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- CRIMEAN PLATFORM
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## Crimea

### Editors

Dr. Hanna Shelest  
Dr. Mykola Kapitonenko

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### Contacts:

website: <http://ukraine-analytica.org/>  
e-mail: [Ukraine\\_analytica@ukr.net](mailto:Ukraine_analytica@ukr.net)  
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ukraineanalytica>  
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# A CHANGE OR CONTINUATION OF THE STATUS QUO IN THE BLACK SEA REGION: THE CASE OF CRIMEA'S ANNEXATION

*Mustafa Gökcan Kösen*  
*Istanbul Bilgi University*  
*Sabri Deniz Tıǧlı*  
*Kadir Has University*

*Although armed conflicts in the Middle East, which have engulfed the Mediterranean region since the outbreak of the uprisings in Arab countries, came to the fore, armed conflicts in the Black Sea region have the potential of initiating a wide range of crises. The crises in Moldova, Georgia, Kosovo, and Ukraine have already been on the agenda of policymakers. Several political changes have been introduced in the Black Sea region in order to cope with the changing security environment. Relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation have played a vital role. The annexation of Crimea has brought the question regarding the relations in the region into focus.*

## Introduction

The annexation of Crimea has been the primary source of security concerns in the region. Even though Ukraine has been the most affected country because of the attempted annexation, its effects spill over to the relations of Turkey and the Russian Federation, Turkey and Ukraine, and the relations of all three with the European Union. The question of how the annexation of Crimea has changed the security environment in the Black Sea region has to be addressed.

The characteristics of the Black Sea provide some challenges and opportunities for the region's countries, including regional equilibrium and future outlook. It could be argued that the geopolitical position of the Black Sea has been crucial for the countries of the region in terms of energy

trade, combating terrorism, exclusive economic zones, naval bases, etc. However, the recent developments in the eastern and northern part of the Black Sea have re-organised power relations in the region. In that respect, Russia's wishes to enhance influence over the region bring about important security challenges to the United States, European Union, and especially Turkey. Even though Turkey acts in coherence with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Black Sea, the gradual increase of mistrust between Turkey and the US and the EU has opened a window of opportunity for the relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation.

The Russian-Turkish relations are crucial to understand the change or continuation of the status quo in the security environment of the Black Sea. Even though these two countries fought for the control of the

Black Sea and Crimea during the 18th and 19th centuries, recently they have not experienced any significant conflict in the region. However, it does not mean that their interests do not overlap in the Black Sea region. On the contrary, the current situation contains huge security risks for both states and for the regional countries. Not only the position of Turkey, alienated by Western countries, but also the interests of other countries pose multiple questions regarding the developments in the region, such as possible consequences of the annexation of Crimea. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the strategic importance of Crimea, its effect on the security environment in the region, and the role of Crimea in the relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation.

### **Strategic Importance of Crimea and Its Annexation**

The strategic importance of Crimea cannot be analysed in isolation from the Straits or from the Black Sea. Despite its seasonal availability for naval forces, it provides a hub and serves as a route for the pipelines. The throughput capacity of Crimea and Ukraine has been crucial for decades. Crimea hosted important bases during the Soviet era. Strategic importance of this peninsula has been crucial for the Russian Federation too. Naval bases in the Crimean Peninsula have been central for the Black Sea, the Straits, and the Mediterranean Sea policies of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.

Even though the geopolitical position of Ukraine and Crimea has been often presented as a buffer region for the Russian Federation, the importance of Crimea is not limited

to this. There are other aspects that keep Crimea important for the policy agendas. One of the other features of Ukraine and Crimea in particular is that their geopolitical position provides important routes for the energy transportation. This turns the position of Crimea into an international issue. Ukraine and Crimea became an issue not only for the region but also for other countries that are not neighbouring the Black Sea.

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***The Russian-Turkish relations are crucial to understand the change or continuation of the status quo in the security environment of the Black Sea***

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These routes provide economic advantages for Ukraine as well, while the language and demographic proximity of Crimea play a crucial for the Russian Federation's policy agenda. These kinds of proximities have been used during the annexation and after the annexation for re-arranging power relations in the region. Thus, there are different aspects of the annexation of Crimea. The strategic importance of Ukraine and Crimea might be traced in the writings of Zbigniew Brzezinski, according to whom, the independence of Ukraine from Russia generated crucial anxiety for the latter. Independence of Ukraine pushed the Russians to rethink their geopolitical space.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Evvazov argued that the loss of Ukraine could not be compensated or compared with any other Soviet periphery.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1997, pp. 112-115.

