

THE KERCH TRAFFIC INTERCHANGE: A GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSION

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ABSTRACT

After unifying with Crimea in 2014, Russia became determined to build a traffic interchange across the Kerch Strait. A bridge across the strait has appeared and disappeared from the agenda several times. Today Moscow means business: the peninsula needs foodstuffs, energy, and water.

Before the war between Russia and Ukraine, this large-scale project with its huge integration potential could have claimed a geopolitical status. Today, when international isolation has transformed it into a transportation dead end, the bridge has lost much of its geopolitical potential. Today, it is a local project designed to resolve the urgent, but local problems of a small patch of land.

Before unification with Russia, the peninsula was completely integrated with Ukraine, which covered its needs for foodstuffs, supplied it with 100% of coal and sugar, and 90% of fuel and 55% of oil prod-

ucts.¹ The peninsula's dependence on the Kerch ferry, the low capacity of which drops even further in bad weather, has become a focal point because of the limited supplies from Ukraine. Discontent among the Crimean people, or even social outbursts, cannot be excluded. The economic and financial blockade of Russia caused by the war with Ukraine has made the Kerch traffic interchange a challenge of huge dimensions. Russia has no choice: the problem must be solved either with the use of arms (occupation of the Ukrainian stretch of the Azov coast from Mariupol to Crimea), or by building a bridge across the Kerch Strait. If the first alternative fails, Russia will have to realize the latter in haste. It remains to be seen whether the game is worth the candle.

¹ See: "Kerchenskiy most: nad burnymi vodami," *Torgovo-promyshlennye vedomosti*, 11 March, 2015, available at [http://www.tpp-inform.ru/analytic_journal/5561.html].

KEYWORDS: *Crimea, Russia, Ukraine, the Kerch traffic interchange, Tuzla Island.*

Introduction

For a long time, a bridge across the Kerch Strait has been part of a large-scale geopolitical project of a Eurasian traffic interchange expected to consolidate integration and promote trade be-

tween the two continents, the importance of the idea being best confirmed by the list of states that started talking about it at different times. In the nineteenth century, the British government laid a telegraph line, a stretch of the famous Indo-European Telegraph that connected London and India; the British toyed with the idea of a transcontinental railway with two continental traffic interchanges (across the English Channel and the Kerch Strait) as the shortest and reliable trade route between the U.K. and India, "the jewel in the Crown." Nicholas II, the last emperor of Russia, also contemplated a Eurasian traffic interchange, which could not be realized in the early twentieth century for technical reasons. Aware of the strategic potential of a bridge across the Kerch Strait as a link in the trans-Eurasian route to India giving access to Persia via the Caucasus, the leaders of the Third Reich ordered Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler's personal architect, to design a permanent flyover.

Closer economic ties further intensified by globalization created a need for ambitious integration projects. Before the war between Russia and Ukraine, a Kerch traffic interchange could have claimed this status as a link of the new Great Silk Road. It could have offered Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia new opportunities, and could have opened up new vistas for big EU trade partners.

Today, in Ukraine the strategic route West Europe-Middle East partially coincides with International Transport Corridor No. 3, the transit capacity of which remains underloaded. A Eurasian corridor Berlin-Lviv via Zhmerinka, Crimea, and the Caucasus to Tehran would have successfully addressed several tasks; it would have connected the EU with Iran, one of the world's largest energy powers, and would have created the shortest land route from the Southern Caucasus to Western Europe. To a certain extent, it would have helped resolve some of the problems of the unrecognized republic of Abkhazia.

Unification with Russia tipped the geopolitical balance of power and reduced the Euroatlantic traffic interchange to a local project. Crimea's international isolation has already transformed it into a traffic dead end. The anti-Russian and anti-Crimean sanctions excluded (for a long time to come) this logistic solution from the sphere of interests of big international players and killed its investment attractions.

Russia is doing its best to re-brand the project and justify its prompt implementation, the following arguments being the main ones:

- (1) Delivery of foodstuffs and fuel to Crimea, which remains the acutest economic problem.

Despite the frantic efforts to detach the peninsula from the continental part of Ukraine, Crimea still depends on it for resources because of the logistic problems of the Kerch ferry, which became obvious in the summer of 2014 and the winter of 2014/2015.

- (2) Invigorating economic growth in Crimea in order to transform it from a recipient into a donor region.

