Turkey's Opening to Latin America: The Case of Venezuela*

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Abstract

In recent years, with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey has become an active player in the global arena, so it has high degree of independence in taking and carrying out its decisions in several international perspectives while paying regard to its Western allies. This has resulted in an intensification of Turkey's foreign and economic policy partnerships with its neighboring countries as well as with previously overlooked regions. In this sense, Latin America and the Caribbean states have been considered as one of the main and very promising lines of Turkey's foreign policy. This study aims to scrutinize Turkey's opening policy in Latin America using the example of Turkish Venezuelan partnership, which has been intensified and diversified as of 2016 after periods of recession and boom. Venezuela is one of the countries with which Turkey has established first diplomatic relations in the Latin America and the Caribbean region. Relations between Turkey and Venezuela which have been limited for many years mainly because of geographical distance, have gathered a new momentum on account of Turkey's opening policy towards the Latin America and Caribbean as well as mutual high-level visits in recent years. This intercontinental cooperation was reflected in the increasing of trade and economic relations, along with the deepening of diplomatic ties. In the study, the main emphasis is placed on the underlying key elements of this partnership between Turkey and Venezuela. The study reveals that the sudden partnership between Turkey and Venezuela is formed based on struggling against common external challenges. The two states are both under sanctions and pressure by the United States even with a differentiating level of severity; both economies are facing crisis moments. In this respect, these factors make contribution to the enhancement of economic relations between them based on mutual advantage. The study concludes that the two states has made both material gains and received ideological support as a result of the flourishing relations in recent years.

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Türkiye'nin Latin Amerika Açılımı: Venezuela Örneği*

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Son yıllarda, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin iktidar olmasıyla birlikte, Türkiye küresel arenada aktif bir oyuncu haline gelmiş, böylelikle birçok uluslararası açıdan, Batılı müttefiklerini de göz önünde bulundurarak, yüksek derecede bağımsız kararlar alabilme ve uygulama imkânına sahip olmuştur. Bu, Türkiye'nin komşu ülkelerle ve daha önce göz ardı edilen bölgelerle dış ve ekonomik politika ortaklıklarının yoğunlaşmasına olanak sağlamıştır. Bu bağlamda, Latin Amerika ve Karayip ülkeleri, Türkiye'nin dış politikasının kilit ve gelecek vaat eden hatlarından biri olarak görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, durgunluk ve canlanma dönemlerinin ardından 2016 yılı itibari ile yoğunlaşan ve çeşitlenen Türkiye Venezuela ortaklığı örneği üzerinden Türkiye'nin Latin Amerika açılım politikasını irdelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Venezuela, Türkiye'nin Latin Amerika ve Karayipler bölgesinde ilk diplomatik ilişki kurduğu ülkeler arasında yer almaktadır. Uzun yıllardır coğrafi uzaklık nedeniyle sınırlı kalan Türkiye-Venezuela ilişkileri, Türkiye'nin Latin Amerika ve Karayipler'e açılım politikasının yanı sıra son yıllarda artan karşılıklı üst düzey ziyaretler aracılığıyla yeni bir ivme kazanmıştır. Bu kıtalararası işbirliği, diplomatik bağların derinleşmesinin yanı sıra ticari ve ekonomik ilişkilerin artmasına da yansımıştır. Çalışmada, Türkiye ve Venezuela arasındaki bu ortaklığın altında yatan kilit unsurlara ağırlık verilmektedir. Çalışma, Türkiye ile Venezuela arasındaki bu beklenmedik yakınlaşmanın ortak dış tehditlerle mücadele temelinde oluştuğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Her iki devlet, farklı şiddet seviyelerinde bile olsa, ABD yaptırımları ve baskısı altındadır; her iki ülke ekonomisi de kriz anlarıyla karşı karşıya bulunmaktadır. Bu açıdan bu faktörler, aralarındaki ekonomik ilişkilerin karşılıklı avantaj temelinde gelişmesine katkı sağlamaktadır. Çalışma, iki ülkenin de son yıllarda gelişen ilişkileri sonucunda hem maddi kazanımlar elde ettiği hem de ideolojik destek sağladıkları sonucuna varmaktadır.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, Turkish society and politics have gone through tremendous transformations under the impact of both domestic and outside forces. The country's foreign policy has also shifted its course from a monolithic Western orientation during the Cold War years to multiregional connections since the 1990s. Thus, although Turkey is a member of almost every international organisation in Europe (such as NATO, OSCE, OECD, Council of Europe, and currently negotiating with EU), it has developed political, economic, cultural, and strategic ties with neighbouring countries in the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. In the 2000s, Turkey further expanded its interests to the ignored organisations and regions in its foreign policy, such as the Arab League, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Gulf Cooperation Organisation and African-based organisations. With the help of its unique geopolitics, cultural identity, military power and economic growth, Turkey is currently redetermining its international identity as an active and constructive global actor, instead of staying a passive pro-Western state (Özkan and Akgün, 2010: 526).

