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## **THE FIRM FRIENDSHIP: TURKISH–UKRAINIAN COOPERATION**

### **Strategic Vision, Institutionalized Framework**

Throughout history, rulers of Anatolia always had to follow a multi-directional foreign policy. Nestled at the heart of the wider Eurasian continent, they simply had no other option. From Central Asia to continental Europe, all developments had to be closely followed. Yet, immediate vicinity always had a special weight in their assessments; and the wider Black Sea Basin has always been the key region in this framework.

This background is crucial to understand why the Ottoman Empire and Turkey viewed Kyiv in strategic terms. Without this backdrop, one cannot fully value the importance of the Ottoman Empire's decision to recognize the Ukraine's National Republic founded in 1917.

Just like the Ottomans who set up an Embassy in Kyiv during the National Republic period, Ankara was once again among the first countries to recognize Ukraine's independence, establish diplomatic relations and open an Embassy in Kyiv after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following Anatolia's traditional strategic outlook on Kyiv, Turkey identified Ukraine as a priority partner as early as 2003. In 2011, this vision matured into a strategic partnership.

What we have today is the institutional cooperation framework, which encompasses annual presidential summits entitled High-Level Strategic Councils, and preparatory meetings at the ministerial level. The last summit was held in Istanbul in November 2018, and the next presidential meeting is expected to take place in Ukraine at the end of 2019.

### **Bilateral Cooperation: Facts, Figures and the Way Forward**

Statistics suggest that Turkish–Ukrainian strategic partnership is not just a slogan but a comprehensive multi-dimensional cooperation programme.

Trade turnover stands at \$4.1 billion, which is not a negligible figure, but it is far beneath what the two countries can achieve. Even to the bare eye, the structure of the economies of Turkey and Ukraine clearly demonstrates that they are mutually reinforcing. Proceeding from this, the leaders of the two countries have already pledged to reach \$10 billion in bilateral trade.

What is needed at this stage to reach this goal is an additional impetus, which is readily available in the draft Free Trade Agreement, which has been under discussion for quite a long time. Signing the Agreement will not only boost bilateral trade but also deliver a clear message for the multi-pronged deepening of economic ties.

One key element in this framework is investments. Turkish capital and entrepreneurs firmly believe in Ukraine's future. If that had not been the case, they would not have invested in Ukraine more than \$2 billion, a figure which is literally increasing on a daily basis. Telecommunication, renewable energy, construction and agriculture are but a few key sectors where Turkish business people contribute to Ukraine's economy.

Another key field of cooperation is tourism. Boosted by the decision of the two governments to first introduce visa-free regime, and then to move on to passport-free travels, the number of tourists between the two countries has reached 1.75 million. This number is significant because tourism is not just a source of income but an instrument that brings Turkish and Ukrainian peoples closer.

Indeed, thanks to tourism but also owing to deep-rooted ties as Black Sea neighbours, there is an ever growing interest on both sides to learn more about one another. This interest boosts cooperation in the field of culture, too. In order to live up to growing expectations in this field, Turkey opened the Yunus Emre Cultural Centre in Kyiv in October 2017. The Yunus Emre Center not only gives Turkish lessons but also cooperates with Ukrainian stakeholders in organizing cultural activities. Likewise, Istanbul University launched Ukrainian language and grammar studies at the end of 2017, in a small but important step to address the lack of academic activities on Ukraine in Turkey.

The two countries are discovering their potential of cooperation in various other fields as well. One noteworthy example is defense industry. In addition to military-to-military contacts, public and private defense industry companies of both sides have been meeting for quite a while in this field, and the first tangible results are already emerging. Likewise, security and law-enforcement authorities of both countries meet regularly and discuss issues of mutual interest.

### **The Regional Dimension, Donbas, Crimea and Tatars**

Turkey has time and again reaffirmed its respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea and Donbas. Turkey closely cooperates with Ukraine in the international arena, especially on the issues related to Crimea and Crimean Tatars.

2019 marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most appalling humanitarian tragedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Crimean Tatar deportation. Turkey was among those who assisted the Crimean Tatars in their quest to return to their ancestral homelands. Following the illegal annexation of 2014, some Crimean Tatars were

once again compelled to relocate to mainland Ukraine. Turkey, in coordination with Ukraine, is trying to address the problems of these people, be it housing or religious needs. TIKA, short for the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, is implementing various projects all over Ukraine in this regard.

TIKA also helps address the needs of other Turkic people in Ukraine, such as Gagauz and Meskhetian Turks. However, its activities are not directed exclusively towards compatriots. TIKA and Turkish NGOs are also implementing various projects throughout Ukraine, improving living quality and standards of all Ukrainians.

Turkey also supports all efforts aimed at bringing the conflict in Donbas to an end. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Donbas was chaired by Ambassador Ertuğrul Apakan for five years, and upon the completion of his tenure, this task was assumed by yet another Turkish diplomat, Ambassador Halit Çevik.

### **Final Thoughts**

Turkey and Ukraine have all the necessary tools to take their relations to the next level. From the depth of mines to outer space, there is a huge potential of cooperation between the two. There is every reason to believe that the trade volume will reach and surpass the stated goal of \$10 billion soon enough, especially provided that the Free Trade Agreement is concluded. In addition to trade, the overall bilateral cooperation is bound to increase in a wide spectrum, ranging from security to culture. The reason for such an ambitious statement is not just because the two governments are working in this direction. Rather, it is due to the fact that the people of the two countries are genuinely interested in cooperation.