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# Dances with the Bear: Turkey and Russia After Crimea

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Turkey

Russia

Ukraine

Crimea

## Abstract

The Turkish-Russian relationship is a complex set of economic, identity and geopolitical factors, and the recent increase in bilateral contacts has substantially decreased the possibility of open confrontation between Ankara and Moscow. However, this relationship cannot be called a strategic partnership, at least not in its present form. Present geopolitical realities, security alliances, the difficult legacy of history and the changing economic environment seriously constrain the possibility for the establishment of that kind of partnership in the medium term. Certainly, a furthering of Turkey's authoritarian slide could result in a rapprochement between a Turkey drifting away from the West and Russia. However, the continuation of Russia's aggressive policy in the post-Soviet space can at the same time alienate Turkey. Ultimately, however, Turkey's policy towards Russia will strongly depend on the character of Russian-Western relations, with Turkey likely to maintain its Western orientation in the event of increased tensions between the West and Russia.

## Introduction

The Ukrainian crisis has confirmed the complexity of the Turkish-Russian relationship. Turkey generally supports the West's position on the Ukrainian crisis, but at the same time Ankara describes Russia as a strategic partner. This depiction of Turkish-Russian ties, however, is exaggerated, and no such partnership seems likely in the medium term. Robust political and economic ties certainly have improved in the last years, but the economic pillar in the relationship tends to be overestimated and is likely to further weaken in the years ahead. Moreover, it is important to note that the partnership lacks a solid social base, and more recently the two countries have witnessed serious divergences on a number of important geopolitical issues.

Turkey's stance during the Ukrainian crisis is a classic example of a delicate balancing act between antagonistic sides: Russia and the West (though it is internally divided). Ankara pursues policies that are definitely closer to the Western stance, which was in support of the Ukrainian protest opposition from the very beginning, but it does not entirely align with the US and the EU because of the importance accorded to its relationship with Russia. Turkey's reaction to the revolution in Ukraine clearly differed from the actions of Russia, which decisively supported President Viktor Janukovych – including his brutal crackdown against the protestors. Ankara did not take sides and instead called for a peaceful, democratic solution to the crisis, while also condemning the use of

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force by Janukovych's regime that resulted in more than 100 deaths. After Janukovych's fall, Turkey recognized the new Ukrainian authorities, and Ahmet Davutoğlu became the first foreign minister to visit Ukraine after the Maidan revolution.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Turkey did not recognize the results of the Russian referendum in Crimea, declaring it dangerous and illegal. Turkey rejected the idea of Ukraine's federalization that was promoted by Moscow, condemned the rebellion launched by pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine and declared that Ukrainians themselves should decide on their country's future.<sup>2</sup> Turkey decisively recognized the victory of Petro Poroshenko in the presidential elections and Ankara also endorsed NATO's decisions against Russia (i.e. the suspension of all cooperation) while voting in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution supporting Crimea as an integral part of Ukraine and condemning Russian aggression.<sup>3</sup> Turkish representatives also voted for the suspension of Russia from the Council of Europe. Turkey, moreover, frequently declared its special responsibility for the fate of their "brothers" – the Crimean Tatars that make up almost 15% of the Crimea's population – and President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan both expressed their concern about the well-being of Tatars, urging Russia to respect their rights. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs also condemned cases of their discrimination by the local Russian Crimean authorities.<sup>4</sup>

In response to Turkey's policy towards Ukraine and Crimea, Russia accused Turkey of violating the Montreux Convention regulating the movement of warships through the Straits because US warships remained in the Black Sea for longer than is allowed, a claim strongly rejected by Turkey. Russia also tested Turkey's capabilities in the security sphere, with Ankara having on numerous occasions to scramble its jets after Russian surveillance planes flew parallel to the Turkish Black Sea coast. Also, following the annexation of Crimea, President Vladimir Putin declared that the issue of Crimean Tatars is a completely internal affair of Russia and should not be a matter of negotiations with any other state.

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1 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Minister Davutoğlu "Turkey is ready to contribute to decrease the tension and to settle the problems in Crimea"*, 1 March 2014, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/foreign-minister-davutoglu-\\_turkey-is-ready-to-contribute-to-decrease-the-tension-and-to-settle-the-problems-in-crimea.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/foreign-minister-davutoglu-_turkey-is-ready-to-contribute-to-decrease-the-tension-and-to-settle-the-problems-in-crimea.en.mfa).

