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THE ROLE OF THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE TURKISH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

The article analyzes the impact of the annexation of Crimea on the development of the Turkish-Russian relations. It highlights the issue of Russia violating the rights of the Crimean Tatars and presents it as the main source of concern for Turkey. At the same time, the article demonstrates how Ankara takes advantage from the increased economic cooperation with Moscow after the Western sanctions were imposed on Russia.

Key words: international relations, annexation of Crimea, Russia, Turkey, Crimean Tatars, economic cooperation

Introduction. The Turkish-Russian relations in general, and Turkey's reaction and attitude to the Russian annexation of Crimea in particular, are of paramount importance for Ukraine. Russia is considered by Ukraine as the aggressor country while Turkey is seen as an essential political and economic partner. The future of the Ukrainian-Turkish relations is directly linked to the Turkey's willingness to stay on Ukraine's side and support its territorial integrity. It is therefore significant for Ukraine to monitor the development of the Turkish-Russian relations.

Sources. The impact of Russia's annexation of Crimea on the development of its relations with Turkey is analyzed in the works of the following authors: Cagaptay, Jeffrey, Clayton, Kisacik, Kaya, Kelkitli. Particular mention should be made of the article Crimea in Turkish-Russian

Relations: Identity, Discourse, or Interdependence? by Aksu and Özer. The authors argue that the annexation of Crimea has totally changed the Black Sea regional power structure and has questioned the efficiency of Turkey's policy the Black Sea region. However, Ankara's response to the Crimean crisis has been surprisingly passive. While Turkey voiced its support to the territorial integrity of Ukraine and stated its readiness to protect the rights of Crimean Tatars, it did not go beyond these statements and even managed to deepen its economic cooperation with Russia who searched for new partners after the Western sanctions had been imposed on it. However, according to Aksu and Özer, this pragmatic policy pursued by Turkey can only lead to Ankara's growing dependence from Turkey.

Aim. The aim of the article is to analyze how the annexation of Crimea changed the dynamics of the Turkish-Russian relations, to demonstrate how Turkey exploits the issue of Crimean Tatars to exert pressure on Russia and to assess what impact the annexation has on the bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia at the current stage.

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 had a tangible impact on the dynamics of relations between Moscow and Ankara. The annexation of the peninsula was enough reason for Ankara to be concerned due to the historical ties between the Crimean Tatars and their diaspora in Turkey. Also since Turkey is trying to present itself as a leader of the Turkic world the kinship aspect is an essential component of the Turkish foreign policy [5].

Crimea hosts some 300.000 indigenous Turkic-origin Tatar populations that has been opposing the Russian intervention. Furthermore, there is a significant Tatar population in Turkey which accounts for millions, according to various researchers. They are among the best organized minority groups, and this fact makes them an influential political factor [5].

It was clear that Turkey was not happy with the Russian annexation of Crimea which was formalized after the Russian President Putin's signing of the unification agreement on March 18, 2014. The agreement followed an illegitimate referendum which was boycotted by the Crimean Tatars [10].

As a response to this, Turkey's leadership underlined that «the problems must be solved within international law and with respect to Ukraine's borders» and stated that it «would not leave Crimean Tatars alone» [6]. The then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Kyiv on 1 March 2014 following the Russian intervention in Crimea, stating that Turkey would seek to protect the rights of Crimean Tatars and stressing that the territorial integrity of Ukraine is a key principle for Turkey [2].

In August 2015 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the President of Turkey, has attended to the World Congress of Tatars held in Ankara. He stated that in order to overcome repression and oppression that Crimean Tatars face, the Turkish Republic has been negotiating with all parties and making necessary proposals and steps [11].

However, Turkish official attitude beyond its rhetoric remained moderate and even questionable when compared to the attitudes of other regional actors. On the one hand, Turkey has not recognized the result of the illegitimate referendum held in Crimea, and has repeatedly declared its adherence to the principle of territorial integrity, but, on the other hand, unlike the Western countries, Turkey did not impose sanctions on Russia caring about its own economic interests [5].

The Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in his interview to the German newspaper Die Zeit in February 2015 in a rather abrupt manner stated that Turkey was not obliged to join the EU sanctions against Russia since it was an important trade partner of Ankara. He added that his country did not consider it necessary to apply sanctions against the Russian Federation and that Turkey would take its own decisions [15].

Before that, in February 2014 Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu even accused Europe of inciting crisis in Ukraine. He had said that the Europeans' approach to Ukraine «choose us or you are not one of us» was wrong [9]. This claim was repeated several times on several occasions by Turkish decision makers by emphasizing that the crisis in Ukraine is not only Russia's fault [5].

