

## **A Strategic Partnership: Turkey-Ukraine Relations**

The ongoing struggle of the West and Russia to influence Ukraine since the country gained its independence has shown the important position of Ukraine in terms of global policies. But while it has tried to follow a pragmatic balance policy between Russia and the West after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has not been able to establish a stable political structure in the present. The country has experienced many political crises and domestic disturbances since the Orange Revolution of 2004 up until today and entered a tougher period with the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. Moreover, the pro-Russia militia in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Eastern Ukraine have seized control and declared independence unilaterally, and this situation has led to the continuation of conflict in the country into the present.

### **Everyone Wants a Slice of the Ukrainian Pie**

The fact that Russia's Black Sea Fleet remained in the Crimean Port of Sevastopol, which is inside the sovereign borders of Ukraine, after the dissolution of the USSR, the priority position of the region within Russia's "inner circle" security concept, and its role in the distribution of Russian natural gas are just a few examples of how important Ukraine is for Russia.

In addition, such names as Gennady Zyuganov, the President of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, who made important contributions to geopolitical discussions during a period intended to define Russia's foreign policy, Vladimir Jirinovski, the President of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, who is known for his nationalist tendencies, and Aleksey Mitrofanov, all defend that Russia should unite with Ukraine, starting with Crimea.

One of the important markets in Eastern Europe with its population of 45 million, the Ukraine has an importance for the West as it is the main route for the transportation of Russian natural gas to Europe and also has a Black Sea coastline.

Considering that today's international system is a multi-polar one in contrast to the Cold War period, Turkey's relationship as a regional power with Ukraine is gaining as much importance as the activities of global powers in this country.

### **High Potential for Relations**

Turkey-Ukraine relations which have made important progress since the dissolution of the Soviet Union have a high strategical value for both countries. Whereas being riparian states of the Black Sea becomes prominent as one of determinant factors for its bilateral relations, the fact that Turkey obtains a large part of its Russian natural gas via Ukraine shows the importance of these relations.

Turkey and Ukraine have made progress in security issues recently, while supporting each other's policies in such international organizations as the European Council, UN, and OSCE. Whereas the NATO-Ukraine Commission, BLACKSEAFOR and Operation Black Sea Harmony have had an important place in military relationships, the cooperation made in defense industry has reached significant levels.

Ukraine as a country with a developed defense industry and Turkey as a country wanting to make progress in this field have carried out some important projects together in recent years. The parties signed agreements on the joint production of a radar system in 2016 and agreed on the joint production of such military equipment as armored vehicles, missiles, and unmanned air vehicles.

Turkey's technology transfer expectation for the defense industry in recent years was not satisfied by NATO countries. However, it is proposed that significant progress can be made on joint production and technology transfer as a result of its relationships developed with Ukraine. If Ukraine shares its know-how on this subject with Turkey and joint production starts, the relationship between these countries will be elevated to a highly strategical point.

Tourism also stands out as one of the important cooperation areas between Turkey and Ukraine. It is stated over 1 million Ukrainian tourists visited Turkey in 2016. The number of Turkish tourists visiting Ukraine is also increasing every year. The countries started to implement visa-free travel in 2012 and passport-free travel as of June 2017. The possibility provided to citizens of each country to visit the other with only identity cards is also of importance in terms of showing the point reached in bilateral relations.

Besides this, trade between Turkey and Ukraine is important in terms of showing the level of bilateral relations. While Turkey is exporting textiles, machinery industry products, cleaning substances and citrus fruits to Ukraine, it imports iron-steel, coal and other chemical industry products from Ukraine. Hundreds of Turkish firms also have important investments in Ukraine.

Trade volumes between Turkey and Ukraine have been stuck at the level of \$4 billion in the last few years due to the shrinkage in Ukraine's economy which started with the Crimea crisis. However, it is stated that the trade potential between the two countries is much higher. It is understood that once the Ukraine overcomes and recovers from the crisis, the progress in political relations will reflect on trade as well. We can foresee that there will be a significant momentum in trade within a short time if the meetings held by the parties for a free trade agreement are concluded positively.

Crimean Turks, [\[1\]](#) Ahiska Turks and the Gagauz living in Ukraine represent a very important connection in the relations between the two countries. But while Turkey deepens its bilateral relations with this country where its kindred minorities reside, it is not possible for Ankara to ignore developments in Ukraine, particularly in Crimea.

This high potential for relations between Turkey and Ukraine gained a significant momentum with the start of the Ukraine crisis, especially with the annexation of Crimea by Russia.

