

# Turkey's Russia conundrum: To court or to curb?

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>>> It is not in Turkey's interest that Russia reassert control over its 'near abroad'. However, as revealed during the Ukraine crisis, Ankara is cautious about taking a firm stance against Moscow's moves in this direction. As a country that would benefit from the resolution of conflicts, open markets, and open borders across the wider Black Sea region, it might be expected that Turkey would align with the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) to counterbalance Russia's assertiveness in this region. However, Ankara essentially hovers between gaining economic advantages from cooperation with Moscow and counterbalancing Russia in the region – both as a NATO member and as a bridge from the South Caucasus, especially for Georgia and Azerbaijan, to the West.

Although Turkish and European interests are largely aligned, tactical cooperation and strategic thinking to this end has been distinctly lacking. Reasons include Turkish cynicism that due to its internal divisions the EU will not have the political will to succeed in containing Russia; widespread mistrust of both the US and the EU in Turkey; and Ankara's wariness of the economic and political consequences of souring its relations with Moscow.

Turkey tends to manage its relations with Russia through an economic lens, and has tried to take advantage of the friction between Russia and the West to maximize advantages from both. However, the tension

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The Ukraine crisis has exposed Turkey's efforts to avoid direct involvement in Russia-EU tensions.
- Turkey's relatively neutral position will not be sustainable if Ankara's vital energy and security interests in the Caucasus are threatened.
- Turkish societal links with East European and South Caucasus countries could become an asset for Turkish-EU cooperation throughout the Black Sea region.

»»»»» between Turkey's economic relationship with Russia and strategic dependency on the West could prove to be unsustainable.

There are essentially two tracks that present Turkey with unique opportunities to curb Russian influence in the Black Sea region today. One is the on-going establishment of a gas transport corridor that links the Caspian basin to Europe and bypasses Russia. The other is Turkey's potential to connect people and ideas by virtue of its societal linkages with communities in the wider region. However, both tracks are ridden with complications and challenges.

### **THE UKRAINE CRISIS EXPOSES TURKEY'S RUSSIA AMBIGUITY**

From the start of the political crisis in Ukraine at the end of November 2013 up to Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Ankara remained relatively silent. In fact, reflecting the conspiracy theories shared by Ankara and Moscow about the Western role in fomenting dissent in the region, Turkey's pro-government newspapers alluded to the Euromaidan protests as being an extension of the 'Western-orchestrated' anti-government protests in Istanbul six months prior.

When the issue of Crimea's status came to the fore, Ankara abstained from overtly criticising Russian aggression. Turkish authorities reiterated support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and underlined the need for a diplomatic solution. They limited their demand to Moscow guaranteeing the protection of Tatar rights in annexed Crimea. Turkish government ministers deliberately framed the crisis as a standoff between Russia and the West, keeping Turkey out of the crossfire. This was justified by the argument that a confrontation between Russia and Turkey would serve neither Turkish interests nor those of the Turkic Crimean Tatar minority.

Ankara's caution in confronting Moscow is grounded in Turkish recognition of, and resignation to, Moscow's upper hand in this region.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, on many occasions Moscow has demonstrated the capacity to contain Turkish influence in the region by manipulating political and economic dynamics on the ground.

Turkey's dependence on Russian natural gas for more than half of its consumption is another reason for caution. Plus, Moscow has leverage over Ankara because of the business interests of Turkish companies vying for major construction contracts in Russia (as well as in countries dominated by oligarchs aligned with Moscow). Also, Turkey is a top destination for Russian tourists and Russia is set to build a nuclear power plant in southern Turkey (Akkuyu). The trade volume has been around \$35 billion a year for the last few years, and the jointly declared goal for 2020 is to reach \$100 billion. Moreover, on the Turkish side there has recently been marked enthusiasm about the potential to increase exports of agricultural products to Russia as a result of Moscow's decision to embargo food products from Western counterparts.