Turkey diversified its base of partners and began to develop specific strategies for new regions geographically and/or culturally distant like Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and Caribbean Region. These areas were selected primarily to increase global influence and prestige, and market diversification by creating official representations, high-rank visits, and commercial enterprises (Levaggi and Zengin, 2016: 262). In this direction, relations between Turkey and Latin America have developed mainly over the past decade. Presently, Latin America is regarded as a strategic region in terms of new Turkish foreign policy under Justice and Development Party's government as Ankara's active involvement in the region has been admitted as a demonstration of Turkey's potential global influence. Davutoğlu's 2009 speech at the opening ceremony of Ankara University's Latin America Studies Research and Application Center sets a good example for the context of the current relationship, wherein he stated that Latin America (along with Africa) 'plays a very important role in the conversion of Turkey's regional effect into a global effect' (Levaggi, 2011: 11).

The limitations of geographical, historical, ethnic, religious and cultural ties in Latin America did not restrict Turkey's goals for the region, and its initiatives in this area revealed Turkey's new foreign policy vision. As a matter of fact, this vision in Turkish diplomacy is embodied in the statement of Deputy Foreign Minister Naci Koru "... There is no longer room for characterizations such as 'far away' or 'remote' in today's proactive and multidimensional Turkish foreign policy" (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Based on this framework, this study aims to scrutinize the main motivations in Turkish Venezuelan relations in the last decade. This sudden and unexpected partnership seems unusual given the fact that Turkey is a member of NATO and a long-standing U.S. ally. Based on this framework, the study aims to answer the *quesito*: What are the basic motivations of accelerated rapprochement between these two historically, culturally, and geographically distant countries in recent years?

It must be noted that there is currently limited academic literature on developing relations between Turkey and Venezuela. Hence, this paper proposes that examining the case of Venezuela and the acceleration in relations from the Turkish perspective will contribute to the scarce literature and will set a good example to understand the overall dominant characteristics of Turkish foreign policy in the recent times.

The paper will be structured as follows: the first section will briefly explain Turkey's opening policy to Latin America. Second, it will discuss in detail how Turkey experienced such frequent shifts in its Venezuelan policy during the 2000s and explanatory factors for the Turkish-Venezuelan rapprochement will be analyzed. Third, the future of Turkey-Venezuela partnership will be discussed

pointing out the main challenges and opportunities. In the conclusion part, the main arguments are summed up and the research question is answered.

Turkey's Opening Policy in Latin America

Latin America and the Caribbean region consist of 33 countries with a population of over 600 million and has rich commercial potential especially in oil. The region includes significant regional organizations such as the Common Market of South America (MERCOSUR), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Commonwealth of Latin America and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Community of Caribbean Countries (ACS) (Çelenk, 2011: 550). Although Latin America occupies a significant place in global politics, it appears as a continent that is less emphasized, spoken, and written when compared to other small continents in Turkish foreign policy. However, Latin America has begun to gain a great importance due to its economic, cultural and political capacities and attracted intensive attention of global powers that seek to be influential in international arena such as USA, China, EU and Russia and from important regional powers such as Turkey, Indonesia and India. As Turkey aims to play a more active role in international politics keeping pace with the globalization, it began to give close attention to the region. As a part of its multi-dimensional foreign policy, Turkey seeks to establish closer relations and institutionalize the current economic and political relations with Latin America (Yetim, 2019: 170).