2 The Turkish MFA stated that "It is imperative to put an end to acts contravening the law, occupations and all kinds of illegal violence disturb public order". See *Press Release Regarding the Presidential Election in Ukraine*, No. 169, 26 May 2014, [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-169\\_-26-may-2014\\_-press-release-regarding-the-presidential-election-in-ukraine.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-169_-26-may-2014_-press-release-regarding-the-presidential-election-in-ukraine.en.mfa).

3 UN News, *General Assembly adopts resolution calling upon states not to recognize changes in status of Crimea region (GA/11493)*, 27 March 2014, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>.

4 Moreover, Turkish President Abdullah Gül conferred Mustafa Jemilev, Crimean Tatar leader, with the Order of the Republic Medal of Turkey, the highest Turkish award.

These disagreements did not lead to a fully-fledged confrontation with Russia, and Turkey clearly refrained from heightening tensions further. Unthinkable as it may seem, the word "Russia" has not once been mentioned directly in the numerous official statements by the Turkish Foreign Ministry on the topic of Ukraine and Crimea. Furthermore, Turkey, which officially defines both Russia and Ukraine as strategic partners, suggested that Ankara would be ready to play a mediating role between them. Indeed, and in contrast to Japan, Australia, Switzerland, Norway and Canada, Turkey did not apply any bilateral sanctions against Russia.

The cautious Turkish stance can be explained by virtue of Ankara's multidimensional ties with Moscow. While these have indeed deepened in recent years, they still do not allow for the Turkish-Russian relationship to be described as a strategic partnership. The second reason relates to Turkey's disappointment with the West's performance in 2013 in the Syrian crisis, when Turkey and France were left alone in supporting NATO air strikes against the Assad regime in retaliation for its use of chemical weapons. Indeed, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu declared that Russia's aggressive policy against Ukraine was encouraged by its veto power in the United Nations Security Council over the Syrian crisis.<sup>5</sup> Overall, therefore, in order to understand the complexity of the Turkish approach to the Ukrainian crisis, Turkish-Russian relations must first be placed in a wider international and regional context and described according to different spheres: geopolitics, economics and history.

## We agreed to disagree ...

Turkish-Russian political relations have improved decisively over the last decade as a result of the realisation that permanent rivalry is mutually disadvantageous. The gradual emancipation of Turkish foreign policy from US tutelage also facilitated the process. Moreover, since 2003 both countries have experienced worsening relations with the EU and tensions with the US, although in Turkey's case these have been less pronounced compared to Russia. Different geopolitical priority areas – the Middle East in the case of Turkey and the post-Soviet space in the case of Russia – also facilitated the improvement in ties. The establishment of the High Level of Strategic Cooperation between Turkey and Russia (i.e. common government meetings) in May 2010 confirmed the beginnings of a new era in Turkish-Russian relations, and indeed one of the most important indicators of this rapprochement is the frequency of high-level bilateral contacts. Since becoming Prime Minister of Turkey in 2003, Erdoğan has met with President Putin or spoke with him over the

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5 "Davutoğlu'dan Ukrayna uyarısı" (Davutoğlu' Ukraine alert), in *Sabah*, 2 March 2014, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2014/03/02/davutoglugudan-ukrayna-uyarisi>.

telephone around 35 times, an impressive number given that Putin rarely meets with world leaders that often. In this respect, the authoritarian inclinations of both leaders have probably created a good chemistry, and in contrast to the EU and the US, Turkey has refrained from openly criticising authoritarian trends in Russia.

These similarities, however, should not be overestimated, and indeed in some respects the good personal relations between the two leaders are astonishing given that Erdoğan often portrays himself on the world stage as a defender of innocent Muslims and Putin is a politician responsible for death of many thousands of Muslim civilians. Moreover, Putin is a divorced womaniser, ex-KGB officer and cool-headed politician while Erdoğan is a family-oriented, charismatic and populist leader whose highly emotional governance style has made his policies somewhat unpredictable.

Closer cooperation between Turkey and Russia does not, therefore, mean that some kind of strategic partnership has been established and that a synergy of geopolitical interests has emerged. On the contrary, both countries hold contrasting positions on some key international issues such as Cyprus, Kosovo, Bosnia, and the possible transit of gas from Iran or Central Asia through Turkey to Europe. In 2011 and 2012, the radical divergence of opinions between Russia and Turkey on the Arab Spring and especially the war in Syria caused a significant cooling of relations. In 2013, both countries differed radically on the coup d'état in Egypt, with Turkey supporting the ousted Muslim Brotherhood leader and Russia the military junta. At the same time Russia established a close relationship with far-right parties in the EU that definitely have a very negative attitude towards Turkey. In the post-Soviet space Turkey avoids challenging Russia openly, but at the same time Ankara does not give up on its own geopolitical ambitions, which in the long term are incompatible with Russia's strategic goal of establishing exclusive influence over the area. Turkey is instead interested in creating a "multipolar" post-Soviet space in which it will achieve the status of major stakeholder together with other countries in the area. Politically, Turkey has become closer to Russia in the post-Soviet space mainly as a result of Ankara's cautious attitude towards NATO's eastward expansion and Turkish objections towards an increased US military presence in the Black Sea basin. Turkey's position stems from its growing independence in the foreign policy realm (playing several pianos) and Ankara's conviction that the West is not ready for an open geopolitical confrontation with Russia. The Turkish leadership has therefore reached the conclusion that a tougher stance against Russia would be counterproductive, as it would not receive sufficient support from the West.

Nevertheless, Turkey has not aligned with Russia within an alleged "axis of the excluded" as certain experts have

claimed. Ankara has a more positive view regarding EU activities in the post-Soviet area than Russia, and Turkey supports the EU's Eastern Partnership and the integration process of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. Turkey is also not an opponent of NATO expansion *per se*. Ankara is certainly not a promoter of human rights as is the case with certain EU member states, but in this domain Turkey should not be compared to Russia – a country that *a priori* views a genuine democratisation with suspicion. Furthermore, without Turkey's acceptance and economic involvement in Georgia, which resulted in the decrease of Russian influence there, the success of that country's transformation after the Rose Revolution would have been more difficult to achieve. Turkey was also one of the sharpest critics of the crimes committed by the regime in Uzbekistan in 2005 during anti-government protests there. In recent years, Ankara has had much better relations than Russia with several post-Soviet countries (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Turkmenistan), while Russia enjoys closer ties with Uzbekistan and Armenia than Turkey. Finally, in the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict, both Turkey and Russia are on opposing sides: Ankara is an ally of Baku, while Moscow is close to Yerevan.<sup>6</sup>

The modest progress achieved in fostering cooperation in the education sector shows the limits of Turkish-Russian rapprochement, confirming the deficit of trust that exists between both societies. Turkey has a very large and untapped potential to influence Russia in the cultural sphere, as approximately 15% of Russia's population are Sunni Muslims, mainly Hanafi Muslims of Turkic and Caucasian ethnic stock. However, very few Russian students study in Turkey.<sup>7</sup> The presence of Turkish educational institutions in Russia is also extremely limited. This situation is due to the Russian authorities' disinterest in strengthening Turkish cultural influence over these communities. Before the conflict that broke out in 2013 between Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish Islamic opinion leader, and Prime Minister Erdoğan, the latter tried to convince Vladimir Putin to increase the number of Gulenist schools in Russia, to no avail. On the contrary, all those schools operating in Russia were closed, and numerous books by the ideologue were placed on the federal list of extremist literature through Russian court decisions.

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6 It should be noted that 1.2 million Russian citizens are Armenians, and that nearly half a million Armenian citizens work and live in Russia. This constitutes the biggest Armenian diaspora in the world after the community in America. To compare, the population of Armenia is less than 3 million. Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, is of Armenian descent.

7 In the 2012/2013 academic year, there were just over 700 Russian students studying in Turkey. See table 21 (Number of Foreign Students by Nationality) in Assessment Selection and Placement Centre (ÖSYM), *2012-2013 Öğretim Yılı Yükseköğretim İstatistikleri* (2012-2013 Academic Year Higher Education Statistics), July 2013, <http://osym.gov.tr/belge/1-19213/2012-2013-ogretim-yili-yuksekogretim-istatistikleri.html>.

