanbul Economics Research Political Analysis Notes Series. The analysis is based on two public opinion surveys conducted in September 2018 with 2.500 individuals and in December 2018 with 1.500 across Turkey using Computer Aided Telephone Interview (CATI) method. The results are representative at a national level with 95% confidence interval and +/- 2,2 pp and +/- 2.5 pp accuracy, respectively.

Introduction

Turkey is on its way to municipal elections to be held on March 31. In the light of the highly competitive and lively campaign period of the last June parliamentary and presidential elections, the local elections are highly anticipated and promises to be an interesting one for a number of reasons. For example, it is the first time that the ex-ante coalitions will compete in a municipal election. As a result, electoral analysis are taking over the agenda and will continue to do so in the campaign period. However, in the meantime, a series of important events are taking place in the foreign policy arena.

While domestic debate focuses mainly on elections, the foreign affairs of Turkey continues to be marked with important developments and events. President of the United States, Donald Trump declared the decision for the withdrawal of American troops from Syria; The Sochi summit brought President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani together for the fourth time under the Astana Process in February, and most recently European Parliament's Turkey report, was adopted by the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee on Feb. 20, calling for the suspension of EU accession negotiations with Ankara.

At Istanbul Economy Research, we considered it a good moment to take a deeper look on public perceptions on foreign policy in this period.

Russia as a potential partner

Turkish Russian political relations have been improving at the leadership level. President Erdoğan and President Putin have been in constant communication over a range of issues, Syria being the top item. Based on a Russian news channel, President Erdoğan is on the top of the list of foreign leaders that President Putin had most telephone conversations in 2018 with 19 calls*. Turkey is also on route for the highly contested purchase of S-400 missiles from Russia, in the face of strong opposition of the USA.

The improved relations with Russia appear to find support within Turkish public opinion. Russia receives a more positive evaluation than Turkey's long term major ally the USA. As well-known feature of Turkish public opinion on foreign policy is that Turkish people in general have negative attitudes towards other states (See Table 1 below). The average scores (out of 10) are between 2.2 and 3.5 (1 means feeling most distant and 10 means closest feelings). Japan receives the most positive evaluation, 1 out of 4 individuals giving a score of 6 or higher, partly owing to the fact that many people lack strong opinion of the country as it is not a everyday partner of Turkey, while the USA receives the lowest evaluation, 7 out of 10 people give the lowest score of 1 and only 1 individual out of 10 gave a positive score of 6 or above for their feelings towards the USA. Russia scores rather positively in general, with an average of 2.93, making it the most popular third country in our list.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Average (max=10)
Japan	44.4	6.8	7.1	6.4	10.8	7.4	4.6	5.1	2.4	5.0	100.0	3.48
Germany	48.0	7.6	9.0	6.8	9.5	4.6	5.9	3.2	1.0	4.5	100.0	3.13
Russia	47.6	10.3	8.8	5.4	13.5	4.0	3.9	3.3	-	3.2	100.0	2.93
China	54.2	9.0	8.9	6.3	11.0	3.8	2.8	2.0	0.5	1.5	100.0	2.57
United Kingdom	57.1	8.9	8.0	6.1	8.1	2.6	3.2	3.8	0.5	1.7	100.0	2.53
France	55.5	9.9	9.6	5.4	7.5	4.2	3.3	2.9	0.5	1.2	100.0	2.51
USA	70.3	6.2	4.8	3.0	5.4	2.2	2.0	1.8	0.8	3.5	100.0	2.20

*Дмитрий СМЕРНОВ | Сайт «Комсомольской правды». (2018, Декабрь 28). Как устроена спецсвязь Президента России: Почему Порошенко не может дозвониться в Кремль, а с Меркель соединяют даже ночью. Retrieved from <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26926/3973857/>

	Not successful at all	Unsuccessful	Neither successful nor unsuccessful	Successful	Very successful	Total	Average (max=5)
Russia – Vladimir Putin	26.8	14.5	13.5	30.3	14.9	100.0	2.92
Germany – Angela Merkel	30.5	22.2	18.4	20.8	8.0	100.0	2.54
France – Emmanuel Macron	36.7	27.9	19.8	10.7	5.0	100.0	2.19
USA – Donald Trump	46.9	27.5	11.5	8.8	5.4	100.0	1.98