### **Annexation of Crimea and Developing Relations**

In November 2013, Viktor Yanukovich, the then President of Ukraine, canceled the partnership agreement to be made with the European Union and cooperated with Russia. This act then led to the opposition reacting and was followed by extensive protests in the country starting in Kiev. While Ukraine was rapidly turning into a crisis region, the European Union supported the opposition and Russia supported Yanukovich. Russia conducted a military landing and took control of Crimea on February 27, 2014, ushering in a new era for the Black Sea Region, with Ukraine at its head.

During this period the Republic of Turkey stated that the territorial integrity of Ukraine should be respected. It identified the rights of Crimean Turks as the most important issue and continued its arguments over this issue. Apart from these developments, Turkey followed the crisis carefully from the beginning and pursued a cautious policy. Contrary to the impulsive behaviors of the West and Russia against the exacerbation of protests and events on the street, Turkey invited the parties to build a consensus. Stating at every chance that Ukraine's territorial integrity should be respected, Ankara met with all parties and sought a point of consensus pursuant to its diplomacy.

The policy Turkey adopted as of the beginning of the Ukraine crisis was quite different than the classic logic of the Cold War. During this period, a Turkish foreign policy was presented that tried to realize Turkey's own arguments rather than following the policies of the West. Expressing its support for Crimean Turks on all occasions and attaching importance to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Turkey did not participate in the sanctions imposed on Russia, even though the two had many disagreements on political issues. However, after Russia increasingly engaged in the Syrian crisis in 2015 and augmented its aggressive behavior, Turkey and Ukraine experienced an important rapprochement.

When Turkey shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M attack aircraft violating the border on November 24, 2015, Turkey and Russia entered a serious crisis in relations. This incident created repercussions in Ukraine. The Prime Minister of the period, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, and National Security and Defense Council President, Oleksandr Turchynov, notified Turkey of their support immediately after the incident. Two parliamentarians from the Ukrainian Parliament showed their support for Turkey by putting a star at the entrance of the Turkish Embassy. The support given to Turkey by Ukraine was not limited to state

authorities; the public was also very active on this matter.

A video made for the Turkish Air Forces which quickly racked up more than one million people views, carried the increasing sympathy of the Ukrainian people for Turkey to social platforms. Furthermore, Ukraine's participation in the 61st Eurovision song contest with a song about the deportation of Crimean Turks in 1944 improved the friendship between the people of Turkey and Ukraine.

Turkey-Ukraine High-Level Strategic Council (HLSC) Meeting which was held in Ankara in 2011 for the first time, was also held in 2012 and 2013, but could not be held in 2014 and 2015 due to the crisis environment in Ukraine. At the meeting held in 2016, President of Ukraine Poroshenko stated that the relationship between Turkey and Ukraine had reached a level higher than ever before and said, "We are strategical partners with Turkey." Turchynov expressed that the key point of a strategical partnership between Turkey and Ukraine was military cooperation. As a matter of fact, in the following period, the parties agreed on joint projects on such issues as the production of armored vehicles, tanks, and missiles. Afterwards, the naval forces of Turkey and Ukraine organized a joint military exercise in the Marmara Sea and the Black Sea in March 2016. Moreover, the media reported the news that Turkey had provided significant amounts of equipment to the Ukraine army and would also be giving financial support.

## Conclusion

Although Turkey and Russia entered a process of normalizing their relations, the countries' differences and conflicts of interest on the Black Sea, Caucasus and the Middle East are still continuing. Considering that Ukraine and Syria are to the northern and southern points of Turkey, under current conditions, it becomes evident that relations between Turkey and Ukraine should be evaluated over strategical and geopolitical calculations. Within this framework, the strategical cooperation and unity to be developed by Turkey with Ukraine in the Black Sea Region have the potential to break the threat created by Russia at the southern part of Turkey through Syria and to narrow down its room for maneuver. This current situation can also be evaluated as a proportional response.

Relations between Turkey and Ukraine which gained a significant momentum in the last three years in terms of politics, military, diplomacy, culture and economy, have evolved into a strategical partnership. In particular, the joint actions of Turkey and Ukraine in the crises they have experienced with Russia and their cooperation in the Black Sea Region will provide important advantages for both parties in the future. Furthermore, considering the export and import goods of both countries, it is seen that they do not have competing economies; on the contrary, they are trading partners who can complement each other. All these developments will carry Turkey-Ukraine relations to a much more advanced level in the following period.

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[1] The people of the region who are known as "Crimean Tatars" or "Crimean Tatar Turks" by the Turkish public say that this term sits uneasily with them. The people of the region do not identify themselves as Tatar and say that this is a term used by the Russians to insult them. As they stated in the interviews we made during our visit to the region that they are Crimean Turks, we considered it more appropriate to use this term.