

Friends in Mutual Need

Türkiye and Ukraine

Maxime Gauin

Except for Russia, Türkiye and Ukraine are the two largest and most populous countries in the Black Sea region.

The Crimean peninsula, which for a time was largely inhabited by Tatars and under a kind of Ottoman protectorate from 1487 until its Russian annexation in 1783, is perceived to be a cultural bridge between the two nations until today. Indeed, the Crimean Tatars suffered tsarist brutalities, which reduced them to a minority, the majority becoming, by immigration and replacement, Russian by the middle of nineteenth century (this is still the case today).¹ Then, the Stalinist deportation of 1944 emptied the peninsula of much of its remaining Tartar population, with some opting to return starting in 1991. The presence of such a sizeable Muslim population has no equivalent in the Black Sea region, as the Circassians population in historical Circassia had been almost completely eradicated by the expulsion of 1864.

Remarkably, the Crimean Tatar question was never a problematic issue between Turks and Ukrainians. The Ottoman cabinet of the Committee Union and Progress supported wartime Ukrainian secessionism from the Russian empire, against which it was at war. It organized armed landings by Crimean Tatar rebels in 1914 in order to provoke an insurrection against its enemy and endorsed the cause of the Ukrainian independence by 1915—this support became more tangible in 1918, in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Constantinople (as Istanbul was then called) signed a treaty with the self-proclaimed Ukrainian entity even before signing one with the Bolshevik regime that was in the process of taking over Russia. The short-lived independence of Ukraine deprived the traditional enemy of the Turks of rich provinces. The geopolitical bottom line for the CUP was something like this: the bigger and stronger Ukraine (including Crimea), the better it was for the Ottomans.² The Bolshevik

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retaking of Ukraine, in 1920-1921, erased these results, until Ukraine recovered its independence seven decades later.

Across the Sea (1991-2014)

Türkiye recognized the independence of Ukraine in December 1991, diplomatic relations were established in February 1992, and the first state visit of a Ukrainian head of state to Ankara took place as early as May 1992. All that happened in the context of collapse of the Eastern Bloc and USSR, which changed the situation wholly in the Black Sea region. In November 1996 a bilateral Agreement on Cooperation in the Sphere of Culture was signed, during a visit by President Leonid Kuchma to Türkiye. Even more importantly, Ukraine was a founding member of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, a Turkish initiative. Within this format, the two countries cooperated in the field of economy (as the name of the organization indicates), but also in combating organized crime and protecting the environment.

Indeed, even before 2004, Ukraine wanted to avoid too much reliance and dependency on Russia, as evidenced both in its choice to acquire membership in BSEC and in its decision to participate in the establishment of the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM)—which consists of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova—in 2001. Such choices can be fully understood only in the regional context: Ukraine saw the invasion of Abkhazia in 1992-1993, the Russian support for Armenian separatism in Karabakh at the same time, and the occupation of Transnistria in 1993. Yet, in May 1992, the Russian National Assembly (Duma) adopted a resolution that termed “illegal” the transfer of Crimea to the Soviet Ukrainian Republic in 1954; then, in July 1993, it adopted another resolution that advocated the annexation of Sevastopol—the largest warm water naval port of the Russian empire and then the Soviet Union. In April 1997, the Duma asked for the transformation of Sevastopol into an international city. All these resolutions, of course, were rejected by Ukraine. Still, the same year Ukraine and Russia signed the Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet, which allowed the Russia-allocated ships to remain in Sevastopol on land leased to Russia until 2017; this was supplemented by the 2010 Agreement between Ukraine and Russia on the Black Sea Fleet in Ukraine (the Kharkov Accords) that extended the Russian lease of the port to 2042.