According to RBC, unification cost the Russian market \$179 billion: capital outflow (\$33.5 billion); lower capitalization of Russian companies in Russia (\$82.7 billion) and in London (\$62.8 billion).² There is a lot of talk of new jobs created by the project and the revived economy of Crimea and the Krasnodar Territory. It is the centerpiece of the five-year federal program Social-Economic Development of Crimea and Sevastopol until 2020, which will cost 700 billion rubles; in this context the project is all-important.

- (3) Setting up infrastructure conducive to Crimea's continued militarization.

Today, Crimea is rapidly developing into Russia's powerful military base and a foothold for an offensive against Ukraine (if this decision is taken at the very top). Over 40 thou-

² See: "Dorogoy Krym: rynek zaplatil \$179 mldr za prisoedinenie poluoostrova," RBC, 9 April, 2014, available at [<http://top.rbc.ru/economics/09/04/2014/916616.shtml>].

sand military, 43 warships, and scores of missile launchers and aircraft stationed in Crimea threaten the European continent.³

(4) Supporting Putin's image.

Image is very important for the people in power in Russia. After declaring himself the liberator of the Russian-speakers of Crimea from the "fascist junta" and "reuniting" them with their "brothers" in Russia, Putin shouldered moral obligations that must be fulfilled at all costs so as to preserve his authority on the peninsula intact.

This means that Russia is aware of the strategic importance of the traffic project and has accumulated weighty arguments in favor of the Kerch traffic interchange. We should bear in mind, however, that between the end of World War II and our days, the Soviet Union and then Russia tried several times, and failed, to implement this project of obvious military-political importance for Russia.

The Kerch Bridge Project in War and Peace

So far, Stalin's was the only more or less successful attempt to build the Kerch Bridge: the traffic interchange of over 4 kilometers in length was built in 1944 to the north of Kerch. It had over 100 spans of either 13.6 or 27.3 m long and four horizontal-swing spans in the main shipping channel.⁴ The whole structure was not strong enough to survive the unusually powerful ice-drifting of 1945, which crushed half of the piers. The very idea of a bridge across the Kerch Strait remained buried for a long time by the postwar economic problems of the Soviet Union and severe winters.⁵ Early in the 1950s, it was decided that a cheaper alternative—a ferry—would be enough. It is still functioning.

In the mid-1970s, there was another attempt to build a bridge; it was suggested by the ecological and economic problems of the Sea of Azov. On the eve of World War II, it produced 30% of the valuable fish and caviar for overall Soviet production. After the war, when the Volga-Don Canal and the Kuban Water Reservoir had cut down the inflow of fresh water from the Don and Kuban rivers by 40%, fishing in the Sea of Azov began to decline: local fish could not adjust to the much saltier seawater. It was decided to tie together the problem of fishing and the future of the Sea of Azov by devising a Kerch hydro scheme to limit the inflow of salty Black Sea water into the Sea of Azov. Entrusted with the project, the S. Zhuk Gidroproekt Institute produced an excellent and technically substantiated project accepted at all stages and pushed aside. Its rival, the Leningrad dam, designed to protect the city from floods (their costs were practically equal—480 million rubles or \$400 million in contemporary prices), won at a sitting of the Politburo of the C.C. C.P.S.U.⁶ This was the end of the peaceful stage in the history of the Kerch traffic interchange.

³ See: "Ves Krym prevrashaetsia v voennuiu bazu Rossii," *Glavnoe*, 23 December, 2014, available at [<http://glavnoe.ua/news/n206048>].

⁴ See: M. Ryzhevskiy, "Kerchenskiy tunnel: zalog bezopasnosti Kryma," *Podzemnye gorizonty*, No. 1, April 2014, available at [http://www.google.com.ua/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CCEQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fspb-projects.ru%2Fforum%2Fdownload.php%3Fid%3D34879&ei=idv9VJr1J83Vapf8grAD&usg=AFQjCNGmdaZDCfCAAdOiMtUNWqOUXqQe02A&sig2=xJu0_XNK-VtyMd0u3JY-Jg&bvm=bv.87611401,d.d2s].

⁵ See: "Istoria stroitelstva i razrusheniia mosta cherez Kerchenskiy proliv," Ministry of Transport and Communications of Ukraine, available at [<http://metrobuildvec.livejournal.com/12944.html>].

⁶ See: M. Semena, "Kerchenskiy most: ot idei do mifa," *Den*, 29 March, 1996, available at [<http://www.day.kiev.ua/ru/article/panorama-dnya/kerchenskiy-most-ot-idei-do-mifa>].