2 D. Еввазов, *Секьюритизация и Региональная Активность Держав на Примере Политики России в Украинском Кризисе (Securitization and Regional Activity of Powers on the Example of Russian Policy in the Ukrainian Crisis)*, "Международные процессы" (International Trends), 15 (4), 2017, p. 162.

Ukraine and the Russian Federation had signed several agreements about the navy,<sup>3</sup> which became a milestone for their relations. According to the agreements, Ukraine allowed to lease bases in Sevastopol to the Russian Navy from 1997 to 2017. The agreement established two national Black Sea fleets for Ukraine and the Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup> However, this agreement had important clauses for the geopolitical position of Crimea. Under this agreement, the Russian Federation had obtained the right to position its military vehicles, planes, air defence systems, and some military personnel on the Crimean Peninsula. Ukraine and the Russian Federation agreed to establish a naval base in Crimea; in exchange, Ukraine would have discounts for energy supplies, rental income, and naval division compensation from the Russian Federation. These agreements have been followed by a fourth agreement, which extended the lease until 2042. The so-called Kharkiv Pact<sup>5</sup> also provided for a possible extension of the agreement for five more years in exchange for a multiyear discount on the natural gas that was supplied by the Russian Federation to Ukraine.

Just a few days after the so-called “Crimean referendum” in 2014, the Kharkiv Pact had been terminated. There are several aspects of these agreements. One of them is that Ukraine used the geopolitical importance of the Crimean Peninsula for economic reasons. On the one hand, this provided income for the

budget. On the other hand, Ukraine benefited from discounted gas prices. It also showed that the Russian Federation wanted to keep its position over the Crimean Peninsula.

Due to the geopolitical importance of Ukraine and Crimea in particular, it might be argued that policies regarding Crimea have been important for the political agenda of regional countries and especially for the Russian Federation. Ukraine’s move westward has been closely monitored by the Russian Federation. After the so-called “colour revolutions”, the Russian Federation started to consider how it might be affected by the developments in the region. As the post-Soviet countries were perceived in Russia as being within the Russian sphere of influence, the protests and other political developments had the potential of a spill-over to the Russian Federation as well. One might easily remember developments and a harsh reaction of the Russian Federation toward Georgia in 2008. These developments have been monitored by other countries as well. However, the attention of non-regional countries and the harsh reaction of Russia are not limited to the developments in the early 2000s. All that might be easily traced in the annexation of Crimea, too. Crimea has been one of the important issues in the relations of Ukraine with the Russian Federation. Russian policies over the Crimea created a different atmosphere for the relations between the Russian Federation and Turkey.

- 3 Ukraine and the Russian Federation had signed three agreements. These are “The Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Parameters of the Division of the Black Sea Fleet”, “The Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Status and Conditions of the Presence of the Russian Federation Black Sea Fleet on the Territory of Ukraine”, and “The Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of Ukraine on Payments Associated with the Division of the Black Sea Fleet and Its Presence on the Territory of Ukraine”. These agreements are now known as the Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet. Full treaty might be accessed (in Russian language) at <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/901737969> or [https://web.archive.org/web/20140321072522/http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/spd\\_md.nsf/0/BBC88CF0F9DF3F9F44257C9800383F4D](https://web.archive.org/web/20140321072522/http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/spd_md.nsf/0/BBC88CF0F9DF3F9F44257C9800383F4D).
- 4 It should also be remembered that main naval base of Soviet Russia was in the Crimean Peninsula. After the dissolution of the USSR, the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and special status of Sevastopol had become an ongoing problem. After the annexation of Crimea, the legal regime of these regions has changed. It can be accessed via “Стаття 3. Тимчасово окупована територія Про забезпечення прав і свобод громадян та правовий режим на тимчасово окупованій території України” (*Article 3. Temporarily Occupied Territory on Ensuring the Rights and Freedoms of Citizens and the Legal Regime in the Temporarily Occupied Territory of Ukraine*) at <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1207-vii#Text>.
- 5 The fourth agreement is known as “The Agreement between Ukraine and Russia on the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine” or Kharkiv Accords as well.

