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Putin’s visit to Turkey: messages, offers, opportunities …

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On December 1, Russian President Vladimir Putin paid a visit to Turkey to attend the fifth session of High-Level Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council. Putin met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu as part of the visit characterized as a state visit by the Russian side to emphasize its importance.

The issues on cooperation in economic, trade and energy sectors and political issues of the international agenda were discussed at the session chaired by the presidents of the two countries and attended by 10 ministers from each side. At the end of the session, 8 documents on cooperation were signed between the two countries. At a joint press conference held following the session, Erdogan and Putin gave important messages regarding the abovementioned issues.

First of all, Putin’s visit to Turkey draws attention in terms of its time. The time of the visit has important political, economic and security motives. In terms of policy, this visit took place in a period when Turkey was experiencing significant problems with the West regarding democratic political regime, EU membership and foreign policy in the Middle East. In terms of economy, the visit came up when Turkey was characterized as possessing one the world’s most fragile economies and its exports to the Middle East market decreased. In terms of security, the visit took place when the Turkish officials accused the West, particularly the United States on intending to overthrow the political power and sabotage the process of negotiating with the PKK through their direct or indirect messages.

On the other hand, the visit is of great importance to Russia. Thus, the visit took place when Russia's relations with the West aggravated in the political, economic, military spheres due to the Ukraine crisis and the country began suffering from it more. Russian authorities had increased activity in other vectors of foreign policy for several months to balance the tension in relations with the West. Kremlin's activity in the Far East focused on the relations with China. $400 billion energy deal signed with China is the most important example of it.

Russia's messages of its intention to sign new agreements with Japan in energy field can be regarded as its effort to involve Tokyo in this process. The second important policy vector is Iran, its traditional ally. By signing a nuclear deal with Iran last month, Moscow got a chance to gain significant economic benefits and conveyed message of its intention to use Iranian card against the West. Putin's visit to Turkey shows that the third direction of Russia's foreign policy is Turkey within the framework of balanced relationship.

Under the existing conditions, Putin's visit to Turkey was of great importance to Russia in terms of policy, economy and energy. From the political point of view, this visit is important at least to mitigate cold relations with Turkey especially caused by the Syrian issue, take side with Turkey which has problems with the West or at least to maintain the current balance of Turkey. In an interview to Anadolu agency ahead of his visit, Putin stressed that Turkey, despite the Western pressures, takes an independent position with regard to Russia. It is clear to understand the same intention from the statements made for the press regarding the Syrian issue after Putin-Erdogan discussions in Ankara. According to the

press statements, the Syrian issue remains the most problematic issue. However, considering the contradictory positions taken by the two countries after the Syrian issue, the styles used and the steps taken in the expression of positions, you may notice that after the visit, the relations between the parties are smoothing.

Recall that as Prime Minister, Erdogan openly accused Russia during the electoral campaigns, Turkey forced a Russian plane to land in the airport and it was checked, and Putin's visit to Turkey in 2012 was reportedly postponed because of discontent. During their last meeting in Ankara, Putin and Erdogan stressed that the situation in Syria is not normal and there is a consensus in solving the problem, but there are still disagreements on the way of resolving this problem. The same careful style which involves cooperation can be observed in the Ukrainian crisis, especially in the issue of Crimean Tatars and mutual messages on the issue of ISIL.

From the economical point of view, the significance of Turkey increase for Russia which is facing serious problems related to food security, foreign investment and foreign trade relations due to the Western embargo. At a press conference, Putin and Erdogan declared the purpose of increasing annual trade turnover of $32 billion to $100 billion by 2013.

This is of economic, psychological and political importance for the Russian market though this goal was not a new message; Erdogan expressed dissatisfaction over the balance of 25/7 in trade relations with Turkey against it and experts had serious doubts about

realization of this goal. Putin's call on Turkish investors to invest in various sectors can be characterized in this context in a period that Western investment left Russia. Putin's reminding the role of Akkuyu NPP and Russian tourists in cooperation are important strokes in terms of demonstrating Russia's strategic and economic importance.

Putin's visit also testifies Turkey's increasing strategic importance for Russia in the energy sector. Turkey can be characterized for Russia as the largest energy market and a transit country. Along with the gas agreement between the two countries signed in 1984 and the Blue Stream gas pipeline, Turkey's permission to the transition of the South Stream pipeline through the Black Sea shows that the cooperation has entered into a new stage. Putin's visit was memorable with the messages to further strengthen this cooperation. Putin announced that from 1 January 2015 six percent gas price discount was primarily granted to Turkey, and if Turkey is able to enter the domestic gas consumer market, the provision of new discounts could be considered. As a result of the discussion held between both presidents, Russia has agreed to increase gas export to Turkey by 3 billion cubic meters annually.

Moreover, the Russian president laid out new proposals aimed at balancing Ukraine's transit potential and delaying the realization of renewable energy projects through Turkey. Putin proposed the loading of Russian gas into an additional gas storage facility to be built on the Turkey-Greece border after constructing a new gas pipeline and from there its sale to South Europe. In this regard, he threatened the European Union with halting the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline in the example of Bulgaria. Putin's gas pipeline proposal is also intended to jeopardize the same-purpose TANAP.

And Ankara's silence over this proposal can be explained with both Ankara's desire to become a "global-scale energy bridge" coinciding with the proposal and the opportunity it can create for Turkey to mitigate competition with Russian in the energy area.

In general, Putin's visit to Turkey can be considered crucial in terms of easing political problems in relations between the two countries and energy cooperation which is of trade-economic and increasingly strategic importance. A new impetus to cooperation between Turkey and Russia can create a chance of maneuver for Azerbaijan that is seeking balance in foreign policy and tone down the balance of power in the region which is gradually turning more severe. However, all these messages bear no signs that this positive impact would affect the threats posed by Russia's growing interest in the post-Soviet area and the balance in the South Caucasus as well as the Karabakh issue. Perhaps in the first place there is a need to create a new format consisting of an Azerbaijan-Russia-Turkey tripartite which would discuss issues like the Islamic State threat, the Ukrainian crisis and energy cooperation. In addition, we can also claim that it's already time to create a new mechanism comprised of an Azerbaijan-Armenia-Russia-Turkey quartet aiming to achieve a solution to the Karabakh problem in the context of peace and security in the South Caucasus.

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