

TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN VENEZUELA: WHAT FACTORS CAN EXPLAIN TURKEY'S SUDDEN AND ACCELERATED RAPPROCHEMENT WITH VENEZUELA IN THE LAST YEARS?

POLÍTICA EXTERIOR DE TURQUÍA EN VENEZUELA: ¿CUÁLES SON LOS FACTORES QUE PUEDEN EXPLICAR EL ACERCAMIENTO REPENTINO Y ACCELERADO DE TURQUÍA CON VENEZUELA EN LOS ÚLTIMOS AÑOS?

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, Venezuela has become one of the Latin America countries targeted by the new Turkish foreign policy towards previously overlooked regions. However, Turkey's interest in Venezuela mainly remained on paper until 2016 when their relations began to flourish at diplomatic, political, and economic levels. Since then, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has visited Turkey four times, whereas Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the first Turkish President to ever visit Venezuela. The Maduro and Erdoğan administrations have become firm supporters of each other in international politics. In addition, 2018 trade volume between both countries surpassed the total trade volume of the previous five years together. Using the IR theories of realism and constructivism, this paper discusses why Turkey suddenly began pursuing an active foreign policy towards Venezuela, a Latin American country that is historically, culturally, and geographically distant to Turkey and with which relations were formerly stagnant. It is concluded that the AKP government under Erdoğan has received both material benefits

RESUMEN

En las últimas décadas, Venezuela se ha convertido en uno de los países de América Latina objetivo de la nueva política exterior de Turquía, en regiones hasta entonces olvidadas. Sin embargo, el interés de Turquía en Venezuela se mantuvo principalmente en el papel. No fue hasta 2016 que las relaciones entre Venezuela y Turquía comenzaron a florecer en todos los niveles; diplomático, político y económico. Desde entonces, el presidente venezolano Nicolás Maduro realizó cuatro visitas a Turquía, mientras que Recep Tayyip Erdoğan se convirtió en el primer presidente turco en visitar Venezuela. Los gobiernos de Maduro y Erdoğan se han convertido en firmes partidarios uno del otro en la política internacional. Asimismo, en 2018 el volumen de comercio entre ambos países superó el total de la suma del volumen comercial de los cinco años anteriores. Haciendo uso de las teorías del realismo y el constructivismo de las Relaciones Internacionales, el artículo analiza por qué Turquía comenzó de pronto a aplicar una política exterior activa hacia Venezuela, un país latinoamericano que dista histórica, cultural y

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and ideological support from the flourishing relations with the Maduro government in the last couple of years.

Keywords: Turkish Foreign Policy, Latin America, Venezuela, international relations, strategic interest, Turkey, rapprochement, strategic opening, constructivism, realism.

geográficamente de Turquía y con el que las relaciones estaban estancadas. El artículo llega a la conclusión de que, en los últimos dos años, el gobierno del AKP de Erdoğan ha obtenido beneficios materiales y apoyo ideológico gracias a las pujantes relaciones con el gobierno de Maduro.

Palabras clave: Política exterior de Turquía, América Latina, Venezuela, relaciones internacionales, interés estratégico, Turquía, acercamiento, apertura estratégica, constructivismo, realismo.

Introduction

With the rise of the AKP government (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* Justice and Development Party) in the early 2000s, Turkey started to consolidate its proactive and multidimensional foreign policy, originally initiated by Turgut Özal in the 1990s. As an effort to catch the train of Western civilization (Ahiska, 2003, p. 352), Turkey, under the AKP Government, aimed to be on the front lines of history, not just waiting for commands to react but shaping the present together with other powers (Davutoğlu, 2013, p. 7). Whereas the neighboring Middle East became the center of attention of Turkey's multidimensional foreign policy in the last decade or more where it pursued the role of regional leader² (Tekin & Tekin 2015, p. 8), Africa, Asia, and Latin America started to fall within the scope of the new Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) (González-Levaggi, 2012; 2016a).

Latin America became one of the destinations in this opening towards regions of the world previously overlooked in TFP (Önsoy, 2017, pp. 247-254). Turkey's ties with the historically, geographically, and culturally distant Latin American region had been stagnant until 1990s. The first official visit to the region was by President Süleyman Demirel in April 1995. Following this diplomatic step of Turkey-Latin America relations, the "Action Plan for Latin America and the Caribbean" was established in 1998, which laid the groundwork for the Turkish opening towards the continent. The Action Plan was updated in 2006 and six countries were identified as key trading partners for Turkey: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela (González-Levaggi, 2012, p. 106). In February 2015, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited the region for the first time, becoming the second president of Turkey to ever visit Latin America.

