

# In the shadow of Ukraine – a weekly news review

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With all eyes on major and fast-moving developments in Ukraine, this is not an easy time to write a news review. Even long-experienced watchers of Eastern Europe seem uncertain what to say, as their predictions fall like ninepins. But without attempting to guess what will happen next, we can reflect on the importance of this latest imperialist disaster.

Events in Ukraine are exposing, yet again, the depths of international hypocrisy, and the powerful imperialist forces that drive world politics. Whatever happens will have widespread impacts on economic and political balances and on power struggles, both between and within many countries. This includes Turkey's relationships with NATO and with Russia; imperial

competition in other countries, such as Syria and Iraq; and the ability of leaders such as Erdoğan to use foreign adventures to distract from woes at home.

Russia's imperialist invasion has to be condemned, but, as has been pointed out many times, Western politicians and media show very different responses to interference in and invasion of another state depending on whether this is done by a NATO power or by one of NATO's enemies. The United States, which is leading the charge against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is probably responsible for more interventions and invasions than any other country. Turkey has underlined its NATO credentials with an official foreign ministry statement that reads, "Believing in the necessity to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of countries, Türkiye is against changing of borders by use of arms." Except, of course, when it is themselves doing the invading. The United States has also facilitated Turkey's invasions of the Kurdish regions of both Syria and Iraq.

On the Russian side, Russia's demands for the "independence" of Ukraine's eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk – demands that have been supported by Damascus – contrast with their refusal to countenance the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria on the grounds that their vision of local autonomy is "separatist".

Behind all the talk, is the old struggle for global hegemony, now set free from any ideological struggle against "communism". (Putin has even blamed Lenin for Ukraine's independence.) After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States used their position as the only superpower to further consolidate their dominance. NATO's *raison d'être* disappeared with the end of the Cold War, but it continued as the prime vehicle for bringing further countries into the American orbit. Russia found themselves surrounded by hostile NATO bases, and it looked as though Ukraine would add to that number. Putin made it clear that, for Russia, Ukrainian NATO membership would be a red line. If a NATO member is attacked, other NATO members must come to their defence. The US has supplied Ukraine with weapons, but, along with other NATO members, they have made it clear that Ukraine cannot turn to them for military support, and it has been argued that NATO membership was never seriously on the

cards. So, all that NATO has succeeded in doing is antagonising Russia, who have now called their bluff. It is unclear how far Putin intends to go, but he seems determined to use the opportunity to take control of the whole of Donetsk and Luhansk, to destroy Ukraine's defence forces, and to bring down the Ukrainian government. Putin has given his own justifying myths, but one doesn't have to believe claims that he is trying to recreate the Soviet Empire to understand his actions as the politics of imperialism. We are witnessing a ruthless power game in which Russia has, so far, outwitted their NATO opponents. As the violence grows, one thing is certain: despite all the rhetoric about rights and freedoms, the politicians have given little thought to the well-being of the ordinary people of Ukraine or of Russia.

Turkey's own strategies for increasing foreign influence ensure that they are caught up in these power struggles, in which they will find it increasingly difficult to maintain their tactic of playing NATO and Russia off against each other. Erdoğan has developed a close relationship with Ukraine's President Zelensky at the same time as finding common cause with Russia in sabotaging the hopes of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Turkey has strong economic relations with both sides in the conflict, including getting 40% of their gas from Russia, which has the power to inflict serious economic damage; and they have arms deals with both sides, too. Turkey antagonised the US and NATO by buying Russia's S-400 air-defence missiles; and they sold their Turkish drones to Ukraine, which had used one against Moscow-backed separatists in Donetsk. Recently, Turkey made a deal to coproduce drones in Ukraine and to buy Ukrainian engines for drone manufacture, which would have helped them get round US sanctions imposed after they bought the Russian missiles. On the unlikely basis of these arms deals, Erdoğan attempted, unsuccessfully, to boost his importance without coming down decisively for one side or the other, by offering his services as a peace broker. Turkey has publicly criticised the Russian invasion, which could damage their relationship with Putin. Erdoğan has pulled up both NATO and the EU for not taking a more "determined" stance, but Turkey has said nothing about implementing sanctions themselves.

