

IKV BRIEF

THE CRIMEAN CONUNDRUM: POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR ANKARA

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Turkey as a Black Sea littoral state is directly exposed to the destabilization in its hinterland. The implications of the crisis in Crimea may force Turkey to make a stark choice between its NATO allies and its second largest trade partner, Russia.

The political protests which initially started as a demonstration of popular dissatisfaction with Kyiv's rejection to sign an Association Agreement with Brussels under immense pressure from the Kremlin, evolved into a political crisis which led to the ouster of the pro-Russian President Yanukoyvch and the reinstatement of the 2004 constitution. The political crisis increased the volatility in east and southeast Ukraine mostly populated by ethnic Russian and Russian speaking communities. The whirlwind escalation in Crimea undoubtedly took the international community by surprise. Ankara was no exception to this. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu was among the first statesmen to visit Kiev in an attempt to broker a solution to the crisis in Crimea¹. Unfortunately, the diplomatic efforts failed to change the course of the events which paved the way for Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

The Crimean Peninsula, which is home to some two million people, lies 173 miles away from the Anatolian coastline. This geographical proximity increases Turkey's vulnerability to a military clash in the peninsula. According to the latest Ukrainian census dated 2001, Tatars – a Turkic tribe which has affinity to the Turks in Anatolia-constitute around 12 percent, whereas ethnic Russians account for 58 percent of the population, 24 percent of the population is Ukrainian². The ouster of Yanukovych led to clashes between ethnic Russians and Tatars.

The crisis continued to escalate with the unilateral decision of the Crimean Parliament to organize a referendum on whether to secede from Ukraine to join Russia. Despite, vocal opposition by the Tatar community and numerous statements from leading international actors such as the US and the EU that the so-called referendum was in violation of the principles of both international law and Ukraine's constitution and that its outcome will not be recognized, Crimea seceded from Ukraine only to become part of Russia. The referendum, which resulted in around 97 percent support for secession from Ukraine to become part of Russia, was followed by the Crimean Parliament's unilateral declaration of independence and the adoption of Rouble as the currency³. As

¹ "Turkish FM Davutoglu visits Ukraine to discuss Crimea", *World Bulletin*, 1 March 2014, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/general/129922/turkish-fm-davutoglu-visits-ukraine-to-discuss-crimea>. Retrieved 18 March 2014.

² "Why Crimea is so dangerous" *BBC News*, 11 March 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26367786>. Retrieved 18 March 2014.

³ Luke Harding and Shaun Walker, "Crimea applies to be part of Russian Federation after vote to leave Ukraine", *The Guardian*, 17 March 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/17/ukraine-crimea-russia-referendum-complain-result>. Retrieved 18 March 2014.

the gravity of the situation continues to increase, the international community's hands are tied.

Turkey as a key player in the Black Sea Basin, is closely monitoring the situation in Crimea. The annexation of Crimea, without doubt has destabilized the region at the expense of the EU's and Ankara's joint efforts at creating a zone of stability and security in their common neighbourhood. In addition, the annexation of Crimea was a game changer in the sense it tilted the geostrategic balance in the Black Sea in favour of Moscow.

There are several factors that will shape Turkey's response to the developments in Crimea. Turkey's ethno-linguistic and historical ties with the Crimean Tatars, good bilateral trade and energy relations with Russia, obligations of NATO membership and obligations stemming from the Montreux Convention are highly likely to come at play in this regard.

Ethno-linguistic ties and kinship with the Crimean Tatars

From a historical perspective, Turkey's links to the Crimean Peninsula date back to the golden age of the Ottoman Empire. Crimea, which then was almost entirely populated by the Turkic-speaking Sunni Tatars, was conquered by the Ottomans in 15th century and became a khanate under the Ottoman Empire. However, the Ottoman Empire ceased control of the peninsula in 1774 as a result of the Treaty of *Küçük Kaynarca* concluded with the Russian Empire, when Crimea was granted autonomy. After this brief episode of autonomy, in 1783 the Crimean Peninsula which was vital to Russian plans to gain access to the "warm waters" was then incorporated into the Russian Empire. The loss of Crime to Russia, dealt a severe blow to the Ottoman Empire's supremacy in the Black Sea Basin. In 1944, Stalin deported the Tatar population in Crimea to Central Asia for allegedly collaborating with the Nazis. Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev transferred the sovereignty of Crimea to the then Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as a gift, at a time when the dissolution of the Soviet Union was deemed highly unlikely. In 1989, as the Soviet Union began to dissolve, the Crimean Tatars began returning to their homeland. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Republic, Crimea has remained an autonomous republic in Ukraine.

