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Turkish-Russian summit in Sochi - excellent prospects for Russia's return to the Black Sea grain deal under pressure from Turkey

Vladimir Putin will receive Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at his Black Sea residence in Sochi, but, in this instance, meeting on home turf does not confer any privileges, much alone superiority. It is quite the opposite.

The2 leaders have a long history of cooperation and conflict, even during the Russian aggression against Ukraine, when Putin faced isolation from most world leaders.

The Russian president will find himself in an awkward situation. Even though he will be host, he might be pressured and required to listen more than make demands.

The arrival in Sochi is a concession by the Turkish president to Putin, who has not left the country since last March when the International Criminal Court issued an indictment and arrest warrant against him for war crimes in Ukraine.

Turkey is not among the 123 signatory states of the ICC Statute, but it actively follows the court's activities and participates in its annual assemblies in The Hague or New York.

The central topic of the talks in Sochi will be the Black Sea grain deal, from which Russia withdrew on July 17, after a year of implementation.

Russian boycott harmed Turkey's reputation

This decision by Moscow was a significant blow to Turkey's international reputation, and particularly to its interests in remaining one of the most influential international mediators in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which managed to maintain lively communication and relations of trust with both warring parties.

Reaching an agreement on the unhindered export of Ukrainian grain through ports on the Black Sea was a great diplomatic success for Turkey and President Erdoğan in July last year.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, this has been the only successful mediation initiative implemented by Turkey and the UN.

After a few months of its implementation, Russia began to obstruct it systematically, then categorically refused to prolong its validity in the middle of July.

President Erdoğan was confident that Moscow would continue to extend the agreement's validity after the 2-month period last July. However, this did not happen. It appeared that the Kremlin deceived the Turkish president with its false promises.

That was not Russia's only offence against Turkey and its leader that preceded the summit in Sochi. Russia further radicalised its position by withdrawing from the grain export agreement, threatening to use fire against all merchant ships approaching Ukrainian ports.

An unforgivable attack on a Turkish ship

Russia followed through on its threat against a Turkish ship sailing under the flag of the Pacific state of Palau.

The Russian Navy's shots directed at the Turkish merchant ship were a gesture of Moscow's even greater insolence towards Ankara, even though it is one of the few states that maintains a balance towards Moscow. Turkey has not yet imposed economic sanctions on Russia like all of Turkey's Western partners.

“After the (Russian) intervention, our interlocutors in the Russian Federation were warned appropriately to avoid such attempts, which escalate tensions in the Black Sea”, the

office of the Turkish president stated after several days of refraining from reacting strongly to this incident.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan's talks with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov this week in Moscow, in preparation for the meeting of the 2 presidents in Sochi, indicate that Turkey will exert pressure on Russia to return to the agreement on grain exports via the Black Sea.

Additionally, these discussions and the context of the next summit between Turkey and Russia suggest that Russia does not have much room to refuse Turkish demands.

Ankara does not want the high tensions in the Black Sea due to the war between Ukraine and Russia to increase further, and that is what Russia has just tried with its trade blockade and armed threat.

All options for bypassing the Russian blockade would involve Turkish military involvement in armed incidents, which Erdogan definitely wants to avoid.

At the same time, Russia's blackmailing position regarding the Black Sea grain deal threatens Turkey's reputation as a factor that considers the Black Sea zone its security yard, for which it does not seek support even from its NATO partners.

Just as the "old" head of Turkish diplomacy did not come to Moscow this week, the "old" President, Erdoğan, will not come to Sochi on Monday either.

Putin will speak with the Turkish leaders who received a new convincing mandate in the last May elections, just like his minister Lavrov. They will communicate with Moscow with far less thought and restraint than they might have in the run-up to the elections.

After the elections, President Erdoğan very convincingly showed a turn towards the policy of his Western allies by backing Sweden's NATO membership, showing steadfast support for Ukraine, and ordering the release of its Azov battalion members.

As a prelude to talks with Putin, Erdoğan confirmed last week that Crimea belongs to Ukraine, and that he does not accept Russia's annexation of the peninsula.

At the same time, he warned that the position of the Crimean Tatars, as its natives is one of the priorities for Ankara, and requested the release of one of their local leaders, Nariman Dzhelyal, who has been held in prison by the Russian authorities since 2021.

Turkey is one of the countries against which Moscow should not make aggressive moves, but it has been persistently doing so, testing Ankara's patience.

The summit in Sochi might mark the end of this period filled with Russian arrogance towards Turkey's interests, including some basic ones, such as security in the Black Sea.

The Turkish leader does not have to offer any concessions to Russia. The only party with a debt balance is Moscow, which should not lose sight of the fact that Ankara is its sole remaining economic and communication link with the West.

Because of this, the forthcoming summit in Sochi has a considerable chance of serving as the venue for the renewal of the crucial agreement on food exports. And perhaps a meeting will be held to discuss more comprehensive solutions for resolving the Ukrainian crisis.

Why is Russia testing Ankara's patience?