

If Türkiye were in the EU, Putin might not have attacked, says a Turkish diplomat

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"One of the reasons why Russia or Putin started this aggression so easily is the failure of NATO and the EU and the cracks in transatlantic relations," Deputy Turkish Foreign Minister Faruk Kaymakci said in an interview for Seznam Zpravy.

"Türkiye could take on the role of mediator of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine thanks to the good relations it maintains with both countries even after the invasion," Turkish diplomat Faruk Kaymakci told Seznam Zpravy. He said that, If Türkiye had been a member of the European Union for 10 or 15 years, it would have been harder for Putin to launch an attack on Ukraine.

Despite the escalation of the war, Kaymakci is convinced that negotiations could end in a peace agreement. According to him, Türkiye also sees an opportunity to revitalize relations with the EU in the current situation.

Faruk Kaymakci

- *He is the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, H. E. Mr. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, and head for EU relations.*
- *He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1994 at the Directorate for the Balkan States, followed by political planning and since 2008 relations with the EU.*

- *Before that, he worked at the Turkish Embassy in Tripoli, Libya, and at the NATO Office of the High Civilian Representative in Kabul, Afghanistan.*
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What is the main reason why Türkiye has become a host for talks between Russia and Ukraine?

We have important relations with Russia, we have dealt with the crisis in both Syria and Libya together. In addition, Russia is an important economic partner for us, mutual trade now has a volume of around \$40 billion and millions of Russian tourists travel to Türkiye every year. Our cooperation in the Black Sea is also successful.

But we also have very good relations with Ukraine. This again applies to trade and tourism, for example, we import cereals and food oil from Ukraine, and recently we have also signed a free trade agreement with Ukraine, so we have really good relations with Ukraine.

Has anything changed for you in your relations with Russia since the invasion?

Türkiye cannot approve of the invasion of the sovereign state of Ukraine. That's why we condemned the invasion. Likewise, under Article 9 of the Montreux Convention, we basically did not allow military vessels to enter the Black Sea through straits.

In general, however, I would say that our relations with both countries are good even after the Russian invasion. Both countries trust Türkiye and its role as host of the talks.

We are doing everything we can to bring the positions of both countries closer together and lead them to declare a ceasefire and, hopefully, a peace agreement. It was only thanks to the trust of both states that a meeting of foreign ministers could take place, who had not been able to arrange a meeting for the last two years. There has also been a technical negotiation in Istanbul, and I can say that this has brought significant progress in negotiations on key points.

We now expect foreign ministers and, hopefully, presidents to confirm agreement on these points. And then the negotiations on the status of Crimea and Donbas could start.

A few days ago, the Ukrainian side announced that the negotiations had progressed well enough to bring the presidents together. If they were to meet, it should take place in Türkiye again. How likely is such a meeting?

President Erdogan spoke to both heads of state on the phone repeatedly, we offered them assistance in arranging the meeting and showed willingness to host the meeting. It's one of the possible scenarios. But the important thing is to get their positions close enough. Where they meet does not really matter, but I think Türkiye is already doing a lot for peace in Europe. The main peacemaker in Europe should be the EU, but at the moment Türkiye is the most active country in Europe in this regard.

Do you think that your current situation could lead to an improvement in Türkiye's relations with the EU?

Yes. Several very important elements are now coming to the fore. With the outbreak of war, we understood Türkiye's role in ensuring peace and stability in Europe, but not only that, but also overall security and defense.

I think that if Türkiye had become a member of the EU 10 or 15 years ago, it would have been harder for Russia to launch such an attack on Ukraine. One of the reasons why Putin attacked is because of the weakness of the EU and the division of NATO and the transatlantic family.

Moreover, it is the marginalization and isolation of Türkiye by the European Union that has created a vacuum in Europe due to its delayed admission process. Brexit also contributed to this, and Europe simply did not show that it was strong. In my opinion, this is one of the important reasons why Putin started this aggression with such ease. Türkiye's role in Europe's security and defense is, therefore, in my opinion, much clearer now than it was, let us say, a few months ago.

What are the other important elements?

The second important problem is energy security. We have the Southern Gas Corridor, which is one of the four main sources of energy for Europe. This corridor could be strengthened by more gas from Central Asia or the Eastern Mediterranean.

The attitude of Greece has made the Eastern Mediterranean an area of tension, but this has calmed down recently and we now have a good opportunity to start working on energy security. Perhaps we could have gas from Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon or Cyprus and link it to the southern corridor, which is already here and which is partly financed by the EU.