Due to the legacy of the Stalin era and the sufferings inflicted by the mass deportation, the annexation of the peninsula by the Kremlin, was met with vocal opposition by the Tatar community and was therefore regarded the most undesirable scenario.

As the crisis in Crimea started unfolding, Ankara has asserted that its primary goal is to ensure the safety and well being of the 266,000-strong Tatar population in Crimea⁴. Turkey's strong rhetoric is attributed to the ethnic, linguistic and religious ties between the two communities. Moreover, Turkey is home to four million Tatar descendants, which increases Ankara's sensitivity and deems it impossible for Ankara to remain a bystander to the events in the Crimean Peninsula. However, analysts argue that Ankara's

⁴ Andrew Wilson, "Ten things you should know about Crimea", ECFR Blog, 3 March 2014, http://ecfr.eu/blog/entry/ten_things_you_should_know_about_crimea. Retrieved 18 March 2014.

advocacy of the Crimean Tatars is likely to remain at the rhetorical level mainly due to economy and trade-related reasons.

Lucrative Trade, Energy and Tourism Links with Moscow

Ankara and Moscow have been going through a golden age in their bilateral relations. Aside from differences over the crisis in Syria, both parties continue to engage in a constructive manner and follow a pragmatic approach highlighting their common interests. Moreover, the intensity of high-level exchanges between Ankara and Moscow as well as the good personal relations between Russia's Putin and Turkey's Erdoğan demonstrate the intensity and depth of bilateral political relations. The High Level Cooperation Council designed to form a strategic partnership between Turkey and Russia, has become the main platform for bilateral relations since its establishment in May 2010. The bilateral relations have flourished through various channels of mechanisms and dialogues such as the Joint Strategic Planning Group, the Mixed Intergovernmental Russian-Turkish Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation and the Public Forum.

According to the latest figures, Russia is Turkey's second largest trade partner after Germany with a trade volume over 32 billion USD⁵. Russia is not only one of Ankara's key trade partners, but has also become a key destination for Turkish investments and businesses. Turkish construction conglomerates are quite active in Russia. Moreover, Turkey tops the list of most preferred holiday destinations by Russians, with sea resorts such as Alanya and Belek attracting more than 4 million Russian tourists in 2013⁶.

Apart from that Russia holds the key in terms of oil and natural gas supplies. Russia accounts for 58 percent of Turkey's natural gas and 12 percent of oil needs⁷. In addition, according to the 2010 memorandum signed by Ankara and Moscow, Russia committed 20 billion USD to assist Turkey in building its first nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, on Turkey's Mediterranean coast.

The multifaceted nature of cooperation between Turkey and Ankara, together with the trade and energy-related interests at stake, will be a key determinant of Ankara's response to the events in Crimea. Given the interdependence between the two economies, Ankara is likely to avoid direct confrontation with Moscow over Crimea.

In a statement released after the referendum, Ankara has joined Washington and Brussels in reiterating its commitment to the territorial integrity, sovereignty, political independence and unity of Ukraine and denouncing the outcome of the so-called referendum which is deemed illegitimate and contravenes the principles of international

⁵ TUIK Foreign Trade Statistics, http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=1046, Retrieved: 18.04.2014

⁶ "Turkey, Russia sign tourism action plan", *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 17 March 2014, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/164562/turkey-russia-sign-tourism-action-plan.html>. Retrieved: 18.04.2014

⁷ İrem Karakaya, "Turkey's energy needs limit diplomatic efforts for Crimea", *Today's Zaman*, 16 March 2014, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-342055-turkeys-energy-needs-limit-diplomatic-efforts-for-crimea.html>. Retrieved: 18.04.201

law⁸. Reiterating its commitment to the protection of the rights of the Crimean Tatars, Ankara has once again urged the parties to find a political solution to the issue.

Allegiance to the Atlantic Partnership vs. Montreux Convention

In case of action by NATO, Turkey is likely to seek a balance between its commitments under the Transatlantic Alliance and the 1936 Montreux Convention governing passage from the Turkish straits (namely the Dardanelles and Bosphorus) to the Black Sea in times of peace and war. Turkey enjoys the gatekeeper position in the Black Sea. The Montreux Convention gives Turkey the legal right to limit the passage and tonnage of vessels belonging to non-littoral states during wartime.