The roots of the relations between Turkey and Latin American countries date back to the second half of the 19th century. Chile was the first Latin American country to recognize the new Republic of Turkey in 1926, and other countries took a leaf from Chile to establish ties and open diplomatic missions (Kızıl, 2021). However, Turkey-Latin America relations, despite the parties' positive approaches and wishes for deepening their relationship, could not reach the expected level and remained "dormant" until the end of the Cold War. This type of low-profile relationship was due to the problems such as the official passiveness, geographical distance, cultural barriers and language difficulties and was the result of Turkey's dominant Western state identity until mid-1990s (Donelli and Levaggi, 2016: 107; Levaggi and Zengin, 2016: 276). In 1995, President Suleyman Demirel's official visit to Argentina, Brazil and Chile has opened a new page in Turkey-Latin America relations. The first time in history, a Turkish president visited to Latin America on that year. The first systematic initiative for the region was carried out in the framework of Turkey's Action Plan for Latin America and the Caribbean in 1998. The main goals of this plan were to complete the legal framework of bilateral relations, to develop the economic and commercial relations, to encourage high level political contacts and to increase the awareness of contemporary Turkey in the region (Çelenk, 2011: 552; Levaggi, 2013:107).

More substantial steps towards the development of Turkey's Latin American policy began to be taken from 2006 onwards. In this context, the plan prepared in 1998 was updated under the name of "Action Plan 2006" and Turkey declared 2006 as the year of Latin America and the Caribbean as an effort to establish links with the region in order to strengthen economic, political, social, military and cultural relations. Since 2009, Turkey has followed the 'Commercial Development Strategy towards the Americas,' which determined Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Cuba and Mexico as key trade partners for Turkey (Levaggi, 2013: 106-107; Kızıl, 2021). In this regard, the steadily developing commercial relations have begun to gain momentum. However, as the most decisive factor in terms of ensuring the permanence of Turkey's Latin American politics Turkey's primary objective has been the deepening of economic relations (Özkan, 2018: 102). In this context, Turkey has signed Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreements along with many others covering issues such as economic cooperation, technical assistance and infrastructure development with 18 countries. While Turkey's trade volume with Latin America and the Caribbean was US\$ 3.4 billion in 2006 and it kept up a level of nearly US\$9 billion in 2018. Despite all progress, Turkey's trade with region is low, representing only around 2 per cent of Turkey's total commerce (Önsoy, 2017: 251).

In Turkey's foreign policy openings, Latin America occupies a critical and strategic place which provides broad economic opportunities to increase international trade and investment. Within this framework, the visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Cuba, Mexico and Colombia in 2015 was planned as a strategic move to develop bilateral relations with key countries. One year later, Erdoğan went to Chile, Peru and Ecuador with the purpose of strengthening economic ties and to make a series of military, cultural and technical cooperation agreements with the region to expand cultural interaction and diplomatic representation within the context of multi-dimensionality in the Turkish foreign policy.

As part of cultural and social policies The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) referred to as Turkey's global "helping hand" provides humanitarian aid across the continent over the two offices opened in Mexico in 2015 and in Bogota in 2016. (Akıllı and Donelli 2016: 167). Between 2008-2018, TIKA carried out a total of 172 development projects and activities in the fields of education, healthcare, agriculture, and infrastructure in Latin America. The number of Turkish embassies in Latin America has also increased to 16 in 2021 from 6 in 2002 (Kızıl, 2021). Meanwhile, increasing of Turkish Airlines (THY) flight destinations, the opening efforts of Turkish Radio and Television Association (TRT) and sending of correspondents by Anatolian News Agency (AA) have been significant initiatives.

