
WILL GAS THAW THE ICE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND TURKEY?

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With a nuclear power plant project underway and a new gas pipeline on the table, Turkey and Russia were moving toward a strategic partnership in the energy realm when things changed abruptly in November after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane at the Syrian border.

Summary□ Print Russias interest in crucial energy projects with Turkey may facilitate fence-mending between the two countries after months of crisis.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was furious. He vowed that Russia would never forget the downing of the jet and the killing of the ejected pilot, that Turkey would regret its action and would not get away with a few economic sanctions and a tomato ban.

Following Putins threats, Moscow curbed Turkish fruit and vegetable imports, put restrictions on the activities of Turkish business people in Russia and cut the tourist flow to Turkey, leading to a 68% drop in the number of Russian vacationers in the first four months of the year.

Turkey, for its part, slowed down energy projects with Russia. The construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant almost ground to a halt, and a major gas pipeline project, to which Moscow attached much importance, was put on ice. The planned Turkish Stream conduit was to carry 63 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to Europe via Turkey per year.

Gokhan Yardim, the former head of Turkeys state-run gas company BOTAS, told Al-Monitor that Russia is under pressure to put in place an alternative gas route to Europe since its transit agreement with Ukraine is scheduled to expire in 2019.

One option for Russia was the South Stream pipeline, which was to run to Bulgaria through the Black Sea and from there on to Europe. The project, however, failed to win the green light from the

European Union. In a surprise move in late 2014, Putin proposed an alternative – Turkish Stream – during a visit to Ankara. According to senior Russian officials, the project was to become operational in late 2017.

In January 2015, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak advised European clients to buy gas from Turkish Stream, reminding them that the transit agreement with Ukraine would expire in 2019. Similarly, Gazprom chief Alexey Miller said time was running out and urged interested European buyers to hurry up with arrangements to take gas from the Turkish border.

The Russian enthusiasm to replace Ukraine with Turkey was obvious, but the plane shooting snagged the project. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan denied initial reports that Moscow was the one to suspend the project, asserting it was Ankaras decision.

Soon, however, the showdown in bilateral ties began to hurt both the Turkish and Russian economies, much to the discontent of both countries peoples. Turkey suffered major losses in tourism and exports, while Russia faced the risk of losing a strategic partner in giant energy projects. With Russia under pressure to secure an alternative to the Ukrainian route, the clock was not ticking in its favor.

Thats where the might of diplomacy came into play. The old dictum of no permanent friends and enemies in international affairs appeared to be at work on May 28, when Putin conveyed a softer message to Turkey during a visit to neighboring Greece. Stressing that Russia never thought of going to war with Turkey, he said, I hope we never come to that point. But what is done is done. Not only was our plane shot down, but our pilot was killed, which is a war crime under international law. We have received some explanations, but an apology has never come. We want to improve our relations, and we were not the ones to spoil this relationship. Words are not enough; action is needed. We are in contact with Turkey, and we expect certain fundamental steps. But there have been none so far.

Responding to Putins remarks, Erdogan also used a softer tone, though he claimed to be unaware of what Moscow expects. Speaking ahead of a trip to Africa last week, he said, I have difficulties in understanding what first step is expected from us. We are not a country sitting in the defendants chair. We are not the ones who want to ruin relations with Russia either. Its really thought-provoking that our relations have come to this point or that he [Putin] is sacrificing a great country like Turkey over one pilots mistake, though our ties with Mr. Putin had reached a truly different level as two good friends. We need to make efforts to improve relations with Russia anew. I hope that this problem will be overcome as soon as possible, and that Turkey and Russia will continue to move forward as they did over the past decade.

According to Turkish journalist Nerdun Hacıoğlu, a veteran Moscow correspondent for *Hürriyet*, Putin's remarks in Athens constituted "a wink at Ankara," which he explained with the following factors: the departure of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, whom Russia held responsible for the plane shooting, and his replacement by Binali Yıldırım, who was quick to express a desire to mend fences with Russia, the negative economic impact of Turkish entrepreneurs leaving the Russian market and Moscow's desire to salvage mega projects such as the Akkuyu nuclear power plant and the Turkish Stream pipeline.

It should not come as a surprise if the Turkish Stream project is taken off the shelf in the near future. The fact that Putin delivered his message from Athens makes it even more meaningful, given that Russia and Greece have reached their own agreement on gas deliveries to Europe. Yet to bring the gas to Greece, a conduit needs to be built via Turkey.

Kaynak/Source: