

# Diaspora's War and Peace: Crimean Tatar Anti-Colonial Struggle against Russia During the Russian-Ukrainian War



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the role the Crimean Tatar diaspora and forced migrants play in the Russian-Ukrainian War starting from the occupation of Crimea in 2014 up to the present. The Crimean Tatars experienced complete de-territorialization in 1944, and transnationalism became a significant characteristic of their nation, despite some individuals returning to their homeland. We consider all four communities of Crimean Tatars as transnational and focus on the following groups: the 'diaspora,' predominantly originating in the 19th century and mainly residing in Turkey, Romania, and the United States; the community that repatriated to their homeland in the 1990s, facing Russian oppression in Crimea after 2014; the community displaced to mainland Ukraine after 2014 and the forced migrants in Turkey since 2014. In this article, we aim to address the following questions: How did the diaspora and forced migrants attempt to influence the conflict, particularly concerning Crimea? Can we comprehend their role as peacemakers or peacebreakers? We propose moving beyond the peacemaker/peacebreaker dichotomy and understanding the actions of the Crimean Tatar diaspora and forced migrants from the perspective of positive peace, focusing on decolonization and transitional justice. Our research is based on the case study of the Crimean Tatar transnational communities since the Russian occupation of Crimea until today, utilizing interviews with Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians, participant observation at two different time points, and content analysis of relevant documents and media.

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The diasporization of the Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of Crimea, began with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 1783. The remaining Crimean Tatars, residing in the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Crimean ASSR) were deported by Stalin to Central Asia and Siberia, becoming a fully diasporic people. The exiled Crimean Tatars re-settled in their homeland in the 1990s. However, following the occupation of Crimea in 2014, 30,000 had to flee to mainland Ukraine and other places. The Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 further intensified the tragic situation of the Crimean Tatars, as they found themselves embroiled in the conflict on both the Ukrainian and Russian sides. Many have fought in the Ukrainian army or were forcibly conscripted to the Russian army, while others sought refuge in Turkey, Europe, and North America to escape war in Ukraine or forced conscription in Crimea.

Before the occupation of Crimea, Crimean Tatars demanded indigenous status from Ukraine, while Ukraine withheld this right in order to appease the vocal ethnic Russian elites in the Crimean Peninsula, who intermittently threatened to separate from Ukraine. With Russia's occupation of Crimea, the previous conflict triangle among the Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, and ethnic Russians in Crimea, backed by Moscow politicians, underwent a transformation in the following manner: The previously mild conflict between Russia and Ukraine over the status of the Black Sea Fleet and Russian interference escalated into a bloody war. At the same time, Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians resolved their own conflicts as Ukraine began to accommodate Crimean Tatar demands for indigenous rights. The conflict between the Crimean Tatars and Russia in the pre-2014 era stemmed from the Russian denial of transitional justice to the Crimean Tatars. Presently, Russia has occupied their homeland and continues to oppress the Crimean Tatars there.

The ongoing debate on whether diasporas serve as peacemakers or peacebreakers or whether migrants fleeing war exacerbate conflicts (Baser 2015; Baser & Toivanen 2020) necessitates a connection between migration studies and conflict studies. Diasporas and forced migrants uphold their homeland-related identities, leading to their intervention in homeland politics and even engaging in state-building from afar. The relevance of the Crimean Tatars' case in this discussion is significant, as they are engaging in peacemaking with Ukraine, whom they had previously opposed for not recognizing their indigenous rights, while simultaneously exacerbating the conflict with Russia. In this article, we aim to address the following questions: (i) How do the Crimean Tatar diaspora and forced migrants attempt to influence the present war, especially with regard to Crimea? (ii) How can we comprehend their dual role as peacemakers and peacebreakers?

Moving beyond the peacemaker–peacebreaker dichotomy, we argue that the role of the Crimean Tatar diaspora in the conflict should be evaluated from a perspective of positive peace, which goes beyond merely ceasing direct violence and focuses on preventing structural violence such as imperialism (Galtung 1981). The diaspora demands a process that involves de-occupation, decolonization, and transitional justice in post-Soviet Crimea and Ukraine. This anti-colonial struggle involves not only Crimean Tatar soldiers fighting a war against Russia or refusing to be mobilized into the Russian army, but also the deployment of diaspora nationalism, which aims to realize their nationalist aspirations in alignment with Ukrainian territorial integrity. The diaspora has developed various institutions of transnational advocacy networks,

not only within the diaspora and migrant communities but also with different states and non-state actors in international politics.

