MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINEVİ

Turkish Foreign Policy and the 2014 Crisis in Ukraine

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Abstract

Beginning with the erupting of tensions in Ukraine in late February onwards, Turkey has been walking a tightrope in its foreign policy between its Western allies and Russia. On multiple occasions, Ankara showed its support for the territorial integrity and political unity of Ukraine, but did not take any concrete measures against Russian aggressiveness. Some particular factors would predict a more aggressive reaction of Turkey to the crisis in Ukraine. To name a few, the increasingly active and engaged nature of Turkish foreign policy under AKP rule and the manifested Islamic identity and positioning as the leader of the Muslim world, the significance of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars in the domestic politics, the obligations as a long-term NATO ally and a EU candidate, a pro-status quo foreign policy in Black Sea, and its understandably acute security concerns with regard to Russian expansionism. But in fact what we see is a reserved policy which stems from the fact that Ankara prefers to downplay the differences in opinion in favor of good economic relations with Moscow. The cost of upsetting the balance in its relations with Russia indeed is very high.

This analysis attempts to contribute to the deeper understanding of Turkey's policy towards the crisis in Ukraine by exploring the reasons that lie behind Turkeys reaction to the crisis. Turkey's response to the Ukrainian crisis was a surprisingly reserved one. Many factors related to Turkey's domestic politics and international geostrategic situation would lead us to expect that Turkey's response would be an aggressive one, especially given the increasingly active and engaged nature of Turkish foreign policy under AKP (Justice and Development Party).

The Islamic identity of the party – manifested in the party's positioning of itself as the leader of the Muslim world [1] – may be assumed to have obliged the party to pursue a policy towards Russia similar to the vehemently critical and even militant policies directed toward Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi or Israeli President Shimon Peres, as

[1] Ömer TAŞPINAR, Turkey the New Model, *Brookings Institute*, 24.04.2012, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/04/24-turkey-new-model-taspinar> 12.06.2014.

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINEVİ

the Crimean Tatars are no less Muslim than the Syrians, Egyptians, and Palestinians.

In the same vein, the Turkish public demand from the government for the pursuance of an active and aggressive policy in the Ukrainian crisis was very high due to the historical and cultural importance of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars for Turkey.[2] Meanwhile, AKP rulers did not want to take the risk of being projected as weak on the eve of the March 2014 elections, which might have resulted from a failure to protect these ethnic – or "outside" – Turks.[3]

Shifting from domestic to international contextual factors, as a long-term NATO member and an EU candidate, Turkey was expected by its Western allies to jump on the anti-Russian bandwagon and impose sanctions against Russia.[4] Further, given Turkey's pro-status quo foreign policy in the Black Sea, and its understandably acute security concerns with regard to Russian expansionism, it would not have come as a surprise if Ankara went beyond a carefully structured rhetoric and join its old allies.

Finally, the sensitivity of the issue of self-determination after the referendum in the Crimea rings major alarm bells over the territorial integrity of Turkey and its turbulent neighborhood.[5] Particularly given international support for Kurds in their ongoing struggle for autonomy/independence, Turkey's interest certainly is to be particularly vocal its opposition to any action that may lead to increased acceptance of self-determination as a precedent.[6]

Despite all these factors suggesting that Turkey was to respond openly and even aggressively to Russia's actions, Ankara's approach towards the crisis was highly measured, verbally supporting the territorial integrity of

[2]Soner CAĞAPTAY and James F. JEFREY, Turkey's Muted Reaction to the Crimean Crisis, *The Washington Institute,* 04.03.2014, available at < http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-muted-reaction-to-the-crimean-crisis>, 01.07.2014.

[3] Alexander ROGOZHIN, Crisis in Ukraine – Why Turkey is in no hurry to impose anti-Russian Sanctions, *New Eastern Outlook*, 07.04.2014, available at <http://journal-neo.org/2014/04/07/rus-krizis-v-ukraine-pochemu-turtsiya-ne-toropitsya-s-antirossijskimi-sanktsiyami/> 01.07.2014.

