



DISCUSSION PAPER

Crimea's Geopolitics and the Plight of Crimean Tatars

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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

June 2023

TRT WORLD İSTANBUL

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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Introduction

The dramatic history of Crimea unveils a region that has been persistently plagued by conflicts among various factions throughout its timeline. Of notable mention is its involvement in both World Wars when control over its territories exchanged hands between different parties, namely the Bolsheviks and Soviets during WWI. This shift had dire repercussions, including what is known as the Tatar exile, whereby Crimean Tatars were unjustly accused of treason. Two world wars profoundly impacted Crimea's demographic makeup, as many were forced to flee their homes.

During the last five years of the Soviet Union, exiled Crimean Tatars stepped up efforts to return to their historical lands, taking advantage of Gorbachev's political reforms. A group of Tatars even held a demonstration in Moscow in 1987 to influence the decision making. Some Tatars were fortunate to return to Crimea at that time. However, their numbers were very low. Hundreds of thousands of exiles returned to Crimea after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

But obtaining their rights under the Ukrainian administration was not easy, and many Tatars were victims of legal, political, and economic discrimination. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, after nearly 25 years of independence (under Ukraine), exacerbated the problems already faced by the Crimean Tatar community, resulting in nearly 200,000 people at risk of leaving their homeland again. Since the end of the Soviet era, the quasi majority of Crimean Tatars have always sided with Ukraine, opposing the annexation of Crimea.

Crimean Tatars encountered even greater difficulties with the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022. Many were coerced into military service through forced mobilisation and faced deployment towards fighting against Ukraine on battlefronts. Some reports say that the number of people enlisted was 5,000 in Crimea in the latest mobilisation, with 90% being Crimean Tatars.

This community had undergone a traumatic exile experience in 1944, and it was only after decades could the Crimean Tatars regain access to their ancestral land and asserted their rights only after the mid-1980s. Tragically, the new wave of turmoil has paved the way to heightened pressures after the annexation.

Crimean Tatars: From Ottoman Citizens to Soviet Exile

On the Crimean Peninsula, there is a predominantly Muslim community known as the Crimean Tatars, who speak their native language. This group has played an important role in shaping military and political developments over time by carrying on traditions from other communities like Kipchaks, Pechenegs, Huns and Khazars and the Golden Horde state (Hülögü, 2004). Under Ottoman rule, they became linguistically similar to Ottoman Turks, which further solidified relations. Interestingly, it is believed that if there was ever a lineage problem in the Ottoman dynasty, it would be passed onto the administration of the Crimea Khans due to their closeness with them.

Due to its strategic importance, the region remains crucial for political and military reasons. Crimea's position on the northern shores of the Black Sea, sharing boundaries with the Azov Sea towards the east, makes this region critical as a gateway between Europe and the Caucasus. Its extensive flatlands provide fertile ground for varied agricultural activities, aided by favourable weather conditions compared to neighbouring nations' harsh weather conditions that affect cultivation patterns negatively. Crimea hosts strategic ports.

Turks first inhabited the Crimean Peninsula during the Huns era, and many Turkic tribes made it their home throughout history, becoming an integral part of the region's history for centuries. The Ottoman Empire built strong bonds with Crimean Tatars that endured until the 18th century.

According to many historians, Russia's capture of Kazan during the conflicts of the sixteenth century was a significant turning point that allowed Russia to reach Crimea (Bączkowski, 1947). The main justification for the Russo-Ottoman wars is Crimea's geopolitical importance, as its strategic ports allow for control and dominance of critical trade routes over the Black Sea. The resistance presented by Ottoman forces gradually diminished over time, and this ended up with Russia gaining influence on the peninsula. Cultural influences fueled unrest within Crimea as more Russians settled in the area and gradually imposed their way of life on its native inhabitants.

Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774, the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca marked an important moment for Russia-Ottoman Empire relations, with the subsequent neutrality of Crimea and its eventual occupation by Russia sent significant shockwaves within Ottoman society. Consequently, Crimea became a part of the Russian Empire in 1783 (Fisher, 1978, p. 36). Russians opted for tactics like settling Slavs whilst intensifying the pressure on Crimean Tatars to strengthen the Russian foothold in Crimea (Görgen, 2022, p. 284). This policy continued over centuries.