Turkey has been cooperating not only with Latin American governments, but also taken several steps to improve its cooperation with the regional organizations and hold observer status in several forums in the region such as Pacific Alliance, Organization of American States (OAS), CARICOM, ACS, MERCOSUR, and the Rio Group (Çelenk, 2011: 552-553). Turkey has been cooperating with Latin American countries at the international level, too. For instance, Turkey and Mexico are members of groupings such as MİKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, the Korean Republic, Turkey, and Australia) and MINT (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey). In addition, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Turkey have cooperated in forums such as the UN Security Council, the G20, and the UN Alliance of Civilizations to make contribution to maintaining international order at the regional and global levels. In general terms, Turkey's increasing presence in Latin America has also established a ground for political benefits, as is seen in the support it took during its admission as a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 2009 (Önsoy, 2017: 251).

The basic motivations behind the growing importance of Turkey-Latin America relations can be summarized as follows: changes and developments in international arena in the first decade of 21st century, several Latin American countries and Turkey's status as rising economies and not only by Turkey but often mutually initiated regional opening policies. After winning their independence in the 19th century, many Latin American countries' experiences in political and economic life show similarities with Turkey's political history. As Turkey and Latin America countries share similar experiences in the bilateral relations with the US to their economic development and from their common understanding of independence to their desire to be active on the global arena, their relations have begun to gain depth day by day. Turkey's all attempts towards the region show that Turkey develops its relations with Latin America as a long-term and permanent policy. However, geographical distance that is significantly decisive particularly on economic relations, the United States' influence in the region, and the impact of frequently changing political conjuncture on Turkey's image in the region emerge as restrictive conditions for Turkey's opening policy in Latin America.

Due to, on the one hand, the rising trend of developing region-region or country-region relations throughout the world, on the other hand, geographical distance and the lack of deep political and economic basis of bilateral relations, Turkey's Latin America Initiative is shaped in a multilateral structure within the framework of this general trend. In addition, we see that Turkey's opening has continued in the past decade in its effort to find partners in Latin America and to discover areas where

relations can be developed. Despite the positive developments, relations seem not to be completely satisfactory. This situation is the result of the geographical distance between regions, economic conditions, and the changing political conjuncture throughout Latin America. There are a range of issue that still require substantial attention, such as academic and cultural cooperation and migration, cooperation on development. However, the mutual opening of diplomatic missions, a growing volume of foreign trade and increasing Turkey's soft power in the region pave the way for the development of relations in institutional and political grounds in the coming years.

What is driving Turkey's apparent rapprochement with Venezuela?

In recent years, Venezuela has emerged as one of the Latin American countries that are at the center of the new Turkish foreign policy, which aims to improve cooperation with previously overlooked regions. Venezuela is one of the first countries that established diplomatic relations with Turkey in Latin America and the Caribbean region. The beginning of Turkish-Venezuelan bilateral relations goes back to 1950. However, their relationship remained on paper and even trade relations increased in the 2000's, the relations between them were stagnant. When Maduro came into power in 2013 after Chavez died, the Maduro government did not take positive steps toward Ankara. However, the coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016 changed the course of relations between the two states and opened a new phase of rapprochement (Öner, 2020: 6). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro first met at the World Energy Congress in Istanbul in October 2016, just months after the coup attempt (Lowen, 2019).

Following a series of bilateral agreements signed during the energy conference (Koerner, 2016), the Turkish and Venezuelan governments made a new series of trade agreements, ranging from agricultural exchanges to military defense cooperation in 2017 (Jaramillo, 2018), indicating a burgeoning alliance. High level official visits between governments have also started to increase as of this date. Diplomatic relations reached their peak with Erdogan's visit to the capital of Venezuela in December 2018, following the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires (Öner, 2020). As part of his speech at Turkey - Venezuela Business Forum, Erdogan, who is the first Turkish President visited the country, reiterated Turkey's interest in Venezuela in these words: "There are strong bonds of the friendship and solidarity between our two countries (...) We strive to diversify and deepen cooperation with Venezuela in every field within the scope of win-win approach" (Daily Sabah, 2018, 3 December).

