



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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**Turkey's Role in the Confrontation Between
Russia and Ukraine in the Spring of 2021**

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The relations between Kiev and Moscow became extremely tense in the spring of 2021, and Ukraine came under the threat of a full-scale Russian intervention. The potential hostilities could have led to undesirable geopolitical changes for Turkey in the Black Sea.

Naturally, in such a situation, Ankara openly supported Kiev both diplomatically and militarily, and at the same time, Turkey also hinted at the possibility of revising the Montreux Convention.

All this has irritated Russia, precipitating tough steps towards Turkey, which has initiated new threats and challenges in the Black Sea region.

Turkey's position in the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine

Turkey and Russia cooperate on many international issues (Syria, Libya, Karabakh, etc.), and in some of them even take a common stance against the West.

However, there are issues where their interests not only fail to coincide, but even contradict each other. One region of such controversy is undoubtedly the Black Sea, where the growing Russian influence precipitates a natural concern in Turkey.

Thus, the actions of these two countries in this region radically diverge: while Moscow occupies the Georgian regions (Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region), annexes Crimea, promotes separatism and war in eastern Ukraine, and opposes the integration of these countries with the West, Ankara supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine, opposes the Russian occupation of the territories of these countries, and supports their integration into NATO.¹

The main point of contention between Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea is the Crimean Peninsula, which Moscow considers as its own territory, while Turkey regards it as land belonging to Ukraine. At the same time, Turkey correctly thinks that the rights of the Crimean Tatars, who are historically, linguistically, and culturally close to them, will be best protected precisely under the Ukrainian state, while at the same time military balance in the Black Sea will not shift in favor of Russia.²

¹ Nur Özkan Erbay, Developments on the Moscow-Ankara line and the Ukraine crisis, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/developments-on-the-moscow-ankara-line-and-the-ukraine-crisis>

² Zurab Batiashvili, "Turkey and the Black Sea Security Issue", Security Review, 2021 <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/%E1%83%97%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0%E1%83%A5%E1%83%94%E1%83%97%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1->

