The recent events in Ukraine and Crimea once again brought Russia under global limelight. I visited
Russia at various times since 1991, when the communist regime collapsed, and I had the chance to
observe the changes that took place over time. My last visit was on May 9, Europe Day, established
to commemorate the ultimate collapse of Hitler’s regime and unconditional surrender of Germany,
also a national day in Russia. On May 9, a military procession was held in Moscow’s Red Square that
was nothing short of the spectacular parades we used to watch during the Soviet era. Moscow
wanted to show the world that it was still a military superpower as it was during the communist re-
gime. In World War 2, Russia had lost 20 million of its citizens and the country was left devastated.
What really intrigued me was the meaningful attention Russian people paid to war veterans, and
their outburst of joy.

In the history of the modern era, the Russian and Ottoman Empires (including the Republic of Turkey)
have been recognized as “European” when the West needed them in military and political affairs.
Contrary to us, the Russians have no issues with the Slavic identity and no claims of being “Europ-
ean,” because the people of this country have made great contributions to the European culture, par-
ticularly in classical music and literature. In classical music there is Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Prokofi-
ev, Shostakovich and Rachmaninoff, while in literature there have been great names like Pushkin,
Gogol, Boris Pasternak, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn starting in the 19th century. On the
other hand, we know little about the political, economic and psychological issues that comprise the
historical heritage of this country – issues that they must overcome. In this article, I will briefly dis-
cuss these issues.

“Russia is the only country with not just its future in the dark, but also its past.” (Manfred Quiring-
Journalist)

The Russian state has collapsed and was reborn five times in history. The first Russian state (Kievan
Rus) was brought down by Tatars and Mongols in the 13th century. The second is Muscovy, which
collapsed in 1600, during the “period of anarchy.” The third state began with the Romanovs in 1613
and lasted until the last Tsar, Nicholas II, was killed by the Bolsheviks. The fourth era is the com-
munist period beginning with Lenin and ending with Mikhail Gorbachev. The final period began in
1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and has seen the rules of Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin
and Dmitry Medvedev. To sum up, a journey that began with Ivan IV continued with Peter the Great
(or the Mad), Catherine II, Lenin, Stalin and Gorbachev. With the exception of the communist period,
the Orthodox Church has been a major influence on the country starting in the 14th century, viewing
itself as the continuation of Byzantium and as Third Rome. From the 17th century onwards, Russians
favored expansionist policies and gained great territories in Asia.

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er.
Having been destroyed and rebuilt through war and anarchy, the Russian states never had ideals or objectives of democracy. Due to the brutality of the state, freedom of thought and economic freedom have always remained alien concepts. Throughout its history, Russia has been traditionally and uninterruptedly ruled by absolute regimes – first the Tsars, then the Communist Party, and now elected authoritarian leaders. In other words, the Russian people and democracy have never been introduced in history.

From the 19th century onwards, the universal concepts and norms of law as known in the West remained undeveloped in Russia both in civil law and public order. The country was unable to create its own law, culture and independent judiciary at any period of time. Journalist Dirk Sager’s observations are on the spot: according to him, “Democracy and the rule of law in Russia appear further than ever before. The only fully functional Russian court is the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.” It is a fact that the ECHR receives the most submissions from Russia and Turkey.

The intellectual-opposition movements that began in Tsarist Russia, continued during the communist period and were more recently influenced by Europe were always targeted by Russian governments for being “Western” and subjected to the harshest treatments. There has been a historical and enduring suspicion of the West. Russia was left out of human movements, enlightenment and Renaissance as these unfolded in Western Europe. If Russia is to attain the economic, political and social levels of other developed countries, radical reforms and restructuring are inevitable. However, this is a truly long and difficult path.

**Ukraine and Crimean issue:**

Ukraine, Belarus and Russia share the same cultural heritage, and Ukraine is home to 11 million Russians. Ukraine’s desire to join NATO, and the possibility that NATO would share a border with Russia made Moscow feel besieged, and Russia viewed this development as a threat to its own security. The reaction of Moscow and the intervention in Crimea are closely related to the notion of security in Russia, which can be summarized as “Russians don’t feel secure unless they have their own soldiers on both sides of the border.”

One of the greatest mistakes that the West might make in retaliation to the developments in Ukraine and Crimea is to impose economic and political sanctions against them. Russia was invaded by Napoleon’s armies in 1812 and Hitler’s armies in 1941. Hitler’s motto that they were there to “save them from communism” did not gain much purchase among the Russian people, and the Defense of Stalingrad made history as one of the most astounding examples of resisting foreign powers and oppression. Despite the severe losses and suffering throughout their history, the Russian people are extremely patriotic and resilient against pain and pressure from the outside. This is why playing with the honor of the Russian people will not do anyone any good. These three countries must be able to resolve their issues amicably in time, and the West should help them along. In his latest statement, President Putin said that they had no intention of resurrecting the old Soviet Union, and that they would recognize the president to be elected. Meanwhile, we must remember two important facts about Russia: One; Russia is a global power in geopolitical and military terms and will remain so. Two; Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are three parts of a whole and they share a common history and culture.
Where is the Russian economy?

Russia was an agricultural country ruled by feudalism in the 19th century. This was followed by the establishment of heavy industries and the defense industry. A contrary to Marx’ thesis, the Bolshevik Revolution is a peasant revolution and is not backed by an industrial worker class. When Lenin came to power, peasants were pressed into ranks of industrial workers. This went on at an increasing rate until World War 2, and the central planning authority ensured that all economic activity was controlled by the state, therefore the communist party.

Current economic indicators place Russia among the “high income” group and developed countries. With an area of 17 million square kilometers, Russia is the largest country in the world and has a population density of only 8 people per square kilometer. A total population of 143 million makes this country the 8th largest economy of the world. Per capita income is around USD 17,800. This year’s forecasts are 0.4% for growth rate and 11.7% for inflation, and the official unemployment rate is 6.3%. Agriculture accounts for 4% of domestic product; industry accounts for 37% and services 59%. Oil and natural gas comprise 68% of total exports, and the country lacks a strong industry that can compete in global markets. The largest import item is capital expense goods with 44.5%. The country has a current account surplus of USD 123 billion, one-third of the gas reserves and the second largest coal reserves of the world, and is among the top eight countries with the largest oil reserves. The Russian energy company Gazprom is among the leading multinational companies globally.

One of the key issues of the Russian economy is the inability to translate the achievements in military technology to the consumer goods industry despite a wealth of talent in the defense and aerospace industries. In other words, Russia has neither an accumulation nor an adequate number of entrepreneurs to accumulate capital in this area. Therefore, it is difficult for Russia to gain global competitive strength in advanced technology or industries other than energy and mining. Another critical issue in Russia is the low rate of population increase. According to forecasts, the workforce will decrease by 13 to 19 million until 2025.

After the collapse of the communist system, the Chinese and Soviet governments adopted different policies to transition from central and regulated economics to a unique kind of market economy called “state capitalism.” Russia and the majority of the former Eastern Bloc countries implemented the “shock therapy” that is recommended by multinational institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) to every country in crisis.

The establishment of the new order after the collapse of the communist system began with political reforms marked by perestroika and glasnost, and privatizing state entities became a priority. The political, economic and social consequences of this strategy were severe: mass unemployment, high inflation, capital withdrawal, collapse in currency rates, and difficulty in paying debts. Haphazard privatization and the heavily-criticized "loans-for-shares" method meant that a large number of state entities were transferred to “oligarchs” or as “New Russians” as the Russian people say, who had close ties to governments. In 2010, Moscow was the 87th city with the most billionaires. If you were to visit St. Petersburg or Moscow today, the separation between classes is stark – which indicates that income disparity was greatly exacerbated after the collapse of communism.

On the other hand, China left the political system intact and adopted a more realistic trial-and-error approach. Drawing on the experience of other nations, the country implemented a progressive ap-
approach and began with agricultural, industrial and privatization reforms to transition from the communist economic system to a market economy. Privatization targets were separated into three categories of profitable, salvageable and unsalvageable, and the method was more functional than outright sale.

**Turkish-Russian relations:**
Relations between the Ottoman Empire and Russia began in 1492 with a letter written by Tsar Ivan III to Sultan Beyazit II. Since then, the armies of the two empires clashed 13 times. Wars began between 1676 and 1681, and ended after 1914–18. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Moscow supplied military and financial aid to the Turkish war for independence, and Russia was the first nation to recognize the newly-founded Republic of Turkey. Relations after World War II were tainted with the Cold War. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, relations warmed once again, and much distance was covered particularly in economic relations.

Russia is Turkey’s largest trade partner. The share of Russia in Turkey’s overall foreign trade in 2013 was 14.6% or USD 32 billion. The Turkish construction industry has been active in Russia for decades. Turkey buys 68% of its natural gas imports—a major part of total energy imports—and one-third of its oil imports from Russia. Thanks to a mutual visa waiver, approximately 2 million Russian nationals visit Turkey every year.

Our political relations are trouble-free for now, partly owing to strong economic relations. We can also say that Erdoğan and Putin are on good terms. But there is not much we can learn from each other in terms of human rights, democratization and the rule of law.

To sum up, Russia is a very important political and economic neighbor of Turkey over the Black Sea. We must know this country very well and keep a close eye on developments there. One of the greatest shortcomings we have today is the very limited number of research centers and scholars working on Russia. It is also paramount that the diplomats we assign to Russia speak the language. If the US or British diplomats in Ankara are fluent in Turkish, I believe it will be good that the diplomats we send abroad speak the language of their respective countries.