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The Russian Intervention in Crimea: Erdogan's Dilemma

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Abstract

The Ukrainian and Crimean crisis are a major challenge for Turkish diplomacy but there is no serious indication that Turkey will stand against Russia. The priority for the Turkish government now is to ensure it will survive the corruption scandals and upcoming elections.

The Russian intervention in Crimea is considered by many analysts as the most severe crisis between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War. The United States and EU but also all the countries of the former Soviet Union, are particularly concerned by this crisis that could affect them one way or the other. As a member of the West bloc and despite its recurrent attempts to emerge as an autonomous actor on the international scene, Turkey is also concerned by the Crimean crisis for at least two reasons: Tatars of Crimea are of a Turkic origin and as such their fate draws interest in the whole Turkic world, and Turkey is an immediate neighbor to the conflict zone. Should the conflict between Russia and the West over Crimea worsen, Turkey, as a NATO member and controlling power over the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits, could be engulfed in this new crisis. Ankara is facing a real dilemma. Indeed, the choice is going to be tough between solidarity with Crimean Tatar brothers and Ukrainian territorial integrity, while pursuing continued good relations with a much feared but economically powerful neighbor like Russia. As of today, Turkey cannot afford to take a strong position.

Why and How Is Turkey Concerned and Affected by the Crimean Crisis?

The first reason why Turkey is so concerned is because Crimea is the home to a Turkic ethnic population, the Tatars, with whom the Turks share common cultural, linguistic, religious and historical background. From 1441 to 1783, Crimea was a powerful Khanate under Ottoman protectorate. When it fell under Russian domination, local Muslim populations who were the majority, left their homeland and took refuge in Ottoman provinces. Like other Muslim groups who fled from the Russian invasion in the 19th century, like Circassians, Abkhaz and Muslim Georgians among others, Crimean Tatars are more numerous in Turkey than in their homeland. Various sources estimate there are currently at least 3 million of Tatars living in Turkey, although there are only 300 000 of them left in Crimea for a mere 12 percent of the population. Massively deported to Central Asia in the early 1940s by Stalin for alleged collaboration with Nazi forces during the Second World War, Crimean Tatars and their diaspora got organized and developed a

strong sense of the community survival, networking and mobilization. Their determination to return started even before the end of the Soviet Union even though such initiatives had little chance to succeed. In Turkey they are among the best organized minority groups with dozens of associations all across the country, but they are particularly strong in Ankara and Eskisehir. Moreover, Tatars benefit from a very positive image in Turkey. In fact, Turkish nationalism thrived from the works of prestigious Tatar thinkers, like Ismail Gasprinski and Yusuf Akçura who are not only venerated by Turkish nationalists but also by other nationalist groups in the Turkic world. Uzbek, Kazakh, Azeri and others have shown a great respect and moral debt for Tatar intellectuals of the 19th century who played a crucial role in the modernization of Muslim societies within the Russian empire. This modern nationalistic philosophy aiming at empowering Russian Muslims, also called Jadidism, had among its most influential members a lot of Tatar intellectuals. After the end of the Soviet Union, Crimea, as part of independent Ukraine was granted a special autonomous status, and opened up to the world outside. Turkey was among the first neighbors to show interest and develop cooperation. TİKA, the Turkish official economic cooperation agency created in 1992 to support the development of ties with the post-Soviet republics, is very active in Crimea. As far as religious cooperation is concerned, the Diyanet, the official Turkish board for the management of Islam in Turkey, is very active too.

Crimean Tatars' prestige in Turkey and great capacity for mobilization make them an influential minority, even in terms of electoral vote. Because of this, Tatars of Crimea in Turkey may have a substantial influence on Turkish politics.

The second concern for Turkey is about security issues, as the crisis zone is very close to Turkey. Should the situation escalate into a conflict and open confrontation between Russia and the West, Turkey could be torn between its loyalty to its Western NATO partners, and its good and strong economic relations with Russia. Strategically, Turkey has complete control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits between the Black Sea, the Marmara and the Mediterranean, as a result of the 1936 Montreux treaty. Allowing Western naval intervention through the straits to support independent Ukraine against Russia would put Ankara in a very uncomfortable position. The worsening of the situation will only show Turkish diplomacy's incapacity to deal with its own neighborhood. Back in 2008 when Russians invaded Georgia to support the separatist region of Ossetia, Turkey was also very upset by its exposed failure to broker any fruitful negotiation to resolve the conflict. In 2014, Turkey is in an even more striking dilemma and has even less leverage to take action.

Ankara's Lack of Reaction

Since the crisis started Turkey's minister of foreign affairs visited Ukraine and Crimea and the prime minister spoke on the phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Both Ahmet Davutoglu and Recep Tayyip Erdogan show rhetorical caution, calling both parties to dialogue and negotiation for a pacific solution. Meanwhile Turkey has expressed its solidarity with the Crimean Tatars, and its support for Ukrainian territorial integrity. Turkey can hardly afford anything more in the crisis than cautiousness for peace and stability. Indeed, for both internal and external reasons, Turkey is constrained to remain a casual observer.

The domestic political situation in Turkey is such that the Turkish government won't be able to take concrete measures to help Tatar brothers in Crimea. Threatened by serious corruption scandals that are more than mere allegations, the Turkish prime minister has other priorities. For sure, there is risk that criticisms will strike another blow to the AKP (Justice and Development party) government. Several political parties in Turkey, such as the nationalist Milli Hareket Partisi, the Party for a Nationalist Movement, criticized AKP's indifference toward Tatars. However, it might be for the better, as prime minister should concentrate on solving domestic issues, like the Kurdish issue or the institutional crisis.

Turkey's low profile over the Crimean crisis can also be explained by its traditional diplomacy and regional implications. Turkey surely does not wish to confront Russia, which has always been throughout history a towering rival and a fear-inspiring neighbor. Ottomans and Turks have always feared Russian military assaults, as they watched the conquests over the Caucasus and Central Asia and it is well known that these threats have grandly contributed to the rapprochement between Turkey and the West. From 1853 to 1856, the Ottomans, French and British already waged a war against Russia in Crimea. By the end of the Second World War, Soviet threats against Turkey, relating to their use of the straits, and their territorial claims on Kars and Ardahan pushed Turkey to join NATO. Continuously after the end of the USSR, Turkey has been monitoring with great attention Russian influence over its former possessions, especially in the south, and from whom they depend for an access to warm seas to operate their naval fleet. Turkish diplomacy preferred cooperation to confrontation and encouraged better trade, business, and tourism, which fueled Turkey's economic growth in the last decade.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian and Crimean crisis are a major challenge for Turkish diplomacy but there is no serious indication that Turkey will stand against Russia. Timing is also involved. The priority for the Turkish government now is to ensure it will survive the corruption scandals and upcoming elections, in which the situation in Crimea is not relevant to Turkish voters. Moreover, the once very assertive and strong Turkish foreign policy vanished after Turkey got trapped in the Syrian crisis. Caution dictates Turkey to align itself with its Western allies. For that matter, the Ukrainian crisis is one more proof of the declining role of Turkish diplomacy in the region and deprives Erdogan's AKP government from any aspiration to regional leadership.