In addition, Ukraine signed (being strongly requested to do so by the U.S. and British governments) the Budapest Memorandum in 1994, which transferring to Russia all Soviet-era nuclear weapons located in Ukraine in exchange of “security assurances” (this is the title of the document), then signed a treaty of friendship with Russia, which includes an article on the mutual recognition of territorial integrity. However, Russia did not respect the Alma-Ata declaration of December 1991 for Moldova, Georgia, and (indirectly) Azerbaijan and the very fact that the U.S. and Britain were part of the Memorandum shows that Ukraine wanted to involve external powers (but, notably, not

Türkiye). Still, Ukraine did look to Türkiye in a related context, which was only logical for Ukraine, notwithstanding important disagreements between the two countries on issues like Karabakh, the invasion of Abkhazia, and the number of Russian tankers passing through the Straits.³

A new turning point in bilateral relations took place in 2003-2004, which was caused by several converging reasons. In 2003, Ukraine was included on the list of countries with which Ankara wanted to develop cooperation, in the context of the intensification of Turkish diplomacy after the first electoral victory of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's party, the AKP. The first bilateral visits took place as early as 2003. Then, at the end of 2004, Türkiye's candidacy for EU membership was formally accepted, marking the peak of the political relations between Ankara and Brussels. At this time, the Orange Revolution was taking place in Ukraine, which installed a Western-oriented government in Ukraine. Parallels between the situations of the two countries were not uncommonly made in the foreign ministries and media outlets of EU member states (and beyond). It is true that the relative political instability in Ukraine and the increase of economic exchanges between Türkiye and EU member states during the years following 2004 contributed to a suboptimal development of relations, but overall, the 2004-2014 period was a fruitful one.

Erdoğan's official visit to Ukraine in April 2004 was marked by the signing of a Joint Action Plan, which focused on the shared fight against terrorism and championed the establishment of greater regional stability. This document was updated in 2006. Meanwhile, the visit of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül to Ukraine in May 2005 and the one of President Viktor Yushchenko to Türkiye the next month were seen as evidence of a mutual commitment to develop simultaneously a rapprochement with the West and the bilateral relationship. More concrete was the Agreement on Cooperation in the Defense Industry, which was signed in Ankara in January 2007. Developing its defense industry has been a top priority for successive Turkish governments since the Cyprus crisis of 1974 whilst diminishing its dependency on Russia became a concern for Ukraine after the Orange Revolution in 2004.

Both partners seemed satisfied by the first results, as they established in May 2010 a High-Level Strategic Council that was designed to deal with both political and economic issues. Moreover, Turkish exports to Ukraine, which had more or less stagnated from 2006 to 2010, started rising in 2011: \$1.2 billion in 2010, moving up to \$2.09 billion in 2019 and climbing even higher to \$3.1 billion in 2021. In the field of tourism, travel was greatly facilitated by the signature of a visa-free agreement for under 30-day visits (the agreement was amended in March 2017, extending the visa-free regime to 90 days). As a result, 1.6 million Ukrainian tourists visited Türkiye in 2019. Meanwhile, Ukraine had experienced a pivotal movement, which also had a deep impact on its relations with Türkiye: the first Russian invasion.

Readiness for War (2014-2021)

The invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, quickly followed by the invasion of parts of the Donbass the same year, was itself then followed by the establishment of two “republics” quite similar to the separatist entities of Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and (until 2023) Karabakh. Ukraine has argued that the Minsk Agreement, which was signed in September 2014, was violated by Russia the same day—thus, Ukraine saw no strong reasons to stick on it. The second Minsk Agreement, which was signed in February 2015, barely was able to reduce the armed conflict and did not restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Moreover, the invasion provoked the immediate end of the links between the Ukrainian and Russian defense industries, a source of challenges for the two countries.

Yet, from the beginning, the Turkish government expressed unconditional support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. At the same time, the Russian support for the Assad regime and the Syrian branch of the PKK was causing a crisis between Ankara and Moscow. The Russian unwillingness to engage with Turkish attempts to mediate the Ossetian issue had obviously done nothing to ease the tensions. The peak was reached in November 2015, when a Russian jet was shot down by the Turkish Air Force. Even during the Cold War, no Soviet jet had been shot down over Turkish territory. Certainly, Vladimir Putin’s supportive attitude towards Erdoğan in the immediate aftermath of the failed coup of 15 July 2016 (as opposed to the hedging position of Turkey’s NATO allies) changed the situation radically, but it caused no diminution of relations between Ankara with Kyiv. Quite the contrary, in fact.

For instance, in August 2019, during a joint conference with Volodymyr Zelensky in Ankara, Erdoğan stated that the annexation of Crimea is not, and will not be, accepted by Türkiye, adding: the “continuation of our kinsmen’s existence in their historical motherland Crimea, protection of their identity and culture, preservation of their basic rights and freedoms are Turkey’s priorities.” Zelensky answered: “I would like to thank you for your steady support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.” In February 2020, Erdoğan repeated, during a visit in Ukraine that “Turkey doesn’t recognize the illegitimate annexation of Crimea. Turkey supports Ukraine’s territorial integrity.” Such a strong commitment is a matter of principle against forcible annexations, as well as the consequence of Türkiye’s context, namely Armenia’s territorial claims on eastern Anatolia (e.g., Serge Sarkissian’s declaration made in July 2011, a pan-Armenian declaration co-signed by the same in January 2015, a speech by Nikol Pashinyan in August 2020), PKK separatist terrorism, and the now-defunct Armenian occupation of Karabakh. Moreover, interest in the plight of the Crimean Tatars only increased after the resignation of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2016 and the alliance of the AKP with the MHP in 2017. It was visible, for instance, by the release, in October 2017, of two Tatars incarcerated by the Russian occupation authorities for having opposed the annexation. They were freed after Erdoğan’s personal intervention.⁴

As early as 2014, the favorable strategic implications of the opportunity to deepen military cooperation with a partner that had broken its ties with Moscow was understood in Türkiye. On the Ukrainian side, the will to multiply its partnerships was obvious, especially in the context of the country's growing disappointment with German policy, which was seen as accommodationist towards Russia at the expense of Ukraine (e.g., the NordStream project). Indeed, Berlin refused to sell weapons to Kiev and even offered to the Ukrainians the example of the reunification of Germany, which took place peacefully but only after four decades. This was at the very least a gross overestimation of Ukraine's patience to suffer occupation and implied a comparison with post-Nazi Germany's position in the international system that Kiev rejected.

Be that as it may, as far as publicly available evidence indicates, military collaboration radically increased in 2021. In April of that year, the Turko-Ukrainian High-Level Strategic Council published this joint declaration:

1. Increase joint efforts in order to deepen cooperation and coordination between the Sides in the fields of economy, trade, tourism, security, defense industries, science, education, and youth,

[...]

3. Reaffirm unconditional support to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders,

4. Continue coordinating steps aimed at restoring territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders, in particular at de-occupation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, as well as territories in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions,

[...]

7. Enhance joint efforts to improve living conditions of the Ukrainian citizens, specifically Crimean Tatars who were forced to leave their ancestral homeland of Crimea in the aftermath of the temporary occupation.

To concretely implement these intentions, especially the first point, a crucial deal was made. The Turkish side gave a license to the Ukrainians to build a factory of Bayraktar TB2 UAVs; and the Ukrainian defense industry would develop an engine for Bayraktar's jet drones. This deal may have unwillingly contributed to the Russian decision to invade Ukraine, the Kremlin fearing a reconquest of the Donbass⁵ and the Ukrainian side rightfully fearing that the official statements made in 2021 about the "historical unity of the Ukrainians and Russians"⁶ were signs announcing a new war.

The Fight for Survival (2022-present)

The general invasion of Ukraine, since February 2022, caused a hostility that can be compared to the Atatürk Administration's reaction to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, but with this considerable difference: unlike in the 1930s, today's Türkiye can provide various forms of very tangible support. The country can also continue to raise the Crimean issue in public, as for example, this 23 August 2022 statement by Erdoğan:

The return of Crimea to Ukraine, of which it is an inseparable part, is essentially a requirement of international law. Türkiye does not recognize the annexation of Crimea and has been openly stating since the first day that this step is illegitimate and illegal. [...] The Crimean Tatars, who have suffered great pains throughout history, are fighting for a peaceful life in their homeland. Türkiye will continue to stand by the Ukrainian government and the Crimean Tatars in this process.

And the Turkish president did not say so in a random context, but in his video message to the Second Crimea Platform Summit, a conference specifically devoted to draw international attention to the illegality of the 2014 annexation.

