



## Türkiye's Policies Regarding the Annexation of Crimea (2014): Balanced Diplomacy Between Russia and Ukraine\*

*Türkiye'nin Kırım'ın İlhakına (2014) Yönelik Politikaları: Rusya ve Ukrayna Arasında Dengeli Diplomasi*

Ayşegül KETENCİ<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Türkiye's response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and examines the balanced approach Türkiye has pursued between Russia and Ukraine. Türkiye's historical ties with Crimea—particularly through the Crimean Tatars—and the region's geographical proximity to Türkiye's (Black Sea) coastline have profoundly shaped Türkiye's strategic interest. Türkiye declared the 2014 annexation illegitimate and contrary to international law and affirmed its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. At the same time, Türkiye has carefully avoided direct confrontation with Russia and the severance of economic ties, including its dependence on Russian natural gas. Türkiye's pragmatic foreign policy is clearly reflected both in its efforts to support the Crimean Tatars and in its continued cooperation with Russia on broader regional issues. The study demonstrates how Türkiye manages its dual commitments to NATO and regional diplomacy, highlighting a strategy of balancing great power relations without compromising national interests. Based on a literature review, the study incorporates historical background specific to Türkiye–Russia–Crimea relations and provides an in-depth analysis of contemporary developments surrounding the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

**Keywords:** Regional Security, Türkiye's Balanced Policies, Crimean Tatars, Annexation of Crimea

### Öz

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin 2014'te Kırım'ın ilhakına verdiği cevabı analiz ederek, Türkiye'nin Rusya ile Ukrayna arasında izlediği dengeli yaklaşımı incelemektedir. Türkiye'nin Kırım'la, özellikle Kırım Tatarları üzerinden kurduğu tarihsel bağlar ve bölgenin Türkiye (Karadeniz) kıyılarına yakınlığı, Türkiye'nin stratejik ilgisini derinden etkilemektedir. Türkiye, 2014 yılındaki ilhakı gayrimeşru ve uluslararası hukuka aykırı olarak ilan etmiş ve Ukrayna'nın toprak bütünlüğünü desteklemiştir. Diğer taraftan, Türkiye, Rusya ile doğrudan çatışma yaşamaktan ve ekonomik bağları koparmaktan -Rus doğal gazına bağımlılık dâhil- dikkatle kaçınmaktadır. Türkiye'nin pragmatik dış politikası, Kırım Tatarlarını destekleme çabalarında ve daha geniş bölgesel konularda Rusya ile iş birliğini sürdürmesinde açıkça görülmektedir. Çalışma, Türkiye'nin hem NATO'ya hem de bölgesel diplomasiye yönelik çift yönlü taahhütlerini nasıl yönettiğini göstererek, ulusal çıkarlarından ödün vermeden büyük güç ilişkilerini dengeleme stratejisini ele almaktadır. Çalışmada, literatür taramasına dayalı bir değerlendirme yapılmaktadır, konu incelenirken Türkiye- Rusya- Kırım özelinde tarihi arka plan bilgisine yer verilmektedir ve 2014'te Kırım'ın ilhakı özelinde güncel gelişmeler derinlemesine analiz edilmeye çalışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bölgesel Güvenlik, Türkiye'nin Dengeleme Politikaları, Kırım Tatarları, Kırım'ın İlhakı

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<sup>1</sup> **Corresponding Author:** İstanbul Kültür University, a.ketenci@iku.edu.tr, aysegulketenci0601@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-3165-7358



## INTRODUCTION

Türkiye has significant historical and geopolitical ties to Crimea, primarily through the Crimean Tatars, who share ethnic and cultural ties with Türkiye. These ties, alongside the strategic importance of Crimea being only 173 miles from the Black Sea coast, have made the region a key area of interest for Türkiye. The annexation of Crimea by Russia not only challenged Ukraine's territorial integrity but also placed Türkiye in a delicate position, balancing its relations with Russia and Ukraine while safeguarding its national interests.

Historically, Crimea was a battleground for power struggles between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire. The Russian Empire's control over Crimea, particularly after 1783, significantly altered the region's demographic and political landscape. The Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of the peninsula, experienced severe oppression under Russian rule, which led to large-scale migrations to various territories of the Ottoman Empire. The 2014 annexation reignited these historical grievances, with Crimean Tatars strongly opposing Russia's control and aligning with Ukraine. According to Balcer (2014), Türkiye's foreign policy regarding Crimea is closely related to regional dynamics. The competition between the Russian and Ottoman empires over Crimea has been engraved in the Turkish state's memory, and Russia's interest in the Turkish Straits after World War II was one of the important arguments for Türkiye's entry into NATO.

