

**THE ANNEXATION OF THE CRIMEA: AN ANALYSIS FROM RUSSIAN  
STRATEGIC CULTURE’S PERSPECTİVE<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

Crimea has been part of Russia from its annexation in 1783 by Catherine II until its transfer to Ukraine in 1954. When the transfer took place, both Ukraine and Russia were part of the Soviet Union. However, when the Union dissolved in 1991, the disputes have risen about “to whom” Crimea should belong. Regardless of international pressures, today Crimean Peninsula has become de facto part of Russia since March 2014. This study aims to analyze the Russian decision to annex Crimea from the perspective of strategic culture. Although strategic cultural studies are relatively new, this article demonstrates that it has utility in analyzing security decision of Russia, especially for the Crimean case. Therefore, this study aims to answer its main research question: How did Russia’s strategic culture effect Russian decision to annex Crimea? It argues that the decision to annex was a reflection of Russia’s strategic culture. Because, the constitutive elements of Russian strategic culture (namely history, Russian elite and their beliefs, and the characteristics of Russian regime) have played an important role to shape the decision to annex Crimea.

**Keywords:** Strategic Culture, Russian Foreign Policy, Annexation of the Crimea, Vladimir Putin.

**KIRIM'IN İLHAKI: RUS STRATEJİK KÜLTÜRÜNÜN PERSPEKTİFİNDEN  
BİR ANALİZ**

**ÖZET**

Kırım, 1783’te II. Katerina tarafından ilhak edilmesinden 1954’te Ukrayna’ya devredilene kadar, Rusya’nın bir parçası olarak kalmıştır. 1954’teki devir esnasında hem Rusya hem Ukrayna Sovyetler Birliği’nin bir parçasıydı. Ancak 1991 yılında Birlik dağılınca, Kırım’ın kime ait olması gerektiği konusunda anlaşmazlıklar çıktı. Mart 2014’te ise, uluslararası baskılara ve kınamalara rağmen, Rusya Kırım’ı uluslararası hukuka aykırı bir şekilde ilhak ederek topraklarına kattı. Bu makale, Rusya’nın Kırım’ı ilhak kararını Rus stratejik kültürü’nün perspektifinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Stratejik kültür çalışmaları nispeten yeni olmasına rağmen, bu makale stratejik kültürel çerçevenin, Rusya’nın bir dış ve güvenlik kararını analiz etmede faydalı olduğunu göstermektedir, özellikle Kırım konusunda. Bu sebeple, makalenin ana araştırma sorusu olan “Rus stratejik kültürü, Rusya’nın Kırım’ı ilhak kararını nasıl etkilemiştir?” cevaplanması amaçlanmaktadır. Makalede, ilhak kararının Rusya’nın stratejik kültürünün bir yansıması olduğu savunulmaktadır. Çünkü, Rus stratejik kültürünü oluşturan kurucu unsurlar (Rus tarihi, elitlerin inançları ve Rus rejiminin özellikleri) Kırım’ın ilhak kararının şekillenmesinde önemli rol oynamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Stratejik Kültür, Rus Dış Politikası, Kırım’ın İlhakı, Vladimir Putin.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the annexation of Crimea, a territory has been annexed for the first time in the European continent since the Second World War. Due to the importance of the event, the decision of annexation is widely discussed in the International Relations (IR) literature. Despite the wealth of studies on the issue, the scholars do not agree on the motives behind the decision. To categorize, there are individual, state and system-level explanations. For example, Tor Bukkvoll focuses on Putin's personality when explaining why Putin annexed Crimea. According to him, Putin's will to increase his approval ratings among Russian citizens and his imperialistic character played an important role (Bukkvoll, 2016). Scholars like Daniel Treisman focuses more on state-level and material explanations. Treisman points out the importance of the naval base and fleet on Crimea. Besides, he argues that Russia tries to recapture the former territories of the Soviet Union (Treisman, 2016). Lastly, system-level explanations ignore internal dynamics and focuses on the structure of the international system and states' positions under it. For example, John Mearsheimer argues that the reason why Russia annexed is the West. According to him, the West has moved into Russia's backyard and threatened Russia's core interests, therefore, Russia annexed Crimea (Mearsheimer, 2014).

As seen above, there are many different answers given about Russia's motives. It can be said that the debate is still relevant because Russia and Ukraine still cannot overcome their problems. Here, strategic cultural analysis provides a more comprehensive and culminative explanation to the issue. Strategic culture allows for more-than-one factors that influences Russia's policies and provides an "inside-out" approach to the case. Rather than focusing only on systemic factors or on personality, the concept provides a more integrated perspective. This means that, without neglecting the roles of other factors discussed above, strategic culture culminates those explanations and provides a broader view. In Political Scientist Alastair Iain Johnston's words, strategic cultural studies are challenging "the ahistorical, non-cultural neorealist framework for analyzing strategic choices" (Johnston, 1995). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the debate on the utility of the concept of strategic culture for understanding patterns in the security policies of the states. The main research question of the study is that, how did Russia's strategic culture effect Russian decision to annex Crimea? It argues that Russian decision to annex Crimea was a "reflection" of its strategic culture. Because decision makers develop behavior patterns or perceptions that result from their state's strategic culture, it shapes and affects security policies. In this way, developing strategic cultural profile of Russia and linking it to its security decision in Crimea, would help to further explain the decision.

The following section will analyze strategic culture as the theoretical framework of the study. Strategic culture's definition, important scholars, its sources will be explained here. Then, it will evaluate the Russian strategic culture and the elements which constructs it. Finally, Russian decision to annex Crimea will be analyzed through Russian strategic culture.

## 1. STRATEGIC CULTURE

Due to the dominance of liberal and realist theories in the IR literature, the studies carried out mostly through material factors of the states(size, capabilities, geography, economy etc.) and/or systemic explanations(anarchy, hierarchy, polarity etc.). Non-material factors, such as culture, ideas, norms, values and identity were relatively neglected. However, towards the end of the Cold War, IR literature gradually started studying non-material factors' effects on foreign policy preferences of the states. In this way, non-material factors also accepted as influential in decision-making process.

The studies of strategic culture also emerged almost in that period, in 1970's. The main driving force behind strategic cultural research is to understand why some states, under the same conditions or under the same international system, act or decide differently. It is argued that decision-makers in different states think and therefore, act differently under similar conditions, because of their strategic cultures. Which means that leaders and other decision-makers have perceptions about their state's history, geography, political system, culture etc. And these perceptions influence the decisions and/or policies. The concept of strategic culture emerged with Political Scientist Jack L. Snyder's article named "The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations" in 1977 (Snyder, 1977). He tried to explain why the United States (U.S.) and the Soviet Union(USSR) reacted differently under similar conditions, about their nuclear strategy. He argued that Soviet and American decision makers perceived nuclear power differently because they are not culture-free systems (Snyder, 1977). Following Snyder, the concept has continued its development. However, there is no consensus about the definition of strategic culture among scholars. For example, an important scholar of strategic cultural studies, Alastair Iain Johnston defines the concept as a system of symbols which aims to constitute pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences (Johnston, 1995). Meanwhile, according to Ken Booth "The concept of strategic culture refers to a nation's traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior, habits, symbols, achievements and particular ways of adapting to the environment and solving problems with respect to the threat or use of force" (Booth, 1990). Another definition came from Iver Neumann and Henrikki Heikka. They provided more comprehensive definition. In their words "The approach focuses on how elites and decision-makers assess and interpret the main characteristics of the international system in which they operate and how these assessments influence their views about security policy, and the use of military force in particular" (Neuman & Heikka, 2015). After examining different definitions in the literature, this study came up with an eclectic definition of the concept. According to this definition, strategic culture is assessments and interpretations by the decision-makers of their state's main characteristics (history, geography, political system or regime etc.) to form security and foreign policies. In addition to this definition, strategic cultural analysis provides sources for researchers to analyze any state's decisions. Political Scientist Jeffrey Lantis summarized these sources with dividing them to three; 1) Physical Sources: geography, climate, natural resources, generational change, technology; 2) Political Sources: historical experiences, political system, elite beliefs, military organization; 3) Social/Cultural Sources: defining texts, myths and symbols (Lantis, 2006, 17).

The sources to be used in the study are selected according to the chosen case. For Crimea's case, political sources are selected for analysis. History is an important factor to shape threat perceptions of the states, therefore, it is useful to know the past experiences to understand current security policies. Second, elite beliefs are important as the leader may be influenced directly or indirectly by elite. Besides, for Russia, political elite have an important role in strategic cultural continuity and change. Lastly, regime type is also another important constitutive element of Russian strategic culture. Because, regime's characteristics, whether it is democratic or not, centralized or decentralized, should be considered when analyzing strategic culture.

## **2. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE: HISTORICAL ROOTS, THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RUSSIAN REGIME AND ELITE BELIEFS**

In the IR literature, scholars who analyze Russian strategic culture, more or less, agree on main points but they diverge on the sources of strategic culture. First of all, most of the studies acknowledge the importance of great power aspirations as constitutive element of Russian strategic culture (Eitelhuber, 2009; Degaut, 2014; Sinovets, 2016; Ermarth, 2006). Second, most of the studies also emphasize the importance of authoritarian, strong and centralized political system/leadership (Eitelhuber, 2009; Degaut, 2014; Ermarth, 2006). For instance, Eitelhuber adds historical roots, threat perceptions and geography to the great power aspirations and autocratic legacy; while Ermarth adds distrust to Western allies as elements of Russian strategic culture. Unlike these studies, Mette Skak (2016) looks at the issue from a different perspective and argues that Russian elite are the constitutive element of Russian strategic culture.

The present article aims to contribute to the literature about Russian strategic culture with combining and culminating studies mentioned above. What's more, the article will test strategic culture's utility on a foreign policy decision. Therefore, the remaining parts of this chapter will analyze Russian strategic culture with political sources like historical experiences, characteristics of Russian regime and elite beliefs.

It can be argued that states' historical backgrounds effect their decisions directly or indirectly. Although history alone does not have enough power to influence the foreign policy outputs, it is still useful to have a historical look at the formation of Russia to better understand its current perceptions, decisions, and behaviors. While analyzing Russian strategic culture, it is important to highlight its threat perceptions. Russia's centuries-long and rich history demonstrates that, due to lack of defensible borders, it was open to attack any time. This situation created vulnerability and a condition to invite foreign invasions and attacks, which took place many times throughout Russian history (Ermarth, 2006, 4). From 9th to 14th century, Russia's strategic culture's constitutive elements were vulnerability, lack of strong leadership and inability to avoid attacks and invasions.

From the formation of “Kievan Rus”<sup>3</sup> and on, foreign powers repeatedly invaded Russian territories (Eitelhuber, 2009, 5). To overcome foreign invasions and dominations, Russia aimed to militarize its army, establish strong and centralized leadership, build defensible borders, create a belt of buffer states from its neighbors.

After overcoming Time of Troubles era in 15th century and consolidating power at home, pre-Soviet Russia had managed to grow stronger. Tsarist era and Imperial Russia had consolidated strong, centralized, and authoritarian leadership, and in this way, pre-Soviet Russian strategic culture’s one of the core elements became monarchy (Emarth, 2006, 18). Although Russia managed to overcome foreign occupations, it started to struggle with internal conflicts. Especially, after the severe defeat during the Russo-Japanese war in 1905, Russia’s already-bad economic conditions worsened, and the already-dissatisfied Russians began to revolt against the regime. This turmoil eventually led first to the 1905 Revolution, February Revolution and then to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russians found themselves in a catastrophic civil war.

During the Soviet times, Soviet strategic culture was characterized by three constitutive elements: military leadership, party leadership and distrust of Western powers (Emarth, 2006, 18). Also, Russia’s tendency towards strong leaders continued and exacerbated during the one-party rule of the Soviet Union. However, the dissolution of the Union caused Russia to lose its superpower status, loss of large territories and public, and loss of influence in the former Soviet states, which is perceived as buffer zones to Russia. This caused another vulnerability and humiliation in Russia’s collective memory.

Moving on with the post-Soviet times, first with Boris Yeltsin, and then with Vladimir Putin, contemporary Russia has continuities as well as changes in its strategic culture. Especially Putin era Russian strategic culture had more continuities than change. For example, distrust of Western allies, autocratic tendencies, the wish to restore its superpower status, to regain its influence in the former Soviet states were all characteristics of Russian strategic culture. Consequently, foreign invasions, indefensible borders, loss of its superpower status, external influences, lack of trust to the Western powers, are all threat perceptions for Russia and they stem from its history. These perceptions helped to shape Russian strategic culture and paved the way for Russia to behave in a certain way. For contemporary Russia, it can be said that its strategic culture provides explanations to its foreign policy decisions. For example, according to Sinovets, Russia has a tendency to surround itself with buffer zones, and this tendency originates from the constitutive elements of its strategic culture (Sinovets, 2016, 419). Russian aggression in Syria, Russo-Georgia War in 2008, the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 can be explained through this tendency.