Our research focuses on the case study of the Crimean Tatar ‘old’ and ‘new’ diasporas, the latter including both post-WWII deportees who repatriated in the 1990s and post-2014 and post-2022 forced migrants with respect to their homeland-centered transnational politics. Although these communities do not exhaust all Crimean Tatars in the world, these are the most politically active ones presently. Our transnational approach aims to map out their cross-border relations with each other and various relevant state and non-state actors. The research draws upon interview and participant observation data gathered during fieldwork conducted in Kyiv and Turkey in February 2017 fieldwork, as well as the fieldwork conducted in Turkey in April 2023. We conducted interviews with 20 Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian civil society leaders, intellectuals, and politicians in Ukraine in 2017 focusing on Ukrainian-Crimean Tatar-Russian relations offline. In 2023, we interviewed 25 Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian diaspora leaders and migrants in Turkey, exploring immigration and changing Ukrainian-Crimean Tatar-Russian relations offline and online. It is worth noting that, while we did not interview any Crimean Tatar migrants in Europe, their situation was mentioned by migrants when discussing their networks in Europe. The interviews addressed various topics, including the impact of the annexation of Crimea and the 2022 war on the diaspora and migrants, the conditions and demands of the Crimean Tatar diaspora and different groups of forced migrants, Ukrainian and Turkish policies toward the Crimean Tatar issue and the displacement, as well as the situation and claims of Crimean Tatars under Russian occupation. Due to security risks for their personal or family safety, we were unable to directly interview Crimean Tatars in Crimea. However, we have close contact with many of them through social media and conducted interviews with recent emigrants from Crimea in Turkey while ensuring the protection of their identities. Additionally, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of documentary sources and media.

In the next section of the article, we provide an overview of the four periods of Russian colonization and the emergence of Crimean Tatar homeland-based and diasporic national movements. We then outline the formation of political exiles and internally displaced person (IDP) communities in mainland Ukraine since 2014, as well as forced migrants from mainland Ukraine and occupied Crimea who have sought refuge in Turkey since 2014 and 2022. In our theoretical discussion, we integrate diaspora and migration studies with conflict studies and present our theoretical framework, drawing on this theoretical framework, we examine major ways the Crimean Tatar old and new diasporas engage in an anti-colonial struggle, including conflict resolution and alliance with Ukraine, transnational advocacy of diasporas, and long-distance nationalism of forced migrants.

## **HISTORY OF CRIMEAN TATARS AND THE COLONIZATION OF CRIMEA**

This article outlines four distinct periods of colonization in Crimea: Tsarist, Soviet, the period of 1991 to 2014, and post-2014. Unlike other cases of colonialism, Russian/Soviet colonialism has received less research attention. Therefore, the discussion about the types of Russian colonialism in Crimea and other places is still new and inconclusive. Various scholars have characterized Tsarist and Soviet expansion as ‘classical colonialism’ due to the exploitation of local resources in the interests

of the colonial metropole or 'settler colonialism' due to military occupation, new settlements, and continuing subordination (Everett-Heath 2003; Michaels 2003; Pohl 2015). Others have depicted the Soviet state as a case of 'internal colonialism' due to more pervasive economic integration than in the Tsarist era (Loring 2014: 80). It can be argued that settler colonialism persisted between 1991 and 2014, as the dominant position of settler communities over the indigenous people of Crimea remained unchanged. The post-2014 occupation of Crimea was characterized as 'colonialism' in general (Charron 2020) or a new phase of 'settler colonialism' (Sviezhentsev & Kisly 2023). In the following sections, we will examine these four periods of colonial rule in Crimea and the responses of the Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of Crimea, to different types of colonialism.

Crimea was originally populated with its indigenous people, the Crimean Tatars, before the Russian annexation in 1783 (Fisher 1978). The Crimean Khanate, which governed the peninsula, played a central role in consolidating various indigenous ethnic identities into a Turkic and Sunni Muslim culture, and the Crimean Tatars emerged as an ethnic community, distinct from other Tatar communities in Russia. With the Russian annexation of Crimea in 1783 and the subsequent colonization of the peninsula and Desht-i Kipchak (southern Ukraine today), a large number of Crimean Tatars from the northern and eastern parts of the peninsula migrated to the Ottoman territories. It is estimated that only one-third of Crimean Tatars residing in the coastal and central mountainous regions of Crimea remained (Fisher 1978; Williams 2001). Further waves of immigration in the 19th century resulted in the formation of Crimean Tatar diaspora communities in present-day Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, with the largest diaspora population estimated as a few million residing in Turkey. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Crimean Tatars formed a long-distance nationalist movement.

