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International
Centre
for Policy
Studies

14 Instytutska, office 10, Kyiv, 01001, Ukraine
Phone (380 44) 279-88-23 | office@icps.kiev.ua | www.icps.com.ua

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Turkey: a friend, a partner, a competitor?



On March 20 an official visit to Kyiv by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President of the Turkish Republic, is expected. While Ukraine's neighbors have formed two distinct groups regarding their stance to the Russian aggression and the conflict in the east of the country, Turkey's attitude has raised more questions than provided answers. It has not sided clearly and unequivocally with Ukraine as did Poland and a number of other countries having traditional pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation. Nor it is trying to find a balance between Kyiv and Moscow in search of political or economic dividends as Belarus does. The country's leaders have made official statements in support of Ukrainian territorial integrity but have not joined the European or US sanctions. Moreover, in the heat of the hostilities in Donbas and sanctions against Russia launched by the West, it has stretched a helping hand to Moscow in terms of adopting a special decision on increasing supplies of Turkish goods to the Russian market. The country is an important player in terms of military and security in the Black Sea region: suffice it to recall its role during the Rus-

sian-Georgian war of 2008. Its policy with regard to the Crimea as a constituent part of Ukraine may be changing in the ways not necessarily beneficial for Kyiv, and in the energy sector Ukraine has already faced a rather unfriendly approach regarding liquid gas supplies. The situation in Ukraine and around it, the attitude towards Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and the future of the Black Sea Basin, and Turkish role under critical circumstances may become one of decisive factors in the near future. Therefore, what is Turkey for Ukraine: a friend, a partner, or a competitor? And what will it become tomorrow?

After the Russian annexation of the Crimea in March 2014 the Turkish authorities have officially voiced a grave concern over the socioeconomic situation and securing the rights of Crimean Tatars on the peninsula. This question was raised during the phone conversation of then Prime Minister R.Erdogan and President V.Putin. Ankara has not recognized the results of the so-called Crimean referendum of March 16, 2014 and has repeatedly declared its adherence to the principle of territorial integrity of Ukraine, as well as called for solution of

the Russian-Ukrainian conflict based on the international law rather than on unilateral use of force.

At the same time, the Turkish leaders have categorically refused to introduce sanctions against Russia as the EU and the US did. Furthermore, as of today Turkey is the only country violating the UN General Assembly Resolution dated March 27, 2014 and continues using transportation (ferry) lines for sailing to the Russian-occupied Crimea.

The Turkish leadership prefers to pursue a pragmatic policy of adhering to common and mutually excluding interests, i.e. to get maximum benefits where possible while using moralizing rhetoric on the issues where Turkey and Russia have quite opposite views. This seemingly ambiguous policy is based on the following: (1) traditionally wary posture regarding any Russian military activity in the Black Sea region, especially armed forces buildup in the Crimea. Russia is regarded as competitor and a threat, especially with Russian presence in the Crimea which has a symbolic significance for Turkey; (2) its own “Turkocentric” perception of the region, the role and mission of Turkey in the Black Sea and Mediterranean basins, in former Soviet territories or in the Middle East, deepening the divide with the EU regarding a number of domestic and foreign policy issues; (3) the wish to capitalize on any opportunities for strengthening its own political or economic interests, on the one hand, and avoiding challenges that may endanger these interests (especially those related to energy, given its dependence on Russian gas supplies), on the other.

From beginning of 2000s the economic boom in Turkish-Russian bilateral relations has been observed in two major sectors: gas imports and tourism. Nowadays, Russia is the second largest trading partner for Turkey after Germany. In 2014 the total trade turnover between Turkey and the Russian Federation amounted to USD34 billion, mostly due to imports of Russian gas covering up to 60 per cent of Turkish needs in this energy carrier. To compare, the trade between Ukraine and Turkey over the same period has totaled USD 4.86 billion. At the same time, according to information from the Russian Central Bank, Turkey accounts for the bulk of services supplied to Russia (tourism in the first place). Thus, in 2014 Turkey was the most popular destination for Russian tourists, with the country having hosted about 4 million of Russians. The larger tourist flow

is only generated by Germany. One cannot also fail to mention civil engineering and agriculture: Russia provides an important export market for these Turkish industries.

In 2010 a High-Level Cooperation Council was established between Turkey and Russia under the auspices of which about 40 contracts were concluded over 4 years, including the treaty on visa-free regime. With time, Moscow has come up with an initiative to add strategic areas for cooperation, including military and political sphere. The case for nurturing such hopes was made by two events mistakenly taken by Russia as hints for possible strategic partnership.

First, in 2003 the Turkish parliament refused to grant permission for use of the country’s territory by US troops during the maneuvers related to the war in Iraq. Second, in 2008, referring to the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits, Ankara did not let US warships to the Black Sea coast of Georgia against which Russia was waging a so-called “five-day war” at the time. Apparently this has provided a reason for President V.Putin to hope for deepening not only economic but strategic relations with the Turkish leader R.Erdogan as a potential counterbalance to the US influence in Southern Caucasus and Middle East.

However, the Russian-Turkish cooperation is unlikely to proceed beyond certain economic aspects. And the fact that Turkey is a NATO member country is not the only reason. Both countries have quite different vision of a number of regional problems: civil war in Syria (Erdogan supports local opposition leaders while Putin supports president B. al-Assad), Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Ankara sides with Baku while Russia is Armenia’s ally); and annexation of the Crimea (Turkey has repeatedly voiced the position as to inadmissibility of neglecting the basic principle of borders inviolability in Europe).