Ankara also could see on which side were its enemies. Two days before the February 2022 invasion, Arayik Harutyunyan, the “president” (now in Baku’s custody) of the separatist entity that was at the time based in Khankendi, congratulated Russia for its “recognition” of the two Donbass separatist entities; then, in October 2022, the secessionist “parliament” in Khankendi explicitly linked its fate to Russian expansionism in Ukraine. Moreover, several nationalist voices of the Armenian diaspora vehemently supported the invasion (on the website armenews.com in particular), others, such as Franck “Mourad” Papazian, preferred to slander Ukraine.

The military help proffered by Türkiye to Ukraine,⁷ sometimes falsely reduced to its more mediatized aspects, deserves an analytic presentation. The Bayraktar TB2 UAV is of course the best known. This drone was particularly efficient during the first phase of the war (February-April 2022), when the main aim of the Ukrainian was to destroy tanks and other military vehicles that were threatening its capital city. Together with infantry missiles (including the Turkish-delivered ones), they are at the origin of the Russian withdrawal. As is well-known, the Ukrainian army released a song in tribute to the aforementioned drone—the first song of this kind (this was later followed by one to the U.S. Javelin missile and, later, to the French CAESAR howitzer). After April 2022, the Ukrainian army almost completely stopped the footage of TB2 videos, because the Russian army used them to improve its analysis of the radar data. Indeed, the detection of the TB2 is difficult, but not completely impossible. In September 2022, Zelensky decorated Haluk Bayraktar, the CEO of Baykar Makinasi, in appreciation for his contribution to the country’s war effort.

Even after this ceremony, the Ukrainians found another way to use the TB2: in coordination with Turkish multiple rockets launcher systems (MLRS). Unlike the American HIMAR, the British MLRS, or the French *lance-roquettes unitaires* (LRU), the Turkish systems can strike mobile targets. Less known and non-lethal, but of not negligible importance, are the bullet-proof vests and the helmets supplied by Türkiye—in fact, these are the ones that are used by Zelensky and his inner circle.

While these materials are particularly useful in qualitative terms, others are in quantitative terms. The delivery of mortars, machine-guns, and, above all, 155mm ammunitions (100,000 delivered by May 2023, in addition to those sent by allies of

Türkiye, for example Pakistan) have been especially welcomed by the Ukrainians. Indeed, the lack of jets (causing a low use of air-to-surface-missiles for attrition and preparation of the offensives) as well as the exceptional intensity of the war provoke a use of shells unprecedented in Europe since the Second World War—even if the howitzers made in NATO member states are much more precise than the Russian ones. Similarly, since summer 2022, Türkiye has provided more than 200 Kirpi armored infantry vehicles, a vital material to make more efficient and less costly counter-offensives. The Turkish side broke up with its trend to produce on its own soil all what can be made there and selected a Romanian subcontractor for some pieces, in order to deliver the vehicles faster. This is evidence of both goodwill and a sense of organization. Against the Russian and Iranian-made drones, the Ukrainian army can count on the short-range HISAR air defense systems, the self-propelled Korkut anti-aircraft gun, and anti-aircraft machine guns.

No formal announcement has been made regarding the sale of the heavy drone Akinci, which has recently (October 2023) been exported to Azerbaijan, but, as early as 2022—namely, even before the end of the testing period—the Ukrainian Minister of Defense and the CEO of Bayraktar, took a photo with a model of that drone.

This direct help is not the only one, even in the military field. Indeed, invoking Article 19 of the Montreux Convention and its agreements signed in 2021 with Ukraine, since 27 February 2022 the Turkish government has been blocking the entrance of Russian military vessels based outside the Black Sea from entering the Straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles). This measure helped to save Odessa from a sea invasion, preserved a road for the export of Ukrainian grain, and prevented the Russian Navy from replacing ships sunk by the Ukrainians.

Concerning these exports, precisely, in July 2022, the Black Sea Grain Initiative was brokered by the United Nations and Türkiye to secure Russian consent for Ukraine to export a part of its corn harvest via the Black Sea (the rest being delivered to Romania by river, then re-exported). The Turkish government took profit of the fact that it had not joined most of the West-led sanctions and export restrictions regime imposed on Russia and was, as a result, seen by the Kremlin as a trusted broker. At the end of October 2022, Russia announced its withdrawal from the Initiative, but Ankara and the UN announced that the agreement would continue to be implemented, which ultimately produced a Russian response (on 2 November 2022) that amounted to a return to the agreement.