Following Russia's attack, Ukraine asked Turkey, as gatekeeper to the Black Sea, to use the 1936 Treaty of Montreux to close the Dardanelles and

Bosporus to Russian shipping. The treaty, which gives Turkey both power and prestige, generally allows access for states that border the Black Sea – which include both Russia and the Ukraine. Opinions as to the options open to Turkey seemed to vary. The Treaty stipulates that “Vessels of war belonging to belligerent Powers shall not... pass through the Straits”; but adds that “vessels of war belonging to belligerent Powers, ... which have become separated from their bases, may return thereto.” Turkey has quoted this latter phrase to claim that it does not have the power to act. Naval News has pointed out that, with several Russian ships already in the Black Sea, this would, anyway, be a case of closing the stable door after the horse had bolted.

The shifting of the world order that is taking place will have repercussions for other areas of imperial conflict, especially Syria – where the Assad regime is backed by Russian imperialism, and NATO allies America and Turkey are effectively in conflict with each other – and Iraq – where America is under pressure to leave entirely.

Economic consequences of both the war itself and of resulting sanctions and boycotts could be huge, especially at a time of widespread economic crisis and rising energy prices. In Turkey, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the main opposition Republican Peoples’ Party, has criticised the Turkish government for allowing the economy to be dominated by Russia: “Since 2019 I’ve been warning the AKP government. You can’t make the economy of a country so dependent on one other country. We have come to a point where we will be devastated when they don’t send tourists. We will be devastated when they don’t deliver natural gas.”

Economic difficulties impact on support for the government in power. Governments, such as the government of Turkey, which attempt to use an expansionist foreign policy to distract from difficulties at home, are under extra pressure if that foreign policy does not bring the hoped-for results.

The invasion of Ukraine sets a dangerous example of the use of force and of the world’s impotence when it comes to stopping that force; and it provides a distraction from other urgent issues. Indeed there will be a temptation for

governments to carry out other questionable actions while the world is preoccupied with Ukraine.

On Monday, speakers of minority languages across the world celebrated International Mother Language Day, and Northeast Syria celebrated the achievements of its schools and universities in reviving mother-tongue education for the peoples of the region. But Ukraine provides a warning of how language rights can be exploited by ethnic nationalists. Historically, the use of Ukrainian has varied between east and west, urban and rural, and with the changing policies of dominant imperial powers. In the Soviet era, its fortunes varied, with the 1970s and 80s being a period of Russification, encouraged by both political and economic pressures. When asked to name their mother tongue, two thirds of the population state Ukrainian, while almost 30% state Russian, but this may not give a good indication of actual use, where people swap from one language to another in the same conversation. Independent Ukraine has, understandably, promoted the use of the Ukrainian language, but they have also raised concerns by bringing in rules that could penalise Russian speakers: concerns that Russia has been quick to exploit. A language law, which was rushed through before the installation of the current president in 2019, insists on print media producing equivalent Ukrainian texts and news websites also producing and prioritising a Ukrainian version of their stories. Restricting the use of language is a long-established method of control, of which Kurds are only too aware, but, as on other occasions when powerful voices appear to stand up for the oppressed, we need to be wary of underlying political motivations, and avoid making lazy parallels.

## **IRAN**

One of the places where language use is most restricted is Iran. To mark Mother Language Day, Washington Kurdish Institute put out a video about Zara Muhammadi, who recently began a five-year prison sentence for giving Kurdish lessons. Zara and her comrades used to travel round towns and villages educating people about their Kurdish language and literature, and also about their basic rights; and she helped survivors of natural disasters when the government was doing nothing. She has received huge support from

teachers and others within Iran and from people across the globe, but, before she disappeared into prison, she asked for even greater support to be given to the many other Kurdish activists that no-one hears about. The video reminds us that hundreds of Kurdish activists are arrested in Iran every year, with many held in prison without trial and some facing execution; and that these people are not mentioned when the United States negotiates with Iran.

The bravery of protestors in the face of Iranian oppression never ceases. This week, teachers were on the streets in hundreds of Iranian towns chanting "Enough tyranny! Our dining tables are empty!" "The country has turned into a den of thieves! Sanctions are only excuses!" Statistics show rising poverty and cutbacks in the consumption of basic foods, and there have also been protests for better pay by firefighters and civil servants.

It is already difficult to know what is happening in Iran, but, last week, an Iranian parliamentary committee moved the country a step further from international communication, and closer to an effective ban on using the international internet. The proposed law still faces resistance in the wider parliament, where concerns have been raised not only about the loss of rights and privacy, but also the impact it would have on businesses.

## **SYRIA**

While news pundits across the world try and dissect Russia's statements on Ukraine, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has to work out how to respond to Russian statements about the future of their country. Specifically, they must respond to Russian talk of participation of "representatives of the Kurds" in Syria's "constitutional reform process", which are being made at the same time as the Damascus government continues to accuse Northeast Syria of "separatism". Writer and journalist, Hussein Omar, claimed to Hawar News that the Russian statements were designed as a threat to Turkey that if Turkey supports Ukraine against Russia, Russia will support the Kurds. He pointed out that Russia has already allowed Turkey a lot of leeway in an attempt to wean Turkey from NATO. Omar also understands the reference to Kurdish representatives as a bid to delink

Kurdish representation from the multi-ethnic Autonomous Administration and force these representatives to try and join up with hostile Kurdish groups. This would all be part of a general policy of destabilising the Autonomous Administration.

In another reminder of the rule of terror promoted by Turkish occupation, the Human Rights Organisation Afrin-Syria has reported that since the start of the year ten civilians have been murdered in Afrin and 96 abducted. Also, nine houses have been destroyed and 5,000 olive trees cut down. Even the 67-year-old imam of the Great Mosque is not safe. A week ago, he was detained by the Turkish intelligence services (MIT).

Meanwhile, the United States announced yesterday that they will be lifting sanctions from the parts of Syria not controlled by Damascus, allowing them to trade with foreign entities – though this won't include trade in oil. This raises the questions of why Northeast Syria was ever sanctioned, why the US is now lumping Northeast Syria together with the terror regimes operating in the Turkish occupied areas, and what, other than widespread poverty, such sanctions achieve.

## **TURKEY**

Turkey has passed another milestone on the route to totalitarianism, with the judgement of the Constitutional Court that both arrests and convictions can be based on anonymous witness statements. The use of anonymous witnesses is generally deemed detrimental to a fair trial, as a defendant should be able to face their accuser, and also needs to know who their accuser is if they are to have an opportunity to question their integrity. Anonymous witness statements have been central to political trials in Turkey since the late 2000s, but, in 2020, in examining the case of a Kurdish MP convicted on "terrorism" charges, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that they should not be relied on without additional evidence. As Bianet reports, reliance only on anonymous witness statements is also against the law setting out their use that was passed by the Turkish parliament.

Ukraine has left little room for further discussion, so other events can get only the briefest of mentions.

An Istanbul Appeals Court upheld the 3½ year sentence given to Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, for "insulting the president". The European Union's Rapporteur on Turkey, Nacho Sánchez Amor, attended the latest phase of Osman Kavala's trial and witnessed, in his own words, "the umpteenth legal trick in this mockery of due process". A delegation from the HDP met in Brussels with Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Relations and Security Policies. An ISIS fighter, captured by the Syrian Defence Forces as he tried to cross into Turkey, told his captors that he was on his way to Urfa or Gaziantep where there are special hospitals for treating ISIS wounded. The government-imposed Governor of Van is organising propaganda visits by teachers to pupils' families on behalf of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). And three Kurdish students were taken to hospital after a racist mob attack in Akdeniz University in Antalya

## IRAQ

In Iraq, Turkey has been carrying out intensive airstrikes in its unreported war in the northern mountains. The biggest strikes took place last Saturday – the day after the Kurdistan Regional Government's Prime Minister and President, Masrour and Nechirvan Barzani, met with the Turkish defence Minister in Germany. Tuesday saw the opening of seven mass graves from the 2014 Yazidi genocide, allowing the bodies to be identified and properly reburied. The same day, Iraq's Supreme Court, which has recently been accused of politicised judgements, ruled that the quota system that had been used to elect Yazidi representatives to parliament was unconstitutional. And, on a slightly more positive note, five journalists and activists, whose imprisonment by the Kurdistan Regional Government has been widely condemned by human rights activists, have had their sentences reduced, though not cancelled; while the two prisoners on death row whose hunger strike I noted last week have had their demands for better treatment accepted.



By the time I write next week, the world may be a somewhat different place. Meanwhile, wherever we are, we can only struggle against the forces that would reduce human society to an imperialist power game.