As mentioned above, Venezuela is one of the six trade partners in Turkey's Latin America Action Plan, as well as one of the first Latin America countries with

2 For an overview of the Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East, see Altunışık & Martin 2011; Ayata 2014.

which Turkey established diplomatic relations (Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The beginning of the relations between Turkey and Venezuela – two countries separated by more than 10,000 kilometers – goes back to 1950³. Yet, for over 60 years of diplomatic ties, their relationship was mainly on paper. Even though trade relations somewhat increased in the 21st century, there was no significant change in the stagnant relationship between Turkey and Venezuela.

Arguably, it was not until 2016 that the Turkish-Venezuelan relations suddenly began to flourish. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro met for the first time in the World Energy Congress in October 2016 in Istanbul, only months after the failed military coup attempt in Turkey (Lowen, 2019). Following bilateral agreements reached on the sidelines of the energy conference (Koerner, 2016), in 2017 Turkish and Venezuelan governments signed another series of trade agreements ranging from agricultural exchanges to cooperation on military defense (Jaramillo, 2018). High level official visits between the governments also boosted since that date. Whereas President Maduro has visited Turkey four times since 2016, Turkish officials visited Venezuela many times in 2018. Diplomatic ties reached a climax with Erdoğan's recent visit to the Venezuelan capital in December 2018 after the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires (Oner, 2018). As part of his speech at the Turkey-Venezuela Business Forum, Erdoğan, the first Turkish president to visit the country, reaffirmed Turkey's interest in Venezuela with the following: “[t]here are solid ties in friendship and solidarity between our countries (...) We are making efforts to diversify and deepen cooperation with Venezuela in every field through win-win understanding” (Daily Sabah, 2018). As a result of the flourishing diplomatic relations since 2016, trade volume between both countries rose from US\$83 million in 2016 to US\$1.1 billion in 2018, making Venezuela Turkey's fourth biggest trade partner in Latin America after Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico⁴.

Erdoğan was also among the first leaders in the international arena to congratulate Maduro on his victory in the May 2018 Venezuelan elections, despite the elections being clearly characterized by the United States (U.S.) and the European Union (E.U.) as flawed, unfair, and illegitimate. Most recently, during the ongoing protests that started in mid-January 2019 in Venezuela as a result of the presidential crisis between Maduro and National Assembly president Juan Guaidó, the fervent support to the Latin American leader from Turkey – a mem-

3 For earlier relations between the Republic of Venezuela and the Ottoman Empire, as well as for a general overview of the history of the Latin America-Turkey relations, see Önsöy 2017.

4 See *Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu*/Turkish Statistical Institute for official numbers regarding trade volumes. Search for the Excel tables “Imports by countries, 1996-2018” and “Exports by countries: 1996-2018” at www.turkstat.gov.tr.

ber of the the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and G20— caught the attention of international politics. Turkish president called what happened in Caracas on January 24th a coup attempt and publicly supported Maduro, positioning Turkey as one of the few states in the world to do so (Daragahi, 2019). In the light of these developments, the question that arises, and the question of this paper, is: Taking into account the stagnant relationship between both states, what factors can explain Turkey's sudden and accelerated rapprochement with Venezuela in the last years?

Finally, it is important to note that there is currently no academic literature on the Turkish-Venezuelan relations. Although there is a new strand of literature that emerged in the last couple of years on the broader topic of the Turkish opening towards Latin America, academic research on the foregoing is also very limited since it is a relatively new and overlooked TFP area. Consequently, this paper suggests that analyzing the case of Venezuela and the abrupt change in relations from the Turkish perspective will not only contribute to the existing literature, but also be a good example to understand the overall prevailing characteristics of TFP in the recent years. Methodologically, the research question will be answered using realism and constructivism as the established International Relations (IR) theories frequently utilized by experts and scholars to explain the change in the Turkish Foreign Policy. The data analyzed is collected from newspaper articles, statistics, and other literature by experts and scholars.

The paper will be structured as follows: the first section presents two IR theories and their main assumptions. In the second and third sections, explanatory factors for the Turkish-Venezuelan rapprochement are discussed based on these theories. Finally, in the conclusion, the main arguments are summed up and the research question is answered.

- *Theoretical Framework*

Realism is the oldest and most established school of thought in International Relations that seeks to explain state behavior in international politics, while constructivism is a powerful alternative. The general perspectives of these theories are briefly summarized to explain foreign policy behavior and the research case study.

Realism (or neorealism) holds states as the primary actors in international politics and concentrates on the material interests of states as the main driving factor in their approach to others. According to realists, states are self-interested, rational, and competitive by nature. In a world where there is no overarching authority to ensure an order – i.e. state of anarchy – and where power

and wealth are not distributed equally among states, every state is a threat to the other. Therefore, states – large and small, powerful and weak – have to not only secure but maximize their own chance of survival, and the only way to achieve this is to increase power based on military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities. As rational actors that behave according to their materialistic power concerns, states always calculate costs and benefits and elaborate on the possible advantages of particular foreign policy decisions (Mearsheimer, 2013; Slaughter, 2011, pp. 2–8).

In realist theory, a change in the state's foreign policy behavior can be induced externally through a systemic change in the global balance of power and also through changes of relative power of the country within the international system (Grieco et al., 2015, p. 133). In the state of anarchy, states tend to make allies, which can help them guarantee their survival and enhance their international standing (ibid, pp. 72–77). In addition, the democratic character of states – as opposed to liberalism – does not care about shaping the outcome of the foreign policy since every state in the anarchical system is expected to adopt a similar course of action in order to secure its interests, irrespective of its domestic features.

On the other hand, contrary to realism, which considers elements such as interests, power struggle, and alliance building as pre-given and examines international politics as an independent external object, constructivism advocates that these elements are not pre-given but are socially constructed through “*processes of interaction*” (Fierke 2013, p. 189, emphasis in original). In other words, actors such as state leaders, institutions, and members of the civil society are influenced by the structures that they themselves produce and reproduce in the first place.

Constructivists also emphasize that the behavior of actors in international politics is determined by shared norms and values. Even interests and assumedly rational decisions of a state are composed of non-material elements such as identities, ideologies, culture, and history that influence the ostensibly rational choice beforehand. In one of his well-known works, Alexander Wendt talks about how the interests of actors can be used as an explanation for foreign policy actions, but only when they are assumed to be identity-driven in the first place (1999: 231): “[i]nterests presuppose identities because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is” (ibid). In this strain of thought, the self-identity of a state actor and its perception about the identity of other state actors might influence their foreign policy behavior. They might designate other states as friends or enemies, (good or evil) and perform a policy action accordingly (see also Fierke, 2013; Grieco et al., 2015, pp. 92–95).

In this constructivist framework, political elites are considered the most important actors in international politics whose world views, norms, and ideologies shape the foreign policy of the state they lead. When state elites as normative leaders communicate and network with other state leaders in historical occasions, these interactions shape the way actors think and behave and can even produce new common interests between governments (Grieco et al., 2015, p. 93). Hence, the actors' perception of international issues and their international political standing are significant in shaping their foreign policy actions.

- *The Realist Approach*

A realist approach to this case suggests that the AKP government's rapprochement with the Maduro regime is based on a rational calculus that ensures Turkey's clout in the international system as well as its pursuit of economic interests.

- *Shift Towards Multipolarity and Turkey's Increasing Clout*

The Venezuelan case in TFP needs to be analyzed at a systemic level where the state of anarchy in the international system is organized through the balancing of power. In this regard, it will be argued that the change in the balance of power since the end of the Cold War constitutes an external factor that, together with Turkey's relative growth of power, reshaped the country's position and capacities in the international system and thus, set up the background of Turkish interests in building closer ties with the Maduro regime.

The gradual loss of hegemony of the United States in the past decades induced a change in the international order creating a shift from a unipolar order, where the United States was the only hegemonic power, to a multipolar one where states like China and Russia increased their material capabilities and became big powers competing with the U.S. The foundation of international organizations such as the G20, the BRICS, and MIKTA in the last twenty years showcases this change towards a more multipolar international system (González-Levaggi, 2012, p. 103). Turkey not only became a member of G20 and MIKTA, but also acquired an observer status in Latin American organizations such as the Organization of American States, CARICOM, MERCOSUR, and the Rio Group, among other regional and international organizations⁵.

In the post-Cold War era, parallel to the U.S. loss of global hegemony, Turkey underwent a substantial economic transformation based on the neoliberal

5 See González-Levaggi 2012 for more information of the Turkish involvement in Latin American regional organizations.

model. Through this neoliberal transformation, Turkish economy grew significantly in the 21st century (González-Levaggi, 2012, p. 105). In this way, Turkey could emerge as a middle power with increased material capacities in a shifting international order, which gave it more room to maneuver and act independently of U.S. interests in foreign policy making (Öniş & Kutlay, 2017, pp. 6–7) and to enhance relations with countries like Russia, Iran, and indeed, Venezuela.

The new international political and economic flexibility allowed the Turkish government to expand its foreign policy towards distant regions (González-Levaggi, 2016b, pp. 70–74) and perhaps to even pursue material interests in countries like Venezuela. Still, while Turkey's rise as a middle power with increased capacities in a multipolar world might explain Turkey's interest in Venezuela as one of the many potential states in the world to cooperate with, it cannot alone explain Turkey's specific and sudden flourishing foreign policy towards the Maduro administration over the last years.

- *Venezuela as a Strategic Ally Against the United States*

Beyond becoming more autonomous in foreign policy making from the U.S., the AKP government in the last years began to increasingly diverge from the United States, despite the latter being its main traditional ally in the international arena for a long time (Parlar Dal, 2018, p. 27). In general, rising middle powers like Turkey in recent years have been

receptive to the changes emanating from the multiplex nature of the shifting international order (...) The emerging middle powers [such as Turkey], different from traditional middle powers such as Australia, Canada, and South Korea, seem to have been more skeptical and challenging of the West (ibid, p. 28).

Increasingly in the last years, the Turkish government has been not just alienating from the West, but also actively challenging the existing Western-led world order and searching for new alliances (Öniş & Kutlay, 2017, p. 17). Although making a comprehensive analysis of the deterioration of ties between Washington and Ankara is beyond the scope of this paper, a short overview is necessary in order to comprehend Turkey's recent positioning against the U.S. and in favor of the Venezuelan regime.

A first factor in the deterioration of U.S.-Turkey relations is the conflictual environment in the Middle East, in which the United States took steps that were against Turkish national and security interests in multiple occasions (Dalay, 2017) Although Turkey had already assumed an independent foreign policy

from the U.S. in the Middle East since before (Kanat, 2014, pp. 68-69), tension between Ankara and Washington escalated in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. Especially since 2016, the political and military interests of Washington and Ankara started to diverge to a greater extent in the Syrian conflict. At the beginning of the conflict, the Turkish government was disappointed by the Obama administration for their lack of support in the face of the security threat the Syrian conflict posed to Turkey. When Washington finally got involved in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in 2014, it started to cooperate with the People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG), which is the sister group of The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization and the biggest threat to Turkey's national security and integrity (Singh & Jeffrey, 2018). In recent years, the U.S. continued to cooperate with the YPG in the Syrian conflict, who were close to establishing a connected Kurdish region along the Turkish border had the Turkish army not intervened. Tension between both countries kept escalating and, in 2018, Turkey's decision to purchase a Russian defense system further pushed the deterioration of the U.S.-Turkey relations (Shapiro, 2017).

A second key factor in the deterioration of the Turkey-U.S. relations was the failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016. The Turkish government declared the spiritual leader Fethullah Gülen – a resident of Pennsylvania who was once an ally of the Erdoğan government – the mastermind of the coup and asked the U.S. government to hand him over. When Washington neither handed him over nor took a clear position supporting the AKP government during and after the coup attempt, Turkish officials grew suspicions and accused the United States of being behind the failed coup led by the Gülen movement (Singh & Jeffrey, 2018). At that moment, when Erdoğan regime had concerns about its survival and security, Maduro was one of the first leaders to voice his support (Gozzer, 2019) and did not doubt in handing over two schools in Venezuela affiliated with the FETÖ (*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*/ Fethullahist Terrorist Organization) to an education body of the Turkish government (Hurriyet Daily News, 2018). In 2017, the escalating tensions finally led to the suspension of the processing of non-immigrant visa (Sputnik, 2017) and, in 2018, Washington started imposing sanctions on Turkey over a friction involving American passports, which led to an immense devaluation of the Turkish lira (Weise, 2018).

The negative economic and security-related consequences of the Syrian conflict for Turkey, together with the decay of the relationships with the United States and the Turkish coup attempt, have increasingly isolated Turkey from the West (Öniş & Kutlay, 2017, pp. 13–14) and driven the Turkish government to search for alternative efforts to attract global legitimacy and support for its foreign policy (Donelli & González-Levaggi, 2018, p. 65). Especially after the coup at-

tempt, Turkey-Russia relationships improved, while Turkey-U.S. relationships worsened, causing debates about Turkey's alleged shift of axis away from the West and towards an alliance with Russia (Dalay, 2017).

