



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

Author: Sasha Maksymenko; URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-government\\_protests\\_in\\_Kiev\\_\(13087644205\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-government_protests_in_Kiev_(13087644205).jpg)

## Turkey - The Portrayal of the Ukraine Crisis in the Turkish Media

Berk Esen

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on Turkey.

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## Turkey - The Portrayal of the Ukraine Crisis in the Turkish Media

It was in late November 2013, when the Kiev protests began, that the Turkish media first showed an interest in the Ukraine crisis. During this initial phase, newspapers frequently featured stories from Kiev in an attempt to update their followers on the political course of events. More specifically, the media's interest reached its peak during three critical events: the onset of protests in late November, Yanukovich's resignation, and the referendum in Crimea. In between these incidents, newspapers mainly provided their readers with basic information on the political context but discussed the Kiev protests as a distant crisis with little direct impact on Turkey. Moreover, they made few attempts to discern the different governments' positions within the EU and the larger significance of the crisis for EU-Russian relations, not to mention the power struggle between the US and Russia in the region. Only during the negotiations to end the political standoff, which were brokered by Russia and the EU, did the international dimension occupy center stage, albeit briefly.

### General Analysis

The focus of most articles was on the scale of the political protests in Kiev and the on subsequent government crackdown. The online editions of national dailies provided regular coverage, including links to pictures taken of the city-wide protests. For an audience unfamiliar with Ukrainian politics, this was an easy way to follow the demonstrations that shook Ukraine. Another important issue discussed in the media was the political factors behind protests. Newspapers mostly picked up on the EU's role, highlighting how Yanukovich's decision to not sign a free trade agreement with the EU had spurred mass protests.<sup>[1]</sup> Instead of focusing on structural problems within the system – corruption, cronyism, oligarchs, and regional divisions – the Turkish media thus interpreted the turmoil in terms of the divide between the Russophiles and pro-Western groups. However, it did not offer any analysis of the complex historical and political factors that created these two factions. The unstructured nature of the protest movement – that the movements had no clear leader – further complicated the task of media coverage.

During this initial phase of the Ukraine crisis, most newspapers refrained from directly taking a side but once the police intervention had escalated, the overall tone began to turn against the government.<sup>[2]</sup> Interestingly, the media coverage focused little on how the Ukrainian crisis might affect Turkey. Unlike with other regional crises that Turkey confronted, Turkish politicians gave a reserved response to protests in Kiev, which reduced media interest in the protests. Indeed, neither the government, nor the opposition had much to say about the turmoil in Ukraine before Russia became directly involved in the crisis. It is possible that shaken by the popular demonstrations of less than a year ago, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) perceived the Ukraine crisis as a highly controversial subject. Obviously, the members of the government had little to gain from defending the corrupt Yanukovich administration. But neither did they want to openly support street protests, considering how the AKP had itself been challenged during the Gezi protests. In that sense, the Turkish government may have feared that the Maidan square protests would spark a new wave of protest in Turkey.<sup>[3]</sup> If popular protests swept aside the corrupt Yanukovich administration, what was to stop the Turkish middle classes from pursuing a similar outcome? How could the government support anti-regime demonstrations in Ukraine, when it had accused the crowds in Turkey of coup-mongering, violence, and illegality?<sup>[4]</sup>

Compared to the West, the national coverage of the Ukraine crisis was therefore limited in Turkey. Even though Ukraine is geographically close, she remains culturally apart from Turkey. Indeed, the two

countries forged only weak ties during the post-Cold-War era. Unlike the Baltic or Eastern European countries, Turkey does not feel existentially threatened by Russia and most Turks (most of who are below the age of 35) have no memory of the Cold War. Moreover, ordinary Turks were not familiar with the main political actors in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> This attitude was compounded further by the deep cynicism that many Turks felt towards the EU after Turkey's accession negotiations had stalled over the past few years. Notably, some articles portrayed the Russian aggression as a sign of the EU's weakness.<sup>[6]</sup> In contrast, others saw the US and the EU behind the protests, sparking unrest and turmoil in Ukraine. Finally, over the past decade the Turkish media has suffered from political pressure under the rule of the AKP, which has weakened its ability to cover international news. For one thing, the AKP government forced the newspapers to tow the official line and refrain from criticizing its policies. This meek attitude naturally weakened the freedom of the press in Turkey, while newspapers lost substantial parts of their readership and their revenues. With resources dwindling, the national dailies were compelled to scale down their international news desks and coverage of world politics. In general, they receive their news not from foreign correspondents but through the foreign media and several Turkish news agencies, such as the state-run Anatolian Agency.

## Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis through Media Segmentation

In response, Turkish newspapers have tried to fill this gap by adding their own ideologically inspired commentary in articles and columns. This is borne out by the stark differences between the coverage of the mainstream secular, neo-Kemalist, the Socialist, and the Islamists newspapers. Notably, the mainstream secular Turkish media tended towards supportive coverage of the Ukraine crisis. During the initial phase, newspapers explained how the internal divisions within the Ukrainian society, namely between Russophile and pro-Western groups that corresponded to linguistic and geographical barriers, sparked the Kiev protests following Yanukovich's refusal to sign the free trade agreement with the EU. The focus was therefore on the country's relationship with the EU, with one newspaper calling it the "EU revolt in Ukraine". Some articles also mentioned the Orange Revolution, adding that Tymoshenko's call motivated the pro-EU masses to take to the streets.<sup>[7]</sup> At this stage, the coverage was still fairly balanced but as the protests grew, the secular media began to side increasingly with the protesters. As a result, police brutality took center stage in most articles. Many secular newspapers sent journalists to interview demonstrators in Maidan square, observe the political scene, and take pictures, which were then shared with hundreds of thousands of Turkish viewers in print and internet editions.<sup>[8]</sup> In an attempt to detect similarities between the protests in both countries, many dailies focused on images from the Maiden Square that would also be familiar to the Gezi protestors in Turkey.<sup>[9]</sup> Only a few months ago, hundreds of thousands of secular, pro-Western Turkish citizens had similarly gathered in the main Taksim square in Istanbul, as well as in other major urban areas across the country, to protest against the government.

Due to this connection, the mainstream secular Turkish media identified with the people in Maidan square. This sentiment grew after the protesters had refused to back down in the face of police violence and forced the president out of office.<sup>[10]</sup> Their victory was featured in almost celebratory tones.<sup>[11]</sup> Sozcu, for instance, a popular Kemalist daily, announced Yanukovich's resignation with the headline "[The people have won in Ukraine](#)". One article stated that one of the politicians in the opposition camp had allegedly told a Turkish journalist they drew inspiration from the Gezi protests, calling on the Turkish people to resume their political stand.<sup>[12]</sup> Journalists were not alone in discerning the parallels between the two protests. On Labor Day a middle aged man trapped by a police barricade defiantly shouted at the policemen: "One day you will kneel in front of the people like the Ukrainian police".<sup>[13]</sup> This encounter made the headlines that day and was picked up by various newspapers and TV channels as well. Such positive coverage by the secular press suggests how anti-government protesters in Turkey related to

their counterparts in Kiev, supporting their political stand.

The obvious similarities between the Gezi protests and the Ukrainian crisis were not lost on the Islamist media, either. If Ukraine was divided between two camps, distinguished by their different cultural orientations and political allegiances, so was Turkey under the Islamist AKP government. Just as the Islamist media supported the Turkish government against the Gezi protests, so it showed little sympathy for the demonstrations in Kiev, taking a critical stance in its coverage. For the most part, the Islamist dailies highlighted the public disorder and civil violence (rather than police brutality!) that accompanied the Kiev protests. For example, one major Islamist daily sported the headline "[Protesters attack the police in Ukraine](#)" and posted video footage on its online website of demonstrators trying to push their way through a police barricade and into the presidential palace. Not perceiving the protests as genuine, the Islamist media saw Western powers at work wherever it looked in Ukraine. Others, it seems, were even more creative in their assessment of the crisis. According to an article published in *Takvim*, an Islamist tabloid, the anti-government protesters in Brazil, Thailand, and Ukraine employed similar tactics because they were all sponsored by the Jewish financier Soros. *Takvim* presented this claim as a fact, offering no evidence whatsoever. An Islamist politician similarly suggested that Israel supported the conflict in Crimea because instability in the region would enhance Jewish migration to Israel.<sup>[14]</sup> *Takvim* also described the protests against the Ukrainian president as a "coup" attempt (a term commonly used by AKP politicians against the Gezi Park demonstrators), arguing that Klitschko's ambition to take over Yanukovich's post would plunge the country into civil war.<sup>[15]</sup> The very fact that the demonstrators were trying to topple an elected government was sufficient for many Islamist columnists to criticize the Ukrainian opposition.

While anti-Semitic arguments were historically popular in the Islamist public opinion, other political groups also used conspiracy theories to explain the Ukraine crisis. For instance, the orthodox Socialist press rejected the view that the protestors represented the Ukrainian people, suggesting instead that they were encouraged and supported by Western powers.<sup>[16]</sup> Some articles condemned the Fascist groups that joined protests, while arguing that the presence of such anti-democratic elements cast doubt on the democratic intentions of the demonstrators. For others, who took this argument further, the US was in direct contact with these ultra-right groups, allegedly turning a blind eye to their illiberal ideology in order to remove the Yanukovich regime from power. The protests in Kiev were therefore by no means a popular revolution. As an op-ed piece in *BirGun* (*One Day*), a Socialist daily, put it, the Kiev protests represented the "rebirth" of Fascism in Ukraine.<sup>[17]</sup> Few of these newspapers, however, took this stance as far as defending Russia's territorial ambitions in the region, although the semi-official daily of the [Turkish Communist Party openly lamented the destruction of the Lenin statue during the protests in Kiev](#).

