

TURKEY AND RUSSIA: PROMISES AND LIMITS OF A PARTNERSHIP

İbrahim Kalın 03 December 2014, Wednesday

Russian President Vladimir Putin paid an official visit to Turkey for the 5th High Level Cooperation Meeting on Dec. 1. The meetings focused on bilateral economic relations and regional issues. Some analysts wonder if Putin's visit signals the beginning of a new era for the relationship between Turkey and Russia. Presidents Erdoğan and Putin seek to improve economic relations despite differences over Syria and Ukraine. Turkish-Russian economic relations continue to grow strong. The current trade volume is around \$30 billion. Turkey buys 60 percent of its gas from Russia while in exchange it sells industrial and agricultural products. Russia is building Turkey's first nuclear power station in Akkuyu, expected to start operations in 2023. Around 4.5 million Russian tourists visit Turkey every year and Turkish construction companies are among the top bidders in Russia.

An important outcome of the Erdoğan-Putin meeting was the 6 percent reduction in gas price and a 3 bcm increase in gas that runs to Turkey through the Blue Stream. As the energy cooperation continues, further reduction in gas price is expected. Turkey wants to see its gas price come close to that of Europe. The big surprise of the Ankara visit was Putin's announcement to terminate the Blue Stream pipeline project, which the Russians have been working on for the last several years. The Blue Stream began in 2007 and was planned to bring Russian gas through the Black Sea to Bulgaria and from there to Serbia, Hungary, Slovenia and Austria. It was seen as a rival to the now defunct Nabucco pipeline.

As Putin said at the press conference in Ankara, the European and American blocking seems to have led him to make a radical decision on this much talked-about project. The proposal to channel Russian gas to Europe through Turkey will be discussed in future negotiations. There is a dilemma for both Russia and European nations here. Europe needs Russian gas and Russia needs to sell it. But the current tensions over Ukraine and differences over larger geo-political issues put both sides in a conflicting situation.

Turkey has its own disagreements with Russia over its policies toward Ukraine and Syria. Turkey does not recognize the annexation of Crimea and is now working to ensure the safety of Crimean Tatars. Together with its European and American allies, Turkey expects the protection of the rights of Crimean Tatars, ending militia operations in the cities and a normalization of life in Crimea for everyone. Putin promised to protect the rights of Crimean Tatars. Erdoğan also urged his Russian counterpart to work with the Ukrainian government to lower tensions in eastern Ukraine. The situation in the southern Caucasus is another area where more progress is expected. Solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will be key to normalizing relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the one hand, and Armenia and Turkey on the other. Normalizing relations among these three countries can make a positive contribution to the commemoration of the events of 1915 next year. Russia can play a constructive role within the framework of the Minsk process.

As for Russia's stance on the Syrian crisis, there were no surprises. Moscow denies that it supports the Assad regime. Putin says he does not have any preference for any specific person or group in Syria. But he also opposes the removal of Bashar Assad on the grounds that the post-Assad Syria will be drawn into greater chaos. Turkey's position is clear on this: Assad is responsible for the killing of tens of thousands of people and the destruction of Syria with catastrophic consequences for the entire region. The Russian proposal to bring together the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition (the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army) around the negotiating table has no practical value as Damascus has manipulated and squandered such initiatives in the past.

As a NATO member and a candidate country for the EU, Turkey treads a fine line in its relationship with Russia. No doubt, Turkey's traditional alliances and the current differences over Syria and Ukraine limit the extent of strategic partnership. But in essence, this is not very different from how Germany and France manage their relationship with Russia. Furthermore, Turkey supports NATO's partnership model with Russia, which has worked well until the Ukrainian crisis. Many analysts note that pushing the NATO borders to the Russian border over Ukraine was an unnecessary overreach and a strategic mistake, which led to the annexation of Crimea and the current chaos in eastern Ukraine.

On the EU front, Turkey supports various EU institutions and mechanisms working together with their Russian counterparts. EU countries continue to have a significant trade volume with Russia, totaling close to 90 billion euros in the first 10 months of 2014. Germany remains the largest exporter of Russian natural gas. EU countries want to see the end of the current political crisis because the sanctions are hurting their economy as much as that of Russia. There are opportunities and then there are limits in the Turkish-Russian relations. It is a prudent policy to deepen cooperation in areas of agreement and work to resolve differences in areas of conflict.