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A troublesome patriotic bridge

Russian President Vladimir Putin officially opened a 19 km road bridge linking the annexed Crimean Peninsula with Russian territories across the Kerch Strait (15th of May). The construction of the bridge, which can carry up to 40.000 cars a day, started in 2016.

Putin was shown live on state television at the steering wheel of a Kamaz truck leading a convoy that crossed what Russia calls the Crimean Bridge, a symbol of Moscow's control over the Ukrainian peninsula. EU foreign-policy chief Federica Mogherini's spokeswoman said that the construction of the bridge "constitutes another violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity by Russia".

The US State Department also condemned Russia's construction of the bridge, noting also that it is an impediment to the freedom of navigation in the Strait of Kerch, the only path to reach Ukraine's territorial waters in the Sea of Azov [*Putin Opens Crimean Bridge Condemned By Kyiv, EU, RFE/RL, 15/05/2018*].

The bridge is the symbol of the historic reunification of the Russian people, but it also advertises crony capitalism: the bridge was built by the oligarch Sergei Chemezov and the Kamaz truck comes from the fleet of a close friend of Putin since childhood, Arkady Rotenberg.

The bridge solves the problem of Crimea's isolation from Russia, but the peninsula has become a black hole for the federal budget: a quarter of investment from the federal budget is connected in one way or another with Crimea. Meanwhile, real incomes fell in 65 of Russia's 85 regions by an average of 1,1%, while Crimea's incomes grew by 13% last year. Crimea and Sevastopol received considerable financial support motivated by what is now generally referred to as "geopolitical reasons" and their further development could harm the neighbouring region of Kuban.

The bridge represents the attempt by Russia to consolidate its seizure of Crimea. Another goal of the huge infrastructure is to circumvent sanctions and the closed borders with Ukraine, as well as decreasing the time of trade with Russia.

The bridge effectively controls the strategic shipping flow to the Azov Sea and this could be the cause of an isolated naval incident between Ukrainian and Russian vessels (Kiev has practically no navy). How Russia will manage this delicate issue will decide if sanctions will not be further tightened; in the meantime Russian Border Guard vessels carry out routinely search operations on Ukraine-bound ships, causing considerable economic damage.

Some US and Ukrainian analysts fear that the bridge could entail a dangerous Russian military build-up in preparation of the seizure of a land corridor to Crimea, but military evidence of this predictable development is so far spotty [*Kyiv Post*, Ukraine loses control of Azov Sea to Russia, 15th of June 2018].

Mattia Giulioli