[4] Dorian JONES, Ukraine Crisis Puts Strain on Turkey-Russia Ties, *Eurasianet*, 07.05.2014, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68351> 01.07.2014.

[5] Levent BAŞTÜRK, Turkey's policy towards Ukraine: Crimean crisis, *World Bulletin*, 02.04.2014, available at <http://www.worldbulletin.net/news-analysis/132095/turkeys-policy-towards-ukraine-crimean-crisis >, 01.07.2014.

[6] Yossi ALPHER, The Ukraine/Crimea crisis: ramifications for the Middle East, *Open Democracy*, 08.05.2014, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/yossi-alpher/ukrainecrimea-crisis-ramifications-for-middle-east> 01.07.2014.

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINEVİ

Ukraine in line with its Western allies while avoiding any direct criticism of or actions against Russia's regionally – and, arguably, internationally – destabilizing moves. In fact, Ankara had been walking a tightrope in its relations with the Russian Federation and the West for over a decade, and thus, in the face of the crisis in Ukraine, found itself caught between the two rival camps. As making a choice between its commitments to its Western allies and its economic and political relationship with Moscow was undesirable, Turkey opted for neither.

How Has Turkey Reacted to the Crisis?

The reaction by Turkey to the Ukrainian events has been quite restrained. For months, Turkey's policies reflected an attitude of indifference to the developments that led to the downfall of the pro-Russian government in Ukraine, at least relative to other challenges to regimes.[7]

The then prime minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, did not apply to the Ukrainian crisis, the phrase "who came to power with elections should go by elections only" – which he used after the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi and during Turkey's Gezi protests in the summer of 2013.[8] Indeed, Turkey started to take an active position only from late February 2014 onwards, after deadly clashes began between pro-Western and pro-Russian groups in Crimea. The first high-level reaction came from the then Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu on 27 February, when key buildings in the Crimean capital of Simferopol were invaded by pro-Russian paramilitary groups. Davutoğlu stressed the importance that Turkey attaches to democracy and democracy-based political stability in Ukraine's future.[9] The following day, Davutoğlu paid an unscheduled three-day visit to Kiev to discuss the developments in Crimea to consult with the acting President Oleksandr Turchynov, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and Deputy Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchytsia. Speaking at a joint press conference with his Ukrainian counterpart, Davutoğlu expressed Turkey's support for the territorial

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[7] Levent BAŞTÜRK, Turkey's policy towards Ukraine: Crimean crisis, *World Bulletin*, 02.04.2014, available at <http://www.worldbulletin.net/news-analysis/132095/turkeys-policy-towards-ukraine-crimean-crisis >, 01.07.2014.

[8] Erdoğan: Perde arkasında illegal örgütler var, *Ege Postası*, 14.06.2013, Available at <http://www.egepostasi.com/yhaber.asp?haberid=35099 > 07.06.2014.

[9] Turkey closely following developments in Crimea, *Anadolu Agency*, 27.02.2014, available at <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/294354--turkey-closely-following-developments-in-crimea> 04.06.2014

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINEVİ

integrity and political unity of Ukraine.[10] Prime Minister Erdoğan also expressed his concerns over Crimea to Russian President Vladimir Putin during a phone conversation on March 4, stating that Russia should protect the rights of Crimean Tatars as they do those of the Russian majority and other minorities in Crimea. He also emphasized the need to find a solution to the crisis within the territorial integrity of Ukraine.[11]