There are several examples from the last decade of tension between Turkey's Western orientation, and Ankara's objective of maximizing economic dividends from its relations with neighbours that are in an antagonist relationship with the West. This has not only been the case with Russia, but also with Iran and Syria between 2008 and 2011. The current conundrum Turkey faces regarding Russia reflects this inherent friction in its foreign policy.

Meanwhile, Ankara shares Moscow's position that maintaining the existing balance of power in the Black Sea requires the non-involvement of external

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actors. But the annexation of Crimea has already altered the balance in favour of Russia. Therefore, Turkey appears to have effectively enabled Russia's expansionism.

Now, in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, the argument in the West for increased EU and NATO commitment in the Black Sea region has gained momentum. Ankara's claim – that it can create a more positive climate in the region by constructively engaging Moscow – rings hollow. As Russian assertiveness has grown, and the West is formulating ways to push back, Turkey's maintenance of its quasi-neutral position looks ever more difficult.

The West-Russia standoff comes at a time when Russia's economic importance to Turkey is at an all-time high, and Ankara's foreign policy in this neighbourhood is driven by a particularly mercantilist outlook. At the same time though, for security reasons, the cost for Ankara of diverging from the West is also higher than any other time in the past decade. Turkey needs support from its Western partners to confront threats from the south – Syria and Iraq. Moreover, Turkey is not in a position to offer hard power on the ground to protect the East-West energy corridor and ultimately relies on Western deterrence against related threats.

### **TURKEY AS AN EAST-WEST ENERGY TRANSIT COUNTRY**

The Ukraine crisis has increased the strategic significance of a corridor designated to carry natural gas from the Caspian to Europe bypassing Russia – or the 'Southern Gas Corridor' – for European energy security. Turkey's interests are aligned with the EU on this front for two reasons. One is that the realisation of this route is central to Turkey's ambition to become an energy hub and crucial transit country. Another is that the Southern Gas Corridor will increase Western stakes in the sovereignty of Azerbaijan and Georgia; two partners critical for Turkey's strategic position in the Caucasus.

However, while the Ukraine crisis increased Turkey's strategic importance as a gas transit country for the West, it has simultaneously increased the importance of Turkey to Russia. Turkey tries to play along with both. In April 2014, the Turkish energy minister expressed interest in the Russian South Stream pipeline being rerouted through Turkey. Moreover, as the EU considers how to reduce European dependence on Russian gas, Ankara has been vying for new projects to deliver Russian gas to Anatolia. While Ankara tries to maximise the gains for selected Turkish contractors through such projects, it also negotiates reducing the price of Russian gas sent to Turkey. Such short-term gains, from projects designed to increase the share of Russian gas in the Turkish and European market, are at odds with the vision of the Southern Corridor.

Ultimately, Turkey's energy strategy is geared at strengthening Turkey's strategic position, which explains the conception of the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline (TANAP), which will bring (for now) Azerbaijani gas to Turkey's border with the EU – unlike another pipeline project, Nabucco, that would have carried gas all the way to Vienna. But the Ukraine crisis raised concerns about to what lengths Moscow would be willing to go to delay the Southern Gas Corridor project, for example by igniting protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus or destabilising domestic situations in Azerbaijan or Georgia.

Azerbaijan – by virtue of its hydrocarbon reserves and vital financial resources for the development of critical infrastructure for the East-West corridor – is the 'prize' around which Turkish, European, and Russian geopolitical rivalry primarily revolves in the South Caucasus. Georgia is a crucial transit link in this framework. Any intensification of ethnic conflict in either Azerbaijan or Georgia would pose a risk to the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey link of the East-West transit corridor. In this context, reignited border skirmishes between Azerbaijan and Armenia in August were interpreted in the region as a message from Moscow. Russia also holds other cards that can be used to strain relations between Azerbaijan,

»»»»» Georgia and Turkey, or disrupt their trilateral integration. Joint Ankara-Baku-Tbilisi projects include a vast network of ports, railways, logistic centres, refineries, and pipelines forming a major link in the chain of an East-West corridor that will stretch from Central Eurasia to Europe.