In addition, Erdogan was among the first leaders to congratulate Maduro in the international arena for his victory in the Venezuelan elections in May 2018, despite being clearly described as illegitimate by the US and the EU. Finally, because of the presidential crisis between Maduro and the President of the National Assembly Juan Guaidó, during the protests that began in Venezuela in mid-January 2019, the Latin American leader was strongly supported and the events in Caracas were described as a coup attempt. "Maduro brother, stand tall Turkey stands with you!" (Zorlu, 2019). This message of Erdoğan to his Venezuelan counterpart can be seen as a Turkey's fidelity to Maduro who was quick to condemn the failed coup attempt in Turkey and to give strong support for Erdoğan (Duran, 2019).

As a result of developing diplomatic relations since 2016, the trade volume between two countries rose from 83 million US dollars in 2016 to 1.1 billion US dollars in 2018, and Venezuela became the fourth largest trading partner of Turkey in Latin America following Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico¹. Although trade volume of Venezuela with Turkey represents a limited proportion of Turkey's total trade volume in recent years, Venezuela which has the the largest oil and third largest gold

¹ Turkish Statistical Institute for official numbers regarding trade volumes. Search for the Excel tables "Imports by countries, 1996-2018; 2013-2021", and "Exports by countries:1996-2018; 2013-2021" at www.turkstat.gov.tr.

reserves in the world has the potential to be a favourable trade partner for Turkey (Kasapoğlu, 2018). In 2018, Venezuela and Turkey announced a joint venture in Venezuela's gold and coal exploration and started talks about Turkish investments in Venezuelan petroleum industries subject to the sanctions (Wilks, 2019). Maduro invited Turkish companies to research and invest in a huge mineral reserve known as Arco del Orinoco in South Venezuela, a region with significant diamond, coltan and gold reserves (Hurriyet Daily News, 2018). Gold trade, which started in 2018, plays an important role in developing and deepening relationships between the two countries in recent years. Remarkably, gold imported from Venezuela constitutes 900 million dollars of Turkey-Venezuela trade of 1.1 billion dollars in 2018. For the first time in 2019, Turkey's exports exceeded its imports. As of April, 2021, Turkey exported \$59M to Venezuela and Venezuela exported \$115M to Turkey in return.

Table 1: Turkish-Venezuelan Trade for 2001-2021 (in millions of US\$)

Years	Turkey's Exports	Turkey's Imports	Trade Volume
2006	42	59	101
2007	42	88	130
2008	28	133	161
2009	36	198	234
2010	44	121	165
2011	84	150	234
2012	156	153	309
2013	76	198	274
2014	49	194	243
2015	19	107	126
2016	18	65	83
2017	38	117	155
2018	134	1019	1153
2019	132	19	151
2020	235	61	296
2021 (As of April)	59	117	176

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute

In response to gold imports, Turkey exports to Venezuela agricultural products such as wheat flour, pasta, sunflower oil, and hygiene products at a time Venezuela needs considerable amount of

food, and products (Kasapoğlu, 2020). In addition to transportation products like cars and machines, Turkey sent Venezuela food products such as tuna fish, green beans, sunflower oil, and powdered milk for approximately 142,5 million Turkish liras via 18 container ships on May 17, 2018 (Sputnik, 2018). Turkey also invested in Venezuelan construction industry with 3,000 houses built in 2017 (Sputnik, 2017). Regarding Turkey's large construction industry, Venezuela represents a suitable market for Turkish construction businesses (Kasapoğlu, 2018). Besides, Turkey's national air carrier Turkish Airlines (THY) launched flights between Istanbul, Havana, and Caracas in December 2016 upon an agreement between the two countries at a time other large airlines cancelled their flights to Venezuela (Wilks, 2019).