Its new history began in the 1990s, when the disintegration of the Soviet Union created a new geopolitical reality, in particular, the certain vagueness of the borders between the newly independent states. The question of control over the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov developed into the first disagreement between Russia and Ukraine over Tuzla Island.

Until 1922, the Tuzla sand bar was part of the Kuban region. In 1941, it was transferred to the Crimean A.S.S.R. (which was part of the R.S.F.S.R.); in 1954 it, together with the peninsula, was transferred to Ukraine. Its geographic location gave Ukraine an advantage. As the only owner of the Kerch Strait (between the peninsula and the sand bar), it charged all, including Russian, ships for passage across the strait and earned about \$15 million every year.⁷

The Russian part of the channel (between the Tuzla sand bar and the Taman Peninsula) was made shallow to suit the needs of fishing vessels. Its deepening for the needs of navigation was fraught with unwelcome ecological and, most important, economic problems: the spawning places of valuable fishes would be destroyed together with Ukrainian fishery since the larger part of the fish-processing plants were situated on the western coast of the Kerch Strait.

Moscow began realizing its geopolitical ambitions on a grand scale; it started building a dam between Tuzla and the Taman Peninsula, a confrontational decision which would have made the island part of the continent and would have allowed Moscow to establish its control over the Kerch Strait. Construction was halted 102 m away from the Ukrainian border; in December 2003, the sides signed an Agreement on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait. The border issue and regime of the sea remained pending.

James Sherr, Fellow, Conflict Studies Research Center, Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, assessed Russia's efforts to organize a Eurasian corridor as follows: "Firstly, Russia is trying to establish whether Ukraine has enough will power and spirit to offer resistance and defend itself. Secondly, to find out whether the West has lost interest in Ukraine or whether it will support Ukraine."⁸ This was confirmed in 2014 by the unification of Crimea.

Satisfied with the results of "fighting reconnaissance," Russia resumed its peaceful attempts to realize its ideas: in 2007, after winning the right to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics, Moscow came up with a new argument in favor of the Kerch traffic interchange, viz. a shorter route from Europe to the Caucasus to simplify access to the Olympics. The absurdity is obvious: it is much easier to reach the Caucasus (Sochi) by air from Moscow than from Russia (Ukraine) via Crimea (Kerch). The billions poured into the traffic interchange would never have been paid off by the tiny groups of tourists willing to use this roundabout route. In 2010, in Kharkov, the then President of Ukraine Victor Yanukovich signed an agreement with President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev on feasibility studies and the construction of the Kerch-Kuban bridge; the agreement was never realized.

Ambitious Project-2014

In 2014 when Crimea was unified with Russia, the new Silk Road issue was raised to a qualitatively different and higher level. The stage of political slogans and half-hearted attempts to address the economic ills of Crimea and the Krasnodar Territory was left behind: a new empire was looming on the horizon. A heap of alternatives offered by the common land space between Azov and Kharkov was replaced with two clear-cut alternatives: either further escalation of the armed conflict with

⁷ See: "Kak zhiivet ostrov Tuzla 10 let spustia posle konflikta?" *Segodnia*, 24 December, 2013, available at [<http://www.segodnya.ua/ukraine/Ostrov-Tuzla-spustya-10-let-posle-tuzlinskogo-krizisa-470049.html>].

⁸ [<http://www.artukraine.com/old/events/tuzla4.htm>].

Ukraine to acquire a very much needed land corridor to Crimea along the Azov coast, or a bridge across the Kerch Strait. Today, the bridge itself is seen as a symbol that has accumulated the rhetorical questions of its financial and geostrategic expediency and its impact on world order. The price is high: this refers not only to the hardly measurable changes in the worldwide balance of power, but also to the project's cost in measurable financial terms and Russia's ability to accumulate the required sum within a very short period of time.

It is much harder to find the correct technical design and to realize it in the conditions of economic blockade in which Russia has found itself. Indeed, this is a challenging task: the ground is loose, while the region's seismicity is high (seismic intensity in the main shipping channel can reach 9 points with 1% possible intensification). There is a fracture of the earth's mantle under the strait, the bottom of which is formed by mud volcanoes, the mud layer being over 50 meters thick. It shifts, leaving behind islands or deep gullies; this means that the bridge piles must be sunk to a depth of no less than 200 meters.

