

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE, GLOBAL VISION

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RUSSIA'S CRIMEAN FAIT ACCOMPLI



The crisis in Ukraine coincided with a domestic political crisis in Turkey and the run-up to local elections at the end of March. As a NATO member, Turkey responded to the crisis by opposing Crimea's break-away from Ukraine and aligning itself with its Western allies. In the face of Russia's imminent annexation of Crimea, Turkey joined the U.S. and the EU in announcing that it will not recognize the referendum as legitimate. Turkey's priorities in the Ukrainian crisis are the country's territorial integrity, the prevention of regional instability, and the safety and security of Crimean Tatars. Russia's actions threaten all of these priorities and should Russia expand its reach into Ukraine, Turkish-Russian relations will be further damaged.

Russian President Putin does not show any sign of yielding to Western pressure and he will likely succeed in yet another fait accompli as he did in Georgia in 2008. The fear is that Russia will not be satisfied with Crimea's annexation, but will go further into Ukraine and beyond in an attempt to resurrect the Russian Empire. The majority of the Western measures taken or planned thus far are unlikely to dissuade Russia, as the EU's energy dependency on Russia renders Western pressure ineffective. Turkey's leverage over Russia is limited and its energy dependency (like much of Europe) is an obstacle preventing Ankara from applying serious pressure. It seems unlikely that Turkey will announce sanctions against Moscow as this would endanger its energy security and trade ties with Russia. However, Turkey will likely join its Western partners in making Crimea's annexation costly for Russia. At the same time, in the long run Turkey may have to compartmentalize its disagreement with Russia - as it did with Syria - in order to avoid negative economic repercussions.

Turkey's concern for the Crimean Tatars is an important component of Turkish policy towards Ukraine because of Turkey's historic ties with the Tatars. In fact, the loss of Crimea in the late 18th century was a devastating strategic loss and a psychological trauma for the Ottomans.

For the first time, the Ottomans lost a Muslim-majority territory after disastrous defeats suffered at the hands of the

Russians. Crimea's independence marked a turning point for the Ottomans, as their retreat against the Russians throughout the 18th century became definitive. Much has changed since then and the demographic balance is not the same, as Tatars constitute close to 15 percent of the Crimean population. In addition to historic ties to the region, the Tatar diaspora in Turkey makes the wellbeing of Crimean Tatars a serious concern for Ankara. Turkey will likely lobby Moscow to ensure their safety, even though it will not recognize the annexation of Crimea. If the situation deteriorates and the Tatars are further threatened, Turkey will be hard pressed to take a harder line against Russia.

The Russia-Georgia war of 2008 led Europe to seek ways of diversifying its energy sources. Turkey benefited from the crisis, as it emerged as an important energy transit route for Europe. With the current crisis, this interest in energy diversification will likely reemerge. However, if this side benefit comes at the expense of good relations with Russia, it will not be a real win for Turkey. The potential for regional instability makes it critical for Turkey that the situation does not deteriorate. If the crisis escalates and leads to a military standoff between NATO and Russia, Turkey will be directly affected and have to make difficult choices, such as allowing U.S. destroyers to cross into the Black Sea through the Turkish straits.

Any escalation will not only lead to regional instability but also a deterioration of Turkish-Russian relations. If Russia continues to expand its reach into Ukraine, the West may decide to isolate Russia. In that case, Turkey would have to align itself with its Western allies in containing Russia's actions. While we should not expect Turkish policy to be more hardline than that of the West, Turkey cannot afford to be a bystander and merely hope for the best in Ukraine.

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