The potential risks to Ankara-Tbilisi relations are twofold. One is the increasingly proactive Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey that regularly violates Georgia's law on occupied territories, by engaging with Sukhumi's *de-facto* authorities and trading directly with Abkhazia. The other is 'Turko-scepticism' stirred by some conservative factions in Georgia, largely believed to be provoked by circles within the Georgian Orthodox Church. These are vulnerabilities in the Ankara-Tbilisi relations that Moscow can stir by virtue of its links with the Orthodox clergy in Georgia, and ties with Abkhaz communities in both Abkhazia and Turkey. The year ahead carries risks for Turkish-Azerbaijani relations too. Turkish initiatives to normalise relations with their common neighbour Armenia could emerge during 2015, on the centenary of the 1915 ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Anatolia. These initiatives could upset the government in Baku, which is involved in a conflict with Yerevan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

In sum, as the TANAP project gets off the ground this year, it does so in an environment of high political suspense. The annexation of Crimea has raised concerns about Moscow's potential leverage to stir dormant tensions along the route of the Southern Corridor. So far, there has been no concerted effort by Turkey and the EU to preemptively avert such risks.

**TURKEY AS A BRIDGE FOR PEOPLE –  
ASSET OR LIABILITY?**

In the 1990s, at the height of the vision of Turkey bridging its east with its west, there were two aspects of people-to-people relations that were described as Turkey's assets. The ethnic and religious ties Turkish society shared with communities in neighbouring countries in Eastern

Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia; and Turkey's potential to spread European values and governance models eastwards as it became more Europeanised. Economic integration was a factor that would supposedly play into these dynamics. However, on all these fronts various contradictions have since led Turkey to play an ambivalent role.

Religious, ethnic, and linguistic ties between Turkish citizens of Armenian, Azeri, Circassian/Abkhaz, Georgian, and Crimean Tatar descent and their lands of historical origin form a basis for influence that can translate into Turkish power of attraction. However, the contradictory expectations of different kinship communities in Turkey complicate policymaking in Ankara, particularly when business lobbies also have conflicting demands. For example, during the Ukrainian crisis, Turkish citizens of Crimean Tatar descent demanded that Ankara take a stronger stance against Moscow, while some in the Turkish business community working with pro-Moscow Ukrainian partners worried about how this would affect their interests.

Abkhaz diaspora associations in Turkey and Turkey's private sector vying for construction contracts in Russia support strong relations between Moscow and Ankara, whereas Turkish citizens of Georgian and Circassian origin often support critical positions towards Moscow. Turkish liberals and the Turkish minority of Armenian descent argue that Ankara should detach its relations with Armenia from Azerbaijan's interests, while a much larger segment of society backs Azerbaijan's cause, and business interests largely call for a pro-Azerbaijan policy from Turkey. Ankara is often caught between its proclivity for kinship policy and the prerogative of preserving a good relationship with Moscow.

Overall, there is a low level of interaction between mainstream Turkish civil society and the civil society of countries that comprise the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Turkish NGOs and human rights activists have been largely excluded from EU-sponsored programmes to engage networks in this region (because Turkey, unlike the other Eastern

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European countries, is a formal accession candidate). The absence of a pro-European perspective in Turkish civil society's approach to the neighbourhood can be attributed to the lack of interaction between Turkish pro-Europeans and their counterparts in the region.

Besides the lack of solidarity from Turkish civil society counterparts, the rhetoric of the Turkish government has aggravated the perception that Turkey is not a stakeholder of a democratisation and human rights agenda in the region. Turkish authorities have suggested dissent against authoritarianism in the region is a Western conspiracy. Accordingly, and also in light of the regression of rule of law and separation of powers in Turkey, recent debates in Western capitals and in the region have presented Turkey, along with Russia, as models of illiberal states with strong leaders. Moreover, it is currently unclear whether Ankara is more favourably inclined to the Moscow-advocated anti-Western culturally conservative axis, or the liberal democratic values that the EU stands for. One question that thus arises is whether more Turkish soft power in the neighbourhood would necessarily contribute to Western values and interests.