Another example that highlights the lack of trust between Ankara and Moscow is the rather negligible cooperation in the security field. Turkey established cooperation with Russia in the military sphere within the framework of multilateral Black Sea initiatives such as Blackseafor or Black Sea Harmony. However, bilateral military cooperation has remained modest. Despite Russian efforts, imports of Russian military equipment to Turkey are minimal. Kurdish organisations related to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that has been fighting with Turkey for more than 30 years still operate in Russia, though on a substantially smaller scale than in the 1990s. Despite Turkey's insistence, Russia did not place the PKK on its list of terrorist organisations. Conversely, Turkey has decisively limited, but did not eliminate, the activities of anti-Russian circles from the Caucasus on its territory. For instance, in February 2014, a Turkish prosecutor accused three murder suspects who assassinated four Chechen members of the Caucasus Emirate in İstanbul in 2009 and 2011 of being Russian secret service agents. On the other hand, during the conflict in Syria, Turkey provided particular support to units of jihadi fighters from the Northern Caucasus.<sup>8</sup>

## Gas pipelines, construction contracts and charter flights

Economic interests are often cited as the primary pillar of the Turkish-Russian relationship, and within this context energy constitutes the main foundation of Turkish-Russian economic cooperation. However, if we scratch the surface we would see that the scale of economic cooperation is often exaggerated by both sides and is already facing serious challenges. On the one hand, the economies of Turkey and Russia are complementary because the former is one of the most important energy importers in Europe and the latter among the main energy exporters in the world. However, such interdependency also creates tensions relating to divergent interests concerning the price of energy and asymmetric relations based on the exporter's advantage over the importer.

As part of the Turkish energy balance, gas occupies first place with approximately 33% of the share, coal is in second place with 30% and oil is in third place with nearly 20%. Turkey imports nearly 100% of its gas, 90% of its oil and approximately half of its coal. Russia's role is especially big in the gas sector. In 2013 imports from Russia covered over 55% of Turkey's gas needs.<sup>9</sup> The price

of gas for Turkey is substantially higher than for other European countries. After the Crimea crisis Turkey has tried to exacerbate Russia's problems with the transit of gas to Europe through Ukraine and a postponement of the South Stream pipeline project in order to gain price reductions. In 2013, Russia's share in Turkey's coal consumption accounted for approximately 15%, while in the case of oil it totalled around 10%. Turkey also imports around 30% of oil products from Russia, but almost half of the imports are used for re-export or stocked in international aviation and marine bunkers.<sup>10</sup>

Summing up, Russia's share in Turkey's energy balance therefore totals around 25%. However, Russia's importance is decreasing and this trend will deepen, excluding the nuclear sector. The Russian share in Turkish import of gas decreased from around 70% at the end of the 90's to around 57% in 2013. Meanwhile, Russia's share in the Turkish oil import fell from 40% in 2007 to around 10% in 2013 as Turkey signed agreements concerning new gas and oil pipelines from Azerbaijan and Northern Iraq. In coming years Turkey will substantially increase domestic production of coal, decreasing its import from abroad. Negotiations are ongoing with Saudi Arabian, Qatari and Japanese companies for the privatization of two big coal sites in Anatolia. On the other hand, the construction of a large refinery in Izmir by Azerbaijan's SOCAR, which began in 2011 (completion planned in 2016), will significantly decrease Turkey's dependency on imported petroleum products.<sup>11</sup>

A recent new area of cooperation between Turkey and Russia in the energy field relates to the nuclear sector. According to an agreement from 2010, Rosatom will build a nuclear power plant near Mersin in Turkey with a value of 20 billion dollar (with 51% Russian ownership). Construction is planned to begin in 2014 and last until 2022. Paradoxically, the construction of this nuclear plant may result in a substantial decrease in the supply of gas from Russia.<sup>12</sup>

Turkey is important to Russia in terms of energy not only as a client but also in the context of the transit of oil. Tankers transport a significant part of Russian oil through the Turkish Straits, which are transited by approximately 10,000 tankers each year – almost 4% of worldwide transit. Moreover, the South Stream gas pipeline promoted by Russia, if completed, will pass through Turkey's territorial waters. However, one cannot exclude that Turkey will make its further support for this project conditional upon

10 Ibidem.

11 Zehra Aydoğan, "Azeris, Spaniards ink \$4.8 billion Turkish refinery deal", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 21 May 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nid=47258>.