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<sup>3</sup> It is accepted that Knyaz Oleg established the origins of the first Russian state, known as the Kievan Rus approximately around 880. (Acton, 1995, 14).

Second source of the strategic culture was the characteristics of Russian regime. Political regime broadly refers to the form of government in a country. A state can be either democratic or nondemocratic. Nondemocratic states can be classified as totalitarian and authoritarian. For Russia, authoritarian legacy is an important element to constitute Russia's strategic culture. In Eitelhuber's words, "Given the state's vast size and multi-ethnic nature, autocratic leadership seemed to be the type of governance that was best suited to cope with the wide range of external and internal threats that cropped up throughout Russian history". In addition, Russia has always remained a country that was less democratic than most of the European states (Eitelhuber, 2009, 6). And, it has a tendency towards strong and centralized leaders. Democratic institutions were introduced at an extremely late time, in 1905; and they remained weak, ineffective, and dependent on the Tsar (Eitelhuber, 2009, 6). What's more, 70 years of totalitarian, communist, single-party system during the Soviet times has reinforced authoritarian tendencies. After the collapse of the Soviet rule, Yeltsin's democratization attempts failed. Russian tendency towards strong leaders continued and increased when Putin's rule started in 2000. For Putin, one very important lesson from Russian history was, "the danger of repeated 'times of troubles' that have risked the collapse of disintegration of the Russian state" (Hill&Gaddy, 2012, 26). That's why, it can be said that Putin attaches importance to centralized and strong authority.

Although Russia's autocratic legacy is undeniable, it is not easy to define Russian regime. For example, Freedom House classifies the countries in five groups according to their democracy status. If the country's democracy score is between 68-100, then it is considered as a "consolidated democracy". If the score is between 51-67 then it is "semi-consolidated democracy". 34-50 is considered as "transitional or hybrid regime" and 18-33 is "semi-consolidated authoritarian regime". Lastly, the score between 0-17 is considered as "consolidated authoritarian regime". In Freedom House's data, Russia is considered as "consolidated authoritarian regime" with the score 7 (Freedom House, 2020). Although this data is accepted by majority, there are scholars who do not agree with it, because on practice, it is not easy to define a regime type. Especially, Russian regime does not simply fit into democracy or autocracy. It has sui generis elements. For those regime types, political science has developed an important concept called "hybrid regimes". According to Henry Hale (2010), hybrid regimes can be defined as a political system which merges democratic and autocratic elements. And, he argues that the concept of hybrid regime is useful to understand political systems of Eurasian countries, including Russia. Therefore, it can be said that Russia's political regime is an example of hybrid regime as it has both democratic (elections, parliament etc.) and authoritarian elements (control over parties and media). In short, Russia is not a democratic state like Western states, so it does not have democratic norms and values. Therefore, its strategic culture also has constitutive elements of authoritarian legacy, however, it also shares an important feature with Western democracies, public opinion. The role of public opinion was also relevant during the Crimea's annexation.