Following the departure of the majority of the Crimean Tatars, Christian colonizers from the Balkans or Russia were invited to Crimea. Not only Russian political leaders but also major Russian literary talents contributed to the Russification of Crimea in their works, through the 'fetishisation' of Crimea which was seen as an 'empty' Russian riviera in 19th-century literature (Finnin 2022). İsmail Bey Gasprinskiy, the prominent Crimean Tatar leader in Bağçasaray (Bakhchisarai), campaigned against the emigration of Crimean Tatars from their homeland and laid the groundwork for the emerging national awakening at the beginning of the 20th century. By 1917, the 'Crimean Tatar' identity distinct from Muslim or pan-Turkist identities, began to take shape, and the Crimean Peninsula came to be seen as a *patrie*. The process toward the declaration of the Crimean Tatar Republic marked the first instance of the Crimean Tatars utilizing their 'mobility capital' and organizing their national movement transnationally (Kırımlı 1996). The term 'mobility capital' refers to the knowledge inherited from one's homeland as well as information about specific destinations, access to those destinations, and the skills needed to navigate a particular society. It encompasses the benefits, resources, rights, and capacities acquired during stays in these places (Cairns 2022; Moret 2018: 213). The destruction of the Crimean People's Republic and the killing of national cadres by the Bolsheviks initiated a new era of colonialism for Crimean Tatars as well as for the rest of the non-Russian peoples (Bennigsen 1969; Loring 2014). Although the Soviet version of colonialism was complex and included a transitional period of tolerance and affirmative action toward national identities and institutions (Martin 2001), eventually all 'nationalities' suffered under collectivization, dekulakization, the Great Terror, man-made famines, and Soviet military strategy during WWII that led to devastating human loss (Sunny 2010).

The most defining event in the history of Crimean Tatars was the deportation of the entire population from Crimea on May 18, 1944, to Central Asia and Siberia. This deportation was a deliberate act of genocide planned by the Soviet authorities, resulting in the deaths of 40% of the population either directly at the hands of the Soviet soldiers or due to the harsh conditions during the transfer and settlement process (Vozgrin 2013). Alongside the actual ethnic cleansing, a process of 'discursive cleansing' (Finnin 2022) took place. Crimean Tatar toponyms, monuments, and traces were erased from Crimea, and any mention of the Crimean Tatars was removed from Soviet books and encyclopedias. The slander that the Crimean Tatars collaborated with the Nazis was perpetuated by the state. Crimea was subsequently recolonized by a new wave of Slavic emigrants from various parts of the Soviet Union. In 1954, Crimea was administratively connected to the Ukrainian SSR, which faced the challenging task of economically redeveloping the region devastated after the expulsion of its indigenous people (Fisher 1978). The deportation event completely de-territorialized the Crimean Tatar nation. This historical event had a profound effect on the old diaspora in Turkey and World War II refugees in the United States, who saw it as a tragedy even greater than their own.

Against all odds, the exiled Crimean Tatars continued to demand their collective return to Crimea to return to their homeland in the early 1990s. Moreover, they asserted their sovereignty based on historical precedents of the Crimean People's Republic (1917) and Crimean ASSR (1920–1944). This political event led the leaders of the Slavic majority, who still held onto their Soviet identity to plot the separation from Ukraine and reunification with Russia. However, Crimean separatism did not evolve into a social movement with widespread support and was soon hindered by the regional autonomy granted to Crimea by Ukraine. Ukrainian politicians, including leaders of the Orange Revolution did not officially recognize Qurultay and Meclis, the Crimean Tatar Congress, and Parliament as indigenous representative organ until 2014 (Malyarenko & Garlbraithe 2014).

Around 1993, the Crimean Tatars began to reinterpret their status as 'indigenous people,' aligning it with the emerging field of international law (Belitser 2002). Recognition as indigenous people would grant them the right to self-determination within the territorial integrity of Ukraine and ensure the conditions for their survival as a distinct nation. They called for transitional justice and made several demands, including the repatriation of all remaining Crimean Tatars in Central Asia who wish to return, land compensation for their losses and stolen property, symbolic redress for the genocide, restitution of their former sociopolitical position by ending human rights violations, racism, and discrimination against them, recognition of Qurultay/Meclis, the Crimean Tatar National Congress and Assembly, and political representation in Crimean and Ukrainian political bodies. These demands clashed with the existing political power of the Russian elite in the peninsula, who still adhered to the Soviet narrative regarding the Crimean Tatars (Uehling 2013). The Ukrainian central authorities feared that giving in to their demands could fuel Russian separatism on the peninsula (Malyarenko & Galbreath 2013). Prior to the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia, the triangular conflict between ethnic Russians, the Ukrainian state, and the Crimean Tatars was largely nonviolent (Izmirlı 2011; Wilson 2013).

The Euro-Maidan Revolution (2013–2014) and the subsequent Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea transformed the status of Crimea. The occupation of Crimea constituted colonization as it involved the settlement of Moscow's army and hundreds of thousands of new settlers from Russia in Crimea (Charron 2020; Mokrushin 2020).

It instituted a system of settler colonialism through racism, cultural assimilation, and 'systematic oppression of indigenous people' (Sviezhentsev & Kisly 2023: 234). Additionally, Crimean resources were appropriated for the military and foreign policy interests of the metropole, disregarding the economic, environmental, cultural, or touristic value or interests of the peninsula. This colonial regime also imposed an oppressive neo-Stalinist ideology (Biersack & O'Lear 2014; Coynash & Charron 2019).

These policies led to 'hybrid deportation' (intimidating people to leave, Uehling 2017), infrastructural collapse due to the influx of new settlers, water scarcity, droughts, and environmental degradation of land, water resources, and the sea (Babin, Chevaliuk & Plotnikov 2021). Despite this renewed attempt at colonization on top of the earlier one, the Crimean Tatars have not abandoned their homeland, which they returned to after a long struggle, with the exception of 30,000 people who were political exiles or connected to religious organizations or Ukrainian state bodies and feared persecution. Consequently, the survival of the Crimean Tatar community came under serious risk.

After 2014, the Crimean Tatar forced migrants (IDPs) mainly settled in Kyiv, Lviv, Vinnytsia, and Kharkiv (Relief Web 2014; UNHCR Ukraine 2021). Along with earlier communities who settled in Genichesk, Kherson, Chernivtsi, and Zaporizhzhia in the 1970s (OSCE in Europe 2016: 22–24),<sup>1</sup> they formed an active diaspora community that advocated for the liberation of their homeland and indigenous rights in Ukraine. Some Crimean Tatars also settled in Poland and Turkey in subsequent waves in 2014 (from Crimea) and 2022 (from mainland Ukraine and Crimea). In the recent period, many have transited to European and North American countries. Table 1 shows the complex phenomenon of Crimean Tatar migrations.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### THE ETHNOPOLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF DIASPORAS AND FORCED MIGRANTS

With globalization, particularly advancements in transportation and communication technologies, migration has undergone a transformation. Assimilation and integration of migrants have slowed down as migrants maintain transnational connections to their homeland and other migrant communities in different geographical locations. Some forced migrants or descendants of forced migrants have also reinvigorated their ethnic identities, engaged in long-distance nationalist projects, and increasingly identified themselves as diasporas. Consequently, the diaspora has emerged as a powerful concept that signifies the ethnopolitical mobilization of old and new migrant communities (Cohen 2008; Faist 2010). The influence of ethnonational movements led by these migrants in conflicts and nation-building processes has become a significant area of research (Baser 2015; Koinova 2009b).