12 This investment has already been delayed because of bureaucratic obstacles, and further delays due to the financial difficulties of Rosatom, a public company hit hard by the recession of Russia's economy, should not be excluded.

8 Amberin Zaman, "İŞİD'e destek'hâlâ sürüyor" (Support to ISIS's still in progress), in *Taraf*, 14 June 2014, <http://www.taraf.com.tr/yazilar/amberinzaman/iside-destek-hala-suruyor/30031>. Amberin Zaman, "Syrian Kurds continue to blame Turkey for backing ISIS militants", in *Al-Monitor*, 10 June 2014, <http://almon.co/23tw>.

9 US Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Turkey*, updated 17 April 2014, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=tu>.

Russian concessions regarding political and economic issues that are of key significance to Ankara (i.e. transit of oil through Anatolia and the price of gas).

Turkey has also become an important trading partner for Russia. Its share in the Russian trade balance approximates 4%, while before the crisis in 2008 it was almost 5%. To compare, in 2000, Turkey accounted for only 2.5% of Russian foreign trade. Turkey has become one of the most important markets for Russian exports (approximately 6%), but despite this the Russian share of Turkish trade has not increased significantly in the 21st century. In 2002 when the AKP came to power, the share of Russia in the Turkish trade turnover approached 6%. In 2013 Russia accounted for 8% of Turkish trade volume. In 2013 Russia was the fourth most important export market for Turkey (4.5% share in exports) and the second in terms of imports (approximately 10%). In consequence, Turkey has the greatest trade deficit with Russia after China (less than 30% of imports are covered by exports).<sup>13</sup>

This imbalance, which is likely to further increase in 2014, stems from the model of Turkish-Russian economic cooperation based on the import of energy. In 2013, Russia's share in the Turkish export lagged behind Iraq's, with Turkish exports to Russia approaching 7 billion dollar compared with 12 billion dollar to Iraq. In light of this fact, the depiction of Russia as a promised land for Turkish exporters appears particularly out of touch with reality. While it is true that in 2013 Turkish exports to Russia slightly surpassed the value of products exported by Turkey to Italy and France, according to data for the first quarter of 2014, Russia's share of Turkish exports seems likely to decrease substantially, with Russia again falling behind France, Italy, the US and Switzerland (a special case related to the recent surge of Turkish gold exports). Moreover, due to the Russian economy's stagnation and prospective recession, the decreasing importance of Russia's market for Turkish exporters seems likely to remain a medium-term trend. Indeed, Turkish export to Russia has stagnated since the crisis in 2008. By comparison, in the same period, Turkish exports to Iraq exploded, witnessing a threefold increase. Even within the framework of the post-Soviet space, the importance of the Russian market for Turkish exporters should not be overestimated. For instance, in 2013, Turkish exports to Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Ukraine were bigger than Turkish exports to Russia, despite the fact that the economies of these countries taken together are radically smaller than that of Russia.

As far as Russian imports to Turkey are concerned, the data also does not look very impressive. In contrast to other main Turkish trade partners, Russian imports to Turkey decreased around 20% between 2008 and 2013.

13 Turkish Statistical Institute, *Foreign Trade Statistics*, [http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt\\_id=1046](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=1046).

By comparison, in the same period Russian exports to Poland, which is more or less on an equal footing with Turkey regarding its share in Russian trade albeit with a politically more tense relationship with Moscow, expanded significantly.

Russia occupies the first position in terms of the cumulative value of construction contracts undertaken by Turkish companies, which possess a 3.5% share in the world construction sector. Here again, however, cumulative data tends to obscure more than it reveals.<sup>14</sup> The value of contracts realized in Russia until 2013 approached almost 50 billion dollar, and they accounted for almost 20% of all construction contracts realized by Turkish companies abroad. However, in the last few years, Russia has begun to lose its importance as a key market for Turkish construction companies. Between 2010 and 2013 Turkish construction companies undertook projects worth 15.6 billion dollar in Russia. By comparison, in the same period, the value of construction contracts realized by Turkey in Turkmenistan exceeded 19 billion dollar. Moreover, in 2013 the value of contracts undertaken by Turkish companies in Turkmenistan was almost two times higher than those implemented in Russia.<sup>15</sup>

Tourism, another highly important sector for the Turkish economy, is also worth analysing. According to the World Tourism Organization, it indirectly and directly accounts for 10% of the Turkish GDP, and Russians constitute the second most numerous group of foreigners that visit Turkey (almost 4,3 million visits, more than 12% of the total).<sup>16</sup> However, the Russian occupation of Crimea and the deteriorating economic situation in Russia will probably result in a decrease of Russian tourists visiting Turkey as Moscow tries to shift their flow towards Crimea. Russia announced that the number of flights between Russia and Crimea in the summer of 2014 will increase almost four times, and these flights are going to be cheaper than charters to Turkey because of public subsidies.