In order to understand contemporary Russian elite structure, or “the power vertical” in Russian political jargon, and their influence, it is important to start from the *nomenklatura* tradition of the Soviet Union. The *nomenklatura* system was established to control the choice of personnel in every area of national life such as industry, education, agriculture, etc (Rigby, 1988). One of the well-known researchers of Russian elite, Olga Kryshtanovskaia provided some common characteristics of the *nomenklatura*. According to her, *nomenklatura* elite were Communists and they were approved by the top-levels of the Communist Party. There were hierarchy and privileges given to these elite (Kryshtanovskaia, 1995, 20). When Gorbachev came to power, he tried to break the rules previously adopted by the former Soviet leaders about the *nomenklatura* system. His cadre maneuverings weakened the positions of the most once-powerful personnel of the *nomenklatura* (Kryshtanovskaia, 1995, 22). With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, elite structure also gone through some changes. However, in Yeltsin-era, it can be said that there was more continuity than change in the elite system. Because, Yeltsin era elite were more or less, share the similar characteristics with the Soviet elite. Most important reason for that was Yeltsin’s elite were the same cadres promoted by Gorbachev (Kryshtanovskaia, 1995, 31). In short, Soviet Union had dissolved, but its elite have not; as Yeltsin era elite were only less in number. During the Yeltsin times, oligarchs<sup>4</sup> had benefited the most from the economic reforms, known as shock therapy, and the privatization. In Richard Sakwa’s words, “Privatisation allowed an already privileged class to consolidate its position by the transformation of public goods into private wealth, and allowed a small group of oligarchs to plunder the national economy” (2008, 285). After the privatization, these oligarchs took control of the Russian economy and boosted their wealth.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were more continuity than change in Russian strategic culture in term of its “elite structure”. However, the main changes in the relationship between government and the oligarchs took place particularly after the election of Vladimir Putin as president in March 2000 (Lane, 1997, 295). Once he was elected, Putin’s primary effort was to strengthen central authority. Accordingly, he began to pursue a policy of “equal distancing” towards oligarchs (Kryshtanovskaia & White, 2005). Putin, instead of opposing all oligarchs, has tried to eliminate those who engage in actions that will undermine his power by interfering politics (Yapıcı, 2010, 86). He dismissed majority of the elite from Yeltsin’s era and paved the way for the rise of a new group of elite, known as the *siloviki*<sup>5</sup>. *Siloviki* consists of people who are working for or coming from security structures, and who is mostly from St. Petersburg. The importance of them is, they are a powerful and influential group compared to other groups of Russian elite. It is accepted that their ideas and beliefs are decisive in determining policy outcomes (Bremner & Charap, 2007, 249). Especially, for this article, their importance will be relevant in Crimea’s annexation.

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<sup>4</sup> Yeltsin-era Russian elite were also known as *semya* (семья), which means “family” in Russian.

<sup>5</sup> The word *siloviki* is derived from *silovye struktury* (силовые структуры), which means power or force structures in Russian language.

Russian strategic culture consists of several elements stems from its history, regime type and elite beliefs. A state's past experiences and threat perceptions guides its future behaviors; therefore, history is a crucial element. To measure whether the characteristics of a country's regime is effective in making decisions based on that country's strategic culture, several questions should be asked: Whether its liberal-democratic or nondemocratic; centralized or decentralized; open or closed; pluralist or dominated by narrow elites; is there stability or instability; has public opinion had much of a role to play in policy-making? (Howlett, 2005). Last element, elite opinion is also accepted as playing an important role for foreign policy decisions (Mankoff, 2009, 4-5). Next chapter will start with a brief summarize of the developments that led to the annexation of Crimea and then, analyze the Kremlin's decision to annex from the perspective of Russian strategic culture.

### **3. CRIMEA'S ANNEXATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE**

The remainder of this article is devoted to analyzing Crimea's annexation from the three constitutive elements of Russian strategic culture, which are history, regime, and elite. But prior to that, the events leading to the annexation in Ukraine will be explained briefly.

In 2013, Ukraine and the European Union (EU) were scheduled to sign the Free Trade and Association Agreement. Prior to that, EU and Ukraine were already partners with EU's Eastern Partnership and with European Neighborhood Policy. However, both sides were seeking to have closer relations, not only politically but also economically. However, EU's demands to have closer relations with Ukraine, were causing anxiety on Russia as it did not want Ukraine to integrate with any Western organization. Because of this situation, since its independency, Ukraine's policies stuck between Western countries and Russia. On one side, it tried to have closer integration with the West and on the other side, it tried to balance Russia. However, this was not an easy thing to do. The West was promoting itself by normative factors and attracting itself with European identity, human rights and values (Shyrokykh, 2018, 845). While Russia was putting pressure on Ukraine to limit its connection to the West. And in 2013, Russia's attempts paid off as Ukrainian President Yanukovich gave up on the Association Agreement with the EU. This shows that, no matter what happens, Russia would not let Ukraine to become a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or EU member or to even have close relations with them.

However, Ukrainian citizens took the streets to protest their government's sudden decision to withdraw from the agreement. These protests led the country to the so-called "Maidan Revolution". When the government could not suppress the protests, President Yanukovich had to escape from the country. Moscow perceived all these events as a threat to its national interests and security; because they feared that these protests might spill over to Russia (Skak, 2016, 325). From the beginning of the February, Russia landed its special forces on the Crimean peninsula and took control of it, this transformed the situation from a domestic crisis into a regional and international problem (İmanbeyli, 2014, 1).