Against this background of U.S.-Turkey relations and Turkey's alleged shift of axis, the following can be claimed: By developing close ties and showing open support to the socialist Maduro regime, which is a long-known enemy of Washington, the Turkish government in recent years has been making efforts to increase its international clout against the United States of America. Geopolitical analyst Jacob L. Shapiro (2017) sums this up provokingly in a column in 2017:

Maduro can't help Turkey deal with the Kurdish Regional Government's recent vote for independence, nor can it help Turkey manage a situation in Syria that is necessitating yet more Turkish military intervention. Nor can Maduro support to solve the strategic differences between Turkey and Russia or Turkey and Iran. Ultimately, Turkey's support of Venezuela is about one thing: the United States (...) Erdogan just needs the US to know that Turkey is an independent actor. So like Russia and China, Turkey will help keep the Maduro regime on life support, not because it helps Turkey directly, but because of the message it sends to the US.

Imdat Öner, a former Turkey diplomat specialized in Turkish-Venezuelan relations residing in Caracas between 2014 and 2016, also expresses an opinion similar to Shapiro's in an interview he gave to Al Jazeera (Wilks, 2019). According to Öner, the Turkish attention to Venezuela can be seen as a leverage against the U.S. that might increase Turkey's influence in other global issues in which the U.S. and Turkey have diverging interests (ibid). From this point of view, Turkey's interest in Venezuela can be interpreted as a rational calculation of benefits of having Venezuela as an ally against the U.S., who acted against Turkey's survival and national security interests in the international system. Thus, even though Venezuela might not be able to prevent the U.S. threat for Turkey alone, together with Russia and other non-Western allies, Venezuela may be an ally for the Turkish government in the multipolar international order that helps increase Turkey's clout against Washington.

- *Turkish Economic Interests in Venezuela*

In addition to Turkey's survival- and power-driven interests in cooperating with the Maduro regime, a realist approach also suggests that, by initiating close ties with Venezuela, Turkey is fortifying its economic power and receiving the following commercial advantages. In general, Venezuela does not constitute a key trade partner considering its limited trade volume with Turkey compared

to total Turkish trade volume. For instance, the total Turkish trade volume in 2018 was approximately \$400 billion, of which \$1.1 billion was with Venezuela, representing an approximate 0.3% of Turkey's total trade⁶. However, the commercial activities that gained an unexpected acceleration are significant enough to explain the Turkish-Venezuelan rapprochement.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Turkish-Venezuelan commerce increased significantly in the last years. After the trade agreements reached on the sidelines of the 2016 World Energy Conference – in which Maduro was the only participating Latin American leader (Koerner, 2016) – the Turkish and Venezuelan governments signed five bilateral trade agreements in 2017 in areas such as economic and commercial ties, defense industry, aviation, agriculture, and tourism⁷. In addition, the Turkey-Venezuela Business Forum was created along the Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board (*DEİK*), which has been organizing trade missions, binational trade councils, and round table meetings in the Latin American region (Donelli & González-Levaggi, 2018, pp. 65–66).

Moreover, the Turkish Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association, MUSIAD, opened its first regional office in Latin America in Venezuela and declared 2019 as the “Year of Latin America and Asian Pacific” (Anadolu Agency, 2018). In 2018, trade volume amounting to 1.1 billion surpassed trade volumes totaling the previous 5 years as well as the average general trend since the beginning of the 2000s (see Table 1 below). During Erdoğan's recent visit to Caracas in December 2018, commercial deals were signed equal to \$5.1 billion (Hurriyet Daily News, 2018), which implies an even closer economic cooperation between both countries in the near future. With these targets for economic cooperation in mind, Venezuela is a door for Turkey to increase its commercial activities in Latin American markets beyond its traditional areas.

More specifically, Venezuela constitutes a considerable trade partner for Turkey in particular view of its rich resources of oil and gold (Kasapoğlu, 2018). In 2018, Venezuela and Turkey announced joint ventures in gold and coal exploration and initiated talks about Turkish investment in Venezuela's sanctioned oil industry, which controls the world's largest proven reserves (Wilks, 2019). Venezuelan President Maduro asked Turkish firms to invest in a giant mining reserve in Southern Venezuela known as Arco del Orinoco, a territory with significant diamond, coltan, and gold reserves⁸ (Hurriyet Daily News, 2018).

6 See trade volume data on Turkish Statistical Institute tuik.gov.tr.

7 See Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Türkiye - Venezuela Siyasi İlişkileri* (Turkey – Venezuela Political Relations) at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-venezuela-siyasi-iliskileri.tr.mfa>.

8 Venezuela moved its gold refining operations from Switzerland to Turkey amid fear of sanctions from the E.U. and the U.S. To be precise, Venezuela quitted refining gold in Switzerland in 2017 when

The same year, Turkey became the largest importer of non-monetary gold from Venezuela (Wilks, 2019). Strikingly, out of the US\$1.1 billion from the Turkish-Venezuelan trade in 2018, US\$900 million are gold imports from Venezuela (Gozzer, 2019). This figure explains the significant difference between the trade volumes of the last years for approximately US\$150 million and the US\$1 billion volume for 2018 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Turkish-Venezuelan Trade for 2001-2018 (in millions of US\$).

	Turkey's Exports	Turkey's Imports	Trade Volume
2018	121	1019	1140
2017	38	117	155
2016	18	65	83
2015	19	107	126
2014	49	194	243
2013	76	198	274
2012	156	153	309
2011	84	150	234
2010	44	121	165
2009	36	198	234
2008	28	133	161
2007	42	88	130
2006	42	59	101
2005	39	59	98
2004	13	43	56
2003	22	20	42
2002	16	13	29
2001	16	2	18

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute, tuik.gov.tr. Table composed by the author.

In return, at a time when Venezuela is in need of substantial amounts of food and products, Turkey has been exporting agricultural products such as wheat flour, pasta, and sunflower oil, as well as hygienic products to the country (Kasapoğlu, 2018). Turkish President also announced that on May 17, 2018, Tur-

there were still no sanctions on its gold. Later, the Trump administration indeed ordered sanctions on the Venezuelan gold sector in November 2018 (Sputnik 2019). Reasoning about the joint ventures between Turkey and Venezuela, Venezuelan Mining Minister Victor Cano in a press conference said: "This is an agreement established with Turkey and the Venezuelan central bank. It's being done by allied countries because imagine (what would happen) if we sent gold to Switzerland and we are told that it has to stay there because of sanctions" (Reuters, 2018).

key sent Venezuela via 18 container ships transportation products like cars and machines, as well as food products such as tuna fish, green beans, sunflower oil, and powdered milk for approximately 142,5 million Turkish liras (Sputnik, 2018). In addition, Turkey also invested in Venezuelan construction industry with 3,000 houses built in 2017 (Sputnik, 2017). Considering Turkey's large construction industry, Venezuela constitutes an adequate market for Turkish construction businesses (Kasapoğlu, 2018). In addition to exports in agriculture, construction and technology, Turkey's national air carrier Turkish Airlines approached Venezuela as well. Flights from Turkey to the Venezuelan capital began in 2017, when other airlines were canceling their routes to Venezuela (Wilks, 2019). Caracas–Istanbul flights of Turkish Airlines currently run several days a week.

Considering Turkish commercial interests in Venezuela, it can be concluded that Venezuela constitutes a beneficial trade partner for Turkey, regardless of its small share in the Turkish total trade volume. Notably, the gold imported from the Latin American country has been the biggest economic benefit for Turkey in 2018 and it is expected to continue with the foreseen investments.

The realist perspective tried to explain the Turkey's behavior in relation to the country's growth of relative power in a state of multipolarity, its security interests against the U.S., and further economic interests in its cooperation with Venezuela. Yet, beyond material interests, ideational factors are fundamental to understand the development of TFP in Venezuela.

- *The Constructivist Approach*

As an elaborated theoretical framework, the constructivist approach suggests that the states' behavior regarding foreign policy is determined by the way states – and their elites as primary actors – perceive the world and other actors. Diverging from and arguably complementary to the realist approach, a constructivist discussion of the Turkish-Venezuelan rapprochement focuses on how the perception of Turkish state leaders of their global role, as well as the identification of Venezuela as a 'friend' in the international order, have shaped their relations since 2016.

- *Self-Perception as a Global Power*

The first point to consider is the Turkish self-perception as a rising power with global reach and influence. The so-called father of the new Turkish Foreign Policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, a chief advisor to Erdoğan (2003-2009) and Turkey's Foreign Minister (2009-2014) and Prime Minister (2014-2016), through his aca-

demic and practical work redefined the role of Turkey not just as a regional leader in the Middle East, but beyond that, as a new global power (Donelli & González-Levaggi, 2018, p. 66; Gürbüz, 2018). As such, the AKP Government's foreign policy conceptualized by Davutoğlu envisioned the Turkish state as one of the central states in the international system rather than a peripheral state (Akillı, 2015).