Turning to foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, the AKP government is known to have brought an unprecedented inflow of investments to Turkey. Russia, however, accounted for only 3% of FDI inflows between 2003 and 2013.<sup>17</sup> Russian capital does sometimes invest indirectly

14 Russia ranked the first position from 1972 to 2012. See Turkish Ministry of Economy, *Overseas Contracting and Consultancy Services. General Note*, August 2012, [http://www.economy.gov.tr/upload/4CEB1B6E-ADFA-968E-93769440DA5B988D/Not\\_ingilizce.pdf](http://www.economy.gov.tr/upload/4CEB1B6E-ADFA-968E-93769440DA5B988D/Not_ingilizce.pdf).

15 Turkish Ministry of Economy, *Yurtdışı Müteahhitlik ve Teknik Müşavirlik Hizmetleri 2013 Yılı Değerlendirmesi (Overseas Contracting and Technical Consultancy Services. 2013 Year in Review)*, January 2014, <http://www.ekonomi.gov.tr/upload/1716ACC7-984B-A973A04F725D556CEF47/Bilgi%20Notu%20-%20%C4%B0statistik%20De%C4%9Ferlendirmesi-yeni.pdf>.

16 Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, *Tourism Statistics*, <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN,36570/statistics.html>.

17 Turkish International Investors Association (YASED), *FDI Statistics*

in Turkey by purchasing assets of Turkish companies from foreign firms. In 2012, for instance, Russia's Sberbank bought a majority of the shares worth 3.6 billion dollar in Turkey's Denizbank from the Belgian-French bank Dexia. The share of Russian investors in Turkey's investment balance will most likely increase in the next years due to the construction of the above-mentioned nuclear plant by Rosatom.

## Identity and history: the legacy of empires

Ultimately, a strategic partnership between Turkey and Russia cannot be sustainable in the long term without a solid social base. Moreover, because of their opposing historical memories, imperial legacies and antagonistic ethnic-religious kinships, Turkish-Russian relations remain prone to crises and disagreements. Despite a huge increase in people-to-people contacts, negative perceptions have persisted, deeply rooted as they are in centuries of rivalry and wars. A substantial rise of xenophobia in Russia (Russia for Russians) and a particularly negative approach towards Muslims from the Northern Caucasus by Russian society constitute the main challenges.<sup>18</sup>

While Turkic and Caucasian Muslims have come to represent "the other" for Russian nationalism, in Turkey these are doubtlessly among the most liked ethnic groups. According to the Turkish official discourse, one Pan-Turkic nation exists that covers different Turkic ethnic communities, which in Turkey are called the external Turks. Crimean Tatars, for example, are defined as Crimean Tatar Turks. Moreover, Caucasus Muslims are perceived as brother nations of Turks, given that a substantial part of Turks originate from the Caucasus and Crimea where their ancestors experienced ethnic cleansing, massacres and even genocide committed by Tsarist Russia.<sup>19</sup> The descendants of migrants and

refugees (*muhacirler*) from Tsarist Russia are to this day over-represented among Turkish elites.<sup>20</sup> In Turkey, the last few years have witnessed the rebirth of awareness about ethnic roots, which can be seen in cultural and social activities as well as in foreign policy (i.e. support for their fellow countrymen fighting for independence as well as the international campaign for the massacres and expulsions of the Circassian people by Tsarist Russia to be deemed genocide<sup>21</sup>). The Crimean Tatars were former subjects of the Ottoman Empire with special status (the Crimean Khanate was a vassal state ruled by the Geryy dynasty, which would have succeeded the Ottoman dynasty if the latter had become extinct). They are Turkic Sunni Hanafi Muslims that had been expelled or migrated to Turkey after the Russian conquest of Crimea and subsequently suffered terribly during the deportation from Crimea organized by the Soviet Union just 70 years ago. It should therefore come as no surprise that these communities have gained widespread sympathy and empathy within Turkish society.

As a result, the Tatar issue has gained the status of an internal political issue in Turkey, although it has occupied a secondary position in the Turkish public debate compared with issues such as the Kurdish question, the war in Syria and Iraq, Turkey's presidential elections, graft probe, economic slowdown and the government's authoritarian slide. The Crimean Tatar diaspora in Turkey organized demonstrations of solidarity with their compatriots that attracted tens of thousands of people. The Turkish leadership, accused of passivity towards the Tatar issue by the opposition, met several times with representatives of the Tatar diaspora living in Turkey.<sup>22</sup> At the beginning of the Crimean crisis, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), a Pan-Turkic opposition party, declared that

Crimean Turks have become the target of cruel and brutal provocation. It is a depressing and saddening development of Russia's one-sided, cruel, lawless and immoral attack targeting the Crimean peninsula, which has a special and privileged place in our history [...] the Prime Minister

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for Turkey, <http://www.yased.org.tr/webportal/English/istatistikler/tudyi/Pages/FDstatisticsforTurkey.aspx>.

18 An ambiguity in the Russian state ideology favours to a certain degree the rise of Russian nationalism. On the one hand, Russia is presented in the official discourse as a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state. On the other, Russians are defined as the backbone of the state, and according to the Kremlin the Russian identity is based on Orthodox Christianity. See Vladimir Putin, "Russia: The Ethnicity Issue", in *Nezavisimaya Gazieta*, 23 January 2012, <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/17831>. On the other hand, the concept of Russki Mir promoted currently by the Kremlin in the international arena assumes the national unity of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians based on Eastern Slavdom. Christian Orthodoxy and the common state traditions of Kiev Russia, Muscovy, Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union has also implicate the anti-Muslim dimension in its historical narrative. Indeed, the tradition of wars against Ottomans, Tatars and Caucasus Muslims in the Balkans and the Black Sea region forms one of its pillars.

19 The historical memory of suffering from ethnic cleansing and massacres is more widespread in Turkish society. It also concerns Turks originating from the Balkans and inhabitants of those parts of

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Anatolia which were occupied several times by Russia in the 19th and 20th centuries and by Greece after the First World War (1914-1918).

20 For instance, the family of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan is of Georgian descent (Adjaria in Georgia). Adnan Menderes, the first and long-serving democratic Prime Minister of Turkey in the 1950's, had Tatar roots. Orhan Pamuk, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, has Circassian roots.

21 This campaign is strictly related to the fact that the Olympics in Sochi in 2014 took place on the 150th anniversary of the genocide. The last location of Circassian resistance was located exactly where Sochi was built.

22 The Turkish public TV stations broadcasted documentaries many times on Tatar history that focused on their martyrdom and suffering. Special prayers commemorating the Tatar deportation were organized by the Directorate of Religious Affairs in all Turkish mosques.

and the government should closely follow this extraordinary situation without ignoring it and should defend our Crimean cognates' rights and laws.<sup>23</sup>

It is worth remembering that in the next twelve months presidential and parliamentary elections will be held in Turkey, and the MHP constitutes the most serious rival for the ruling AKP party's electoral base, namely the conservative nationalist constituencies in Central Anatolia.

As the heir of the Ottoman Empire and the largest Turkic nation, Turkey ultimately does aspire to the position of protector of Muslims of the former Ottoman lands and Turkic communities. Russia, on the other hand, presents itself as a protector of Eastern Christians – particularly Slavs – in the post-Soviet space, the Middle East and the Balkans. In effect, Turkey and Russia have been supporting antagonistic communities in conflicts taking place in the Balkans and the Caucasus (i.e. Bosniaks and Albanians vs. Serbs, Armenians vs. Azeris). Currently a fully-fledged ethnic conflict in Crimea between Tatars and Russians seems unlikely, but it cannot be entirely ruled out in the future. In the event of such a confrontation, the Turkish government would find itself under pressure from Turkish society, which would demand a more assertive stance in support of their Tatar co-nationals. However, the bloody war in Syria decreased decisively the eagerness of Turkish society for military engagement.