Another question is whether a more pro-European agenda would serve Turkish interests. Clearly, in Georgia, Moldova, and arguably Ukraine, which have opted for deeper integration with the EU, Turkish soft power has the potential to flourish to the extent that Turkey is perceived as an extension of the Euro-Atlantic umbrella. However, in Azerbaijan and Russia, Turkey stands to derive benefits from *not* jumping on the European bandwagon in areas such as human rights advocacy and democratic reform.

Meanwhile, the threat perception of Turkish citizens regarding Russia is consistently very low, and this separates Turkey from most countries in the Black Sea region. However, according to the Transatlantic Trends survey, a favourable opinion of Russia in Turkey is only lower to that in Poland and Sweden, and has dropped steadily in the past four years (20 per cent in 2014, 24 per cent in

2013, 32 per cent in 2012, 37 per cent in 2011). Moreover, according to the same survey, approval of Ankara's management of relations with Moscow among Turkish citizens is only 35 per cent, which is the third-lowest among the 13 European countries surveyed – after Poland with 33 per cent and Spain with 27 per cent.

The same survey reflects low support (19 per cent) in Turkish society for acting with the EU in managing relations with Russia. Still, there is a potential to engage the Turkish society more actively and constructively. EU objectives in the region, such as stronger rule of law and minority rights, will also serve Turkish business interests and 'relatives' in the region but these shared interests need to be better explained and increasingly stressed by the EU. In designing civil society networking platforms for the region, the EU should include Turkish participants from mainstream civil society, media, and kinship-based associations. This may also curb the growing frustration that can be heard from pro-European activists ranging from Ukraine to Azerbaijan that Turkish voices are absent from the chorus of solidarity raised from their European counterparts.

Turkey's civil society needs to be more active in linking up with counterparts in the region around shared concerns, ranging from women's rights to judiciary independence, freedom of expression, and other areas of political reform. The Turkish government should recognise that multifaceted civil society links are a necessary component of Turkey's influence in the region, and that they can strengthen policy-making and public diplomacy. Ankara can tailor the instruments it has already invested in to be more effective; for example by maintaining alumni networks across the region for those who attended university in Turkey, or remaining engaged with imams in neighbouring countries who received religious training in Turkey. Ankara should also coordinate the activities of TIKA (Turkey's development agency), the Directorate of Turks Living Abroad and Relative Communities, and the Diyanet (Religious Affairs institution) in line with a cohesive vision for the region and Turkey's role in it.



»»»»» **CONCLUSION**

Since the Ukraine crisis, Ankara is confronted with ever more straining contradictions between its economic, geostrategic, and normative associations with Russia versus the West. Russia's revisionism in the Black Sea region limits Turkey's strategic depth and Ankara does not have the leverage to counter this trend on its own. Yet, seemingly oblivious, Ankara prioritises its economic dividends from Moscow, undermining Euro-Atlantic strategies to curb Russian assertiveness. On top of this, Turkish rhetoric regarding Western promotion of open societies seemingly pits Turkey against the West, undermining trust in Ankara among its traditional allies and pro-Western capitals east of the EU.

Particularly if cohesion in NATO necessitates Turkey to take a stronger stance against Russia, or the infrastructure connecting Azerbaijan to Turkey through Georgia is threatened, Turkey's balancing act will not be sustainable. Turkey will have to side with the West. However, in such a case Turkey will also incur serious blows from Russia because it has not guarded itself against excessive dependence on Moscow, particularly in the sphere of energy.

Turkey has unique assets in the neighbourhood, foremost in its role as an energy hub and its close ties with several peoples and countries in Eastern Europe – extending to the eastern-most anchor of the Greater Black Sea Basin, Azerbaijan. If Turkey and the EU have no strategy to align these assets around a pro-Western vision, they may very well not be able to cope with Russia's revisionism in the region. Whether Turkey will be a pro-European power in the neighbourhood ultimately depends on whether the EU (and the US) formulates an effective approach to the region, as well as on Turkey's EU accession track and domestic political trajectory.

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