The neo-nationalist Kemalist media also saw both the EU and the US as culprits behind the turmoil in Ukraine, as they had allegedly been during the Orange Revolution. Indeed, many Kemalists believed that the US masterminded the colored revolutions that triggered the public unrest leading to the downfall of regimes in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine. The anti-US line taken by many editors during the Ukraine crisis may have therefore emanated from such sentiments. The Kemalist columnists lamented the fact that protests in Kiev would undoubtedly provide an impetus for Ukraine's disintegration, divided as the country was between pro-West and pro-Russia factions. Orhan Bursali, for instance, a well-respected leftist Kemalist journalist, suggested that despite having been plunged into deep economic problems after the end of the Cold War, Ukraine could have developed far better had she been free from the influences of either side.<sup>[18]</sup> Much like the Socialist dailies, the orthodox Kemalists criticized the West more than Putin's Russia. Ever since the painful breakup of the Ottoman Empire, territorial breakup has

been associated with political instability and ethno-civil strife by the Turkish national psyche. Most Kemalist columnists, it seems, found that the Russian invasion confirmed their worst fears.

## Historical Dimension

Following the Russian intervention, the Turkish media struck more of a common note, a phenomenon motivated by concern about Putin's expansionist goals and by support for Ukraine's territorial unity. Attention turned especially to Crimea, where a Tatar Muslim minority with deep historical and cultural ties to the Turks lived. Before the Russian occupation, some parts of Ukraine and Crimea had been governed by a Turko-Mongol vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, known as the Crimean Khanate. During this period, the majority of the local population consisted of nomadic Turkish and Tatar tribes that settled in this region serving both as a buffer zone and a military frontier between the burgeoning Muscovite and the Ottoman Empire. Frequent movement of people and goods were a testament to the close political and military ties between Anatolia and Crimea. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars took refuge in Anatolia between the Russian conquest in the late 18th century and the early 20th century, others were exiled to Central Asia by Stalin (and allowed to return only the early 1990s).<sup>[19]</sup>

Some columnists intended to stoke up interest in this subject by writing about the historical ties between the Ottoman Empire and Crimea. In particular, their articles analyzed how the Crimean Muslims initially fell under Russian rule in the late 18th century and what had happened to them since.<sup>[20]</sup> Additionally, the Turkish media focused on the status of Crimea within the Republic of Ukraine, discussing how the Russian encroachment into the region would affect the Tatar Muslims. For instance, academics who were working on the region or had family ties there wrote op-ed pieces to highlight Ukraine's importance and to raise support for the severely weakened Tatar position.<sup>[21]</sup> On this issue, Turkish public opinion almost unanimously preferred loose Ukrainian control over direct Russian occupation. Before the referendum, the Turkish media also increased its diplomatic coverage, covering in much detail the diplomatic haggling between the US, Russia, and the EU. Newspapers frequently printed statements by foreign minister Davutoglu, who stressed to his Western counterparts the importance of preserving Ukraine's territorial integrity.<sup>[22]</sup> According to him, Ukrainian turmoil might spread to other countries, spurring a region-wide crisis.<sup>[23]</sup>

Even then, the Turkish media interest in Crimea was not intense. Newspapers did not, for instance, treat the Russian conquest with the same kind of urgency as they would a political crisis in the Middle East. Journalists made no direct appeals to the government to take action, with the exception of some who rather disappointingly just reiterated the same old points about the cultural and historic importance of the area for Turkey. This may be attributed to several factors. Given the polarized nature of Turkish politics, parties focused almost exclusively on domestic issues. Indeed, the Ukraine crisis hit Turkey on the back of a whole series of domestic corruption scandals that implicated the government and affecting a very divisive local election campaign. As voters showed little concern for what was going on in Crimea, so did the mainstream Turkish media. Furthermore, Russia is a major military power and has been one of Turkey's main trade partners over the past two decades.<sup>[24]</sup> Turkey therefore had little bargaining power over Russia and the Turkish media must have recognized and accepted their country's relative weakness.<sup>[25]</sup> Finally, it would seem that the Crimean Muslim lobby in Turkey was weak. It had no prominent spokesperson inside the country so newspapers had to contend themselves with publishing occasional statements from the long-time leader of the Tatar Muslims to learn their point of view.

## Conclusion

The Turkish media's portrayal of the Ukraine crisis reveals as much about contemporary Turkey as it does about the turmoil in Ukraine. In general, the Turkish newspapers approached the topic with their domestic audiences in mind. For the anti-EU/anti-Western dailies, the crisis was yet another example of the negative effects of Western interventionism. Some of them saw Jewish conspiracies and others were put off by the involvement of Fascist groups. However, neither side recognized the country's complex political and historical realities, just as they glossed over the heterodox social structures inside Turkey and saw only clear-cut ideological divides. Many others lamented the Russian acquisition of Crimea, fearing that Ukraine's territorial breakup would carry over to other countries in the region. More to the point, the secession of minority groups - as in the case of Russian speakers in Ukraine - was a controversial subject in Turkey, due to the country's own large Kurdish minority. But in the end, many in the media recognized the historic nature of the protests, highlighting how a new generation of young Ukrainian activists organized through social media to pursue their agenda. And indeed: whether Turkey or Ukraine ever join the EU (and if so, when) will very much depend on the success of the young generation that gathered at Gezi Park and the Maidan Square in establishing a vibrant civil society that might build a democratic, transparent political system.

## Footnotes

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