Eventually, on 16th of March 2014, a referendum was held in Crimea, and according to the Russian news, more than %95 of the Crimeans voted in favor of joining Russia (Russia Today, 2014). According to Renz, there were favorable conditions in Crimea for Russia such as weakened political and military leadership in Ukraine, their unwillingness or inability to resist and the large pro-Russian population that welcomes Russian actions rather than resisting (Renz, 2016, 288). However, majority of the states did not recognize the results. Western states and the U.S. have imposed sanctions on Russia because of its invasion and annexation of Crimea. However, in Mearsheimer's words, "History shows that countries will absorb enormous amounts of punishment in order to protect their core strategic interests" (Mearsheimer, 2014), 10). Although the sanctions and condemnations, Crimea and Sevastopol became the 84th and 85th regions of Russia.

Despite this, the referendum has no legal basis. It took place under the shadow of Russian forces in Crimea, therefore it was illegitimate, and it was anti-democratic. Also, it was conducted with the protests of the Crimean Tatars not to vote. Crimean Tatars are one of the many ethno-religious minorities in Ukraine, however, they are crucial for Crimea due to their attachment to the peninsula. Crimean Tatars are the indigenous people of Crimea, and they constitute the peninsula's Muslim population. However, their "indigenous people" status was not recognized by the Ukrainian government until the annexation in 2014. Ukrainian government has changed the legal status of the Crimean Tatars to indigenous people of Ukraine after the annexation. In 1783, almost 95 percent of the Crimean population was made up of Crimean Tatars, today this ratio has dropped to around 15 percent (Karadeli, 2014, 130). There are two main reasons for this decline: Russification and deportation. During the 19th century, the Crimean Tatars experienced intense Russification policies (Fisher, 1978, 81). After 1783, Russia gradually applied policies to increase the number of ethnic Russians and decrease the number of Tatars in the peninsula. This situation reached its top especially in 1936, when Soviet Russia directed campaigns to crush Tatar identity and rather than that, to impose Russian identity, culture and language. Second factor, deportation, took place during the Second World War. After the Nazi occupation, Crimean Tatars were accused of helping Germans, in consequence, Stalin deported the entire Crimean Tatar population from Crimea to Central Asia in 1944 (Lieven, 1999, 107). Deportation caused Crimea to mostly have Russian population, Russian culture and identity, which maintains even today and also in 2014 (Kent, 2016, 140). For instance, the ethnic Russians' were used to legitimize annexation in 2014, however, this justification has no legal basis in terms of international law.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tatars showed their loyalty to Ukraine. During the February 2014 seizure of the Crimea by Russia, Crimean Tatars fought against the Russian forces to show their loyalty to the Ukrainian government (Williams, 2016, 157). Crimean Tatars opposed the illegal referendum, and they also opposed the fact that they and their homeland were transferred overnight from Ukraine to Putin's authoritarian Russia (Williams, 2016, 157).

Continuing with the brief history of Crimea, the peninsula had been invaded by many different powers and nomadic people like Cimmerians, Scythians, Huns, and Mongols, until the establishment of the Khanate of Crimea in 1441.

The Khanate became under the Ottoman Empire's rule in 1475 and remained a part of the Empire until its annexation by Russian Empire in 1783. Since 1783, Crimea became a part of Russia and remained under the Russian rule ever since the collapse of the Russian Empire and the Romanov dynasty. It spent the first half of the 20th century under the Soviet rule, then, it was transformed to Ukraine in 1954, and it continued to remain a part of Ukraine after the dissolution of the USSR. The brief history of Crimea shows that it was under Ukrainian rule for only 60 years, since Russia's annexation in 2014. However, prior to that, Crimea was under Russian rule for one and half centuries and this has implications to the contemporary Russia's sensitivity towards the peninsula. This long period of Russian rule has left important marks on Crimea. In addition to that, Crimea also has some other advantages and importance to Russia. The Peninsula is located in a strategic location, and it is a key for the security of the Black Sea, thus, Russian naval base is located in there. Kremlin feared that with the Euromaidan protests, the new NATO and EU-backed Ukrainian government would demand the eviction of the Russian Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol (Gardner, 2015, 29). Besides, Kremlin was suspicious that Kiev would break its historical ties to Russia. What triggered these suspicions was the fact that an European identity was very popular among Ukrainians, and Kiev's cancellation Russian as a regional language in Ukraine (Tsygankov, 2015, 293).