This also relates to strategic infrastructure-related initiatives, in particular the Russo-Turkish pipeline “Turkish Stream”. President Putin made a hurried announcement about its inception during his visit to Turkey on December 1, 2014. However, immediately after his departure the Turkish Government stated unambiguously that the alternative Azeri-Turkish project TANAP is an absolute priority for the country. The same position was

reconfirmed during the recent visit to Ankara of Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan. In essence, in December Botas and Gazprom corporations have only signed a declaration of intent according to which the Russian gas monopolist undertook to prepare a preliminary feasibility study for its further submission to the Turkish side. Meanwhile, the festive opening of TANAP construction took place on March 17. By 2019 this gas main will allow diversifying gas supplies to the Turkish domestic market and considerably decreasing current Russian 60 percent share.

In private meetings with Ukrainian Embassy representatives in Ankara Turkish diplomats admit not having strategic relationships with Russia, while there does exist a certain economic agenda limited primarily to tourism and gas imports. In their view, lack of mutual understanding between Ankara and Russia on the Syrian, Ukrainian, Iraqi, Caucasian, and Egyptian issues presents an insurmountable obstacle for building strategic relations with Russia which does not have any prospects for establishing cooperation with Turkey in security field.

On the other hand, one must not expect a stricter Turkish stance towards Russian aggression towards Ukraine just because of differences in strategic interests between the two countries. Apart from energy dependence on Russia which will not disappear before 2019, within the next three months this process might be stalled due to Turkish parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2015. The President-led Justice and Development Party expects to win the elections along the lines used back in 2002, i.e. from the times when Erdogan first came to power. One of the secrets of Erdogan's political longevity and his high ratings lies in steady growth of the Turkish economy and constant increase in living standards in the country. The lion's share of these economic results has come from developing strong economic ties with major regional powers like Germany, Iran, and Russia. Under conditions of slowdown in economic growth and almost 30 per cent devaluation of the national currency over the past year, introduction of sanctions and limiting economic ties of Turkish businessmen with Russia would mean a voluntary political suicide for the President and his party. It is obvious that not a single Turkish leader would make such a sacrifice for the sake of Ukraine.

It is exactly the situation when economic interests determine further political steps. In particular, by staying away from sanctions against the Russian Federation, Turkey has not only kept the volumes of its agro-industrial products export but has increased them due to signing a protocol on expansion of Turkish foodstuffs exports to Russia. Meat and milk products, fish and vegetables from Turkey have allowed Russia to mitigate the negative effect of its self-imposed bans on food products from the West.

A traditionally wary attitude of Turkish politicians to large social protests, on the scale of those that took place in Taksim Square in Istanbul in 2013, have also played their role in defining Turkey position with regard to the Ukrainian crisis. Revolutionary events in neighboring countries have never been regarded by Turkish leaders positively (let's recall their reaction to the 2004 Orange Revolution). Having stability rather than revolutions and unpredictability, especially in the Black Sea region, makes the cornerstone of Erdogan's foreign policy. Therefore, the 2014 Revolution of Dignity has been perceived by the Turkish leaders with the same concern.

Thus, relations between Kyiv and Ankara have reached the stage when new priorities and points of contact must be sought. Such contact points may lie primarily in the economic field: during visits of Turkish leaders abroad they are always accompanied by large business delegations looking for new trade and investment opportunities, and current visit to Kyiv is not an exception. Even under conditions of Russian aggression and domestic economic pressures known to everyone, opportunities still exist for developing on the Ukrainian territory of projects in such sectors as textiles and apparel manufacturing, food industry, agriculture, civil engineering, banking, marine logistics (construction of port terminals in the Dnieper and Southern Bug estuaries for river-to-sea cargo transshipments). There is much potential for bilateral cooperation in shipbuilding, aircraft building, and energy sector. Trade and investment flows could be channeled to southern oblasts of Ukraine (Kherson, Mykolayiv, Odesa and Zaporizhia) where favorable conditions could be created for Turkish businesses. In this regard, a recently advanced idea of holding a bilateral business forum under the name '21st Century Black Sea Economic Initiative' deserves attention.

A new momentum could be provided by conclusion of the free trade agreement with Turkey. However, due to the current state of the Ukrainian economy, in the next few years the major increase in bilateral trade cannot be expected. Moreover, during the negotiation process Ukraine must duly protect its domestic business interests, as Turkey is today in a much more advantageous position.

It must be clearly recognized that, as of now, Ukraine is more in need of Turkey than Turkey may need Ukraine. Ukrainian leadership aspires for the unified front of support. By its refusal from sanctions and active contacts with Russia and the occupied Crimea, Turkey does not contribute to pressure

on the aggressor which could lead to fastest possible resolution of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Together with its US partners, Ukraine must work closely with Ankara regarding its policy with regard to sanctions and the Crimea. At the same time, there is a need to think of new mutually advantageous economic and energy projects; Ukraine must capitalize on a wary attitude of Turkey towards Russian imperialism and on the Turkish business willingness to earn maximum profit in the neighbors' markets. Ukrainian diplomacy must propose to Ankara a revisited strategic partnership and a new vision of both the region and Europe where both countries could provide for their national interests.

The aim of the publication is to provide analysis of Ukraine's foreign policy in the context of global processes in the region and the world, as well as an overview of major world events that may have an impact on the further development of Ukraine and the region. Special attention is paid to the European integration of Ukraine, in particular implementation of Ukraine–EU Association Agreement.

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Idea of the project: Vasyl Filipchuk

Team of ICPS experts: Anton Krut, Yaroslav Voitko, Iryna Ivashko

ICPS experts are open to communicate with media. To receive professional comments on the issues covered by Foreign Policy Insight publication please contact Communication Director Mr. Vladyslav Reshetnyak:
vreshetnyak@icps.kiev.ua