

## Book recommendation by Viktor Marsai

**Nikolett Pénczváltó: *Turkey's Russian roulette*. MCC Press, Budapest, 2022.**

It is always a thankless task to write about the foreign policy relations of individual countries, though at first glance, it would seem that nothing could be more straightforward: simply examine the agreements, foreign trade balances and summits, as well as certain strategic documents (if they are in the public domain), and one's work is surely almost done. Or is it?

Perhaps the most important realisation of the past decade is that we do not understand the motivations and interests of non-Western powers – often even if they are our direct allies in NATO, for example, and possess as rich a history, spanning continents, civilizations, and the frontiers between cultures, as Turkey does. Not to speak of the added complication if we factor in its relations with the other “sick man” of Europe, Russia.

Nevertheless, Nikolett Pénczváltó painstakingly examines the nature of the relationship between these two powers of outstanding importance from the point of view of Europe – namely by presenting the overall Turkish framework by which to interpret Moscow–Ankara relations. The historical experiences that fundamentally define Turkey's attitude to the outside world might be termed *Tanzimat* and *Sèvres syndromes*, in reference to moments in Turkish history when it felt both undermined and betrayed, dragged into a vortex of Western modernization and political ideas, its territorial integrity challenged, generating traumas that to this day continue to define Turkish thinking – or, as the author puts it, the country's strategic culture.

The role of Russia is particularly interesting in this context. The rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow in recent years is interpreted by many in the context of the new great power competition, placing it in the context of a kind of anti-Western ideological alliance. In this account, what is occurring is nothing more than two Eastern European powers dissatisfied with the hegemony of the United States and its allies joining forces to strengthen their global and regional positions.

Pénczváltó points out, however, that Russian–Turkish relations are essentially pragmatic in character. Ankara needs Russian energy carriers and tourists for its economy. At the same time, when it comes to certain regional conflicts, such

as the Syrian crisis, coordination between the parties is also useful in order to avoid escalation and harm to interests. At the same time, it also appears that Turkey does not shy away from confrontation if it sees it as being in its interests, though this sometimes comes at a price, as was shown in connection with the SU-24 incident. What is more, the two states have supported opposing sides in a surprisingly consistent manner in Libya, Syria, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – and even in Ukraine, where Turkey rejects Russian territorial claims. Given all this, it is particularly notable that around 2016, after a period in which Ankara was relatively isolated – at least in the Middle East region – it was Moscow that enabled its return to the negotiating table and facilitated the resumption of the policy of “zero conflict with neighbours” – though the results achieved so far have been rather modest.

The author discusses in detail the anti-Western, primarily anti-American, attitude of Turkey’s political leadership and public opinion. At the same time, she also clearly points out that it is precisely the Western protective umbrella that enables this: Historically, for Turkey, the primary threat is not the United States or France, but Russia, with which it has fought numerous wars in recent centuries. As such, it is precisely the collective defence provided by NATO that allows Ankara to take measured risks and confront Moscow on certain matters, knowing that its allies will stand by it – as happened after the Russian fighter bomber was shot down in 2015. Moreover, from the other side, Turkey’s allies recognise its influence and interests in the Middle East, giving NATO additional influence in the region. It is no coincidence that, in the spirit of this reciprocity, neither party ever actually considers breaking up – even when it comes to such heated matters as Turkey’s acquisition of Russian S-400 air defence missile systems, or the suspension of Turkish participation in the F-35 program.

At the same time, reading Pénczváltó’s book, it is also apparent that the West has a lot to learn about how to deal with Turkey. It could, for instance, show less arrogance and more understanding towards Ankara’s suspicions of Kurdish minorities at home and abroad. At the same time, the present Turkish leadership ought to make it clear that it has more important interests beyond regime security and survival – maintaining the country’s well-being and prosperity, for example.

This volume, divided into six large chapters, is written in an extremely readable style. The author guides us with a sure hand through the history of Turkish–Russian relations up to the present day, extending this in the fifth chapter to the role of the United States in the development of the relationship between the parties, with

particular regard to the acquisition of the S-400 system and the F-35 program. Illustrations, maps and graphs aid comprehension of the text. Perhaps one minor criticism of the volume could be formulated here: namely that deciphering the colour codes of the black and white graphs is not always easy, and printing the book in colour would have made them clearer.

All in all, it can be said this work fills a crucial gap, helping readers understand the competing and converging interests that shape the relationship between Ankara and Moscow, including both its potential and the clear boundaries limiting cooperation. That is why we hope that the volume will soon be read not only in Hungarian, but also in English.