The self-assigned role of a central state with global influence is reflected in Turkey's active engagement in non-commercial activities such as cultural, public, and humanitarian diplomacy in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the last decade (Donelli & González-Levaggi, 2018, p. 67; Parlar Dal, 2018, pp. 23–24). Having the ambition to consolidate global outreach as a central actor, Turkey's Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) under the AKP government expanded to various developing countries in different parts of the world and highly diversified its activities, accentuating Turkey's soft power and international status as a donor state (TIKA, 2018b). To put it in figures, TIKa conducted 172 projects in Latin America between 2008 – when it started its work on the continent – and 2018 (TIKA, 2018a). In the case of Venezuela, the Turkish state-run development agency completed three projects in 2018 in the fields of maternal and infant health, women's education on employment, and cultural activities in a school (ibid). While these projects are relatively small in scale and number, they are nevertheless representative of Turkey's assertion of being a global influencer with networks and noncommercial activities all around the world.

The self-perception as a global leader can also be observed in the Turkish government's discourse towards Venezuela. Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, underlines in an interview, that, by backing Maduro, the AKP government has been “propagating this notion that Turkey is an emerging global power” (Weise, 2018). Perceiving itself as a power that is ready to lend a hand to protect the countries that are domestically and internationally pressured by Washington, the Erdoğan regime has repeatedly expressed its support to Maduro (Daragahi, 2019). Maduro, who describes Erdoğan as “a friend and leader of the new multipolar world” in various speeches, has been further boosting the AKP government's self-perception (Olmo, 2018). As such, it can be claimed that the AKP government's self-understanding as a central actor in the international system that has a say in important world affairs, has affected Turkey's rapprochement with Venezuela, a country that has been under increased pressure by the West in the last years.

- *Common Experiences and Ideologies: Maduro as a “Friend”*

While Davutoğlu’s aforementioned legacy of a multidimensional TFP as a central actor in global politics coined the AKP administration’s understanding of Turkey’s place in the world, his role as the conceptualizer and producer of TFP was gradually curbed after the first Turkish presidential election in 2014. Regardless of Davutoğlu’s wide network of foreign relations, Erdoğan began establishing personal connections with world leaders after 2014, making diplomatic calls almost on a daily basis and increasing his presidential visits abroad (Aras, 2017, pp. 5–6). In this way, TFP arguably started to become more and more dependent on the personal opinions and relations of the Turkish president (ibid). The fact that foreign policy was personalized to a single person to such an extent, had a significant impact on the post-2016 flourishing relationship between Venezuela and Turkey, whose presidents built personal ties after the 2016 Energy Congress and met in several diplomatic occasions in the last years.

As suggested by the constructivist theory, the interaction between state leaders, their perception and designation of each other as friends or enemies as well as shared values and experiences have a fundamental impact on states’ foreign policy. This is also the case in the Venezuela-Turkey relationship where President Erdoğan’s perception of Venezuelan president Maduro as a “friend” more than a mere strategic partner is built upon both leaders’ shared experiences and worldviews. Although politically Islamist and economically liberalist, Erdoğan, at first glance, does not seem to share a lot with Christian Maduro, who is the descendant of Hugo Chávez’ Socialist Bolivarian Revolution. However, both leaders indeed identify with each other in multiple issues (Shapiro, 2017).

First, both Maduro and Erdoğan aimed to fundamentally transform their country’s Western-oriented political tradition after coming to power. In Maduro’s case, it was the socialist revolution against the previous U.S.-allied regime, whereas in Erdoğan’s case, it was the revival of the role of the Islamic religion in a Kemalist nation-state founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Rubin, 2019). In a related manner, both Maduro and Erdoğan were subject to sharpening Western criticism regarding domestic violations of human rights, lack of freedom of speech, and authoritarian practices in the last years and were dispraised as charismatic, populist, undemocratic leaders in the Western international community (Wilks, 2019). As Mehmet Özkan, the until-recently regional director of TIKA in Latin America denoted to Al Jazeera: “Most of the criticisms of the international system coming from Venezuela are similar to those of Turkey. Ankara considers that they both share a similar destiny as they face similar threats, criticisms and issues in global politics” (Wilks, 2019).

At the same time, as implied by Özkan and as partly explained above, both leaders have a common enemy and threat in the international system: the United States. Erdoğan, like Maduro, portrays the U.S. as an imperialist state and has a multipolar vision of the world, where Washington cannot intervene in Turkey's affairs and where it does politics in an independent manner (Daragahi, 2019). Kerem Ali Sürekli, leader of the Venezuela Friendship Group in the Turkish Parliament, affirms this ideological factor in an interview to the Russian news agency Sputnik, saying that "Turkey and Venezuela are two countries that oppose foreign interference in their internal affairs, and strive to stand firmly on their own two feet, pursuing an independent policy in line with their own interests" (Sputnik, 2017).