The third dimension is migration. Türkiye now hosts over 4.2 million people, of whom about 3.7 million are Syrians, and another 4.1 million Ukrainians have now fled to Europe, which I think makes Europe even more fragile in terms of dealing with migration. This is another area where Türkiye and the EU should work closely together. Another area is the supply chain, because it is now significantly weakened due to the war and even due to the pandemic.

The Turkish President welcomed the Israeli Head of State last week and they were just talking about energy. Is this part of Türkiye's stronger effort to get rid of its dependence on Russia?

We used to be 60% dependent on Russian gas, but now we are at 40% and we have a policy of diversifying our energy resources. We are doing well with oil, which we take only 10% from Russia. So this is our strategy.

More gas from Central Asia and Azerbaijan will be needed to diversify Europe's energy sources, we must also think about Iran, and of course Iraq, especially its southern part around Basra, has great potential.

In addition, it could also be easy to draw resources from the eastern Mediterranean that could be connected to the southern gas corridor. This could be the case with Israel, Egypt and the island of Cyprus, and this might not only benefit Türkiye, but also the rest of Europe.

What do you think this cooperation with the EU should look like, what does Türkiye expect from it?

I think we should revitalize relations. We already know that we can work together, for example in 1999, when Türkiye and Greece were hit by a severe earthquake. This was also demonstrated at the Helsinki summit, where Türkiye officially became a candidate country.

Relations then strengthened in 2016 during the migration crisis, when we reached an agreement on 18 March. But it wasn't just about migration. It also includes the revitalization of the EU admission process, the mediation of high-level talks on energy, the economy, the liberalization of the visa system, in which we have made some progress subsequently, but also cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

This is all important, and I believe that after this crisis, there will be a great opportunity to revitalize relations. For us, of course, the key is the admission to the EU, our intention is to be a full member who will contribute to the EU and at the same time benefit from membership.

Türkiye is a member of NATO, yet a recent poll of its public opinion revealed that 48% of people blame NATO and the US for the invasion, and only less than 34% blame Russia. How do you explain that?

I would be very careful with the survey results, it always depends on how you ask. At the same time, what I've already told you is true. One of the reasons why Russia, or Putin, started this aggression so easily, is the failure of NATO and the EU, and the cracks in transatlantic relations. This encouraged Putin to invade. The same applies to Türkiye's marginalization in the EU admission process. But the Turkish government condemns the Russian invasion, and neither does the Turkish public agree with it.

The Turkish Foreign Minister said that all Russians who enter legally are welcome in the country. What does this mean, could it include oligarchs who are on the sanctions lists of other countries?

We will, of course, follow the UN sanctions, we have also fully supported NATO's decisions and we are acting in accordance with the rules of these organizations. But Türkiye has a special position in this, because it is trying to help with the peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.

Another thing is that the sanctions imposed by EU countries have not been consulted with Türkiye. For this reason, Türkiye will be one of the countries most affected by this crisis, we cannot impose sanctions of all the parties that imposed them, we support UN and NATO sanctions, but each country has its own way to deal with this problem.

We have no fewer than 40 000 of our citizens in Russia, so we hope that a ceasefire and peace will be achieved as soon as possible and no further sanctions will be necessary. A crisis that would require their imposition would have no winner.

And why does the Secretary of State say the Russians are welcome here? Of course they are. Every year, 7.5 million tourists from Russia come to us, but also 2.5 million Ukrainians, all of whom are welcome. However, Türkiye will not allow sanctions to be avoided, we have no interest in creating conditions that would allow Russia to avoid sanctions.

From the very beginning, the Turkish drones Bayraktar became one of the great symbols of the war in Ukraine. How do you perceive that the Turkish invention has attracted such attention from all over the world?

The Turkish defense industry has made great progress lately, Bayraktar drones and other military equipment are at a very high level. Some countries, including Ukraine or Poland for example, have bought them and I think they are effective and capable of achieving their goals.

Can you imagine Türkiye sending more pieces to Ukraine? Ukraine has repeatedly asked for this.

We have been supporting Ukraine and our allies for some time. We are happy for military cooperation, but at the same time we must be vigilant about our role in the peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia.

There was also speculation that Türkiye might send Russian S-400 air defense systems, which would probably make Russia very angry, so I guess that's out of the question?

Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu made it clear that I think, this is out of the question. Türkiye has some form of cooperation with Russia, and we are a country that respects the agreements signed.

With the intensification of the war, peace seems more and more distant, how do you think it will turn out, do you maintain optimism?

As a diplomat, I am always optimistic about this. My country is doing everything it can to contribute to peace in Europe and, as I said, some progress has already been made.