Ultimately, the different approaches to the issue of the Armenian and Circassian genocides shows the divergence of Turkish and Russian historical memories. Both genocides occupy a prominent place in the agenda of both countries because 2014 marks the 150th anniversary of the Circassian genocide and 2015 will mark the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. Russia definitely has a negative attitude towards the recognition of the Circassian genocide and avoids a serious discussion on that issue. At the same time, Turkey rejects the recognition of the Armenian genocide. On the other hand, in 2005 the Russian parliament accepted for the second time a resolution defining the Armenian massacres as a genocide and most probably will endorse it again next year. Meanwhile, in May 2014, within the framework of commemorations of the Circassian genocide, Turkish politicians, including Prime Minister Erdoğan, declared that Circassians experienced in Tsarist Russia one of the largest tragedies in the history of humankind that resulted in millions of victims.<sup>24</sup> Erdoğan,

23 "Turkey's MHP leader says Crimea on brink of becoming new Ossetia", in *Today's Zaman*, 3 March 2014, <http://www.todayzaman.com/news-341065-mhp-leader-says-crimea-on-brink-of-becoming-new-ossetia.html>.

24 "Obrazheniye Redzhepa Erdogana k cherkesskoy diaspore Turtsii" (Erdoğan's appeal to the Circassian diaspora in Turkey), in *Adyge Kheku*, 26 May 2014, <http://www.aheku.org/news/society/5823>.

however, refrained from directly mentioning Russia and, despite the Circassian requests for a boycott in February 2014, participated in the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics, where in 1864 the Russians committed one of the largest massacres of Circassians.

Last but not least, the political leaders of both countries do not enjoy huge support in the partner country. Indeed, President Putin has become a symbol of authoritarianism for the majority of Turkish society. In the Turkish opposition media Prime Minister Erdoğan is often compared, because of his authoritarian tendencies, to the president of Russia. On the other hand, the religious and conservative Turks, who make up the backbone of the ruling elite's constituency, perceive Putin as a supporter of hostile Shia and Christian neighbours (Assad's regime, Armenia, Cyprus and Iran).

## What next?

The Turkish-Russian relationship is a complex set of economic, identity and geopolitical factors, and the recent increase in bilateral contacts has substantially decreased the possibility of open confrontation between Ankara and Moscow. However, this relationship cannot be called a strategic partnership, at least not in its present form. Moreover, present geopolitical realities, security alliances, the difficult legacy of history and the changing economic environment seriously constrain the possibility for the establishment of that kind of partnership. Certainly, a furthering of Turkey's authoritarian slide could result in a rapprochement between a Turkey drifting away from the West and Russia. However, the continuation of Russia's aggressive policy in the post Soviet space can at the same time alienate Turkey, a country sensitive of its status as an independent and relevant actor in the global arena. Ankara will most probably not stand idly by to the possibility of a complete Russian domination over this part of the world.

The general framework of Turkish-Russian relations is unlikely to change substantially in coming years. Taking into consideration the mayhem in Syria and Iraq and the sharp internal polarisation, Turkey will be very much preoccupied with the Middle East and itself. However, for the same reasons, Turkish economic interests could partly shift to the post-Soviet space. In the medium term,

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Sadık Yakut, deputy chairman of the Turkish Parliament, from the ruling party was more outspoken than Prime Minister Erdoğan in his statements on the Circassian genocide. "Zayavleniye Zamestitelya predsedatelya Turetskogo Velikogo Natsional'nogo Sobraniya Sadyk: Yakut o trebovaniyakh cherkesov o priznanii genotsida i deportatsii cherkesov Rossiyskoy imperiyey" (Statement by the Deputy-Chairman of the Turkish Grand National Assembly Sadık Yakut: Requirements for recognition of the Circassian genocide and deportations of Circassians by the Russian Empire), in *Adyge Kheku*, 26 May 2014, <http://www.aheku.org/news/society/5822>.



Turkish-Russian cooperation in the energy sector will undergo a substantial shift due to the diversification of Turkey's energy balance, which will decrease Ankara's dependency on Russia.

At the end of the day, Turkey's policy towards Russia will strongly depend on the character of Russian-Western

relations. What is sometimes neglected is that the EU and the US are radically more important partners for Turkey in the economic, social and security fields than Russia. In case of the new cold war between the US and the EU and Russia, Turkey – perhaps without strong conviction – will most probably align its policy with the West.