Soviet authorities viewed Crimean Tatars as a potential threat (Aydingun & Balim, 2012, p. 257). In addition, oppressive tactics employed by the Soviets against minority groups resulted in numerous losses within the Crimean Tatar intellectual community (Williams, 2002, p. 326). Acknowledging the Crimean Tatar language officially demonstrated Russia's commitment to supporting this community during Lenin's rule. However, under Stalin's leadership, the Tatars were subjected to genocide that left lasting scars in the collective memory. Under Stalin's regime, around two hundred thousand Crimean Tatars got exiled to Siberia and Turkestan areas after being accused of supporting Nazi Germany during World War II. This cruel policy cost hundreds of thousands of lives, and survivors were forced to start afresh in places far from their homeland.

Fisher (1978, p. 70) discusses the impact of the Russians' political, social, cultural, and economic pressure on the Tatars, which led to migration from Crimea to Ottoman lands. He also states that during the 19th century, the Crimean Tatars were subjected to cultural genocide and Russification. Many Tatar-language names of Crimea neighbourhoods, villages, and cities were replaced with Russian names, attempting to portray Crimea as a Russified land (Allworth, 1998, p. 12). Morkva (2021, p. 388) interprets this as an effort to establish Russian dominance over the region. In 1928, the Arabic letters used for writing Crimean Tatar were replaced by Latin, then Cyrillic letters in 1938. Over half of the 23 years of Crimean Tatar broadcasting outlets were closed in this process (Fisher, 1978, p. 148).

Crimean Tatars constituted 90% of the population in the Crimean Peninsula during the Russian-Ottoman wars (Kullberg, 2004, p. 18). However, starting in 1783, Crimea's Slavization began as Russians settled in the region. The change in demography resulted in a decrease in the Tatar population's percentage. Tatars constituted the majority of the population in Crimea, but by 1936, only 23% of the people had Tatar ancestry in 1856 (Kirimli, 2008, p. 767).

1944 is one of the most important dates for the Crimean Tatars. During Stalin's genocidal drive, hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars were expelled from the peninsula within a few days, and they were not allowed to return for decades. With the 1944 deportation, 46% of the Crimean Tatar population died in the early years of exile (Williams, 1998, p. 300). The estimated number of deaths is around 100 thousand (Aydın, 2021, p. 69). From 1967 to 1978, only 15,000 Crimean Tatars, which

accounted for just 2% of the Crimean Tatar population, could officially come back to Crimea (Alekseeva, 1985, p. 150).



The Post-Soviet Era Limbo

During Khrushchev's rule, Crimea was granted as an autonomous republic within the Ukrainian SSR. However, due to the bureaucratic deadlock, this decision never took effect. Since then, Ukraine and the Russian Federation have had ongoing conflicts regarding policies that protect Russians living in Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine. Strategic control over Crimean ports remains particularly important for Russia from a military standpoint. Ukraine responded by balancing the Russia threat via more engagement with the US and EU countries (Bilener, 2004, p. 317).

Based on the State Statistics Committee of Ukraine's 2001 census, the total population of the Crimean Peninsula was 2,024,000 people. Within this total, 58.3% were ethnic Russians, 24.3% were Ukrainians, and approximately 243,000 people identified as Crimean Tatars, i.e., 12% [1].

The Christian Orthodox Church is the predominant religion in Ukraine. The church itself has become divided with loyalties split between Moscow and Kyiv. The Muslim community's ratio to Ukraine's general population is about 1%, and of the 436,000 Muslims, about 56% are Crimean Tatars, and 17% are Volga Tatars (Kemper, 2019, p. 159).

Crimean Tatar culture is different from both Ukrainian and Russian cultures. However, it is closer to Turkish culture, along with the language. These language and cultural differences also extend to religious beliefs. While most Crime-

an Tatars are Muslim, Ukrainians and Russian minorities living on the peninsula are Orthodox Christians. In such an environment, granting rights to minorities is a challenge for post-Soviet Ukraine because such rights can also legitimise larger minorities living in other conflict-ridden regions of the country, potentially harming the national interests of a nascent country.

The Soviet Union's policy of disregarding religious beliefs applied to Islam. Muslim communities residing within the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev era were frequently subjected to anti-religious campaigns (Zuiev as cited in Brylov, 2018, p. 40). The situation was no different in the Ukrainian SSR. The only way to pass on their traditions to future generations was to inconspicuously practise their religion within small local communities. This was also the case for the Crimean Tatars: the Volga Tatars and the Tatars exiled to Central Asia in 1944 (Bogomolov et al., 2006, p. 29).

Williams asserts that approximately 240 thousand Tatars returned to the Crimean peninsula by 1993 (Williams, 1998, p. 311). During the Crimean Tatars' return to their ancestral land after many years of exile, they faced a challenging situation because the Ukrainian administration had to struggle with economic, political, and legal issues as well as in Crimea. Meeting the needs of the Crimean Tatars was only possible with a good economy, but problems in the budget

became more frequent in Ukraine. This situation led to a delay in resolving their problems.

Unemployment and job scarcity were among the main economic issues faced by the returning Tatars. Compounding their challenges was that the areas where they were resettled were far from the coast, where tourism could generate income, and the crops of the lands given to them were low. Upon their return, the Crimean Tatars' most pressing problems were land and property. Before their exile, many resided in coastal cities with high economic value due to tourism, but upon their return, these lands were in the hands of others. Although the Crimean Tatars had inhabited approximately 70% of the coastal lands before their exile, even after 17 years of returning, they only owned 1.5% of these lands (UNPO, 2007).

They received negative responses from local authorities when they attempted to reclaim their lands and houses, which were previously owned by them but were now allocated to ethnic Russians and Ukrainians (İzmirli, 2008, p. 228). According to a report by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) on the property rights of the Crimean Tatars, they faced three major issues.

First, local authorities were unwilling to return to the coastal areas suitable for tourism activities and with high economic value. As a result, the Crimean Tatars had to settle in urban and undeveloped areas close to Aqmescit and Bakhchysarai.

Second, the zoning law passed in 2001 aimed to solve some problems in land ownership. It allowed for the free allocation of land for housing. However, this law further complicated the situation of the Crimean Tatars because local governments were entrusted with the authority to grant zoning permits. The local government's decision

raised questions in mind as they were neither fair nor transparent. The Tatars had problems finding an appropriate and satisfactory response to their demands.

Third, the Crimean Tatars were disadvantaged in the post-Soviet privatisation drive. The privatisation of state and collective farms started before the Tatars returned, and it stopped them from benefiting enough. Later, although the Ukrainian government granted the right to share up to 2 hectares of land with the Crimean Tatars, almost three-quarters were allocated to lands with low fertility. Williams (2002, p. 368) notes that these lands lack infrastructure and are physically hard to reach. According to Wilson's findings, merely a quarter of the Tatar community resided in habitable regions before 2014.

Aside from their land problems, the Crimean Tatars have faced political issues for many years. These problems arose when Ukraine attempted to classify the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, the Crimean Tatar national assembly, as an NGO rather than a minority self-governance institution. However, the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People disagreed with this classification as it comprises elected representatives of the Crimean Tatars and cannot be simply categorised as an NGO (Shevel, 2001, p. 114).

Tatars who resettled in the Crimean Peninsula after 1989 have faced numerous economic, social, and political problems that have remained unresolved for many years. The inability of the returning Tatars to regain the properties they owned before 1944 and their exclusion from settling in the coastal areas with high tourism potential are among the economic challenges they have faced. However, social problems have been somewhat alleviated, with the freedom to speak their language, establish schools, and practise their religion.

Struggle and Persecution Amidst Annexation and War

The oppression and persecution, which started in the late 18th century, reached its highest point during the era of Stalin. The Crimean Tatars, who had longed for their homeland for decades, took a stance against the re-occupation of Crimea by the Russians in 2014. According to a public statement^[2] made by Putin in 2014, around 290-300 thousand Tatars live on the peninsula. *"We do not want Ukraine to be divided. We do not need it. As for Crimea, it*

was Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean Tatar and will remain so," Putin said, adding that most Crimean residents participated in the referendum. In contrast to Putin, the chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, Refat Chubarov, points out that the vast majority of Tatars protested the referendum, except for around a thousand, which represents less than 0.4% (Qırım Haber Ajansı, 2014).



(Bülent Doruk - Anadolu Agency)

Russia's annexation of Crimea caused uncertainty among the Crimean Tatars due to subsequent negative developments. Moreover, the 2022 war opened a new phase of pressure. Thousands of Crimean Tatars are fleeing from Russian mobilisation and continuing to leave their lands to seek refuge in Türkiye in order not to be involved in the war and to avoid being sent to fight on behalf of the Russian army (Çurku, 2022). After more than 30 years of rebuilding their lives under the administration of Ukraine, those who returned to their homeland were forced to leave their lands and migrate once again. The partial mobilisation declaration in September 2022 included conscripted Tatars who refused to fight against Ukraine. As a result of the massacres that occurred after 2014, Muslim Tatars living in Crimea were forced to become Russian citizens. This fact, along with the migration of Russians fleeing mobilisation and war, has led to the emergence of a Crimea free of Tatars, reminiscent of the post-1944 situation. The demographic re-engineering of the region is also a significant issue (Incekaya, 2019). According to reports, the partial mobilisation decision in Russia did not include those living in St. Petersburg but those residing in minority areas (Latypova, 2022; Mackinnon, 2022).

The forced conscription of Turkic-speaking communities to the fronts will bring about demographic changes that may harm minority groups, including the Crimean Tatars. Nearly 90% of 5,000 draftees in Crimea have targeted the Tatar population, constituting only 13% of the region's population (Yaroshenko, 2022).

Russia's annexation of Crimea provoked significant implications, especially for those Tatars subjected to Soviet-era persecution, making them even more vulnerable. The uncertainty regarding their future remained evident, as demonstrated by Moscow's early decision to ban the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, which had granted female voting rights in 1918 and provided these people with a legitimate voice in post-Soviet times.

Almost without firing a single bullet, Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula. This fact prevented bloodshed in the peninsula. However, in the post-invasion process, the oppression of Tatars occurred, and those who opposed Russia silenced them and banned their political representatives. Russian authorities force Crimean Tatars to obtain Russian passports, denying them access to basic rights such as free healthcare and a driving licence and subjecting them to potential arrest for up to 15 days (Bal, 2023; Greene, 2014; Lozovenko, 2023). The ATR channel, which has been broadcasting in Crimea since 2006 and opposes the annexation of Crimea and whose audience is Crimean Tatars, was shut down by Russia in 2015 (Gorbunova, 2015). An entry ban to Crimea was imposed on Mustafa Kırımoglu, who was accepted as the leader of the Crimean Tatars and rejected the Russian annexation (Çakmak, 2021).

The Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 demonstrated the consequences of having a Russian passport. Russia issued military mobilisation orders and called upon Russian citizens to fight against Ukraine. Among these Russian passport holders were Crimean Tatars who recognised Crimea as part of Ukraine but were compelled to obtain a Russian passport.

Power Dynamics and Human Rights

Reports from organisations such as Amnesty International (2016) and Human Rights Watch (2017) relate the existence of an atmosphere of fear surrounding the Crimean Tatars who stand against the annexation. Coercive methods such as intimidation, house searches, arrest, imprisonment, entry ban, and abduction are commonly used. As of 2017, it is stated that the number of casualties has reached 100, while 15 were kidnapped, nearly 300 were tortured, and nearly 350 were subjected to political pressure (Gorbunova, 2017). Russian authorities transferred more than 200 Crimean Tatar prisoners from the peninsula to Russian territory for trial in Russian courts (Mokrushin, 2020). It has become a necessity for Crimean Tatars to obtain Russian passports to survive in Crimea because they are excluded from many social rights without a passport (Morkva, 2021, p. 387). An unfortunate reality faced by residents hailing from Crimea is the imposition of citizenship under Russia's jurisdiction without their consent or willingness (Sedova, 2017).

This situation particularly disadvantages Crimean Tatars as those who have yet to obtain a new passport find themselves severely limited in their job prospects, while employers also face potential legal sanctions for hiring individuals not holding valid documents. Furthermore, access to free healthcare is explicitly restricted only to those established as official citizens within Russia's system; anyone lacking this status has been deemed an immigrant and can be deported if caught working or living illegally unless granted asylum elsewhere.

The question of who holds the dominant power in the Crimean Peninsula is of great importance for the Tatars' future. Refat Chubarov, the President of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, asserts that the Crimean Tatars have no future under Russian control and advocates for Ukraine to regain control of the Crimean Peninsula (TRT-Avaz, 2022). Chubarov claims that since 2014, many Crimean Tatars have been abducted and killed by Russian soldiers, and the pressure on Tatars who choose to remain in Crimea and stay at home has been increasing daily since February 24.

According to the OSCE's report, 80% of the 3 thousand people who left Crimea during the first 35 days of the war were Crimean Tatars. The report highlights that the Crimean Tatars have lost their lands and faced security concerns. The report points out that the government formed around the "self-defence" unit engages in illegal activities such as identity checks, resulting in a deteriorating human rights situation.

The UN refugee agency (2014) said on May 20, 2014, that around 10 thousand Ukrainian citizens, including numerous ethnic Crimean Tatars, have relocated from Crimea, the eastern regions of Ukraine, to western Ukrainian cities with a lower level of conflict. According to a report by KirmSOS NGO in 2022, it is indicated that the number of people enlisted was 5,000, with 90% of them being Crimean Tatars (Yaroshenko, 2022).

During the period leading up to the end of 2022, Russia attempted to attract some Crimean Tatars to its cause. The parliament representing the Crimean Tatars was abolished, and administrators and 33 political figures were banned from entering Crimea after Russia's Crimea Supreme Court decided to recognise the actions of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People as extremist (Human Rights Watch, 2016). However, a pro-Russian Crimean Tatar named Ruslan Balbek was elected as a Duma deputy for 2016-2021. In Crimea, a pro-Russian formation called the "Crimean Movement" emerged, and politicians supporting this movement gained political advantages within Russia.

The efforts of decision-makers to increase hostility towards the Crimean Tatars are examples of the Kremlin's policy of historical and cultural cleansing towards the Crimean Tatars (CHRG, 2019).



(Crimean News Agency - Anadolu Agency)

Geopolitical Interests and Perspectives on Crimean Tatars

The issue of Crimea has numerous international ramifications. First, Ukraine has rightful claims to the region and does everything it can to assert its legal ownership over the territory. Then, Russia, which has annexed the region de facto, is trying to make a case for the ownership of this territory. As part of the historical and cultural links with the indigenous population, Türkiye has concerns about the fate of this part of the world. On the other hand, the prevailing opinion among Russians is that Crimea experienced socio-economic and cultural development only after it came under Russian rule, leading to improved living conditions for Tatars in Crimea.

The political, economic, and cultural problems of the Crimean Tatars, who are Muslims, have Turkic roots and represent the peninsula's indigenous people, concern Türkiye. One of the most sensitive aspects of Türkiye's balancing act in the Ukraine-Russia war is the defence of Crimean Tatars' rights in Crimea. Turkish leaders regularly defend Ukraine's territorial integrity and political unity and consider Crimea part of Ukraine. President Erdoğan stated that he does not recognise the annexation of Crimea by Russia. He referred to the relationship between Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars and said, "We know the importance Ukraine attaches to the Tatars with proven loyalty to their country" (Kerem & Düzgün, 2017). The Turkish leadership

endeavours to achieve peace in the region. If peace is reached, the Ukrainian government will continue the political, social, and humanitarian support they provided to the Crimean Tatars before the war.

Gayana Yuksel, Head of the Media of Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, says[3] that Ukrainians from Ukraine and Tatars from Crimea came to Türkiye due to the war and the efforts of the Turkish state and the Crimean Tatar diaspora to settle in Türkiye and solve the problems experienced in terms of accommodation and healthcare. Meanwhile, many Tatar activists believe that Russia's objective is to transform the Crimean Tatars into an ineffectual minority in their homeland, thereby continuing the colonial practices of the Russian empire.

Mustafa Kırmoğlu, the current leader of the Crimean Tatars, revealed that he had a phone conversation with Vladimir Putin a few days before the annexation (TRT-Haber, 2014). Putin attempted to convey to him the 23 years of Ukraine's unsuccessful policies in solving the social and political problems of the Crimean Tatars. He also offered Kırmoğlu the possibility that all those problems could be solved under Russia's rule through annexation. Furthermore, he advised the Crimean Tatars against engaging in armed resistance against the Russian military in a warning tone rather than a friendly one.

From Russia's perspective on the lands it occupied, including Crimea and the recent 2022 Ukrainian War, it can be said that if the region was under Russian domination in the past and the people living there speak Russian, Russia sees that region as part of its own. In an article titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", written by Putin in July 2021, the Russian President argues that Ukrainians and Russians are essentially the same nation. This serves as a justification for the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and other regions within Ukraine in 2022.[4]

Vladimir Putin criticised Ukraine for not making much effort to give Crimean Tatar comfort in the last 20 years (Kremlin, 2014). On April 21, 2014, he announced a new law establishing a "normal life" for oppressed peoples through cultural and political rehabilitation (Korotaev, 2014). He also later emphasised that after the annexation of Crimea, the Tatar language joined the official languages of the peninsula apart from Russian and Ukrainian and historical



Leader of Crimean Tatar People and the Member of the Ukrainian Parliament Mustafa Abduldzhemil Dzhemilev Kırımoglu.
(Doğukan Keskinliç- Anadolu Agency)



(TUR Presidency/Murat Çetinmühürdar - Anadolu Agency)

places must be restored to keep the Tatar culture alive, like the Khansarai building in Bakhchisarai (Ivanevich, 2018).

The participation of the Crimean Tatars in the 2014 referendum, according to the news by Vadim Nikiforov in the Russian newspaper Kommersant, was particularly low. The stance of the Crimean Tatars regarding their allegiance has been called into question by a Russian official. The development of mosques as well as other infrastructure improvements and educational opportunities, have not produced an uptick in their voting patterns: they have voted at low levels instead. Despite attempts by Russia's leadership to portray themselves as supportive of this population group, it appears those efforts were unsuccessful; it seems unjust treatment by authorities has left many wary of collaboration.

Ukrainian governance provided Crimean Tatars with democratic rights, such as the right to protest; however, other problems were not fully resolved. There were minor improvements in land ownership, work rights, language, and education-related issues until 2014. However, a fair solution to the land and resettlement problems was still ongoing, and the legal status of the Crimean Tatars had not been clarified for many years. Although the Ukrainian government provided some opportunities to represent the Crimean Tatars in administrative structures, the Ukrainian parliament recognised them as indigenous people only in 2021, seven years after the annexation referendum.

Looking closer at Ukraine's linguistic and population permutations reveals some intriguing patterns: specifically, those who use Ukrainian frequently inhabit predominantly western areas, while individuals self-identifying as Russian tend to be densely populated throughout territory lying further east.

Until 2022 arrived, Ukraine was stuck in a dilemma over which foreign policy path it should pursue - either one that favoured closer ties with Europe through its relationship

with the European Union and NATO or one that edged closer towards Russia. This decision was greatly exacerbated by cultural divides related to ethnicity and political divergence concerning Western versus pro-Russian viewpoints within the country.

These factors contributed significantly to Russia's military intervention in Ukraine under its alleged "special" operation banner - an action that essentially initiated today's long-running war between Ukraine and its neighbour. The development of nation-building and national identity in Ukraine was delayed due to the heterogeneous groupings in the country, which affected domestic politics. Kuzio (2001, p. 348) states that the language of 'us' used by Ukrainian leaders while trying to create a common identity also polarises those who do not belong to their group as 'others'. Therefore, integration problems were experienced, and separatists became radicalised.

Since around 2014, when large numbers began relocating to cities deemed less hazardous for living purposes - notably impacting regional demographics - we've seen even greater visibility around these groups' respective demographics across certain parts of Ukraine's eastward regions.

The referendum concerning Crimean status on March 16, 2014, has been declared invalid by both Ukraine and global society due to its inconsistency with Ukrainian and Crimean constitutions despite the unaccepted results. Ukraine has a vital land connection to Crimea in terms of electricity, water, and gas supply, and the annexation of Crimea caused shortage problems for those living on the peninsula and made them more isolated. Russia built a bridge connection on Kerch Strait to minimise those negative effects. Although the Crimean administration announced that Russia was ready to provide these needs, it took time to accomplish them.

Conclusion

The Crimean Peninsula maintains its historical importance even today, and the Crimean Tatars, the natives of this peninsula, continue to struggle for their existence. The pressures that began with the Slavization of the region in 1774 turned into a tragic situation with the exile of all Tatars living in Crimea in 1944. The Tatars, condemned to live away from their homes and lands for years, could return to Crimea only after Ukraine gained independence and the Soviets dissolved. However, upon their return, they faced various problems, such as housing, land sharing, and unemployment. Although some progress was made in addressing these issues from 1991 to 2014, they persisted at an unsatisfactory pace.

Before 2014, Mustafa Kırımoğlu refers to the post-annexation period, stating that at least they could stage protests in a democratic environment and advocate for their rights through democratic means under the pre-annexation Ukrainian administration. While these problems were slowly dealt with before 2014, Russia occupied Crimea through annexation. The Crimean Tatars did not participate in the invasion referendum and favoured the Ukrainian administration. The Russian administration obliged the Tatars to obtain Russian passports to access rights such as health and transportation necessary for survival. During the Russian-Ukrainian war, many Tatars were forced to take Russian passports, were called to military service and dispatched to the frontlines against Ukraine. Those Tatar men who did not want to fight against Ukraine either fled to safe countries like Türkiye or refused to serve in the military, accepting prison sentences of up to three years. Some Tatars describe this situation as the second exile.

For geopolitical reasons, Russia gives the utmost importance to Crimea. For nearly three centuries, its interest in the region has resulted in its control over strategically important Crimea and its ports. Over the years, the settlement of Slavs in the region has altered the peninsula's population balance. Russia claimed the peninsula's occupation in 2014, stating that the decision to give Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR was a mistake. As of 2023, the peninsula remains under Russian administration. The Crimean Tatars, who refuse to cooperate with the Russians, strive to survive under pressure. Their support for the Maidan demonstrations, opposition to Russia's policies, and defence of Ukraine's integrity has led to negative prejudice against them, especially from Russians who supported the occupation. This prejudice, which harks back to the Soviet times, has resurfaced and become even stronger.

Concerning Türkiye, due to its historical bonds with Crimean Tatars, Turkish politicians recognise the Russian occupation as illegal and Crimea as Ukraine's territory. As a result, Türkiye supports the Crimean Tatars diplomatically and morally.

In sum, the Russia-Ukraine war is centred on Crimea. By 2022, Russia had occupied four oblasts of Ukraine and advanced towards the capital, Kyiv. However, Ukraine has been preparing for an all-out confrontation with Russia since then. Kyiv has mobilised its people and resources to resist the Russian onslaught. This resistance led the Russians to retreat from Kyiv and subsequently withdraw from Kherson. For Ukraine, which plans to drive the Russians out of its borders through counter-offensives, Crimea remains a land within its borders. The Crimean Tatars, who believe that Crimea is Ukrainian territory, maintain their importance for Ukraine, which, in turn, recognises them as Crimea's indigenous people.

[1] For details: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/>

[2] Read more: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

[3] Read more: <https://www.kirimdernegi.org.tr/haberler/1548-ktmm-medya-baskani-gayana-yuksel-in-basin-aciklamasi>

[4] <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

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