Ethnic and national identities are not primarily determined by factors such as birthplace, kinship ties, or mother tongue. Instead, they are constructed as a result of political projects, claims, and programs (Brubaker 2005) within structural

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s or 1970s, some Crimean Tatar families who attempted to settle in Crimea were deported by the authorities. Some of these early activists settled in the southern regions of Ukraine, close to Crimea, with the intention of eventually resettling Crimea.

| COUNTRIES OF SETTLEMENT             | POST-1783                                                     | 1944 (DEPORTATION AND WWII CIRCUMSTANCES) | 1989–2014                               | 2014–2022                           | POST-2022                                                           |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Turkey                              | Diaspora (estimated a few million)                            | Refugees (1944–1955)                      |                                         | Forced migrants                     | Forced migrants, transit migrants from Crimea to European countries |
| Romania                             | Diaspora (50 thousand)<br>Remigrations from Dobruca to Turkey |                                           |                                         |                                     | Transit migrants from Crimea to Turkey and other European countries |
| Bulgaria                            | Diaspora (7,000)                                              |                                           |                                         |                                     |                                                                     |
| Central Asia-mainly Uzbekistan      |                                                               | Deported community (200,000)              |                                         |                                     | Forced migrants, transit migrants from Crimea to Turkey and Europe  |
| USA                                 |                                                               | Refugees (1944–1960)                      | Labor and skilled immigrants            |                                     |                                                                     |
| Europe (mainly Poland, Germany, UK) |                                                               | Refugees                                  |                                         | Forced migrants, mainly from Poland | Forced migrants                                                     |
| Crimea, Ukraine                     |                                                               |                                           | Part of the deported community returned |                                     |                                                                     |
| Mainland Ukraine                    |                                                               |                                           |                                         | Forced migrants (IDPs)              |                                                                     |
| Canada                              |                                                               |                                           | Labor and skilled immigrants            | Forced migrants                     | Forced migrants                                                     |

contexts such as modernization, colonialism, or state-building processes. Unlike territorial communities that generally have state-like institutions facilitating their ethnonational identity-building, old and new migrants construct their ethnonational identities through political mobilization by migrant organizations and networks. It is possible, and indeed empirically observed that large numbers of migrants engage in hegemonic national projects within a cross-border framework or become involved in various nation- and state-building projects. The empirical literature provides numerous examples of diasporas challenging state sovereignty in domestic and international arenas (Shain & Barth 2003), being linked to *de facto* states (Carment & Calleja 2018), potentially reinforcing weak home-states, contesting the sovereignty of their homeland (Koinova 2009b), and influencing statehood dynamics in various ways (Koinova 2017). Periods of violence in their original homelands not only create refugee communities but also lead to the diasporization of former immigrants and refugees (Sökefeld 2006; van Hear 1998) or the radicalization of diasporas (Demmers 2007; Koinova 2009a). Brinkerhoff highlights that internal actors in the country of origin can also utilize ‘diasporans for a *boomerang* effect to voice, promote and engage what cannot be done within the borders of the homelands’ (Brinkerhoff 2011: 118).

**Table 1** Types and periods of Crimean Tatar Migration and Countries of Settlement.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>The table is built based on Williams (2001) and Aydın (2021a).

Diasporas play a significant role in conflict studies, acting as either peacebreakers or peacemakers. However, this dichotomy is based on assumptions about negative peace, which simply refers to the absence of violent conflict. To achieve lasting stability, the conflict resolution process must address issues of justice, whether by tackling structural injustice or implementing transitional justice programs. Wiebelhaus-Brahm (2016) argues that diasporas can have a positive influence on peacemaking through human rights advocacy, contributions to transitional justice, and raising awareness among the host public and decision-makers. According to Demir, the diaspora might play a special role as a decolonizing agent. She explains that the diaspora seeks to undo unequal and hierarchical relationships entrenched in the empire (Demir 2022: 4).

Tlostanova criticizes the ‘Soviet empire,’ which attempts ‘methodological elimination of all alternative thinking and being’ (Tlostanova 2012: 135). Similarly, Putin’s declaration of Crimea as Russian disregards centuries of emigrations, immigrations, deportations, and genocide that have shaped Crimean history under imperial rule. The Crimean Tatar diaspora identity is a response to this kind of silencing, which denies their rightful place in history.

While Demir (2022) argues that the diaspora can play a decolonizing role, she does not view nationalist diasporans as decolonizing or transformative. David (2020) also cautions against institutional attempts to remedy historical injustices such as colonialism, as these attempts may serve ‘nationalist solidarities’ instead of serving ‘human rights values.’ Both authors forget that when communities are targeted rather than individuals by colonizers, fulfilling ‘ethnocultural’ justice is required instead of fulfilling human rights in a difference-blind manner. Nationalism must not be dismissed too quickly, as it has empowered the masses since the 19th century to fight against external or internal colonialism, assimilationist policies, genocide, apartheid, and racism. Calhoun emphasizes that nationalism is a powerful societal force that provides cultural capacity for social solidarity and mobilizes collective commitment to public institutions and projects (Calhoun 2007: 153–154). Several authors have argued that the realization of individual freedom, justice, and democracy is dependent on national cultures (Kymlicka 2001; Tamir 1992). Nationalism can empower diasporas by enabling the formation of collective identities, the establishment of institutions, and the mobilization of the masses to voice their demands for ethnocultural justice.