MAP 1

The Black Sea Region

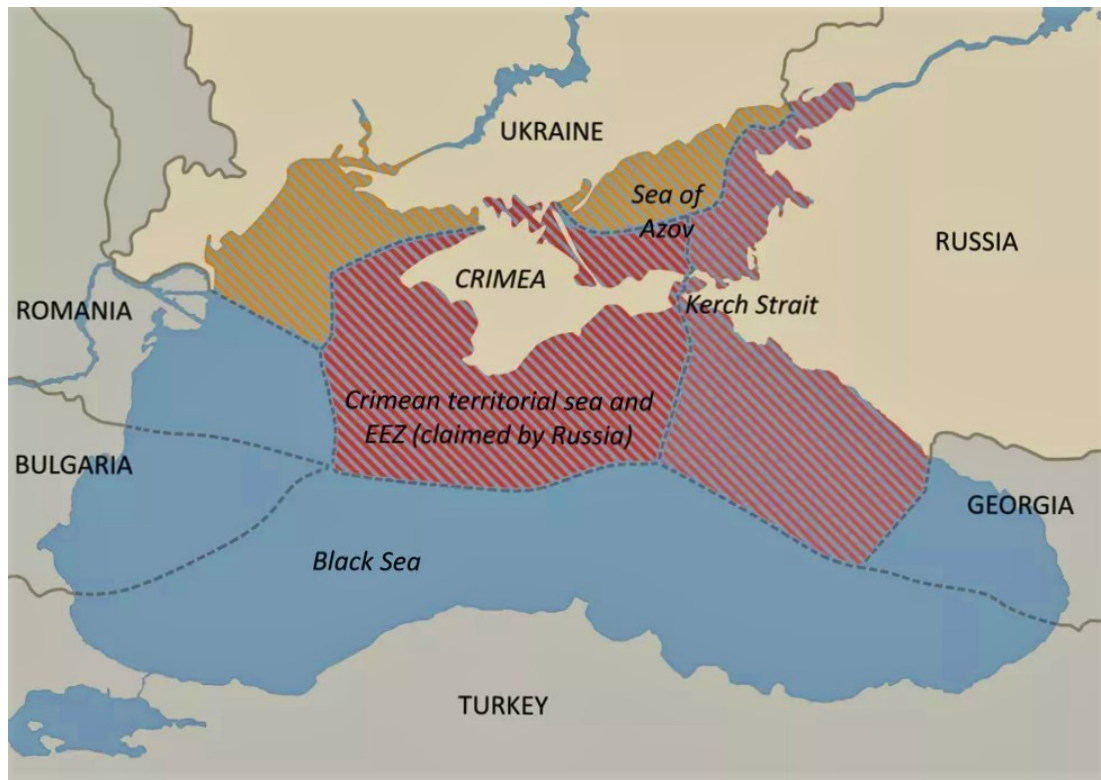


SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

BG3614 heritage.org

Increasing Russian influence in the Black Sea basin

At the same time, it should be noted that after the occupation of Crimea, Russia de facto expanded the area of its territorial waters and the Special Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Black Sea, while also blocking the possibility of a Ukrainian-Turkish connection through the same sea.



De facto change of territorial waters and special economic zones in the Black Sea after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The particular geopolitical location of Crimea after the annexation by Russia has a negative impact on Turkish air security, as the Russian missiles stationed there can reach Turkish airspace and hinder the safe operation of Turkish military aircraft in the Black Sea.³

It should be noted that Ankara is constantly trying to increase Kiev's defense capabilities. For example, under a bilateral agreement signed in February 2020, it pledged to allocate \$36 million in assistance to the Ukrainian Armed Forces throughout one year.⁴

Turkish-Ukrainian military cooperation particularly intensified during the Second Karabakh War (Autumn 2020), when the capabilities of Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles were revealed. For example, in December 2020, a number of military cooperation agreements were

³ Zurab Batiashvili, "Turkey and the Black Sea Security Issue", Security Review, 2021, <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/%E1%83%97%kE1%83%A3%E1%83%A0%E1%83%A5%E1%83%94%E1%83%97%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%9B%E1%83%98%E1%83%93%E1%83%92%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98-2941.pdf>

⁴ Mehmet Fatih Ceylan, What Role for Turkey in the Crisis between Russia and Ukraine?, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/what-role-turkey-crisis-between-russia-and-ukraine>

signed between the two countries, which include the joint production of both naval vessels and unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as the transfer of relevant technologies.⁵

This issue became especially important for Turkey after the fall of 2020, when the Canadian side stopped supplying certain technologies to Turkey due to the active use of Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles in the Second Karabakh War.⁶ The Turkish side intends to replace the Canadian technologies precisely with the Ukrainian alternatives, which, on the one hand will neutralize the Canadian embargo, and on the other hand will reduce the production cost of drones by 35%.⁷

As early as in 2019, Ukraine bought 12 units of Turkish (Bayraktar) produced drones,⁸ and is currently interested in acquiring for its Armed Forces an additional 48 units of unmanned aerial vehicles. Given the fact that the Turkish Armed Forces has a total of 107 drones, the acquisition of such a high number of unmanned aerial vehicles would be a very serious purchase for Ukraine.⁹

At the height of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, Turkey indicated that Ankara might revise the terms of the Montreux Convention, which restricts the presence of a non-Black Sea country (primarily USA) warships in the Black Sea.

It is noteworthy that shortly after these indications, on April 9, Russian President Vladimir Putin called President of Turkish Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the first thing he asked was the subsequent fate of the Montreux Convention.¹⁰ Clearly, the Russian side is concerned about the possibility of a revision of this Convention, which could result in an increase in the presence of Western troops in the Black Sea.¹¹

⁵ Mehmet Fatih Ceylan, What Role for Turkey in the Crisis between Russia and Ukraine?, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/what-role-turkey-crisis-between-russia-and-ukraine>

⁶ Burak Ege Bekdil, Canadian block on drone parts shows Turkey's defense industry still not independent, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/10/13/canadian-block-on-drone-parts-shows-turkeys-defense-industry-still-not-independent/>

⁷ Ukraine considering buying Turkey's Bayraktar drones - Turkish media, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-defence-industry/ukraine-considering-buying-turkeys-bayraktar-drones-turkish-media>

⁸ Nitin J Ticku, Bolstered by Turkish Bayraktar TB2 Drones, Ukraine Steps-Up Pressure Against Russia – Reports, <https://eurasianimes.com/impressed-by-turkish-bayraktar-tb2-drones-ukraine-using-drones-more-actively-against-russia>

⁹ Ukraine considering buying Turkey's Bayraktar drones - Turkish media, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-defence-industry/ukraine-considering-buying-turkeys-bayraktar-drones-turkish-media>