As another indication of growing partnership between two countries, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu visited Venezuela on August 18, 2020, to sign some agreements and celebrate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries (TRT World, 2020, 19 August) and brought with him medical supplies to Venezuela to fight Covid-19, including more than two dozen ventilators and thousands of testing kits and masks. In addition to the growing political and economic engagement between Turkey and Venezuela, cultural ties also seem to be strengthening. Erdoğan announced during his visit to Caracas in 2018 that based on Venezuela's request, Turkey plans to build a mosque in Caracas and to open an office of the Yunus Emre Institute, the state-run cultural agency, in Venezuela (TRT World, 2018, 4 December). In 2019, Turkey was invited to the 14th Venezuela International Book Fair (FILVEN) as a "guest of honor" (Anadolu Agency, 2018, 9 November). Besides, *Diriliş Ertuğrul* (Resurrection: Ertugrul), a historical drama about the founder of the Ottoman Empire, began to be screened on the Venezuelan state channel TVes (Anadolu Agency, 2018, 24 October).

Beyond all these material interests, ideational factors should also be taken into account in order to understand the development of Turkish foreign policy in Venezuela. First, according to the Turkish foreign policy approach conceptualized by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey is considered as one of the central states in the international system rather being a peripheral country (Akıllı, 2015). Turkey redefines its roles as a global power just beyond that it is as a regional leader in the Middle East. This self-perception of Turkey can be seen in its foreign policy rhetoric towards Venezuela. Although the two leaders have ideological differences, they could be able to develop strong personal ties. The two leaders do not seem to have a lot in common given the fact that Erdoğan is politically Islamist and economically liberalist, but Christian Maduro is the descendant of Hugo Chavez Socialist Bolivarian Revolution. However, they identify with each other in several issues (Shapiro, 2017). While Maduro defined Erdoğan as a "friend and leader of a new multipolar world" (Hürriyet Daily News, 2018), Erdoğan pledged his support and referred to Maduro as "my brother." (Hürriyet Daily News, 2019) Thus, Turkey's central position as an actor who has a voice in key issues of the international system and Turkey's challenging, anti-imperialist, and anti-hegemonic discourse and behaviors towards US policies on the "oppressed countries" may affect rapprochement between Turkey and Venezuela which is under the increasing Western pressure in recent years. Erdoğan's views on anti-hegemony and anti-colonialism can be clearly seen in his reaction to the recognition of Juan Guaidó as president. Erdoğan's statements such as "Those who try to appoint a postmodern colonial governor to Venezuela, where the people rule and the president is appointed by elections, should know that only democratic elections can determine how a country is governed." (Reuters, 2019, 30 April); "If Maduro stands tall and continues on the path he believes, I am sure he will have the support of the Venezuelan people." (Jones, 2019) seem to encourage Maduro to continue to resist the "imperial attempt" towards overthrowing him.

The rapid and unexpected rapprochement between Turkey and Venezuela in recent years attracted attention in the international arena, and in this context, several explanations have begun to be

made on the underlying factors of their deepening relations. First, Turkey's growing prestige in the international system which is in a transformation toward a multipolar structure in recent years offered Turkey with an opportunity to show interest in the Latin American countries such as Venezuela. In this way, Turkey's changing status as a rising middle power with significant material capacity and soft power elements provided Turkey to act independently from US in foreign policy making and enabled Turkey to develop its relations with countries like Russia, Iran and even Venezuela. Having established close ties with the socialist Maduro regime, Washington's long-known enemy, the Turkish government has recently been making efforts to increase its international influence against US. In this regard, Turkey's desire to strengthen its relations with Venezuela clearly conveys a message to the United States that shows Turkey is an independent actor that takes place in the international arena (Shapiro, 2017). However, Turkey's interest in Venezuela may be seen as a leverage against the United States which could increase Turkey's impact on other global issues that they have diverse interests with each other. Thus, Turkey and Venezuela are regarded as one of the members of the alliance formed by authoritarian states including Russia, China and Iran to challenge the West. (Wilks, 2019). On the other hand, establishing close relations with Venezuela facilitates Turkey both to increase its economic power and to obtain commercial advantages. In this context, Turkey's growing interest in Venezuela is also seen as a condition resulting from Turkey's desire to minimize its external dependence on energy sources such as natural gas and oil and to generate alternatives, it is not the result of anti-Americanism. In other words, the cooperation between the two countries should not be interpreted as a strengthening of the front against the USA and it should be considered that the first priority of the bilateral relations is the economy (Şimşek and Hayatsever, 2017).