In this article, by incorporating constructivist explanations of nation-formation (Brown 2000) and social movement theory, we develop the following explanation: When populations undergo traumatic dispersal as a result of colonization and nation-building policies, certain elites can develop diaspora identity by constructing *frames* (Benford & Snow 2000: 475) that outline strategies for obtaining restitution for displacement injustices and re-establishing their political institutions in their homeland. This struggle is conducted through transnational *coalition-building* (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 1997), the establishment of transnational institutions, and the utilization of *mobility capital* such as their transnational citizenship (Tölölyan 2012).

Applying this framework to the Crimean Tatar diaspora, we observed that it pursued de-colonization through the following strategies:

- (i) Challenging the Russian master frame about Crimea putting forward its alternative nationalist narrative.

- (ii) Forming coalitions with various states, primarily Ukraine, but also Turkey and Western states; international organizations such as the United Nations and European Union, human rights organizations; and transnational movements including indigenous, environmental movements, and other diasporas like the Ukrainian diaspora to support the de-occupation of Crimea.
- (iii) Establishing transnational institutions, such as the World Crimean Tatar Congress, and advocating for the transnationalization of their national assembly (Meclis), while also developing a transnational advocacy network of diaspora and migrant organizations.

## CRIMEAN TATAR IMMIGRANT AND DIASPORIC COMMUNITIES AND CONFLICTS IN UKRAINE

### THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE UKRAINIAN STATE/SOCIETY AND THE CRIMEAN TATARS

The Euro-Maidan Revolution, particularly the changes it brought in elite attitudes was a 'transformative event' (Koinova 2018) that enabled a more accommodating approach toward Crimean Tatars among Ukrainian elites and society. However, the structural changes in Russian-Ukrainian relations after 2014 constituted a 'critical juncture' (Koinova, 2018) in Crimean Tatar-Ukraine relations. As the conflict dynamics between Crimean Tatars, Ukraine, and Russia changed in 2014, Ukraine's previous policy of appeasement toward Russia came to an end. Ukraine shifted its focus toward reclaiming its occupied territory and arming itself in preparation for further Russian attacks. Ukraine not only sought closer partnership with Western and neighboring countries but also formed an alliance with the Crimean Tatars, represented by Meclis, the Crimean Tatar government-in-exile, and a network of other exiled activists in Kyiv. As one of my interviewees, a former public servant stated, 'Ukrainians finally realized that Crimean Tatars are the only segment of the population that supported them in Crimea. During the [Euro-maidan] revolution, they also welcomed Crimean Tatar support' (interview with Taras (pseud.), Kyiv, 2017). Two weeks after the illegal annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian President Poroshenko responded to the key Crimean Tatar demands and recognized Crimean Tatars as indigenous people, a status that was denied to them by Ukraine for over 20 years (Belitser 2002).

This was followed by a process of creating the legal framework for the internal self-determination of Crimean Tatars and the recreation of their national autonomy in Crimea, which was abolished after their deportation from their homeland in 1944. The resolution of the conflict was mainly catalyzed by the Crimean Tatars' defense of Ukrainian territorial integrity in Crimea. It was also recognized that the promised Crimean Tatar autonomy remains theoretical as long as Crimea remains under occupation. Furthermore, the potential benefits of recognizing Crimean Tatars in terms of attracting Western support were also considered. However, providing group-differentiated rights (Aydın & Şahin 2019) and transitional justice for the conciliation between Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians may not be solely prudential. Finnin argues that collaboration in the face of Russian aggression has deeper historical and discursive foundations for both peoples (Finnin 2022:199).