The weather is another destabilizing factor: between November and April storms are frequent. On 11 October, 2007, several ships were sunk by a storm that contaminated the coastal waters with oil and sulphur.⁹ In cold winters, the ice sheet can be up to 30 cm deep, which results in damaging ice drifts (in 1945, one such ice drift destroyed the bridge).

This means that to build the bridge Russia needs unique technologies, access to which is blocked by its conflict with Ukraine. With no access to high technologies, experts from more experienced countries, and money from richer countries, Russia's ability to cope with the challenging task looks doubtful. Indeed, few companies, if any, will be adventurous enough to be involved in an ambiguous project. This means that everything we are hearing from Moscow about the willingness of China, Turkey, or South Korea should be taken with a grain of salt.

The traffic interchange project will include the bridge and envisage modernization of the traffic infrastructure on the Taman and Kerch coasts: the Krym, Kavkaz, and Ayvazovskaya stations should be modernized together with the access routes, railway lines, and highways in Crimea and Kuban. The project will require more passenger stations, loading facilities, reloading mechanisms, and corresponding services; the Feodosiya oil terminal must be expanded. Taken together, these absolutely necessary adjustments and modernization will bring the cost of construction up to over \$4 billion, according to preliminary assessments.

It remains to be seen whether the assessed cost of the project will attract investors, or to be more exact, whether the traffic interchange will become an important economic link between Europe and the Caucasus, and whether Crimea will become a tourist Mecca (Russia plans to open a free gambling zone on the peninsula).

It should be said that so far the considerable and negative environmental effects are being pushed aside. The water surface of the Kerch Strait is the spawning place of valuable fishes, while the coast is the favorite nesting place of several types of birds. This is especially true of the Chushka sand bar and the reed beds in the Kuban. New roads and the bridge will damage them.

It seems that it is much wiser to contemplate the security of a bridge built too close to the Caucasus and the explosive situation there: terrorist threats call for exclusive safety measures.

The Project's Technical Side

On the whole, several acceptable alternatives of the traffic interchange have been discussed:

⁹ See: M. Ryzhevskiy, *op. cit.*

- (1) The northern alternative, on Fonar Cape, where the strait enters the Sea of Azov.
- (2) Zhukovsky, at the site of the functioning ferry.
- (3) Enikale, to the south of the functioning ferry, between Eni-kale Cape and the southern end of the Chushka sand bar.
- (4) Tuzla, at the old fortress, to the south of Cape Ak-Burun Bely on the Tuzla sand bar.¹⁰

According to information on the site supplied by the State Avtodor Company, which was entrusted early in 2014 with creating a daughter company for engineering and feasibility studies, it has arrived at the two most acceptable alternatives—Zhukovsky and Tuzla.¹¹

An analysis of the environment and the navigation conditions points to the Tuzla alternative as preferable. The bridge will span the narrowest part of the strait, where navigation is limited by the high coast, on the Crimean side, and shallow waters and the Tuzla island-sand bar, on the Caucasian side.

Today, the project is being actively discussed by Russian experts and politicians, many of them being very doubtful about its prospects. In December 2014, the Stroitransgaz Company left the project, its head, Gennadi Timchenko, one of Vladimir Putin's personal friends, explained this in an interview to ITAR-TASS: "This is a very hard project for us. I am not sure that we can cope with it. I do not want to run reputational risks. It is unclear what the cost will be because there is no ready project. No one understands the geological features there. And neither do we. So it is a very risky deal. I am afraid of undertaking it and failing."¹²

The Council of Ministers of Crimea, represented by Head of the Republic Sergey Aksenov, pointed out that "a tunnel is a more effective and cheaper construction than a bridge." Oleg Saveliev, RF Minister for Crimea, and Georgy Muradov, Deputy Prime Minister of Crimea and representative of the republic to the president of Russia, consider the bridge too expensive and dangerous. The latter has calculated the approximate cost of the tunnel at 60-80 billion rubles.

Early in 2015, over 40 prominent experts concluded during the final discussion of all the possible alternatives of traffic interchange that a bridge was the only one that met all the necessary conditions.¹³ On 19 February, 2015, Stroigazmontazh was appointed as general contractor and signed a contract with the Taman Department of Federal Highways of the Federal Highway Agency.¹⁴ Two hundred and twenty-eight billion rubles were allocated from the federal budget to the Kerch Bridge; the infrastructure on both sides will swallow even more money. The road-rail bridge is scheduled to be opened by December 2018 for testing, and will later be fully operational in June 2019; the total length of the traffic interchange will be 19 km.¹⁵

A political decision, however, is not enough: Russia is not ready to shoulder this ambitious project money-wise. The international blockade, economic slump, and the war with Ukraine make the accumulation of the needed sums a challenge despite Russia's certain financial safety margin.