While Türkiye officially declared the annexation as illegitimate and refused to recognize it, it has been careful to avoid confrontation with Russia. This prudent strategy is shaped by Türkiye's dependence on Russian natural gas, economic connections, and the broader regional dynamics in Syria and Libya, where the collaboration between Russia and Türkiye is also crucial. Nevertheless, Türkiye has used diplomatic tools to support the Crimean Tatars, advocating for their rights on international platforms and condemning Russia's actions. According to Çağatay and Jeffrey (2014), Türkiye is one of the NATO countries most affected by the annexation, due to its geographical proximity to Crimea and regional security dynamics. The annexation that followed Russia's 2008 intervention in Georgia has fueled Türkiye's security concerns. Despite these negative developments, Russia's hard-power capacity, Türkiye's limited power projection in the Caucasus, and mutual economic and energy ties have led Türkiye to pursue a conflict-averse, cautious policy toward Russia.

Türkiye's participation in military initiatives such as BLACKSEAFOR and its close relations with Ukraine have also been strategic. The two countries share common interests in maintaining stability in the Black Sea region, and Türkiye's military support to Ukraine, including arms exports, highlights its commitment to this alliance. At the same time, Türkiye's refusal to participate in Western sanctions against Russia reflects its pragmatic foreign policy, where it seeks to maintain a balance between its NATO commitments and its regional interests.

This study argues that Türkiye's approach to the Crimean crisis represents a broader foreign policy strategy of balancing relations with major powers while safeguarding national interests. The historical, cultural, and strategic factors influencing Türkiye's stance on Crimea are examined, and the potential regional and global implications of Türkiye's policies are assessed. It argues that Türkiye supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and the principles of international law, while simultaneously seeking to avoid direct confrontation with Russia. This stance reflects a strategic balancing policy aimed at safeguarding Türkiye's geopolitical, economic, and security interests in the Black Sea region.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature on Türkiye's relations with Russia or Ukraine in the context of the 2014 annexation of Crimea is extensive; however, existing studies tend to examine these relationships separately and primarily through the lenses of bilateral tensions and alliance choices. As a result, the literature pays limited attention to Türkiye's simultaneous and carefully calibrated diplomacy toward both actors. This study fills this gap by focusing on Türkiye's balanced diplomatic strategy toward Russia and Ukraine, examining how Ankara seeks to manage its relations with both in a multidimensional manner while safeguarding its national interests in the Black Sea.

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Türkiye's balanced foreign policy toward Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, examining it in both historical and contemporary geopolitical contexts. In this framework, the study explores Türkiye's efforts to reconcile its Western orientation stemming from NATO membership with its concerns for regional stability and security in the Black Sea. It also evaluates the implications of Türkiye's post-2014 balancing policies for regional security dynamics and international diplomacy.

In order to examine the issue in a multidimensional manner, primary and secondary sources—such as academic journal articles, reports published by think tanks, and official statements and documents—have been utilized. According to Aydın (2014), the annexation of Crimea is significant insofar as it has created a dilemma in Turkish foreign policy. On the one hand, Türkiye's historical ties with the Crimean Tatars impose a sense of responsibility on Ankara; on the other hand, there is a strong desire to maintain and sustain multifaceted relations with Russia. A similar situation applies to Russia as well, since Moscow seeks to preserve and consolidate Türkiye's support by emphasizing its efforts to improve the living conditions of the Crimean Tatars. Türkiye's official statements on the issue—specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements from 2014 and 2022—are also examined. These statements emphasize respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity, non-recognition of the annexation, and the resolution of the issue in question through negotiation and peaceful means. The study employed a qualitative research method, informed by a literature review.

The first part provides a concise background, outlining the historical and cultural factors that underlie Russia's annexation of Crimea. The next parts provide general information on the geopolitical importance of the Black Sea and Crimea, followed by a discussion of the importance of Crimea and the Crimean Tatars from Türkiye's perspective, as the Crimean Tatars play a critical role in shaping Türkiye's policies on Crimea. The final part discusses Türkiye's balancing diplomacy and multidimensional foreign policy strategies regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea and Ukraine.

### 1. The Annexation of Crimea & Background Information

It will shed light on Crimea's historical and strategic position in relation to Russia and briefly evaluate the process leading up to its annexation.

President Putin expresses the importance of Crimea for Russian history and culture as follows: “This place—Crimea—is Chersonese, where Saint Prince Vladimir was baptized, the spiritual achievement of turning to Orthodoxy. That achievement enabled the establishment of a common cultural value and a civilizational foundation that unites the peoples of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In Crimea lie the graves of brave Russian soldiers who in 1783 brought the peninsula under the administration of the Russian state. Sevastopol is also the homeland of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Crimea is Balaklava, Kerch, Kurgan, and Mount Sapun—each of these places is sacred for Russia; they are symbols of the unprecedented courage of Russian military glory. Of the 2.2 million people living on the Crimean peninsula, 1.5 million are Russians; in addition, there are about 350,000 Ukrainians whose mother

tongue is Russian, and around 300,000 Crimean Tatars living here. Crimea is both a shared heritage and an important factor of stability, and today this strategic region should be under only a strong and stable Russian sovereignty; otherwise, as Russians and Ukrainians, we may lose Crimea in the near term from a historical perspective. Given the statements being made about Ukraine's membership in NATO, it is important to consider what Crimea means for Sevastopol. The presence of a NATO fleet in a city where Russia has a military presence is a very definite and lasting threat to Russia's South (Putin, 2014).

Crimea's unique historical, ethnic, and social structure creates an environment conducive to Russia's ability to exploit separatist Dynamics (Kononczuk, 2014). In the winter of 2013, pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich suspended the Association Agreement with the EU, which increased Russia's security concerns. The political uncertainties and instability in Ukraine were assessed by Russia as creating a favorable environment for the annexation of Crimea. On February 27, 2014, the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and several other strategic points were brought under Russian control (Dolya, 2016). During the annexation of Crimea, although Putin claimed that "local self-defense units" were involved, it later became clear that these were Russian military forces. From a historical perspective, Russia regards Crimea as a lost Russian territory that rightfully belongs to it (Biersack and O'Lear, 2014: 249).

## 2. The Geopolitical Importance of the Black Sea and Crimea for Türkiye

The Black Sea is a critical region not only in terms of geopolitical importance for coastal states such as Russia, the Balkan countries, and Türkiye, but also in terms of global power and security balances. For example, Moscow considers the Black Sea as a springboard to the Mediterranean and beyond, and as a geographical area that will limit NATO. Russia consistently views the international situation as a 'battlefield' and strives to shift the balance in the Black Sea in its favor. For example, the ongoing efforts to strengthen the Russian Black Sea fleet and exert pressure on countries such as Türkiye and Bulgaria by prioritizing energy relations are examples of this strategy. The Black Sea is of vital importance not only because it is home to two EU and three NATO members (Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania) from a European perspective, but also because it is a crossroads between democracy in the west, Russian autocracy in the north, China's financial influence in the east, and instability in the south. In addition, the region plays a strategic role as a critical route for energy flows (Horjus, 2021).

Türkiye is concerned about a possible increase in tension that could lead to military options being considered in the Black Sea (Kaya, 2014). Maintaining stability and security in the Black Sea has been a priority for the Turkish state from the Ottoman Empire to the present day. Throughout history, Russia's goal of reaching warm seas has created a constant threat perception for Turkish decision-makers, who have been sensitive to maintaining and monitoring regional balances. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye sought to maintain its military superiority in the Black Sea, but Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its control of the Kerch Strait disrupted this balance and shifted the power dynamics in the region in Russia's favor. The weak response of the Transatlantic alliance to Russia's growing influence has highlighted the need for Türkiye to take more cautious and decisive steps in the Black Sea (Güngörmez, 2021).

Türkiye's Black Sea strategy encompasses many areas, including economics, security, and international law. Türkiye supports the Black Sea becoming a peaceful basin with strong economic integration and, to this end, strictly enforces the Montreux Convention. Montreux serves as a protective legal basis against external interventions in the region by imposing restrictions on the duration and tonnage of warships in the Black Sea. Thanks to this policy, Türkiye can maintain balanced relations with Russia while limiting NATO's entry into the Black Sea. On the other hand, Türkiye also supports the NATO and EU membership processes of the countries in the region. Türkiye

aims to preserve the status quo in the Black Sea and pursues a policy of balance between Ukraine and Russia (Güngörmez, 2021).

Crimea is a peninsula situated between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, occupying a highly strategic position. It features numerous bays that function as natural harbors, providing safe shelters for ships. Since much of its terrain consists of plains and it enjoys a favorable climate, agriculture and livestock breeding have flourished in the region. Due to its geopolitical significance, Crimea serves as a crucial gateway for Siberia's access to the Black Sea and as a vital link connecting the Caucasus to Europe (Görge, 2022:283-284).

Crimea, which had turned the Black Sea into a "Turkish lake" during the Ottoman period, was lost to Russia with its annexation in 1783. From that point on, the Crimean Tatars were subjected to forced migrations, and a large portion of them settled in Anatolia, where they formed a strong diaspora. Following Russia's second annexation in 2014 and the resulting increase in pressure, a new wave of migration from Crimea began. Due to its historical and ethnic ties, Türkiye attaches special importance to Crimea. In this context, Türkiye strives to develop multi-dimensional strategies that simultaneously take into account historical responsibilities, the need to balance Russia's influence in the Black Sea, and military as well as defense cooperation with Ukraine (Güngörmez, 2021). Crimea is an important part of Türkiye's efforts to ensure stability and security in the Black Sea and pursue a balanced foreign policy. Ankara is trying to strike a balance between Western alliances and regional security interests on the issue of Crimea. Furthermore, Crimea is a key area of Türkiye's Black Sea security strategy and plays a central role in Türkiye's goal of preserving its cultural ties with the Turkic world (Sarı, 2024).

The historical, cultural, and strategic significance of Crimea for Russia is of critical importance. At the same time, Crimea occupies a special place in Türkiye's geopolitical calculus. Throughout history, the Black Sea has stood at the core of Türkiye's security, trade, and energy policies, while Crimea has played a decisive role in shaping the balance of power across this maritime region. For Türkiye, Crimea serves both as a historical symbol of Ottoman–Russian rivalry and, in contemporary terms, as a strategically vital area for ensuring the security and stability of the Black Sea region. Therefore, the following section focuses on the historical, geopolitical, and economic importance of Crimea and the Black Sea for Türkiye, offering a detailed background to Türkiye's interests in the region.

### 3. The Importance of Crimea in Turkish History

Crimea holds significant geostrategic importance for Turkish history and Türkiye, being located just 173 miles away from the Anatolian coastline across the Black Sea (Çağatay and Jeffrey, 2014). The peoples who formed the ethnicity of Crimea (Cumans, Mongol Tatars, Pechenegs, etc.) established the Crimean Khanate in 1441. In the 15th century, this dynasty recognized the authority of the Ottoman Empire. By the 18th century, Crimea became a focal point of power struggles between the Ottoman and Russian Empires (Dolya, 2016). Along with the Ottoman Empire, Crimea became a 'khanate,' and during this time, the entire population of Crimea was Turkish and spoke Tatar. The Russian Empire gradually established control over the Crimean Khanate and pursued a policy of expansion in the Black Sea Basin (Çağatay and Jeffrey, 2014).

In 1774, the Crimean Khanate declared its independence, but soon after, Russia seized the Crimean lands. This incident marked the conclusion of the Crimean Khanate, resulting in the Tatars becoming a minority while the Russian Empire created numerous advantageous settlements in the region. Due to Russian pressures and the expropriation of lands, the period known as "Karaçağ" (the dark time) began for the Crimean Tatars, leading many to migrate to Ottoman Empire territories such as Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria (Dolya, 2016).

The Black Sea, which was previously considered the 'inner lake' of the Ottoman Empire, became the subject of Russian dominance after its capture by the Russian Empire. Crimea was regarded by Russia as a strategic jumping-off point that would enable its expansion southward. During this period, the Ottoman Empire was unable to resist the attacks of the Russian Empire. Since the 18th century, the Russian state has positioned Crimea as a forward base and a strategic outpost, giving it access to the heart of significant regions like the Balkans and Eastern Europe (Urkosta, 2016).

After Russia captured Crimea, significant changes occurred in the Turkish-Muslim population that had existed in the region for centuries. The Russian state settled a Christian-Russian population in the area and initiated colonization efforts. The demographic changes over time also caused social and economic transformations, distancing the region from Anatolia, with which it had strong commercial and social ties during the Ottoman Empire. Facing intense pressure, the Crimean Tatars migrated to Ottoman lands at various times (for instance, in 1812, 1828-1829, 1860-1861, 1874, 1890, 1902), resulting in a considerable demographic transformation (Şahin, 2018:143).

Due to the negative events and pressures they faced between 1783 and 1883, the Crimean Tatars initiated an enlightenment movement in 1883, led by İsmail Bey Gaspralı. During the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the Crimean Tatars convened the 1st Crimean Tatar Congress, taking steps towards independence, and later organized the 2nd National Tatar Congress, declaring their intention to establish a Democratic Republic. In response to this, the Bolsheviks seized control of Crimea and executed the Tatar leaders (Şahin, 2018:142-144).

Crimea has maintained its significance for Türkiye in the context of Russia–Ukraine relations even after the end of the Cold War. After the Cold War, Russia's use of ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus to implement its "Near Abroad Doctrine" led to an increase in Türkiye's security concerns. With Putin's rise to power, creating economic influence over neighboring countries became one of Russia's main priorities. In 2008, Russia intervened in Georgia, and in 2014, it annexed Crimea. As a NATO member, Türkiye supported Georgia and criticized Russia's actions regarding Crimea. In this context, Türkiye's approach can be evaluated within the framework of its traditional foreign policy, which prioritizes national interests in areas of tension between Russia and the West. Türkiye made efforts to prevent its relations with Russia from deteriorating over the issues of Georgia and Crimea. Instead of reacting as sharply as Western countries did, Türkiye pursued a more balanced and pragmatic foreign policy characterized by moderation and dialogue (Yılmaz, 2023: 24-25).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye-Ukraine relations gained significant progress. The common coastline bordering the Black Sea and the significant volume of natural gas imported by Türkiye from Russia that transits through Ukraine have both enhanced the strategic significance of these partnerships. While cooperating in military initiatives like BLACKSEAFOR and the Black Sea Harmony Operation, Türkiye and Ukraine pursue parallel policies in organizations such as the Council of Europe, the UN (United Nations), and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe). The presence of Crimean, Ahıska, and Gagauz Turks in Ukraine further strengthens the ethnic ties between the two nations and contributes to Türkiye's interest in developments within Ukraine. These relations, which have great potential, have gained further momentum following the annexation of Crimea (Çalışkan, 2017).

#### **4. The Crimean Tatar Factor in Türkiye's Policies**

Russians, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatar communities prioritize their perspectives regarding the past and attempt to legitimize their claims over Crimea through historical references. While Russians and Ukrainians argue that Crimea has been a Slavic land since ancient times, the Crimean Tatars believe that their ethnic ties to the region's oldest indigenous peoples make them the rightful owners of this

land. The Crimean Khanate, being an independent and powerful state, represents an advanced civilization for the Tatars, synthesizing eastern and western elements (Şahin, 2014).

The Crimean Khanate played a critical role in the Russian and Ukrainian territories, and its position as an obstacle to Russia's access to the sea, the presence of a navy, and access to trade routes are factors that explain Russia's expansionist attitude from the 17th century onwards. Taking advantage of the weakening of the Ottoman Empire, the Russian state has tried to expand its power projection in the Black Sea since the 18th century. In 1774, with the Treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca, the Crimean Khanate seceded from the protection of the Ottoman Empire. The annexation of Crimea is an example of the imperial policy of 'divide and rule'. The Russian state implemented a policy grounded in Orthodoxy and imperial ideology. Tatars who converted to Orthodoxy and were considered loyal to the Tsar could rise in the state ranks, which is an example of assimilation (Bostan, 1995: 353-358).

One of the main issues connecting Türkiye and Ukraine has been cooperation on the resettlement of Crimean Tatars who migrated from Crimea to other Soviet republics during the Stalin era. Türkiye has actively worked on the return and resettlement of Crimean Tatars to their homeland. The Crimean Tatar diaspora in Türkiye is spread across a wide geographical area and continues to carry out active initiatives. Türkiye's main policy regarding the Crimean Tatars is to support them as loyal citizens living in peace and prosperity within Ukraine's territorial integrity, under equal conditions with other Ukrainian citizens (Özdal and Demydova, 2011: 36-37).

The Crimean Tatars' concerns about being annexed by Russia are deeply rooted in historical events. Alongside key players like Russia and Ukraine, the Crimean Tatars are one of the significant parties in the Crimean crisis. As the indigenous people of Crimea, the Tatars represent the third largest ethnic group in the region, following Russians and Ukrainians. The Tatars hold a crucial position in the political landscape of Crimea. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Tatars adopted a pro-Ukrainian stance, opposing the transfer of Crimea from Ukraine to Russian control. Maintaining this position, the Tatars also boycotted the 2014 referendum held during the Crimea crisis (Şahin, 2014).

There are various reasons for Türkiye's concerns regarding Russia's intervention in Crimea. Geographically, Türkiye is situated close to the conflict zone, and due to the Turkish origins of the Crimean Tatars, the events affecting them are closely followed both in Türkiye and across the entire Turkic world (Balci, 2021).

Public demonstrations and information campaigns in Türkiye supporting the Crimean Tatars have the power to influence and mobilize the political actions and rhetoric of the Crimean Tatars. For instance, on the 70th anniversary of the Crimean Tatars' deportation, certain events were organized, and a critical discourse towards Russia was developed on this issue (Korobov and Smetannikov, 2015:24-25).

In 2014, representatives of various political parties in Türkiye, despite differing views, participated in protests and demonstrations to support the Crimean Tatars, with slogans such as "Crimea is Turkish land" and "Türkiye should support Crimea," held in various parts of the country. Türkiye's support was met with approval by the politically active circles in Crimea. Türkiye has been making efforts to strengthen the position of the Tatars in Crimea, partly due to historical ties. In this context, Türkiye has been actively utilizing its "soft power" tools specifically regarding the Crimean Tatars. These policies not only have the potential to create regional effects but also hold the possibility of generating global impacts (Korobov and Smetannikov, 2015:24-27). Given the historical connections between Türkiye and the Crimean Tatars, it is reasonable that the Tatars may seek assistance from Türkiye, amongst challenging circumstances imposed by the occupation and annexation of Crimea. Türkiye has reacted to the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine. The Speaker of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Cemil Çiçek, stated that Türkiye deemed the annexation of Crimea

unacceptable, did not recognize it, and prioritized supporting the Crimean Tatars. Despite its economic ties with Russia, Türkiye voiced its support for the Crimean Tatars and imposed a ban on the passage of ships coming from or passing through Crimean ports (Blank, 2015: 27-28).

Türkiye is regarded as a country capable of balancing Russia's hegemonic ambitions in the Black Sea. Its status as a NATO member and efforts to gain influence in the southern Black Sea region (with security-driven initiatives in Libya and Syria) are very important. Türkiye's equipment and arms exports to Ukraine, its support for Ukraine's NATO membership, and its refusal to recognize the annexation of Crimea on the international stage illustrate areas of disagreement with Russia, while also indicating that Türkiye is cautious about maintaining its relations with Western countries following its interests (Gressel, 2021).

Following the events of 2014, as a result of Russia's considerable pressure on Ukraine, the Crimean Tatars, the indigenous population of Crimea, were compelled to abandon the ancestral homeland that they had inhabited for thousands of years. Those who remained faced a difficult choice: either give up their Ukrainian citizenship to become Russian citizens or continue living in their homeland as "foreigners." Key figures in the Crimean Tatars' National Movement, Mustafa Cemilev and Mejlis Chairman Refat Chubarov, were banned from entering Crimea for five years. The sole television channel of the Crimean Tatars, ATR, was closed, while Russia initiated its TV channel as a means of soft power, seeking to enhance its image in Crimea (Dolya, 2016).

## **5. Türkiye's Multidimensional Diplomatic Effort and Balanced Diplomacy Between Russia and Ukraine**

Türkiye's foreign policy regarding Crimea can be understood through its longstanding diplomatic practices and the complexities of regional dynamics. Throughout history, the Russian state has been a significant rival and source of concern for Türkiye. Since the Ottoman period, the Turks have been well aware of the military conflicts and threats posed by Russia, particularly due to the legacy of Russian conquests in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Between 1853 and 1856, a struggle for influence between the Russian and Ottoman states in Crimea led to conflicts. In the aftermath of World War II, geopolitical tensions remained pronounced, particularly due to the Soviet Union's aspirations regarding the Turkish Straits and its territorial claims over Kars and Ardahan. These factors compelled Türkiye to align more closely with the Western alliance, ultimately culminating in its membership in NATO. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's persistent aspiration to reach warm seas rendered it a nation that Türkiye had to observe with considerable scrutiny (Balcı, 2021).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye has largely refrained from overtly opposing or directly confronting Russia. Nevertheless, despite this cautious stance, Türkiye has not stepped back from pursuing its geopolitical objectives that do not align with Russia's long-term strategies in certain regions (Balcer, 2014: 3-4).

The annexation of Crimea holds great historical, strategic, and geopolitical significance for Türkiye. Türkiye's historical and cultural ties with the Crimean Tatars and the region's location in the Black Sea basin make it impossible for Ankara to remain indifferent to these developments. While emphasizing the need to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity, Türkiye has placed the protection of the Crimean Tatar community's rights at the center of its foreign policy. During this critical period, Ankara adopted a cautious and balanced diplomatic stance, differing from the harsh reactions of Western countries, and kept dialogue channels open with both Kyiv and Moscow. Türkiye described the annexation as contrary to international law, yet refrained from joining Western sanctions against Russia, pursuing instead a diplomacy-oriented and stability-focused approach. Overall, Türkiye's foreign policy after the Cold War and during the 2014 Crimea crisis was based on a strategy of

balancing great power competition while safeguarding national interests. This approach reflects a pragmatic foreign policy vision that strengthens Türkiye's regional influence (Çalışkan, 2016).

The annexation of Crimea has caused a dilemma in Turkish foreign policy. On one side, there exist profound historical and familial connections with the Crimean Tatars, whereas on the opposite side, Türkiye maintains substantial relationships with Russia, especially in the fields of energy and economics. To maintain its close ties with Russia, Türkiye is also mindful of the significant concerns surrounding the Crimean Tatars. Türkiye seeks to leverage its positive relationship with Russia to enhance the circumstances of the Tatars, while refraining from participating in sanctions against Russia. For its part, Russia tries to maintain Türkiye's support by emphasizing efforts to improve the conditions of the Crimean Tatars (Aydın, 2014: 91).

The Crimea crisis has been a significant event in revealing the complex nature of Türkiye-Russia relations. Türkiye perceives Russia as a crucial ally, although it simultaneously aligns with Western nations concerning the Crimea matter. There are notable differences in perspectives between Türkiye and Russia, particularly on geopolitical matters. Türkiye has endeavored to establish a delicate balance between Russia and the West (Balcer, 2014: 7-8).

During the Ukraine crisis, Türkiye did not strictly follow Western policies but acted by prioritizing its own arguments and interests. Ahmet Davutoğlu emphasized the need for continued dialogue between Ukraine and Russia, stating that diplomatic channels should remain open and there is no need for a new Berlin Wall. Türkiye's stance helped gain the trust of both Ukraine and Russia, ensuring the continuation of bilateral relations with both countries. After 2015, Russia's increasing involvement and aggressive policies in the Syrian crisis brought Türkiye and Ukraine closer together, and their relations continued to gain positive momentum. The cooperation between the two countries in the Black Sea and their joint stance against Russia's expansionist policies have contributed to strengthening bilateral relations (Çalışkan, 2016).

As a NATO member, Türkiye can be regarded as the nation most impacted by Russia's intervention in Crimea. The 2008 Georgian intervention and the 2014 annexation of Crimea deeply strained relations between the two countries. After the 2008 Georgian intervention, Türkiye considered one of the main reasons for Russia's actions to be the restriction of competition over the transportation of hydrocarbon resources to Türkiye and other countries through Georgia. However, Russia's capacity for retaliation and its role in gas sales prevented Türkiye from expressing a strong response. Due to the lack of high-level coordination in the Caucasus region, Türkiye adopted a cautious approach, avoiding direct conflict with Russia (Çağatay and Jeffrey, 2014).

Following the annexation of Crimea, pro-Crimea demonstrations took place in Türkiye; nonetheless, it can be argued that Türkiye refrained from adopting a predominant policy due to its relations and interests in areas such as Russia, Europe, and the Middle East. Since the foundation of the Republic of Türkiye, Atatürk's most significant foreign policy principle has been "pragmatism." Consistent with this idea, Türkiye has adopted a policy that evaluates all its interests through a pragmatic perspective. For instance, in a speech delivered in Kyiv on March 20, 2015, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan refrained from making negative remarks about Russia (Korobov and Smetannikov, 2015: 29-30).

In his interview, İlber Ortaylı emphasized Russia's historical, demographic, and military superiority over Crimea, stating that the region's annexation by Moscow was "a process that had long been foreseeable." In this context, European countries have been unable to pursue an effective policy in the region, while the United States, despite its rhetorical responses, has no intention of intervening in practice. This situation necessitates a more moderate and cautious policy for Türkiye regarding Crimea. Based on Türkiye's historical and cultural ties with the Crimean Tatars, Türkiye's primary responsibility is to protect the security and cultural continuity of this community. Accordingly,

adopting a pragmatic and balanced approach rather than emotional reactions to the Crimea issue represents the most appropriate strategy for safeguarding Türkiye's national interests (TürkRus, 2023).

Türkiye's official statement on the matter is as follows: No: 300, 30 September 2022, Regarding Russia's Annexation of Certain Regions of Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye- official announcement): "Türkiye did not recognize the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 following an illegal referendum, and has repeatedly underlined its strong support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty on every occasion. In line with the stance we adopted in 2014, we reject Russia's decision to annex the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine. We can't accept this decision, which constitutes a serious violation of well-established principles of international law. We reiterate our support for the resolution of the war — which is reaching increasingly grave proportions — based on a just peace through negotiation". (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye- official announcement, 2022)

No: 86, 17 March 2014, Regarding the Referendum Held in Crimea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye- official announcement)

"The outcome of the illegal and illegitimate "referendum" held in Crimea on Sunday, 16 March 2014, as well as the ensuing steps that will be taken, will bear no legal validity for Türkiye and will not be recognized. Türkiye has consistently and emphatically underlined at every opportunity the importance of finding a solution to the crisis in Ukraine based on that country's independence, sovereignty, political unity, and territorial integrity, in line with democratic principles, the rule of law, and international agreements. Türkiye attaches special importance and priority to the safety and well-being of the Crimean Tatar Turks — our kinsmen who constitute the indigenous population of Crimea and who have been subjected to great suffering throughout history. This matter is underlined by Türkiye on every occasion before international organizations. It is assessed that possible developments that may take place in Ukraine, and particularly in Crimea, in the upcoming period could have negative repercussions on the security and stability of our immediate vicinity. In this context, we once again draw attention to the grave risks of creating faits accomplis by military means and call upon all parties to come together to find a political solution to the issue based on the above-mentioned principles". (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye- official announcement, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined Türkiye's diplomatic response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and its balanced foreign policy strategy between Russia and Ukraine. Türkiye's historical ties to Crimea, particularly through its strong ethnic and cultural connection to the Crimean Tatars, highlight the importance of this region in its foreign policy. Crimea's geostrategic location, only 173 miles from the Anatolian coast across the Black Sea, adds to its significance for Türkiye's regional interests.

A careful balancing act has characterized Türkiye's response to the annexation. While Türkiye openly supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and has officially rejected the legitimacy of the annexation, it has avoided confrontation with Russia. This prudent strategy is driven by Türkiye's broader economic and geopolitical concerns, especially its dependence on Russian natural gas. Türkiye's economic dependence on Russia has played a crucial role in shaping its foreign policy, as it seeks to avoid jeopardizing its bilateral ties with Moscow.

At the same time, Türkiye has taken an active stance in supporting the Crimean Tatars, who have faced significant pressure under Russian rule. Türkiye views the protection of Crimean Tatar rights as both a historical responsibility and a political imperative. It has used diplomatic channels and

international platforms to advocate for the Tatars, condemning Russia's actions in Crimea. For instance, Türkiye imposed restrictions on the passage of ships from Crimean ports, a symbolic yet significant move underscoring its opposition to the annexation.

Türkiye's balanced diplomacy reflects a broader strategy of maintaining relations with both Russia and the West. As a NATO member, Türkiye has aligned with Western states in supporting Ukraine's sovereignty, providing military equipment to Ukraine, and reinforcing its commitment to Black Sea security. However, Türkiye has refrained from joining Western sanctions against Russia, emphasizing its pragmatic approach to safeguarding its economic and strategic interests.

This pragmatic foreign policy also reflects Türkiye's efforts to balance the regional power dynamics in the Black Sea. With Russia seeking greater dominance in the region, Türkiye has sought to protect its strategic interests while maintaining a cooperative relationship with Moscow. Türkiye's involvement in conflicts in Libya and Syria, where it has clashed with and collaborated with Russia, further illustrates its multifaceted foreign policy in balancing security and economic goals.

In conclusion, Türkiye's response to the annexation of Crimea highlights its ability to navigate complex geopolitical challenges through a balanced and multi-dimensional foreign policy. While Türkiye has remained steadfast in its support for the Crimean Tatars and Ukraine's territorial integrity, it has also been careful to preserve its economic ties with Russia. This reflects Türkiye's broader foreign policy strategy of pragmatism, where it seeks to maintain stability and safeguard its national interests without engaging in confrontation. Türkiye's future foreign policy will likely continue to follow this approach, balancing its relations with global powers while protecting its regional and strategic interests.

By maintaining this delicate balance, Türkiye has managed to play a critical role in the region, navigating its relationships with Russia and the West in a way that reflects its unique geopolitical position and historical responsibilities. In this context, Türkiye's ability to pursue a balanced diplomacy during a sensitive issue such as the annexation of Crimea can be considered a significant achievement, one that has enhanced its capacity to manage subsequent foreign policy initiatives requiring nuance amid increasingly multidimensional and multi-actor global and regional developments. The experience gained during the annexation of Crimea constitutes a valuable precedent for Türkiye. In light of this experience, it is likely that in future crises characterized by shifting regional dynamics, Türkiye will adopt a foreign policy approach that prioritizes its core national interests while simultaneously maintaining equilibrium among multiple international actors.

### **Compliance with the Ethical Standard**

**Conflict of Interest:** The author(s) declare that they do not have a conflict of interest with themselves and/or other third parties and institutions, or if so, how this conflict of interest arose and will be resolved, and author contribution declaration forms are added to the article process files with wet signatures.

**Ethics Committee Approval:** There is no need for ethics committee approval in this article, the wet signed consent form stating that the ethics committee decision is not required has been added to the article process files on the system.

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