¹⁰ Putin underscores importance of Montreux Convention preservation to Erdogan, <https://tass.com/politics/1276201>

¹¹ Zurab Batiashvili, "Turkey and the Black Sea Security Issue", Security Review, 2021

In addition to the above, at the zenith of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, on April 10, 2021, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky paid an official visit to Turkey and held talks with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan.¹²



Meeting of the Presidents of Turkey and Ukraine in Istanbul on April 10, 2021

At the meetings held during the visit of the Ukrainian President to Turkey, the Turkish side once again assured the President of Ukraine that Turkey would continue to support the territorial integrity of Ukraine and would not refuse to cooperate with it in the military sphere.

Russia's response

Obviously, the statements and actions of the third countries during the Russian-Ukrainian crisis were closely monitored in Moscow. Accordingly, Turkey's active support for Ukraine during this very important crisis for Moscow did not go unnoticed there.

Two days after Zelensky's visit to Turkey, on April 12, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov first strongly warned Turkey against providing military assistance to Ukraine,¹³ and then, the

¹² Turkey's Erdogan voices support for Ukraine amid crisis, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-erdogan-voices-support-for-ukraine-amid-crisis/a-57157898>

¹³ Russia urges Turkey, others to stop supplying arms to Ukraine, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/russia-urges-turkey-others-to-stop-supplying-arms-to-ukraine>

same evening, Moscow took the first "punitive" step: Russian Vice-Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova said that the Russian side is suspending all flights (both regular and charter flights) to Turkey from April 15 to June 1. The official reason for the move was the difficult epidemiological situation in Turkey caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁴

It is clear to everyone that the decision was not caused by the pandemic (flights were open in 2020, despite the severe epidemiological situation in Turkey, as a result of which 2.1 million Russian tourists visited Turkey last year¹⁵). As is often the case with Moscow's decisions, the main motive in this case was the current political situation.

Ankara hoped to negotiate with the Russian side and resume flights between the two countries from June 1, 2021, but it was disappointed. Despite the fact that the number of coronavirus cases in Turkey has significantly decreased and it seemed that this could no longer be an official excuse for refusing flights, the Turkish side's offer to resume flights was rejected.¹⁶

Clearly, by suspending flights, Russia was deliberately hitting the already dire Turkish economy, in particular, the Turkish tourism sector, with an expected loss of billions of US dollars. It is difficult to determine the exact amount of damage, as at this stage no one knows whether flights between Turkey and Russia will resume, and if they do, when.

That this will not happen in the near future became clear in an interview with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on May 24, 2021, in the newspaper "Argument i Fact", where he once again warned Turkey against providing military assistance to Ukraine and called on Ankara to stop such actions.¹⁷

Despite the suspension of flights, Turkey has neither stopped providing military aid to Ukraine nor has Russia been reticent in expressing its dissatisfaction with this fact.

¹⁴ Elena Teslova, Russia suspends flights with Turkey until June 1, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-suspends-flights-with-turkey-until-june-1/2206559>

¹⁵ In 2020, Russian tourist flow to Turkey decreased by 69.7%, <https://russtd.com/in-2020-russian-tourist-flow-to-turkey-decreased-by-69,7.html>

¹⁶ Firat Kozok, Turkey Fails to Convince Russia to Begin Flights in Tourism Blow, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-18/turkey-fails-to-convince-russia-to-begin-flights-in-tourism-blow>

¹⁷ Russia warns Turkey over ties with Ukraine, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/24/russia-warns-turkey-over-ties-with-ukraine>

Conclusions

- During the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Ankara once again showed that it is an important foreign policy actor in the region, which makes decisions independently based on its own national interests;
- Despite the serious difficulties in its economy, Ankara is not afraid of the possible consequences of countermeasures imposed by the opposite side (in this case - unofficial Russian sanctions);
- Turkey is not indifferent to the military-political picture in the Black Sea region. Therefore, it continues to support the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia, as well as their possible accession to NATO;
- Ankara has once again shown that Turkey remains the only regional power south of Russia that can cause serious difficulties and discomfort to Moscow in this domain;
- The degree of Turkish resistance to Russia will largely depend on the strength of Turkey-West (primarily Turkey-US) relations. However, the latter, for various reasons, is at a very low point at this stage. This in turn limits Turkey's ability to resist Russia.