The Challenges and Limitations of Turkey-Venezuela Partnership

Mainly within its Latin American politics, Turkey has begun to establish close relations with Venezuela. However, Turkey's newfound alliance with Venezuela has serious and big challenges and limitations. The solidarity between the two countries naturally strains Turkey's relationship with the United States. Specially, gold trade between Turkey and Venezuela has been a source of concern for Washington because of the nontransparency of the deals and the benefits they generate. As the U.S. special representative for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, expressed, "Whether it's gold or anything else of value, we inquire, and we ask the Turkish government to stop it We have not had the cooperation from Turkey that we want. Turkey is undermining its own position, not only in Venezuela but all of Latin America; . . . it is a cost for Turkey." (Financial Times, 2019, 28 March). Turkish and Venezuelan official data give no perceptible information about the destination of Venezuelan gold after it arrives in Turkey (Öner, 2020: 21).

Despite Ankara has assured Washington that all of trade between Turkey and Venezuela is pursuant to international law, American government officials visited Turkey in 2018 and expressed their suspicions that some of the gold exported to Turkey may have wound up in the hands of Iran, which would violate US sanctions (Lowen, 2019). In addition, the lack of transparency regarding increasing trade links of Turkey and Venezuela have also led to questions about possible doubtful personal enrichment and massive corruption. The United States has recently imposed sanctions on the companies involved in opaque financial deals between the two countries. In July 2019, the U.S. Treasury placed sanctions Istanbul-based Mulberry Proje Yatırım for its alleged involvement in corruption networks (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2019). Despite Ankara's public defiance of Washington's sanctions and pressure (Anadolu Agency, 2019, 10 August), the companies in Turkey are undeniably highly sensitive to the U.S. sanctions toward their country. This was clearly seen in the decision of one of Turkey's largest state-owned banks, Ziraat Bank, in August 2019. Ziraat Bank made a decision to cease offering servicing to the Central Bank of Venezuela after the US government issued an executive

order allowing the Treasury Department to impose sanctions on foreign nationals and companies that do business with the Maduro administration (Laya and Koc, 2019).

Turkey and Venezuela have formed an unconventional partnership based on cooperation in many areas. However, Turkey's political and economic prominence to Venezuela is small when compared with that of Russia and China. Besides, the relationship between the two governments is not profoundly institutional, but it is mainly due to the close personal ties between the two countries' leaders. It is thought that Turkey and Venezuela are unlikely to turn this personal rapprochement into a broader alliance (Öner, 2020: 22).

Turkey's recent enthusiasm for Maduro is based on more pragmatic and less geopolitical interests than those of Russia and China, which have long sought to maintain economic and political influence in the United States. Thus, U.S. punitive measures that increase the cost of Turkey's relations with Venezuela may force Erdogan to reduce his support for Maduro. In a similar vein, Turkish companies will walk on eggshells about their financial interactions with Venezuelan entities. However, it would be wrong to esteem that bilateral political relations will experience a sudden break in the foreseeable future. This was apparent in the Turkish government's press release in response to Ziraat Bank's decision to stop offering service to the Venezuela's Central Bank: "The decisions taken by the private sector and institutions, especially due to the comprehensive unilateral sanctions imposed on Venezuela by the U.S., are independent from the official bilateral relations between Turkey and Venezuela. Turkey's principled position towards Venezuela has not changed." (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019, 19 August).

How durable the rapprochement between the two countries will be is questionable. Erdoğan seems to adopt a conjunctural and pragmatic policy—with a potential for deepening but also restrictions. On the other hand, the Maduro government also seems to be aware of Turkey's limited capacity to provide significant economic support at a time when Turkey's has financial problems.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to analyze Turkey's recent active foreign policy towards Venezuela which has participated in trans-regional cooperation in the 21st century, with its central role in the fields of economy, energy, and ideology.