## Impact of the Crimean Factor on the Relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation

Even though the situation in Crimea has not been raising serious concerns in relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation, the strategic importance of Crimea and Western countries' stance against its annexation can be still a compelling subject in the future of Turkish-Russian relations. Similarities of the Russian interventions in Georgia and Crimea in a political sense<sup>6</sup> and similarities of Turkish response to both cases bring the question about how the Russian wishes to enhance their presence in the Black Sea will influence security policies of Turkey in the Black Sea and the relations between the two countries.

While rising instability in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean have been continuing, both countries eventually found a way to push their relations in a much more cooperative way by establishing bilateral or multilateral dialogue processes. From that perspective, the Black Sea might be seen as an interesting case as the developments there do not raise problems so far. The status quo in the region might face new challenges with the attempts to enhance influence over the region, which might dominate the security agenda of both countries. Hence, the annexation of Crimea is still a critical point for future relations of the two countries due to a variety of concerns.

There are several developments in the Black Sea, the Middle East, and the Eastern

Mediterranean that influenced the relations between the Russian Federation and Turkey. The Arab Spring and its spill-over effects have created a vast turmoil in several countries in the Middle East, and its aftermath had a huge impact on neighbouring and non-neighbouring countries. The presence of Russia in countries so close to Turkey as Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria carries the potential to affect the relations either positively or negatively.

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The interests of Russia and Turkey have been clashing in Syria and Libya for a long time. The failure of cooperation between Turkey and the US in Syria, deteriorating relations between Turkey and the EU, as well as internal conflicts in Iraq and Syria have generated a competitive environment for Turkey and the Russian Federation, who both have a desire to play an influential role in regional issues.<sup>7</sup> However, the endeavours of both countries to extend their presence and influence throughout the mentioned regions did not bring about conflicts between

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6 "These similarities are identified with political reasons [for the] Russian stance against the 'orange revolutions', which [are] believed [to be] a Western trap to Russia." See M. E. Becker, M. S. Cohen, S. Kushi, I. P. McManus, *Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens*, "European Security", 25 (1), 2016, p.120.

7 Dimitri Trenin (2016) implies that the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015 is the revival attempt of the country's great power status, which was started to be neglected in Gorbachev's period in the USSR. Becker et. al. (2015): "The Crimean intervention is a part of the revival of Russian Empire, particularly the gradual increase of the wealth and political consolidation under the Putin ascendancy has led to Russia to re-emphasize its assertive power in foreign policy". On the other hand, President Erdogan has been seeking an assertive role for Turkey in regional and global politics, he also declared the aim that "transformed from a regional power to a global one". See his speech at AK Party Gümüşhane Provincial Congress in 2017 [<https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/87401/turkish-nation-stands-tall-just-as-it-has-been-for-thousands-of-years>].

them, with the exception of the turmoil period in Syria, which started with a Russian jet downed by Turkey<sup>8</sup>. Important issues in these regions might shadow the importance of Crimea in the relations. However, policies toward Crimea cannot be understood without accounting for the impacts of other controversial issues indicated above.

Despite the historical antagonism between Turkey and the Russian Federation, the two countries established a mechanism of mutual cooperation on various problematic issues, especially after the 15 July coup attempt in Turkey. However, before the coup attempt, the Turkish-Russian relations were strained due to many controversial issues, including the annexation of Crimea, even though Turkey hesitated to openly criticise the Russian activity in the early period of annexation of Crimea<sup>9</sup>. As Turkish-Russian relations were strained further by the Syrian Civil War, Turkish authorities publicly started to criticise the Russian activities in Crimea. Turkish Prime Minister Davutoğlu boldly stressed that Turkey might give a response to Russian activities in Crimea<sup>10</sup>, while President Erdoğan also responded to the Russian Prime Minister Medvedev's statement on 1915 events by raising the issue of the annexation of Crimea.<sup>11</sup>

While relations between Turkey and its Western partners were deteriorating, the Turkish-Russian relations had a much more positive trajectory. Crimea has been swept under the carpet for a while. However, the potential of controversy over the Crimea issue has shown itself. Aktürk asserts that Russia has become a military and political hegemon with the annexation of Crimea<sup>12</sup>, thereby, in a strategic sense, achieving a greater leverage in the Black Sea against Turkey. The statement of non-recognition of the Russian annexation of Crimea by Turkish authorities might have been seen<sup>13</sup> as a part of silent but countering policies of Turkey.

Regardless of the consolidation of the Russian influence, which started with the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, the Crimean annexation has brought the potential to re-adjust the status quo in the region. Due to the contemporary status of Crimea, increasing Russian navy in the Black Sea has enhanced the Russian presence in the region.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Russian military presence in Abkhazia since 2009<sup>15</sup> is another component of the increasing Russian influence in the Black Sea. The words of the Russian former Chief of Staff Valeriy Geramissova also acknowledged that. According to him, Turkey

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- 8 The Russian SU-24 jet was shot down by a Turkish F-16 due to breaking engagement rules on the Syria-Turkey border in 2015. This is an important turning point in the Turkish-Russian relations that brought both countries on the edge of war.
  - 9 B. Devlen, "Don't poke the Russian bear": Turkish Policy in the Ukrainian Crisis, "NOREF Policy Brief", May 2014, p. 2.
  - 10 Davutoğlu: Böyle devam ederse Rusya'ya yanıt veririz (Davutoğlu: If It Continues This Way, We'll Give a Response to Russia), "Cumhuriyet", 15 February 2016 [https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/davutoglu-boyle-devam-ederse-rusyaya-yanit-veririz-481538].
  - 11 Erdoğan: "Rusya, Kırım'ın hesabını versin" (Erdoğan: Let Russia Answer for Crimea), "BBC Türkçe", 27 April 2015 [https://www.bbc.com/turkce/multimedya/2015/04/150427\_vid\_erdogan\_putin].
  - 12 A. Şener, "Türkiye'nin Rusya ile ilişkilerinin yükselişi ve gerilemesi, 1992-2015: Neorealist Bir Değerlendirme" in G. Özcan, E. Balta, B. Besgul (eds.), *Türkiye ve Rusya İlişkilerinde Değişen Dinamikler: Kuşku ile Komşuluk*, İletişim, 2017, p. 141.
  - 13 The statement was published by Presidency of the Republic of Turkey Directorate of Communication, 16 October 2020 [https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/we-have-always-supported-ukraines-sovereignty-and-territorial-integrity-including-crimea].
  - 14 P. Michael, *The Naval Power Shift in the Black Sea*, "War on the Rocks", 09 January 2019 [https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea/].
  - 15 K. Alexandra, S. Wezeman, *Russia and Black Sea Security*, "SIPRI Background Paper", December 2018, p. 11-12.

is not a master of the Black Sea anymore.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Russia also has benefited from the internal turbulence in NATO.

However, Turkey's threat perception and its security agenda in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean shadow the current situation in the Black Sea. Due to imminent threats in these regions, increasing Russia's presence in the Black Sea does not become a priority issue. Strategic relations between Turkey and Ukraine have continued to improve with economic and military agreements. Ukraine bought Turkish Unarmed Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in 2019 and agreed to reinforce its navy by purchasing Turkish Ada-Class corvettes.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Turkey's supportive role is important for the modernisation of the Ukrainian army in line with NATO standards.<sup>18</sup> Beyond that, Turkey's joining NATO exercises and conducting drills with US Navy in the Black Sea demonstrate that the Russian threat is considered seriously by Turkish authorities. On the other hand, Egyptian-Russian naval training in the Black Sea in November 2020 is another indicator to witness that regional actors do not solely define the regional balance anymore.<sup>19</sup>

On identity and cultural relations, Turkey has interests about the status of the Crimean Tatars, which became a problematic issue

after the annexation of Crimea by Russia.<sup>20</sup> The status of the Crimean Tatars has been a controversial issue for a long time. Prime Minister Davutoglu and President Erdogan declared that the status of the Crimean Tatars is vitally important for Turkey. Both of them also declared that Turkey was determined to protect the Crimean Tatars' rights.<sup>21</sup> Turkey's support to the Crimean Tatars creates another political sphere for Turkey in the Crimean issue.

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With these developments, Turkey is slightly but emphatically changing the field against Russia; yet, these efforts do not seem sufficient. Turkey's intertwined relationship with Russia in Syria and Libya and its tense relations with Western countries have created obstacles to establish balance-of-power policies against Russia in the Black Sea. Turkey's reluctance to join economic sanctions applied by Western

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16 *Российский генштаб: безраздельное господство Турции в Черном море закончилось* (Russian General Staff: *Turkey's Undivided Domination in the Black Sea Is Over*), "err.ee", 14 September 2016 [<https://rus.err.ee/234706/rossijskij-genshtab-bezrazdelnoe-gospodstvo-turcii-v-chernom-more-zakonchilos>].

17 Y. Göksel, *Ukrayna, korvet ve İHA ihtiyacını Türkiye'den karşılayacak*, "Anadolu Agency", 18 December 2020 [<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/-ukrayna-korvet-ve-ihaihtiyacini-turkiyeden-karsilayacak-/2080972>].

18 *Turkey Helping Ukraine Achieve NATO Standards: Experts*, "Anadolu Agency", 20 January 2021 [<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/helping-ukraine-achieve-nato-standards-experts/2116903>].

19 *Egyptian Naval Vessels Head to Black Sea for "Friendship Bridge-3" Exercise*, "Egypt Today", 16 November 2020 [<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/94314/Egyptian-naval-vessels-head-to-Black-Sea-for-Friendship-Bridge>]; J. Dettmer, *NATO Boosts Black Sea Naval Presence*, "Voice of America", 03 February 2021 [<https://www.voanews.com/europe/nato-boosts-black-sea-naval-presence>]; D. Hamit, *US, Turkish Navies Conduct Joint Exercises in Black Sea*, "Anadolu Agency", 12 February 2021 [<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-turkish-navies-conduct-joint-exercises-in-black-sea/2142199>].

20 Turkey and the Russian Federation are not unfamiliar with these kinds of identity and cultural issues. The post-Soviet Turkic countries have been another controversial issue between them.

21 *Erdoğan Tatar lider ile görüşti*, "Al Jazeera-Turk" [<http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/erdogan-tatar-lider-ile-gorustu>].

countries against Russia during the Russian-Georgian War and the annexation of Crimea is an important indicator of how the relations will continue.

Finally, as Dmitry Peskov, Kremlin spokesperson, stated, "These relations are of a mutually beneficial nature, and they are based on the principles of non-interference in each other's domestic affairs and on the respect for each other's interests".<sup>22</sup> Russia considers Crimea as an internal issue. However, several considerations, such as the status of the Black Sea, NATO's position, and Ukraine's territorial integrity, affect Turkey's interests in the region. In this sense, the conflict of interests over Crimea between Russia and Turkey seems inevitable but deferrable. However, policies over Crimea are intertwined with other controversial areas such as Syria and Libya.

## Conclusion

The annexation of Crimea has brought changes to the security environment in the Black Sea. The strategic importance of Crimea was examined in its historical and contemporary context. Turkey and Russia are the most powerful countries in the Black Sea region; therefore, their relations are a key component of the regional security architecture.

However, the relations between these countries are affected not only by the developments in the Black Sea region. Their interests and policies also conflict with each other in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus. Thus, the annexation of Crimea is only one of the factors in the Turkish-Russian relations.

Russia's overstretching wishes in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean carry the potential to create possible areas of conflict not only for Turkey but also for the region. Even though the annexation of Crimea seems less relevant for the foreign policy of Turkey, the Russian wishes to enhance its influence in the Black Sea might clash with Turkey's re-adjusted sea policies (the Blue Homeland). Although Turkey's political agenda has been occupied by the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea still keeps an important place in its policies. Crimea shows that "frozen conflicts" from time to time change the relations between Turkey and the Russian Federation, creating a struggle between the changes and wishes to keep the status quo in the region, as it is the case with the annexation of Crimea.

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*Mustafa Gökcan Kösen is research and teaching assistant at the International Relations Department of Istanbul Bilgi University and pursuing his PhD at the International Relations Department of Kadir Has University. He completed his MA degree with the thesis of "The Political Economy of Russian Impact in the Balkans". His research interests are focused on the Russian foreign policy, political psychology, and emotions in foreign policy.*

*Deniz Tıǧlı is pursuing his PhD at the International Relations Department of Kadir Has University. He completed his MA degree with the thesis of "By status-quo to Proactivity from 1990 to Today: Conservative Foreign Policy in Turkey". His research interests are focused on Turkish foreign policy, Middle East, and neoclassical realism in IR.*

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22 *Russia Will Continue Explaining Its Position on Crimea to Turkey, Kremlin Says*, "TASS Russian News Agency", 04 December 2020 [<https://tass.com/politics/1231437>].



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