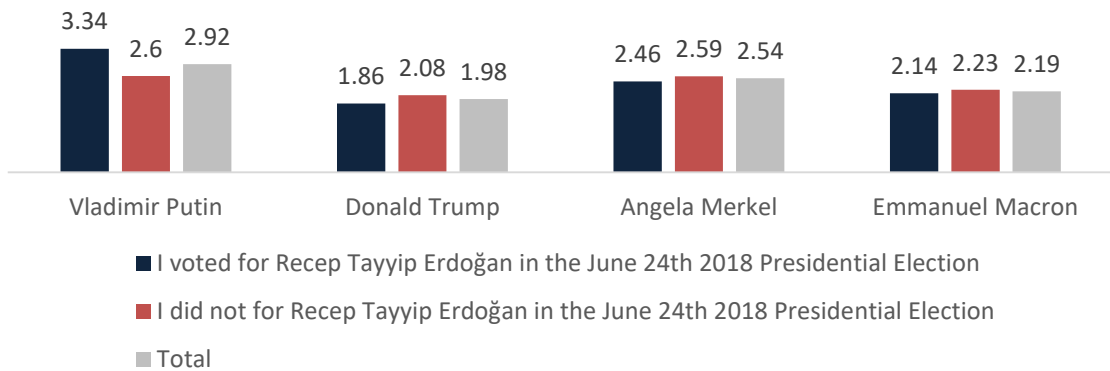
President Vladimir Putin in the eyes of Turkish Public

More detailed analysis on perceptions indicate that the popularity of Russia is actually a reflection of President Putin's image. Compared with other leaders, Putin is considered as the most successful leader, with an average of 2.92 out of 5 points (1 not successful at all; 5 very successful). The closest leader under evaluation is Germany's Angela Merkel, who scores 2.54 (out of 5). President Donald Trump is considered as the most unsuccessful leader in the eyes of Turkish public, with a mere success evaluation of 1.98 out of 5.

Considering Turkey's polarized political scene, it is an important to see whether President Putin remains across the political spectrum. Our data reveals that the individuals who have voted for President Erdoğan in June 24, 2018 elections have a significantly more positive evaluation of President Putin, compared with those who did not vote for President Erdoğan. Among the Erdoğan voters, 41.5 % finds President Putin successful and 19.2 % find him very successful. Among the individuals who did not vote for President Erdoğan in June 2018, these figures are much lower; 21.5 % successful and 11.8 % very successful. The average success score for President Putin is 3.34 (out of 5) for Erdoğan voters and 2.60 (out of 5) for those who did not vote for President Erdoğan.

The division on positive evaluations of President Putin among Turkish voters is not valid for other leaders. The difference between President Erdoğan voters and non-voters on the evaluations of President Trump, President Macron and Chancellor Merkel is insignificant and marginal (Table 3). This finding indicates that the supporters of President Erdoğan are receiving leadership cues, and they are influenced by the close relationship of two Presidents.

How successful do you find the following world leaders? (Mean, max=5)

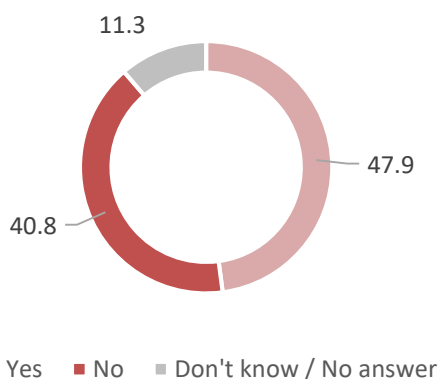


Future of Turkey Russia Relations

In the light of previous findings, a major issue is the future foreign policy orientation of Turkey. Numerous experts have been analyzing Turkish Russian relations, questioning Turkey’s new alliances and orientations. In the eyes of Turkish public opinion, a long term political alliance with Russia is not very popular and a very divisive issue. While 47.9 % thinks Turkey should enter into a long term political alliance with Russia, 40.8 % opposes such an alliance.

Once again, this difference of opinion seems to be parallel to voting preferences. The support for establishing a long term political alliance with Russia goes up to 62.7 % among individuals who voted for President Erdoğan, and only 36.4 % of those who voted for another presidential candidate support such an alliance.

Do you think Turkey should enter a long-term political alliance with Russia?



In terms of a long-term military alliance with Russia, the support is less than a political alliance. Only 4 out of 10 individuals support a long term Turkish Russian military alliance, while half of the respondents oppose. Yet again there is a clear divide between President Erdoğan voters and those who voted for another candidate. While 52 % of the Erdoğan voters support the idea of a long-term military alliance with Russia, the support is only 25.9 % among those who did not vote for President Erdoğan.

The polarization over Russia is worthy of further analysis. Relations with Russia was clearly not an electoral issue during the campaign period in summer 2018. None of the candidates, including President Erdoğan set their electoral platform on foreign policy, especially on Russia. Nevertheless, there is a clear divide, to a degree of polarization, on the individuals' perceptions and evaluations of Russia and Russian president. This divide is not present in other foreign policy issues that are included in the survey. With further analysis on perceptions on foreign policy ongoing, it is possible to hypothesize that the strong difference of opinion on the issue of Russia and Russian president Vladimir Putin is a reflection of the ongoing political polarization in Turkey. While one camp is following the strong leadership cues and taking a positive stance, the other side is reacting to those cues in a different manner.