First, Turkey's increasing prestige in the last decades in a changing international system has enabled Turkey to develop an interest in a distant Latin American country like Venezuela. In addition, the deteriorating relations of Turkey's with the United States opened the way for the Turkish government's accelerated foreign policy activism in Venezuela.

Considering Turkey's economic interests, Venezuela seems to be a beneficial partner based on its rich resources while it has not constituted a crucial trade partner for Turkey in the last years. The gold imports of Turkey from Venezuela have a great significance here as trade volume in 2018 increased to approximately one billion U.S. dollars, a number that is expected to multiply in the coming period. Without giving attention to the opposition of Turkey's allies, the atmosphere of negotiation was shaped by the economic cooperation between Ankara and Caracas.

The paper also puts emphasis on the similarities in ideologies and experiences of two leaders. From this viewpoint, the rapprochement between Turkey and Venezuela might be indicating a tendency in Turkish Foreign Policy to form new alliances with like-minded leaders pursuant to Erdoğan's anti-Western discourse. For Turkish side, the analysis is carried out by the assumption that Turkey has managed to increase its presence and influence in Venezuela based on the changes in Turkish foreign policy known as multi-dimensional policy. On the other hand, it is crucial for Venezuela to make economic cooperation with Turkey in order to reduce the negative effects of the

continuous economic crisis. The supply of Turkish food products contributes to decrease a food shortage, as purchases of Venezuelan gold by Ankara help to renewal of the Venezuelan budget with currency assets.

The future of close relations with Venezuela, which developed somewhat surprisingly, depends on Maduro's political future rather than Turkey's willingness. Today, the success and future of Turkey-Venezuela relations are directly related to whether multidimensional cooperation in the fields of technology, energy, trade, education and security can be carried out in a coordinated, healthy and common vision. In this sense, Ankara may seriously consider appointing a special representative for its relations with Venezuela, as the experience of Somalia shows.

Turkey and Venezuela need to go a step further and deepen the political dimension in their relations, that means mutual interactions related to both security and directly political issues. In this respect, Turkey can make useful contributions to Venezuela in at least two issues. Efforts to overcome the internal political crisis in Venezuela, and especially to find common ground with the opposition, have not been successful over the last three years. Although the Vatican was involved in the process on several occasions, it could not achieve any meaningful results. Former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Zapatero, on the other hand, continues to make various initiatives between the opposition and the government, together with some former heads of state from the continent. The reason why these efforts made so far have not been successful is the absence of a serious actor that could have an impact on Maduro. In this sense, in the light of its past mediation experiences, Turkey can contribute to the internal peace of Venezuela by considering the special relationship established with Maduro. It should be considered that Ankara's reasonable relationship with the Venezuelan opposition, most of which lives in the United States, can contribute to the resolution of the economic and political crisis in Venezuela.

Similarly, Turkey's mediation role can be expanded with the participation of the countries of the region. Venezuela-Colombia relations have a key priority in this sense. Considering that Turkey has very good relations with both countries, this situation can be taken seriously. Ankara's efforts towards both internal peace in Venezuela and peace in the region will likely deepen Turkey's political role in Latin America, and Turkey will show a highly successful foreign policy example. In this regard, Turkey may also consider acting together with actors such as India and Russia. If Turkey wants to use its special relations with Venezuela in a way that will contribute to global peace and benefit the Venezuelan people, any mediation attempt by Ankara can be the only obstacle to the Venezuelan crisis to turn a systemic crisis.

Having discussed the underlying elements of the unexpected partnership between Turkey and Venezuela in the last couple of years, it can be stated that material power concerns and ideational factors offer significant insights for this rapprochement. However, from a broader perspective, it is worth investigating whether the non-institutionalized and personalized character of the ties between the two governments will lead to an adverse change in Venezuela-Turkey relations at any time.

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