In the following days, similar concerns were repeatedly expressed by Turkish statesman.[12] Following the vote in the Crimean Parliament to hold a referendum on whether to secede from Ukraine to join Russia, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release condemning the resolution as a dangerous step that may create negative results in the region and beyond. The statement also indicated that the crisis in Ukraine should be resolved on the basis of the political unity and territorial integrity of the country, within the framework of democratic principles and in accordance with international law and agreements. It urged all sides to act with restraint and common sense to ease the tension in Crimea. It was further stated that the Autonomous Republic of Crimea was a particularly sensitive issue for Turkey because it hosts the Crimean Tatars, the cultural and historic kinsmen of the Turkish people.[13]

Turkey also voted in favor of the adoption of a resolution in the UN General Assembly along with 100 other countries "calling upon states not to recognize changes in the status of the Crimea region," **despite strong rebukes from Moscow.**[14] Further, the Foreign Ministry and Davutoğlu's statements with regard to a separate referendum held in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk were once again supportive of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, arguing that the results of the referendum are null and void and

[10] Fm Davutoğlu in Ukraine, *Basın Yayın Enformasyon Genel Müdürlüğü*, 01.03.2014, available at <http://www.byegm.gov.tr/english/agenda/fm-davutoglu-in-ukraine/54892 02.06.2014.

[11] #give title (please adjust all footnotes according to the editorial guidelines) http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/crimea-russia-turkey-crisis-challenge-opportunity.html

[12] Cemil Cicek: "Autonomous Republic of Crimea occupies special place in the relationship of Turkey and Ukraine", *the State Council of the Republic of Crimea*, 06.04.2013, available at <http://www.rada.crimea.ua/en/news/06_04_301_5>, 01.07.2014.

[13] Press Release Regarding the Latest Developments in Crimea, *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs,* 06.03.2014, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-77_-6-march-2014_-press-release-regarding-the-latest-developments-in-crimea.en.mfa >07.06.2014.

[14] General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not To Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region, *UN General Assembly*, 27.03.2014, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2014/ga11493.doc.htm> 07.06.2014.

therefore not recognized.[15]

While Ankara's approach to the crisis sometimes echoed statements made by its Western allies, it would be a mistake to conclude that Turkey's policies toward Ukraine are pro-Western. Though not comfortable with Moscow's aggressive power politics, Davutoğlu's statements contained no direct criticism of Russian aggressiveness.[16] Ankara remained far from showing determination or firmness, using a very moderate tone and hardly (if ever) voicing an opinion against the Russian strategy in Ukraine. Clearly Ankara did not want to suffer the negative consequences of a political move impacting its relations with Russia.

For example, at a time when the West was increasingly requesting that Turkey assume a more active role,[17] Davutoğlu called for an international approach to deal with the crisis in Ukraine.[18] Attempting to rule out a Russian-Turkish conflict over Crimea, he was quoted by a Turkish newspaper as saying "If anyone attempt to turn the Crimea issue into first a Tatar-Russian and subsequently a Turkish-Russian crisis. We will not let this happen."[19] In an effort to justify Turkey's refusal to join the US and the EU in applying sanctions against Russia, Davutoğlu said "diplomacy is the way, rather than sanctions."[20] He argued that the crisis between Ukraine and Russia is a global one concerning all countries that, instead of isolating Moscow, should be settled by a mutually acceptable compromise.[21]

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[15] Press Release Regarding the Referendum Held in the Eastern Regions of Ukraine, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14.05.2014, available at < http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-148_-14-may-2014_-press-release-regarding-the-referendum-held-in-the-eastern-regions-of-ukraine.en.mfa> 07.06.2014.

[16] Levent BAŞTÜRK, Turkey's policy towards Ukraine: Crimean crisis, World Bulletin, 25.03.2014, available at <http://www.worldbulletin.net/author/levent-basturk/2404/turkeys-policy-towards-ukraine-crimean-crisis>, 08.06.2014.

[17] "Turkey can play active role in Crimea issue": German politician, Anadolu Agency, 19.03.2014, available at <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/303316--quot-turkey-can-play-active-role-in-crimea-issue-quot-german-politician > 01.07.2014.

[18] Davutoğlu: Türk-Rus krizine izin vermeyiz, *Dünya Bülteni*, 03. 03.2015, available at <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/haber/291298/davutoglu-turk-rus-krizine-izin-vermeyiz>, 07.06.2014.

[19] FM Davutoğlu rules out Turkish Russian crisis over Crimea, *Todays Zaman*, 03.03.2014, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-341063-fm-davutoglu-rules-out-turkish-russian-crisis-over-crimea.html>, 10.06.2014.

[20] Turkey pushing diplomacy over sanctions in Crimea crisis, *Todays Zaman,* 18.03.2014, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-342453-turkey-pushing-diplomacy-over-sanctions-in-crimea-crisis.html> 08.06.2014.

[21] Richard WEITZ, Global Insights: Turkey's Russia Policy Put to the Test by Ukraine Crisis, *World Politics Review*, 18.03.2014, available at

International Factors that Shape Turkey's Response

Relations with Russia

Turkey's relations with Russia represent a key determinant for its reaction to the crisis in Ukraine.[22] Economic factors are critically significant here. Russia has been a leading trade partner and has risen to become Turkey's top energy supplier since 2007. Economic relations extend beyond energy trade, as Turkey is also providing Russia with various goods and services such as construction and tourism.[23] Despite some major political differences, including over the ongoing crisis in Syria, Turkey and Russia have been able to maintain certain disputes at a "frozen" level.

Historically Rooted Distrust

In addition to economic factors, security factors – and particularly historical perceptions of insecurity vis-à-vis Russia – also play a large role in shaping Turkey's foreign policy in the region. Centuries-long hostilities have affected the Turkish perception of Russia and the Russians.[24]

Although decades-long diplomatic efforts have helped the two states to build effective mechanisms for solving certain problems and ironing out some former animosities, contemporary Russian-Turkish relations suffer from a political dualism. While the relationship contains cooperation, rivalry and insecurity never disappear.[25] Historical deduced insecurities, coupled with Russia's aim to re-emerge as a superpower, make it difficult for Turkey to ignore the signs of an emerging security dilemma by turning a blind eye to the

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ POLİTİK BİLİMLER FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13636/global-insights-turkey-s-russia-policy-put-to-the-test-by-ukraine-crisis>, 09.06.2014.

[22] Amanda PAUL, Turkey's Crimea Quandary, *Todays Zaman*, 11.03.2014, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/amanda-paul_341805_turkeys-crimea-quandary.html > 08.06.2014.

[23] Ziya ÖNİŞ, Turkey and Post-Soviet States: Potential and Limits Of Regional Power Influence, *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5 (2001), n. 2, 66-74, 69.

[24] Sergey MARKEDONOV and Natalya ULCHENKO, Turkey and Russia: An Evolving Relationship, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19.08.2011, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/08/19/turkey-and-russia-evolving-relationship/8kld> 12.06.2014.

[25] Igor TORBAKOV, Turkey-Russia: Competition and Cooperation, *Eurasianet*, 26.12. 2002, available at <www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav122702.shtml> 11.06.2014.

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINEVİ

threat-like signals coming from its northern neighbor.[26] Fears abound of a revival of Russian expansionism in the Black Sea at any time. Increasing Russian Black Sea fleet capabilities is a major issue of concern for Turkey. With the seizure of the Ukrainian fleet by Russia, Turkey now faces a stronger Russian naval power in the Black Sea.

Referendum and the Use of Self-determination: A Threat for Turkey and the Region

Another factor shaping Turkey's reaction to the Ukrainian crisis is the Turkish attitude towards the use of the principle of self-determination in Crimea. Ankara, worried about an over-generous acceptance of the principle of self-determination in international politics as a conflict resolution method, did not hesitate to display its anti-referendum stance to the world. An over-generous acceptance of the principle of self-determination in the region is likely to have destabilizing effect. A norm or precedent being set legitimizing secession based on the principle of self-determination is concerning not only Turkey but also but also Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova, whose territorial integrity would also be put at risk by means of a referendum.[27]

Domestic Factors that Shape Turkey's Response

As elsewhere, domestic policy calculations have always affected foreign policy decision processes in Turkey. However, in the pre-AKP period, international and domestic politics had been two distinct domains; although affecting each other, they were operating differently. When it took over power in 2002, the AKP eliminated the difference between the foreign policy-domestic politics domains.

The crisis in Ukraine was thus an untimely one in terms of Turkish domestic politics. In March, just as the crisis in Ukraine was reaching a fever pitch, Turkey was on the eve of its local elections. For the AKP, which was tussling with a massive corruption scandal, the election turned into a matter of political survival. While all eyes were focused on domestic developments, the government had neither the will nor the capacity to get involved in the newly

[26] Semih İDİZ, Turkey, Russia tread cautious line over Ukraine, *Al-Monitor*, 15.04.2014, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/turkey-russia-ukraine-cautious.html> 11.06.2014

[27] Dimitar BECHEV, No Crimean Wars for Turkey, *ECFR*, 13.03.2014, available at <http://www.ecfr.eu/blog/entry/no_crimean_wars_for_turkey#sthash.ok3bJfFP.dpuf> 11.06.2014.

erupting conflict in Ukraine.[28]

The Crimea Factor in Domestic Politics

The developments in Ukraine raised concerns inside Turkey that put the AKP under pressure. Turkish public opinion, was concerned with the developments in Crimea and the fate of the Crimean Tatars. Firstly, a Crimean Tatar diaspora of several million lives in Turkey, many of whom protested against Russia's occupation and expected the Turkish government to do something for their relatives in the peninsula. Secondly, Crimea has an important place in the Turkish nationalist discourse as the birthplace of prominent ideologues of 20th-century Turkish nationalism and Pan-Turkism such as Ismail Gasprinski[29] and Yusuf Akcura[30]. Thirdly, the common religious identity between Crimean Tatars and many Turks is an important driver for the AKP. Failing to defend the rights of Muslims Tatars over orthodox Russians would be in contrast with the overall foreign policy goals of AKP. It is clear that with regard to domestic politics, Turkey had more than enough justifiable reasons for opposing the Russian annexation of Crimea. Any development endangering the fate of the Tatars and Crimea posed the risk of projecting the government as weak and unreliable on the eve of the upcoming elections and carried the risk that criticisms will strike another blow to AKP's standing which was severely shaken by the corruption scandal. At all costs, the government had to tailor its reaction in domestic politics to fit the political climate in Turkey.

Opposition parties such as the nationalist *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, (Nationalist Action Party) directed an ample dose of criticism towards the AKP and Davutoğlu, mainly due to the AKP's indifference toward Tatars and the moderate tone taken over Crimea.[31] In addressing these criticisms Davutoğlu, appealing to the Tatar associations in Turkey, said "Don't let it cross your mind that our prime minister and president will be indifferent to any issue affecting

[28] Gönül TOL, Ukraine and the Middle East, Middle Eastern Institute, 27.03.2014, available at <http://www.mei.edu/content/ukraine-and-middle-east > 11.06.2014.

[29] Şener AKTÜRK, Counter*Hegemonic Visions and Reconciliation Through the Past: The Case of Turkish Eurasianism, Ab Imperio, 4 (2004), 207-238.

[30] Hasan KÖSEBALABAN, Turkish Foreign Policy: Islam, Nationalism, and Globalization(New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 41.

[31] Bahçeli'den 'Kırım' Mesajı, *İhlas Haber Ajansı*, 03.03.2014, available at <http://www.iha.com.tr/bahceliden-kirim-mesaji-politika-336942> 11.06.2014.

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINEVİ

our people of kin in Crimea and anywhere in the world."[32] Erdoğan tried to appease the Tatar community at home. Speaking at an election rally in Eskişehir, a western province of Turkey that is home to thousands of ethnic Tatars, Erdoğan said to the masses "We have never left our Tatar brothers on their own and we never will."[33]

Despite this rhetoric, it is clear that for AKP officials, most notably for Erdoğan himself, religious conservatism is an ideological imperative that supersedes any Turkic bonds felt by Pan-Turkists to prescribe policies based more on religious rather than ethnic or descent-based linkages.

Fear of a Refugee Problem

Ankara might face a Crimean Tatar refugee problem. Under Ukrainian rule, the Crimean Tatar community supported pro-Western figures, and opposed Russian annexation of Crimea. Taking such a position could create tensions with the ethnic Russians in Crimea, as Moscow would likely cooperate with these ethnic Russian groups in establishing local governments. As a result, the Tatar Community may find their cultural freedoms curtailed, producing a clash with the peninsula's ethnic Russians.

Conclusion

This analysis attempted to contribute to the deeper understanding of Turkey's policy towards the crisis in Ukraine by exploring the reasons that lie behind Turkeys reserved reaction to the crisis. The Ukrainian crisis was an incident in which Turkey has involved itself rather reluctantly and for which it was caught unprepared in terms of both international and domestic politics. The crisis in Ukraine was an untimely one for the Turkish domestic politics. On the eve of local elections, the AKP was tussling with a corruption scandal, and the government had no energy to make this newly erupting conflict part of the domestic political debate. However, it also did not have the luxury to completely ignore the issue as Crimea, a historically important region, and its people, the Crimean Muslim Tatars, were the points in question.

As the US and EU sanctions against Moscow appear weak, and West

[32] FM Davutoğlu rules out Turkish Russian crisis over Crimea, Todays Zaman, 03.03.2014, available at <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-341063-fm-davutoglu-rules-out-turkish-russian-crisis-over-crimea.html>, 10.06.2014.

[33] Turkey not to "leave Crimean Tatars in the lurch" , Anadolu Agency, 07.03.2014, available at <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/298078--turkey-not-to-quot-leave-crimean-tatars-in-the-lurch-quot> 05.06.2014.

MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ YAYINEVİ

continue its reluctant opposition, Turkish silence on Ukraine would not cause a scene of disturbance. Neither the EU nor Turkey could afford to alienate Russia in the near future therefore, primarily due to energy dependence comprehensive sanctions against Russia are not easy to impose. In order to be effective, they should be extended to a list of economic and political targets including the energy sector in Russia. What the West could do is to punish a number of Russian officials that in some way or other supported the annexation of Crimea. These are economically powerful figures, not likely to suffer immediately from its consequences.

Ankara is not in a position to reverse the course of events in Ukraine; even so, it will continue to cautiously support Ukraine's territorial integrity via diplomatic means. The naval power balance in the Black Sea is turning in favor of Russia. Turkey losing its advantageous position in the Black Sea, could take any step to stop the course of events. However, at the time being Ankara does not aim to escalate the tensions in relations with Russia. There are certain signs of normalization and goodwill gesture by Ankara to Moscow. For instance, Turkish Airlines resumed flights to Crimea which halted in April.[34] However, the caution in this approach towards Russia should not be taken for granted. If Moscow further opts to engage in expansionist policies in the Black Sea Region, Turkey might return to its anti-Russian stance. Although Turkish foreign policy has a propensity to distance itself from the west, a radical disengagement from its traditional allies should not be expected at any time soon. Turkey's concerns regarding this matter are not likely to disappear at any time soon either.[35] However, a return to the traditional Western alliances does not necessarily provide a safe haven for Turkey, either.

[34] Turkish Airlines to resume flights to Crimea in June, *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 11.04.2014, available at <http://en.itar-tass.com/russia/727396 > 04.07.2014.

[35] WEITZ, Global Insights.