

END NOTE

TURKISH-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS RECEIVE A BOOST

By Taras Kuzio

Turkey was one of the first countries to support Ukraine's 23 May announcement that it will seek NATO membership. That expression of support came during an 11 June visit to Ukraine by Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem.

Turkey has historically seen Ukraine as a strategic partner. In 1918-21, the governments of independent Ukraine had good relations with the new Turkish state as both countries perceived Russia as their main threat.

In the years immediately following the demise of the USSR, Ukraine and Turkey similarly had a very close geopolitical outlook in the Black Sea and CIS regions because of their common hostility to what they perceived to be Russian expansionism and intervention in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. In addition, Ukraine and Turkey shared similar views on the return to the Crimea of the Tatar community deported to Siberia in 1944, and Ankara backed Ukraine in its Black Sea Fleet dispute with Russia.

"However, the initially promising relationship failed to produce the expected results," according to Suat Kiniklioglu of the Center for Russian Studies at Bilkent University in Ankara. One reason was because of socioeconomic collapse in Ukraine. "Ukraine simply did not live up to the high expectations that were propagated in the immediate aftermath of disintegration," Kiniklioglu added. Since the mid-1990s, greater pragmatism in Russian policies, increased attention on domestic Turkish problems, and the international isolation of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma after the "Kuchmagate" crisis all lessened Turkish interest in Ukraine. The death of Turkish fishermen at the hands of Ukrainian border troops and high-profile Turkish media reports blaming Slavic women for bringing a potential AIDS epidemic to the country have also not helped matters.

During Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz's visit to Ukraine in February 1998, then-Prime Minister Valeriy Pustovoytenko claim that, "We are planning to transform our relationship to the level of a strategic partnership," was typical hyperbole, given that Ukrainian leaders have defined relations with almost 20 countries in such terms without any factual basis for doing so. But despite the unfulfilled nature of their relationship, Ukraine and Turkey share four strategic objectives.

First, "The Turkish security establishment views Ukraine as an invaluable partner with which it shares a common outlook to the region," Kiniklioglu believes. The fact that Ukraine has preserved its independence and sovereignty, while remaining outside the Russian sphere of influence is also important to Turkey. "Turkey views the viability and constructive role of Ukraine as an important factor of the geopolitical landscape," Kiniklioglu said.

Second, the territorial integrity of states as a principle in international relations is of special concern to Turkey because of its Kurdish secessionist conflict. That concept is also important to Ukraine because of insecurity over its borders. Both countries are therefore status quo powers. Turkey strongly backed Ukraine in its dispute with Russia over the Crimea between 1992-97. Visiting Ukraine in 1994, then-Turkish President Suleyman Demirel condemned

Russian expansionism, expressed support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Moldova, and warned Russia that the "Crimea is Ukraine's internal affair."

Turkey and Ukraine have also supported the territorial integrity of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova bilaterally, in international forums, and through Turkish diplomatic support for the GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) regional group. Turkey and GUUAM jointly opposed Russia's attempts to revise upward its flank limits in the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty).

Nevertheless, the high hopes that Turkey had for GUUAM as a counterweight to Russia have not materialized. And the creation of such a counterweight has also become less important as Turkey and Russia have improved their relations, as testified by the "Action Plan" they signed in November 2001 in New York.

Unfortunately, "Ukraine has been unable to communicate effectively its policies on the Caucasus and its relationship to Turkey in this regard," Kiniklioglu points out.

Turkey and Ukraine both see Georgia as geopolitically important and would like to devise ways to break the deadlocked Abkhaz conflict. One way to achieve this would be to "internationalize" the conflict as President Eduard Shevardnadze has demanded through the introduction of Ukrainian, Turkish, and other peacekeeping forces under a UN or OSCE mandate. Ukraine has already offered to provide peacekeepers to serve in such a UN-mandated force.

Third, the Tatar issue. Turkey backed Ukraine's territorial claims to Crimea because it strongly opposed the idea of the Crimean Tatars -- of whom there are some 5 million to 7 million in Turkey, where they are called "Crimean Turks" -- returning to Russian rule. Turkey is unhappy that the election law has been amended to abolish the guaranteed representation that Tatars had in the 1994-98 Crimean Supreme Soviet.

Turkey is helping to finance the construction of mosques and accommodation for returning Tatars through the Turkish Agency for International Cooperation, which has operated an office in the Crimea since 1998. Turkey also provides Tatars with scholarships for higher education in Turkey.

Fourth, security cooperation. Ukraine and Turkey signed an intergovernmental agreement in July 1994 on cooperation in the field of military training, technologies, and science. The agreement provided for the joint training and education of servicemen, exchanges of information, and joint scientific research in the military sphere. Further agreements on cooperation in their defense industries were signed during then-President Suleyman Demirel's visit to Ukraine in May 1998.

Turkey's support for Ukraine's NATO membership represents a natural continuation of their joint cooperation through NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) and "In the Spirit of PfP" exercises organized by the United States. Both countries have provided bilateral military support to Georgia together with the United States and Germany. Turkey and Ukraine have also taken part in joint peacekeeping exercises organized by NATO, such as the "Peace Bridge-98" exercise held in Topkule, Turkey. Turkish military units have taken part in NATO exercises at the Yavoriv training ground near Lviv. Both countries have also regularly taken part in the annual "Sea Breeze" exercises organized by the United States "in the spirit of PfP."

Ukraine and Turkey have always held close views on the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization, because it is one forum that Russia cannot dominate. Unlike Russia, Turkey is not perceived by Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan as a hegemonic regional power.

Ukraine also potentially has much to gain if Turkey is admitted, after a decades-long wait, into the European Union. Turkish membership in the EU would go far to allay perceived fears regarding Ukraine's admittance to the EU — including the union's ability to "digest" Ukraine as a new member. Turkey is largely Islamic, lies mainly in Asia Minor, and has a larger population than Ukraine.

Unlike the three Baltic states, Ukraine lacks allies to lobby on its behalf its integration into trans-Atlantic and European structures, with the possible exception of Poland. Turkey could certainly become an important such lobbyist if the much talked about "strategic partnership" is finally allowed to develop. Dr. Taras Kuzio is a resident fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto.