

HUNTINGTON REVERSED: HOW TURKISH MEDIATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE FALSIFIES THE 'CIVILIZATIONAL' PARADIGM OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS - 21.05.2025

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Turkish mediation between Russia and Ukraine offers not only a technical opportunity to terminate the active phase of the war between the two countries, but it also provides evidence that the civilisational paradigm of international conflicts may be proven false and therefore gives new hope for their resolution.

Since Samuel Huntington presented his vision of international relations as an inevitable and permanent conflict between groups of countries divided into civilizations, his approach gained almost a universal recognition and a strong place in academia. If something bad happens, analysts, experts, and journalists often refer to Huntington to describe hostilities between peoples and countries in inter-civilizational terms. In accordance with this parsimonious theory, in some places of the planet, where those supposedly different civilizations border each other, conflicts are inherently programmed into regional relations. According to this theory, hostilities will happen sooner or later with an inevitable fatalism independently of what people actually think and feel about each other. Huntington brought several examples to prove his point and since he published his opus magnum, the history of the world more than once seemed to have confirmed his thesis.

But what if the Huntingtons clash of civilizations is a self-fulfilling prophecy? What if the conflicts between peoples and countries belonging to different civilizations are not only solvable but avoidable in general? Türkiye has made noteworthy efforts to mediate the

ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine □□□□□□□□□ that according to Huntingtonian methodology belong to the same civilization. Yet Türkiye as a country represents a civilization not only different, but one that is theoretically the most likely to clash with Russia and Ukraine. If the reality does not match the pattern, it means that either Russia and Ukraine are not European, Slavic, and Christian, or Huntingtons theory is all together wrong.

According to the civilizational approach, Türkiye should be an unyielding enemy of both Russia and Ukraine. In reality, it not only maintains dynamic political and economic relations with both of them, but actively proposes itself as a mediator in the fields such as grain corridor and POW exchange, and acts as a cease-fire facilitator. And both Ukraine and Russia agree on this role of Ankara, preferring its services over those proposed by countries belonging to their own civilization. Is this a Machiavellian scheme designed by Türkiye to better deceive its civilizational enemies and decrease their forces before the final inevitable clash? Not so much in my opinion, because Türkiye has good reasons to engage in mediation. These reasons go beyond identitarian criteria absolutized by Huntingtons approach.

Seen in a longer perspective, especially in the Russo-Ukrainian context, Huntingtons theory seems as simplistic as it is user-friendly and fashionable. If two countries of the same culture, ethnicity, language, and religion fight with each other and brought to the negotiating table by a country which does not share the same identity, there must be factors other than civilizational identity that formulate its political conduct. Uncovering, studying, and understanding them would be an interesting subject on its own. Now, it is enough to conclude what the Russo-Ukraino-Turkish anomaly apports in the theoretical dimension.

Firstly: countries belonging to the same civilization do fight which other, sometimes more eagerly than they do with countries from a different one. Russia is destroying a Slavic, Christian, and Russian-speaking population in the name of protecting it from a foreign influence. And this foreign influence comes from the West, the civilization that has the most in common with the Russian (Orthodox in Huntingtonian terminology) one. Moreover, several countries belonging to the Orthodox civilization are a part of a political and economic blocks (EU and NATO) that Russia actually declares to be tools of a cultural intrusion into its own (and Ukrainian) civilizational territory (and, by the way, one of the most actively anti-Russian ones).

Secondly: countries from a different and hostile civilization do not always enter into a civilisational conflict even if they have such an opportunity. If the sense of Turkish identity would be to fight Christians and Slavs, it would be logical to make this war longer, harder and more destructive. But Ankara seems not to find any satisfaction from the conflict that could potentially weaken if not eliminate two elements of a competing civilization. If Russia and Ukraine continue to destroy each other, it would create a strategic, economic, and ideological vacuum in a region where Turkish political presence has existed for centuries and where Ankara possesses a considerable potential for soft power based on cultural, confessional, and linguistic factors. If Ankara does the reverse by proposing itself as an intermediary for a ceasefire, it allows Russia and Ukraine to save a potential that it

should theoretically diminish. An internal conflict inside a rival civilization would be a perfect opportunity to make it weaker and according to the civilizational pattern, Türkiye should immediately make efforts to exacerbate it, yet, it does not.

Thirdly: Countries labelled different civilizationally can play a constructive role in lowering tension between countries belonging to the same civilization but which are actually conflicted with each other. The war between Russia and Ukraine demonstrates how easy is it to manipulate and instrumentalize elements of culture such as ethnicity, language, and religion and use them as a motivation to fight people who in reality share all of them. If basic civilizational factors do not stop states from attacking other states, there must be arguments of a more general nature to be introduced. And it seems that Ankara manages to speak a language of universal values to both Moscow and Kiev.

The anticipated direct leader-to-leader meeting between Russia and Ukraine failed to take place in Türkiye last week. It is uncertain whether the lower-level meeting that did take place there will positively change the dynamics of the ongoing war, or eventually bring a stable end to hostilities. But the sole fact that both Ukraine and Russia accepted the country from the other side of civilizational Iron Curtain proves Huntingtons theory to be wrong and falsifies the fatalistic prospect of inter-cultural conflicts all together. If there is a positive aspect of this, otherwise terrible, situation, it is the proof that the 21st century does not have to be a period of inevitable and permanent wars between people belonging to different cultures and traditions.

The falsification of Huntington can, on the other hand, be also done by stating that Russia and Ukraine belong to two different civilizations. Numerous radical statements of Ukrainian idealists are based on this voluntaristic thesis. But the reality of Ukrainian state institutions, its army and society together with the ultra-slow if not non-existing process of reforming them proves the opposite. If Ukrainians were people of a fundamentally different mindset than the Russians, the process of changing the country from Russian-style behavioural patterns to non-Russian (in this specific case: Western or European - whatever it actually means nowadays) should be fast, easy, and enthusiastic, as was the case in Poland, Romania, or the Baltic States after the Soviet Union was not any more in a position to execute the foreign control over its peoples. If Ukraine does not meet European standards after thirty years of independent rule and after three years of an existential war, it makes the inter-civilizational character of its war with Russia questionable.

Yes, Ukraine may one day belong to another civilization than Russia, but it is an ambitious and long-term objective to reach rather than an accomplished fact. But what the Ukraine-Russia war and Türkiyes efforts at mediation have demonstrated is that civilizational factors such as language, ethnicity, confession, history, and traditions do not pre-determine political choices of states and nations, including with whom they shall inevitably enter into conflicts.

Russia and Ukraine taught us a bitter lesson about what civilizational brothers are able to do to each other. This breaks the Huntingtonian theory in regard to the internal functioning of civilizations and even to their existence as such. Türkiye has all the chances

to falsify this theory regarding the conduct of civilizations towards each other, and to give hope that a theory of a clash was just a methodological mistake and not a prophecy for years to come.

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***Picture: Russian and Ukrainian delegations during their meeting at the Dolmabahçe Palace in İstanbul/Türkiye on 16 May 2025 where they agreed to swap 1000 prisoners. Source: Ramil Sitdikov, Sputnik Pool Photo via AP*

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