Another common ideological opinion related to the anti-U.S. sentiment that both leaders share is the Palestinian cause. Whereas Erdoğan is known to be a strong defender of the cause, Maduro, like his predecessor Hugo Chávez, is also considered to be a firm supporter (Daragahi, 2019). Maduro's unexpected participation in the extraordinary summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul in December 2017 is a showcase of the latter. The extraordinary meeting took place upon Erdoğan's call and the topic of discussion was Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Nicolás Maduro was the only Latin American leader in the summit and said that the purpose of his participation was "to evaluate everything that has to do with the solidarity for the Arab people of Palestine" facing "aggression of the imperialist government", referring to the United States (Daily Sabah, 2017). Coincidentally in 2018, the Venezuelan government allowed TIKA to renovate a Palestinian Center in Venezuela, the hall of which is now painted with a cartoon displaying Turkish and Palestinian flags (TIKA, 2018a).

With their ideological similarities and experiences in international politics, Erdoğan perceives Maduro as a "friend" in the international arena. Hence, it can be claimed that Erdoğan's self-identification with Maduro – a leader of an internationally isolated government with similar anti-Western rhetoric – contributed to the accelerated rapprochement of the Turkish and Venezuelan governments in the past years.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to find an answer to the perplexing question why over the last years Turkey suddenly began pursuing an active foreign policy towards Venezuela, a Latin American country historically, culturally, and geographically distant from Turkey and with which relationships were previously stagnant.

Having analyzed and discussed the prevailing factors that could explain the latter in the light of the theories of realism and constructivism, it can be said that both material power concerns, as well as ideational factors, provide valuable insights into the analysis of the unexpected rapprochement between Turkey and Venezuela.

Using the realist theory point of view, in which state behavior is determined by the state's power concerns and interests in an anarchic international system, the paper discussed three main factors. First, Turkey's increasing clout in the last decades in a shifting multipolar world order has allowed this country to develop an interest in a distant Latin American country like Venezuela.

Second, the Turkish government's accelerated foreign policy activism in Venezuela was related to Turkey's deteriorating relations with the United States. From the Turkish administration's point of view, in recent years the U.S. has been a constant threat to Turkish security interests in the Middle East as well as to the AKP government's existence in general. Although Venezuela alone cannot protect Turkey against the U.S., the Maduro government, along with Russia and other 'anti-Western' actors, might be a beneficial ally for the Erdoğan government to increase its political clout in the international arena against Washington.

Thirdly, regarding Turkey's economic interests, while Venezuela has not constituted a crucial trade partner for Turkey in the last years, it has the potential of becoming a beneficial partner in view of its rich resources. Of great significance here are the gold imports of Turkey from Venezuela that in 2018 increased trade volume to approximately one billion U.S. dollars, a number that is expected to multiply in the following period.

On the other hand, the paper put under scrutiny similarities in ideologies and experiences of both state leaders from a constructivist point of view. Looking closer at the way the AKP administration perceives Turkey's role in the globe, the first argument was that the rapprochement with Venezuela might be in line with the AKP leaders' assertion of Turkey as a global influencer that has the power to substantially shape international politics and support a regime like Maduro's against Western pressures.

Secondly, the paper pointed out Turkish president Erdoğan's personalized foreign policy making in the last years, which played an important role in the acceleration of the Turkey-Venezuela relationship relying on the two men's friendship. Maduro and Erdoğan share the antipathy against the designated enemy of the United States, are firm supporters of the Palestinian cause, and have experienced similar pressures by the U.S. in form of discourse, sanctions, or coup at-

tempts. Similar ideologies and experiences from a constructivist point of view seem to have brought the two state leaders together who have created strong ties in a short time. From this point of view, the Turkish-Venezuelan rapprochement might be indicating a tendency in Turkish Foreign Policy to develop new alliances with like-minded leaders as part of Erdoğan's anti-Western discourse.

To conclude, it is fair to say that the Erdoğan regime in Turkey has had both material benefits and ideological support through flourishing relations with the Maduro government in the last couple of years. Yet, seen from a broader perspective, it is worth exploring if the uninstitutionalized and personalized character of the ties between both governments could, at any time, cause a change in the Venezuela-Turkey relations in the reverse direction. Among the ongoing political turmoil in Venezuela between Juan Guaidó's strong opposition backed by the West and Maduro's obstinate resistance upheld by countries like China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, relationships between Turkey and Venezuela are to be explored further.

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