A case in point in this regard is Turkey's response to the Georgia crisis, when Turkey restricted the passage of the US navy vessels from the Dardanelles. It did so, in accordance with its rights emanating from the Montreux Convention on the Governing the Regime of the Straits.

What role for Ankara?

Given the context, Ankara's room for manoeuvre seems to be limited to providing economic and humanitarian support to the Tatar community in Crimea. In the short run, given the interdependence of Turkish and Russian economies and Turkey's reliance on Russian gas for more than half of its natural gas needs, it seems highly unlikely for Turkey to impose sanctions on Russia. Turkey favours a political solution and advocates respect for the rights of the Tatar community. In line with this stance, the role that Turkey can assume in this crisis is that of a mediator. Due to its good bilateral relations with Russia, and its ethno-linguistic affinity to the Crimean Tatars, Ankara can mediate between the two to ensure the betterment and the protection of the rights of Tatars in Crimea.

The crisis in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea seems to have injected new energy to the Trans-Atlantic relationship which was seriously shattered after the US intervention in Iraq. As Robert Kagan famously put it, the divergence of approaches by the two actors gave the impression that "Americans are from Mars, while Europeans are from Venus"⁹. The member states' decreasing national defence budgets have been criticized by the US and the National Security Agency (NSA) spying scandal has only added up to the mistrust between the two sides of the Atlantic.

The crisis in Ukraine, from this perspective has emerged as a cause of common concern that unifies the two sides of the Atlantic. Analysts argue that formulating an effective policy response to the Crimean conundrum will necessitate cooperation between the two actors, which in turn will lead them to overcome their differences that have lately bedevilled the future and the foundations of the transatlantic relationship.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, "No: 86, 17 March 2014, Press Release Regarding the Referendum held in Crimea", *Latest Press Releases*, 17 March 2014, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no-86-17-march-2014-press-release-regarding-the-referendum-held-in-crimea.en.mfa>. Retrieved 2 April 2014.

⁹ Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness," *Policy Review*, No. 113 (June and July 2002), <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/kagan.htm>. Retrieved 2 April 2014.

The annexation of Crimea also dominated the agenda of US President during his first official visit to Brussels in late March. When Obama stated that the Kremlin's intention to increase the divisions between Europe and the US with their action in Crimea was a miscalculation, he was making a point¹⁰.

Acknowledging the EU's dependency of Russian gas for its energy needs, Obama also indicated that the Trans Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which is currently being negotiated with the EU, will make it easier for the US to sell gas to the EU which in turn will reduce to the EU's reliance on Russian gas. The EU, which relies on Russian gas for more than 40 percent of its energy needs, will still have to differentiate its energy suppliers. EU's dependency on Russian gas presents the most serious challenge that will determine how far the EU can afford to go as regards sanctions.

The EU has convened numerous extraordinary meetings at the level of foreign ministers and heads of state and government in order to formulate an effective response to the developments in Ukraine. Within the context of the EU's policy of targeted restrictive measures, 33 individuals that have taken part in actions aimed at undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity have been subject to a travel ban and an asset freeze¹¹. Moreover, EU leaders agreed to suspend the EU-Russia Summits which have been the highest platform for bilateral relations. However, the EU has not resorted to economic sanctions, yet.

Foreign ministers of NATO countries in their latest meeting on 1 April decided to suspend the 28-nation bloc's cooperation with Moscow¹². In addition, NATO Foreign Ministers ordered military planners to draft plans to strengthen the defence of the Eastern European allies.

Against this background, as the West is struggling to respond to the annexation of Crimea, Turkey finds itself in a very delicate position. By denouncing the legitimacy of the outcome of the referendum in Crimea, Ankara has signalled that it will align with the West. This however does not mean that Ankara will be likely to adopt sanctions against Moscow. Finding a political solution through diplomatic means remains the most desirable course of action that Ankara will prefer. In this regard, Moscow's treatment of the Crimean Tatar population will be a key determinant shaping Ankara's policy.

¹⁰ "President Obama: Russia 'miscalculated' Crimea reaction", *BBC News*, 26 March 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26755129>. Retrieved 2 April 2014.

¹¹ European Council, "EU strengthens sanctions against actions undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity", 21 March 2014, 8049/14, Brussels, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/141741.pdf. Retrieved 2 April 2014.

¹² NATO, *Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers*, 1 April 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_108501.htm. Retrieved 2 April 2014.