Turkey has tried to take advantage of the tense relations between Russia and the West since the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine. The war in the territory of Ukraine has increased Turkey's strategic value as a gas transit country for the West and also made Turkey more important to Russia.

In April 2014, the Turkish energy minister expressed interest in the Russian South Stream pipeline being rerouted through Turkey. At the same time Ankara started negotiations about the reduction in the price of Russian gas sent to Turkey [9].

Furthermore, Turkey has been enthusiastic about the potential to increase exports to Russia as a result of Moscow's decision to embargo food products from Western countries. One week after Russia announced a one-year ban on Western food products in August 2014, Turkish Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci called Russia «an opportunity for Turkey». «We should make this opportunity a strong, long-term, permanent and corporate one,» he said [7].

In addition, while Turkey approved the UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262 dated March 27, 2014 which affirmed the territorial integrity of Ukraine [8], it in some sense violated the resolution since quite a number of Turkish ships was involved in maritime traffic with the Russia-annexed Crimea [12]. The entry of ships under foreign flags into closed seaports in the annexed Crimea and Sevastopol is considered by Ukraine to be a violation of international law and an action that undermines the sovereignty of the country.

The further violation of the political rights of the Tatar population in the Russian-

controlled Crimea raised some concern in Turkey. However, in the joint press conference in December 2014 held during Putin's visit to Istanbul, Erdoğan said that he found Russia's approach to the Crimean Tatars positive and that he had been given assurance that their rights would be protected. During the same visit announcing Russia's decision for the reduction of natural gas prices for Turkey by 6% and expressing intentions to build another energy pipeline through Turkish territory, Putin created a new dimension of Turkish-Russian relations that diverted attention from the issue of Crimean Tatars [5].

Soon after Turkey nevertheless again had to express concern about the protection of Tatar rights in annexed Crimea. A couple of months later, when the Crimean Tatar television channel ATR, as well as the radio stations Meydan, were forced to stop broadcasting by the Russian authorities, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu stated that «the Crimean people and particularly Crimean Tatars have been oppressed, attacked and their rights have been violated» [14]. In March 2015, in a press conference with Mustafa Dzhemilev, the former President of the Crimean Tatar National Assembly, the then Prime Minister Davutoğlu stated that Turkey stands together with the Western countries on Crimea, but he once again mentioned that Turkey does not close the door to diplomacy with Russia [5].

The breakdown of Turkish-Russian relations following the November 2015 plane incident led Turkey to strongly criticize Russian policy in Crimea. Especially after the prohibition of the activities of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People on April 26, 2016, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused Russia of pursuing a systematic policy of «terrorization, suppression and intimidation towards the Crimean Tatars» [13].

However, the gradual normalization of the Turkish-Russian relations starting from the end of June 2016 made Ankara again change its rhetoric towards the Kremlin's policy on the Crimean Tatars.

Although the Turkish leadership has stated multiple times that Turkey will never recognize the Crimea as a part of the Russian Federation [3], it became noticeably less critical of Russia on this issue.

In November 2016 the annexed Crimea was visited by a Turkish delegation. The delegation included the representatives of the Turkish business circles, members of the Turkish parliament and even the cousin of president Erdoğan, and in combination his adviser, Mehmet Mutlu [4]. In October 2019 Erdoğan for the first time received a delegation from the Russian Federation which included two members of the Russian State Duma for the Crimea, Natalia Poklonskaya and Ruslan Balbek. Before then Ankara refused to meet at the official level with the representatives of the annexed peninsula [1].

Conclusions. Thus, the Crimean crisis had a very mixed impact on the relations between Russia and Turkey. On the one hand, it raised concern in Turkey due to its close ties with the Crimean Tatars whose rights have suffered immensely as a result of the illegal annexation of the peninsula by the Russian Federation. But on the other hand, the policy pursued by Turkey during Crimean crisis was a pragmatic one and Ankara has effectively used the issue of Crimean Tatars as a leverage in the negotiations with Moscow on economic and energy matters. Moreover, the Western sanctions imposed on Russia in connection with the annexation of Crimea paved the way to closer cooperation between Moscow and Ankara and opened new opportunities for Turkey in economy and trade.

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Роль анексії Криму Російською Федерацією у турецько-російських відносинах

Статтю присвячено аналізу впливу анексії Криму на розвиток турецько-російських відносин. Особлива увага приділяється порушенню Росією прав кримських татар, що є головною причиною стурбованості Туреччини. Водночас у статті демонструється, як Анкара використовує можливості від економічної співпраці з Москвою, що зросли після впровадження західних санкцій проти Росії.

Ключові слова: міжнародні відносини, анексія Криму, Росія, Туреччина, кримські татари, економічна співпраця.

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