For a year (July 2022-July 2023), almost 33 million tons of grain and other foodstuffs had been exported via the Black Sea Grain Initiative. However, the situation became more complicated and more uncertain after Türkiye broke its promise to Russia not to return Azov fighters to Ukraine in July 2023—a decision the Kremlin considered to be a break of the previous balance in the Turkish position (one can characterize it as “pro-Ukraine but not anti-Russia”). Indeed, these 2,000 or so soldiers had surrendered in May 2022, after a long and harsh fight, then were sent to Istanbul in exchange for Ankara’s promise

to remain in Türkiye until the end of the war. That having been said, the losses inflicted by the Ukrainian army to the Russia fleet—in addition to the destruction of S-400 air defense systems—and even more the recent (October 2023) withdrawal of this fleet from Crimea, diminish the scope of the Russian threat.

After the end of the war, the biggest challenge for Ukraine will be the reconstruction of huge, devastated areas located in the largest member state of the Council of Europe. Yet, the experience of Turkish companies in Karabakh, and to a lesser extent in Syria, could prove to be particularly useful. As Erdoğan put it during a joint press conference with his Ukrainian counterpart on 8 July 2023 in Istanbul:

Our contracting companies, that hold a leading position in Ukraine, will definitely help their Ukrainian friends in the reconstruction of the country. One of the reasons that we look to Ukraine's future with confidence is the selfless struggle put up by the Crimean Tatar Turks in order for their country to regain its freedom. I thank once again Mr. Zelenskyy for his efforts regarding the securing of our kinsmen's rights and consolidating their self-governing status. On this occasion, I extend once again my condolences to all the Ukrainians who have lost their lives.

To me, this calls to mind something a former Ukrainian MP and currently managing director of the Henry Jackson Society in London, Aliona Hlivco, stated in Baku in April 2022 regarding the “long-term effort” required for the reconstruction of her country: “Shusha helped me look to the future of Ukraine.”

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2. Michael Reynolds, *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918*, (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 121, 133-134, 181-184, and 186.
3. Duygu Bazoğlu Sezer, “Ukraine, Turkey, and the Black Sea Region,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* vol. 20, (1998), pp. 84, 87-92.
4. Matthew Kupfer, “Turkey: Erdoğan Negotiates Release of Crimean Tatar Leaders Imprisoned By Russia,” *Eurasianet*, 26 October 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/turkey-erdogan-negotiates-release-of-crimean-tatar-leaders-imprisoned-by-russia>.
5. “Ukraine: le Bayraktar, ‘star des drones turcs,’ nouveau symbole de la résistance aux Russes,” *L’Express*, 2 May 2022. See also “Ukraine’s Turkish Drones Could Checkmate Pro-Russia Fighters In Donbas, Analysts Predict,” *Current Time*, 10 November 2021, <https://en.currenttime.tv/a/ukraine-s-turkish-drones-could-checkmate-pro-russia-fighters-in-donbas-analysts-predict/31554510.html>.
6. See, especially, Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.
7. “Local Company Provides Helmets to Zelensky, His Team,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 22 April 2022; Joe Saballa, “Ukraine Receives 50 Kirpi Armored Vehicles From Turkey,” *The Defense Post*, 10 August 2022; “The Stalwart Ally: Türkiye’s Arms Deliveries to Ukraine,” *Oryx*, 21 November 2022, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/11/the-stalwart-ally-turkiyes-arms.html>; “‘Better’ Than HIMARS, Ukraine Gets New Laser-Guided MLRS From Turkey That Can Even Strike Moving Targets,” *The Eurasian Times*, 1 December 2022; Stefan Korshak, “Turkey, Pakistan to Send Cluster Munitions, Howitzer Shells to Ukraine—Reports,” *The Kyiv Post*, 23 January 2023; “New Batch of Armored Vehicles Kirpi for Ukraine—This Time with Remotely Controlled Combat Module,” *The European Times*, 13 April 2023.