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Erdogan Blinks First in Russian-Turkish Impasse

By Peter Hobson

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Seven months ago, the country watched on television as a Russian fighter jet fell to earth in a stream of flame. It had been shot down by a Turkish warplane over the border with Syria.

The nation froze, and waited for President Vladimir Putin to respond. It was the first major setback of Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war. Two servicemen were dead. Would Russia take revenge? Hours passed before Putin, barely controlling his anger, appeared before the cameras. This is a "stab in the back," he said, and demanded an apology.

But Turkey's president, Recep Erdogan, was obstinate. Annoyed by Russia's support for his enemy, Syrian President Bashar Assad, he insisted the Russian plane had violated Turkish airspace. Moscow should apologize, he said, not him. As a result, diplomatic relations ruptured, and Moscow imposed sweeping sanctions.

In late June, Erdogan dramatically backed down in a move that could end the stalemate.

"We never had the desire or deliberate intention of shooting down the plane," Erdogan wrote in a letter to Putin published by the Kremlin. Expressing "sympathy and profound condolences to the family of the Russian pilot," Erdogan asked Russia to "Excuse us." He also said a Turkish man suspected of killing the pilot would be prosecuted.

The aim, he later said, was to "normalize our relations with Russia." It seems to be part of a larger reconciliation that also saw Turkey restore diplomatic relations with Israel after a six-year hiatus.

Russian officials were jubilant. "[Ankara] recognized that the idiotic position of Turkey's leadership has put the country in a very difficult position," said State Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin in a television interview.

Analysts agree that Turkey's international standing has weakened. Erdogan's authoritarian rule has alienated allies in Europe and the United States. Meanwhile, his strategy in Syria has failed. Assad has survived, and Kurdish militias have bolstered their position along Turkey's southern border with backing from both the United States and Russia, emboldening Kurdish nationalists inside Turkey.

"For Erdogan the primary concern is to block the emergence of a Kurdish entity," says Vladimir Frolov, a foreign affairs analyst in Moscow. That means working with the Kremlin, which has opened diplomatic channels with the Kurds and may be supplying Kurdish forces in Turkey with shoulder-mounted rockets, Frolov says.

Meanwhile, Russian embargoes on Turkish products have reduced bilateral trade by almost half. New visa and work restrictions have shrunk a Turkish community in Russia that numbered about 80,000 last year. Turks entering the country routinely face aggressive questioning by border guards. And a ban on package tours has left Turkish beach resorts half empty.

Some of this may now be reversed. On June 29, Putin spoke to Erdogan on the telephone for the first time since the plane was downed. Putin agreed to lift the travel restrictions and begin negotiating an end to other sanctions.

But pride could remain a sticking point. Turkish officials have made clear that Erdogan only "regretted" the downing of the plane, and did not "apologize" for it. Ankara may also refuse to pay compensation, a key Russian demand.

And many Russian officials are unwilling to wipe the slate clean just yet. Turkey must "reject its opportunistic and selfish foreign policy" in the region, says Konstantin Kosachyov, the chairman of the senate's committee on foreign relations. "The apology alone isn't enough."

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