Based on what has been said so far, it can be said that there are different opinions about to whom the peninsula belongs. Crimean Tatars' perspective was based on the acceptance of their indigenous status in Crimea and after being illegally transferred to Russia, they were concerned about whether a similar deportation would occur. Ukrainian government's view argued that Crimea has geographic, ethnic, and cultural connection to Ukraine therefore it is an indispensable part of Ukraine since its transfer to Ukraine by the Soviet Union in 1954. Despite that, the Russian perspective argued that Crimea had been a part of Russia for centuries and the peninsula is the home of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers.

Continuing with Russian elite beliefs on the annexation, as mentioned earlier, military/security officers, or the *siloviki*, occupy a special place in Russian politics. In Volkov's words, "No Russian elite group appears to be as organized and influential as the *siloviki*" (Volkov, 2016). Although their importance is undeniable, the amount of data available on Russian elite, *siloviki* and other groups, are less and hard to come by. But still, due to their importance on decision-making and Russian strategic culture, it is important to analyze their beliefs.

Russian elite have witnessed the traumatic collapse of the USSR. Russia's loss of great power status, the humiliation of the Soviet collapse, the loss of influence in the former Soviet region all together affected their beliefs. To regain superpower status, Russian elite prefer more assertive foreign policy (Sherlock, 2020, 3).

In an elite survey conducted by Hamilton College Levitt Poll<sup>6</sup> in 2016, the elite were asked whether Russia's national interests are limited to its current territory or extend beyond its territory. Before the annexation, in 2012, %56,6 of the participants answered in favor of its current territory, while after the annexation, in 2016, %82,3 answered as the national interests of Russia extend beyond its existing territory (Hamilton College Levitt Poll, 2016, 22). This shows that, the elite approve Russian actions abroad if its for the sake of Russian core interests. An example apart from Crimea was, Russian aggression in Syria. On Syria, they were asked why the Kremlin has participated to the conflict and %76 of them selected the answer: "An attempt to neutralize and eliminate the spread of military activities by Islamic radicals and terrorists to Russia" (Hamilton College Levitt Poll, 2016). Therefore, it can be said that Russian elite stand by their government if the government intervenes for Russian vital interests and security. In addition to that, in elite survey, there were a question about whether Russia violated international law in annexing Crimea. The answers demonstrate that, overwhelming majority of the Russian elite answered that Russia did not violate international law. Related to that, another question was: "What led to the conflict in Ukraine?" %75,7 of the Russian elite shoes the answer "Attempts by the USA to foment another color revolution in Ukraine" (Hamilton College Levitt Poll, 2016, 20). The answer also has direct relations with Russian strategic culture, because, in elite beliefs, the West, more precisely the U.S., is perceived as a main rival of Russia and presented as an evil who tries to undermine Moscow's security and interests (Sinovets, 2016, 419).

In short, Russian elite is accepted as a constitutive element of Russian strategic culture, therefore their beliefs are important in Russian politics. On Crimea, the Russian elite supported Putin, his regime and Kremlin's decision to annex (Volkov, 2016, 1). The main reason why most of the Russian elite supported Russia's decision to annex is, the annexation was perceived by majority of the elite as a signal that Russia's great power status was restored (Volkov, 2016, 8). Because, Russian leadership believed that Russia cannot be a great power in the region if it cannot keep its central position and control in the former Soviet states (Sergunin, 2016, 157). Due to these beliefs, they supported Kremlin on the decision to annex.

The last element of Russian strategic culture is the characteristics of the Russian regime. According to Vladimir Gel'man (2015), in nondemocratic states like Russia, the distinction between "regime" and "ruling group" is unclear. Therefore, three sources of Russian strategic culture is directly related to each other, especially about their effects on Crimea's annexation. For instance, the *siloviki* has an important shared value, for them "Law and order and stability are much higher priorities than democratic process or an active civil society" (Bremmer&Charap, 2007, 86). Russia is not a democracy like most Western states but for the elite, it is not a top concern.

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<sup>6</sup> The elite survey conducted by Hamilton College Levitt Poll under the supervision of Associate Professor of Government Sharon Werning Rivera, in 2016. The survey was made by face-to-face interviews with 243 Russian elite who works in Russia's federal bureaucracy, parliament, military-security agencies, businessman, state-owned enterprises, media outlets and academic research institutes.

However, as mentioned in the Russian strategic culture part of this article, Russian regime shares an important feature with the Western democracies, public opinion. Putin and his government are sensitive to the public opinion and the approval ratings, especially after the 2011-2012 protests in Russia. The protests reason was the claim that the election was not held honestly. The protests created a legitimacy crisis and made Russia to see that its regime is actually fragile. Therefore, Putin needed to regain his legitimacy and boost his approval ratings. Crimea's annexation was the opportunity he was waiting for.

According to Russia's relatively independent polling agency Levada Center, Putin's approval ratings before the annexation, in 2013 were the lowest level since 2003, the rate was %61. It is also relevant for the government's approval among Russian citizens. In 2013, %36 of Russians was approving their government's actions while %59 was disapproving. With the annexation in 2014, Kremlin managed to reverse the declining support from the citizens. After the annexation, Putin's approval ratings increased to %85 while the support to the government increased to %59 (Levada Center, 2021). The survey results indicate that, due to the characteristics of Russian regime and its emphasize on the "public opinion", the annexation helped Putin and his regime to increase their support and prestige among Russians.

As a result, it can be said that, to consolidate power at home, the Russian leadership used foreign invasion. Crimea's invasion and annexation was a violation of international law and Russia endured high costs for its action, however, as the survey results indicated, it did not decrease Putin's approval ratings, on contrary, it helped to increase the support. Besides, Russian elite also did not oppose to the annexation, and this has to do with how they perceive the annexation. It can be argued that, with the annexation of Crimea, the Russian regime's legitimacy crisis from the mass protests were resolved (Volkov, 2016, 1). Commenting on the issue, Andrei Kolesnikov states that, "It appears that in order to get off its knees, Russia felt it had to reclaim a key imperial territory that is rich in symbolism and full of nostalgic, historical, and nationalist significance" (Kalesnikov, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

This study analyzed Crimea's annexation by Russia in 2014 from the perspective of three constitutive elements of Russian strategic culture. In the process, an eclectic definition of strategic culture was chosen by the author and according to that definition, the concept means the assessments and interpretations by the decision-makers of their state's main characteristics. Keeping the definition in mind, historical experiences shed light on the interpretations of decision-makers of their state's history. For instance, Kievan Rus' domination covered more or less, today's Ukraine, Belarus and European parts of Russia. This means that, the place where the Russian history starts is Kiev and its surroundings. Therefore, it can be said that Russia's and Ukraine's histories are intertwined, and it is hard to explain them without reference to one another. In this long yet intertwined history, the question of Crimea has been a problem, because both sides claim domination over the peninsula.

As mentioned before, Crimea has been under Russian rule for more than one and half century and was under Ukrainian rule (Soviet Ukraine and contemporary Ukraine) only for 60 years. Therefore, the long historical ties enabled Russia to use historical elements to justify its seizure and annexation. Besides, Russia's fear of containment, distrust of Western allies, devastating experiences during the World Wars, all together, constitutes today's Russia's threat perceptions. Russia's unique strategic culture evolved from these experiences and as this study indicated, it still effects Russia's foreign and security policies.

In line with its strategic culture, throughout its history, Russia has always been pivotal player in the world politics. Russian elite witnessed the traumatic dissolution of the Soviet Union and loss of the superpower status. They wanted to regain that title and perceive their state as strong. In this way, they supported the Kremlin's decision to annex Crimea. This study also agrees that Russian political elite are important and influential on Russian strategic culture and this influence was particularly relevant on the Crimea's annexation.

In Kremlin's view, strong and centralized state is key to maintain security. According to the characteristics of its regime, whenever Russia was weak in history, it was invaded by many different powers. To avoid this, it needed to form a strong centralized state. When Kremlin's and Putin's approval ratings decreased significantly, the regime used Crimea's annexation to increase their approval radically. In this way, annexation served as a key source for regime legitimacy.

Overall, it can be concluded that, strategic culture has utility to explain security decision of Russia. Even though Russia's sense of security is attached to strict realist approach, strategic culture was also useful to explain why Russia militarily intervened Ukraine and annexed Crimea. The results indicate that, Russian decision to annex Crimea was a reflection of Russian strategic culture.

Although strategic culture as a concept suffers from lack of common definition, generalization, and codified methodology, nevertheless, the concept is useful for understand the underlying causes or motives of a state's security decision. Besides, it has utility to boost a researcher's insights about a country and its foreign policy preferences. Due to the scarcity of studies on strategic culture, more studies, empirical and theoretical, are needed. Therefore, further research is needed to determine whether strategic culture also has predictive power and whether it is generalizable or not.

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