

CONSTRUCTIVIST ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY TÜRKIYE-EU RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Abstract

Contemporary Türkiye is one of the greatest powers on the international stage. It has significant influence over the Black Sea region - It is considered to be the number one military force in the area. In addition, it is a key member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which increases its role in the global context.

The Russia-Ukraine war that began in February 2022 poses a major threat to the Black Sea Region and, consequently, also represents a threat to Türkiye as a regional leader. Within the framework of this war, Türkiye positions itself as a kind of a mediator between Russia and Ukraine. Its foreign policy is ambivalent - it actively supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, but at the same time, it continues its economic and political cooperation with Russia.

The above-mentioned political decisions of Türkiye often become subject to criticism in the West. On the one hand, the European Union actively calls on Türkiye to join the economic sanctions imposed against Russia and expresses dissatisfaction with Türkiye's stance toward Russia, but on the other hand, the Russia-Ukraine war revealed the scale of the threat posed by Russia, its implications for the European continent, and at the same time - Türkiye's role in managing the conflict.

The history of the European Union and Türkiye dates back to multiple decades, during which it has undergone many changes. The theory of Constructivism of International Relations allows us to analyze these changes in detail. According to Constructivism, the self-identity of states plays a large role in the conduct of their foreign policy. Türkiye's self-identity is primarily connected to the Black Sea region. For Türkiye, the loss of regional leadership would entail not only political but also existential threats. On the other hand, the war also presents great risks for the European Union and its collective identity. The Russia-Ukraine war allowed us to view EU-Türkiye relations from a different perspective. It demonstrates that modern states and institutions make political decisions primarily on the basis of their self-identity and their sociological perceptions of other states.

Key words: Türkiye, European Union, Russia-Ukraine war, Constructivist theory

Introduction

Contemporary Türkiye is one of the most important and interesting actors in both regional and global contexts. Its significance is firstly determined by its geopolitical location - it represents a kind of bridge between the East and the West. In addition, it holds an important strategic position in the Black Sea region, where it

enjoys considerable influence defined by various treaties and agreements. It is also noteworthy that Türkiye is significant in terms of its military armament - it represents the number one power in the region, while globally it ranks eighth (Warpower: Türkiye 2025), which creates a strong foundation for it to be perceived as one of the most important countries on the modern international stage.

Considering all the above-mentioned factors, it can be said that Türkiye is one of the most valuable states for the West. The region where Türkiye is located and in which it holds a leading position is of vital importance for the European Union, as it unites all the actors that play an important role in the contemporary political sphere. The events that have taken place in recent years have shown even more clearly the global significance of this region and, in particular, Türkiye's role in maintaining regional security and stability.

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began in February 2022, is one of the most significant events of the modern political sphere. It has shaken the international system entirely and has become the cause of numerous changes in the world order. This war is especially important for Türkiye, as it is taking place in its immediate neighborhood and involves states with which Türkiye has many historical, political, and other kinds of connections. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, it has become even clearer how Türkiye operates and what its main goals and values are. It pursues an ambivalent policy, assumes the role of a mediator, and maintains relations with Russia, Ukraine, and the West, which often leads to differences of opinion and criticism on the international scale.

The Change in EU-Türkiye Relations and Its Causes

EU-Türkiye relations originate from a time when the European Union, in the form we know it today, did not even exist. Therefore, to explain the interdependence of these two actors, the theory of Constructivism of International Relations is of great help. The European Union was created around the common interests of the states of the European continent - the historical context that preceded its establishment played a significant role in the formation of a common European identity. This identity was a direct result of collective trauma, which gave rise to a sense of collective insecurity. This, in turn, shaped a common European identity. Thanks to this identity, a unified system - the European Union - was created and its main goal remains the preservation of unity and stability.

In one of the foundational works of constructivist theory by Alexander Wendt, we read that states define their self-identity in relation to other states. (Wendt 1992:397-398) They assign significance to events and actors based on their own identity and perception. (Wendt 1992:397-398) Since the time of the Soviet Union, present-day Russia (and previously the USSR itself) has represented one of the greatest threats to European security. It was precisely for the purpose of balancing the Soviet Union that many of the European international organizations we know today were created. This fact has never been erased from Europe's collective memory. Even when the EU's responses to Russia were weak and limited to diplomatic attempts, the EU feared Russia - its approach was simply more restrained than it is today, after 2022.

Türkiye's attitude toward Russia does not differ much from that of the EU, despite the fact that contemporary Turkish foreign policy actions show something else on the surface. The point is that defining Türkiye's attitude toward Russia only by its current economic and strategic decisions represents merely the surface level of foreign policy and international relations. This issue is very complex, and to understand it we must go deeper. Türkiye harbors distrust toward Russia, which, similar to the EU, is conditioned by its collective memory. (Gaber 2023) Türkiye's distancing from Russia in the last century was already driven by Russia's growing interest in the Black Sea region and the Turkish Straits. Russia is a very powerful actor in the Black Sea region. Nevertheless, Türkiye, with its strength and influence, surpasses Russia and maintains its role as the central state in the Black

Sea region and as the main restraining force against Russian expansionism. (Gaber, Lewis and Herd, 2023)

Türkiye has always been individualistic. It has always made its decisions autonomously, based on its own interests. A clear example of this is 2006, when the EU blocked eight chapters of negotiations with Türkiye because of its refusal to recognize Cyprus. Instead of taking into account the EU's criticism and taking steps to resolve this issue, Türkiye's entire attitude toward the EU changed. Anti-European sentiment grew both in the government and among the population. (Goff-Taylor 2017:6-7) In addition, one of the biggest obstacles to Türkiye's path of European integration remains its relationship with Greece. Nevertheless, Türkiye continues to display its principle-driven approach. It will never make a political decision that contradicts its own interests, even if such a decision would be welcomed by the West. Türkiye has always prioritized its principles and its Turkish identity. This remains true today. The growing Russian influence poses a danger to Türkiye's identity and its future prospects.

The above-mentioned information about Turkish and European identity and the analysis of their changing nature allow us to conclude that, according to constructivist theory, the main defining factor of EU-Türkiye relations is the socially constructed self-identity of these two actors and the roles they have assigned themselves. Türkiye still does not meet the standards required for EU membership - in other words, it does not share the common European identity. It has a firmly Turkish identity. This identity has always been strong and plays a decisive role in the conduct of its foreign affairs. Nevertheless, the EU maintains a, albeit distant, but still very significant relations with Türkiye. It recognizes that Türkiye's role in maintaining its own security and stability is of vital importance. The Russia-Ukraine war has made this type of relationship between the EU and Türkiye even clearer. Today, given Türkiye's internal political scandals and its unconventional, though characteristic, foreign policy, it is evident that its number one priority at this stage is not EU membership but the preservation of its role and position in order to safeguard its Turkish identity.

At last, it can be said that, according to the Constructivist theory of International Relations, contemporary EU-Türkiye relations in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war are complex and based on the deep and interrelated factors that have shaped the existing identity of each actor over years and decades. The construction of state identity takes place socially and through a historical process that spans years and centuries. These identities are the main driving core of international relations. The international system can be imagined as one large space where every state is a player, and each has its own role. Based on this role, every state chooses its allies and enemies and makes decisions that correspond to its self-defined identity and the interests it has constructed.

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