¹⁰ See: "O perekhode cherez Kerchenskiy proliv," Ministry of Transport and Communications of Ukraine, available at [<http://metrobuildivec.livejournal.com/13820.html>].

¹¹ See: "Most cherez Kerchenskiy proliv možno postroit tolko v dvukh mestakh," RBC, 19 May, 2014, available at [<http://top.rbc.ru/economics/19/05/2014/924661.shtml>].

¹² [<http://tass.ru/en/economy/765943>].

¹³ See: "Krymskiy most prevrashchaetsia v tunnel," *Gazeta.ru*, 30 December, 2014, available at [http://www.gazeta.ru/auto/2014/10/30_a_6283189.shtml].

¹⁴ See: "Podpisan kontrakt na stroitelstvo Kerchenskogo mosta," *Novosti Kryma*, 15 February, 2015, available at [<http://news.allcrimea.net/news/2015/2/19/podpisan-kontrakt-na-stroitelstvo-kerchenskogo-mosta-31625/>].

¹⁵ See: "Stalo izvestno, kto budet stroit most cherez Kerchenskiy proliv," *Korrespondent.net*, 30 January, 2015, available at [<http://korrespondent.net/world/russia/3472966-stalo-yzvestno-kto-budet-stroyt-most-cherez-kerchenskiy-prolyv-smy>].

Another project of the century will become a heavy burden for Russia's citizens. One cannot but wonder whether people are ready to shoulder it.

Propaganda is in full swing: in February 2015, veterans of the Russian Black Sea Navy in Sevastopol called on the people of Crimea to gather money for a "national project." Vice Admiral Alexander Frolov, who initiated the campaign, referred to similar actions during World War II when people donated money to the Magnitogorsk Iron and Steel Works; collective farmer Golovatov donated two aircraft to the Stalingrad Front; and the people of Tambov collected enough money to build a tank column.¹⁶

Can Ukraine Halt the Project?

Late in December 2014, Head of Crimea Sergey Aksenov made an astonishing, yet absolutely justified statement to the effect that "international legal norms, which make the Sea of Azov a common area of navigation of Russia and Ukraine, stipulate that building the bridge requires the approval of the Ukrainian government, which will be impossible to receive due to the current relations between the two countries." Indeed, in 2003, Russia and Ukraine signed an agreement on the Azov-Kerch that defined the Sea of Azov and the strait of Kerch as the historically internal waters of the Russian Federation and Ukraine and envisaged that all related issues must be regulated by an agreement between the two countries. In 2012, they signed an agreement on delimitation of the sea; no borders were drawn, which means that use of the sea is still regulated by the 2003 agreement and the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. This means that Russia cannot violate the agreement, although it can suspend it according to Art 62 "Fundamental Change of Circumstances" of the Convention, by which the changed status of Crimea is meant. Most states have refused to recognize the act of unification of Crimea and Russia, which means that Ukraine has a good chance of contesting this "fundamental change" in the International Court of Justice or in a conciliation commission of the United Nations. The traffic interchange will block Ukraine in the Sea of Azov, but Russia's aggressive foreign policy in the region suggests that it will ignore any decisions made by any international departments. This means that Aksenov's arguments will be pushed aside.

This may mean, however, that the statement was a trial run of the Crimean leaders amid the water and energy hunger. It can be interpreted as part of a wider project of exchanging Crimea for Donbass, since Russia is very open about its desire to return the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics to Ukraine in exchange of Ukraine's democratization.

Conclusion

We are watching one of the rounds of Russia's "great geopolitical game" called the Kerch Traffic Interchange. In view of the above, it is being used as a pressure lever applied to Ukraine and the world community and as justification of Russia's efforts to organize a corridor along the Azov coast of Ukraine.

The use of force looks cheaper and faster; if it fails Russia will be left with building a bridge as the only option. Its construction will increase regional tension and decrease security in this part of the Sea of Azov.

¹⁶ "Sevastopolskie veterany prizyvaiut sobirat dengi na most cherez Kerchenskiy proliv," *Lb.ua*, 4 February, 2015, available at [http://society.lb.ua/life/2015/02/04/294403_sevastopolskie_veterani_prizivayut.html].