Russia as an alternative to NATO?

Hints of the motivation behind support for a military and political alliance with Russia can be traced to the perception of NATO. In the eyes of the Turkish public, NATO's role in global security is rather negative, and its significance for Turkey's security is questionable. According to our latest poll, 66.2% of the society express the view that NATO's role in global security is negative, and 34.2% believe that the organization serves as a tool that foreign powers employ to manipulate Turkey. While 3 out of 10 believe that Turkey needs NATO to ensure its security, 44.1% believe otherwise. This begs the question of why NATO carries such a negative connotation and what the viable alternative to this situation would be according to the public opinion.

	Agree	Disagree
Turkey does not need NATO to ensure its security	44.1	55.9
NATO is a tool employed by foreign powers to exercise control over Turkey	34.2	65.8
NATO is necessary for Turkey's security	30.0	70.0
NATO limits Turkey's independence	27.0	73.0

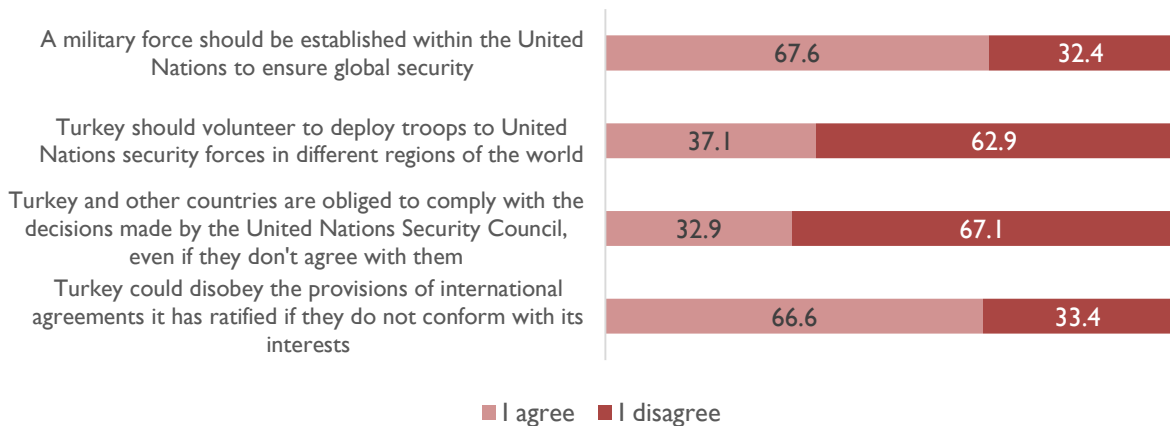
What do you think about NATO's role in global security?



■ I think it is positive ■ I think it is negative

Findings of IER's public opinion polls indicate that conditionality stands in the way of widespread support for international alliances, regardless of the area of cooperation. In other words, Turkish society tends to disapprove of relations where the support provided to Turkey is conditional on compliance with often undesirable obligations, including reciprocity, even if they interfere with national interests, priorities or public opinion. It does not side with alliances or governance models that require a certain transfer of sovereignty to the entity or to the foreign counterpart, especially if the said entity is perceived to be a tool for the exercise of control over the country.

To illustrate, in the eyes of the Turkish society, multinational military forces carry a certain potential to ensure global peace. 67.6% of the public show support for the establishment of an international armed force under the United Nations to ensure global security, despite the perception that the entity is «under the control of great powers» (57.7%). However, when asked if Turkey should volunteer to deploy Turkish soldiers to support United Nations forces in different countries, only 37.1% respond in favor. Even in cases where the importance of the existence and the effective functioning of a certain international entity is acknowledged, full participation seems to be reluctant and preferably discretionary, according to the Turkish public. This principle is revealed to be valid in the case of NATO membership, when one of the most basic requirements of being a NATO member state is analyzed in depth. Indeed, 55.1% of the country disapprove of the deployment of Turkish troops to ensure the security of another NATO member state.



A further 66.6% of the Turkish society argue that Turkey does not have to comply with the provisions of international agreements it has ratified, in cases where the provisions do not align with its interests. Similar inclinations manifest themselves in questions related to the extent to which the decisions made by the European Court of Human Rights should be binding for Turkey, or whether if Turkey should allocate a part of its budget to providing humanitarian assistance to other countries and communities in need. The common denominator is a resistance to the imposition of certain actions that Turkey does not wish to undertake, which inherently overrides willingness, thus interfering with national sovereignty.

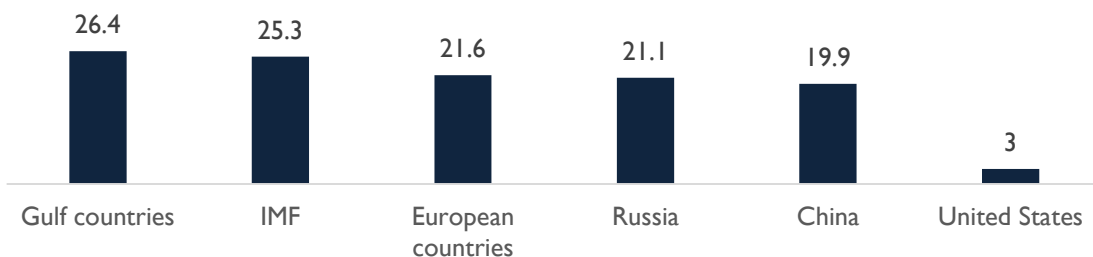
When read together, it is possible to argue that, in addition to its perceived role in allowing Turkey to balance the impositions associated with being a member of the NATO and being an ally of the United States, Russia comes as a favorable ally due to the more tolerable and less evident compromises its support requires. It is important to note, however, that support for a military alliance with Russia is not placed as a direct alternative to NATO membership, as evidenced by the 22.1% support for the statement that “Turkey should engage in a security cooperation with Russia instead of NATO”. The prevailing sentiment, albeit not held by the majority, calls for a diversification of alliances through military cooperation with non-NATO countries (36.5%), as a means to counter the impositions by NATO.

	%
Even if it remains in NATO, Turkey should pursue military cooperation with non-NATO countries	36.5
Turkey should leave the NATO and act on its own	27.5
Turkey should stay in the NATO	27.4
Turkey should engage in a security cooperation with Russia instead of NATO	22.1

Russia as an economic ally and path to prosperity

IER’s research indicates that the support for a Turkey-Russia alliance is rooted in and limited to the categorization of perceived security threats. While recognized as a worthy ally in the political and military spheres by an important part of the society, the Turkish public opinion does not appear to place Russia as a viable economic relief provider. Despite the realization of the importance of Russia as an economic partner following the consequences of its economic sanctions on Turkish tourism, construction sector and food exports, 2 out of 10 individuals suggest that it would be right for Turkey to seek a loan from Russia in the case of need for economic support from a foreign entity - placing Russia as a more preferable option over the United States (3% support), yet behind the Gulf countries (26.4%), the IMF (25.3%) and European states (21.6%).

According to you, where should Turkey seek a loan from in case of a need?



Another noteworthy result of the same survey shows that a Russian education is not perceived to provide as much opportunity to foreign children as Western education according to Turkish families. While 3 out of 10 Turkish citizens express a desire for their children to pursue their higher education abroad, if they had the means to provide the opportunity, a mere 2.1% of those who indicate this preference chose Russia as their preferred destination. It can thus be concluded that while Russia is perceived as a strong ally in the context balancing foreign relations, the destination for self-fulfillment and prosperity remains the United States and the West at large, who still top the list as the most preferred foreign countries for higher education. This stance seems to be one of the few matters on which the voters of rival presidential candidates agree: Both individuals who voted for President Erdoğan and those who voted for Muharrem İnce in the June 24th Presidential Elections list the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany as their top targets for international student migration. Although President Erdoğan's supporters view a political alliance with Russia and evaluate the Russian President Vladimir Putin significantly more positively than the rest of the Turkish society, none of them chose Russia as their preferred destination for studies abroad.

%	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Muharrem İnce	Meral Akşener	Selahattin Demirtaş	Overall
United States	30.4	21.2	22.2	28.6	26.9
Germany	19.6	18.2		19.0	17.0
Austria	2.2	1.5	16.7		3.6
Belgium	2.2	3.0		4.8	2.8
China			5.6		0.8
Finland	2.2	7.6	16.7	9.5	7.9
France	2.2	1.5	16.7	4.8	3.7
Netherlands		3.0			1.0
United Kingdom	19.6	21.2	5.6	4.8	17.0
Spain		1.5		4.8	2.2
Switzerland	4.3	4.5			3.1
Italy	4.3	1.5			2.2
Cyprus		3.0			1.0
Norway	6.5	1.5		9.5	2.9
Poland		4.5			1.8
Russia		1.5	5.6	9.5	2.1
Canada	2.2	1.5	5.6		1.6
Other	4.3	3.0	5.6	4.8	3.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

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