Furthermore, long-term confidence-building measures, which are a significant aspect of achieving lasting conflict resolution (Wallensteen 2015: 41–42), were adopted between Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian society. These measures addressed historical

conflicts and included both memories in the constitution of the new Ukrainian ‘civic’ nation. In our interview, a Ukrainian historian suggested that the issue of slavery must be ‘contextualized’ and pointed out the presence of elements of Turkic culture in Cossack society. (Interview with Volodymyr (pseud.), Kyiv, 2017). After discovering points of reconciliation in history and agreeing to de-emphasize points of contention, both communities formulated a common collective memory to constitute a civic Ukrainian nation while countering the Russian colonial master narrative (Aydın & Sahin 2019: 45–46; Charron 2019; Wilson 2021: 857). The collective memories of both communities are captured in several books (Bekirova et al. 2020; Wilson 2017: 11–12).

David (2020) argues that state-sponsored institutions of transitional justice in her case studies of Palestine and Bosnia do not serve their intended purpose. However, it is important to consider more cases, particularly positive ones such as the Crimean Tatars, before making a categorical statement. David raises the question of whether societies have internalized state-mandated attempts to address historical injustice (David 2020: 66–124). The examples suggest that top-down initiatives of transitional justice can find resonance under certain circumstances. For instance, Jamala, a Crimean Tatar singer, was chosen to represent Ukraine in Eurovision based on the votes of Ukrainians. According to a Ukrainian academic, online forums were recently discussing the possibility of Jemilev, a Crimean Tatar leader, becoming the next Ukrainian president. This was previously unthinkable in Ukraine (Interview, Olga (Pseud.), February 2017). Another example of a shift in perception is the increased visibility of Crimean Tatars in the media (see Cyborgs 2017).

It is not an exaggeration to assert that Crimean Tatars have significantly influenced Ukrainian foreign policy. This led to the formulation of a state strategy for regaining Crimea (Yavuz 2021) and the establishment of the Crimean Platform to internationalize the issue (Ukraine Analytica 2012).<sup>2</sup> Ukraine granted the Crimean Tatar political exiles the ability to leverage the resources of the Ukrainian state.

As a result, the politics in Kyiv, acting on behalf of the captive homeland community, have demonstrated how Russian authoritarianism and colonialism can be transcended through their mobility capital (Tölölyan 2012). They utilized their strong integration into the Ukrainian political context to empower Crimean Tatars who were trapped in their homeland.

## TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY OF CRIMEAN TATAR DIASPORA AGAINST NEO-COLONIALISM

It is crucial to remember that the historical victimization of the old Crimean Tatar diaspora predates that of their homeland community, making their struggle for the de-

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2 Main Crimean Tatar international advocacy network is the ‘Crimea Platform’ initially suggested by Crimean Tatar politicians and now sponsored by the Ukrainian state (<https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/emine-dzhaparova-opens-inaugural-forum-crimea-platform-expert-network-kyiv>) bringing together delegations from 46 countries, the Council of Europe, NATO PA, and 180 experts and scholars from 33 countries. NGOs for advocacy in Ukraine are Crimea SOS: <https://krymsos.com/en/>; Crimean Tatar Resource Center is supported by the European Endowment for Democracy: <https://ctrcenter.org/en/activities/166-crimean-tatar-resource-center>. The Crimean Tatar bureaucrats and MPs in Ukrainian bureaucracy and government circles demonstrate concerted advocacy for Crimean liberation and Crimean Tatar rights. Some of them are Mustafa Jemilev, an MP, Commissioner of the President of Ukraine for the Affairs of the Crimean Tatar People (2014–2019), Rustem Umerov, who recently became Minister of Defense of Ukraine and Emine Ceppar, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and one of the architects of the Crimea Platform.

colonization of their homeland particularly enduring. They aligned themselves with the anti-communist coalition against the Soviet Union after World War II (Aydin 2021a) and distributed samizdats to counter Soviet totalitarianism (Altan 2001). It can be argued that the cycle of Russian recolonizations of Crimea, including the 2014 annexation and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, spurred transnational mobilization by the diaspora against Russian colonialism. A Crimean Tatar leader from the diaspora suggested that ‘the Crimean Tatar diaspora reacted to the annexation of Crimea forcefully. Previously independent organizations came together under a coalition, a platform of Crimean Tatar associations. Russia did not permit the commemoration of deportation, in Turkey, we had rallies on 18 May’ (interview with Latif (pseud.), Ankara 2017).

With the emergence of new politically exiled and forcibly displaced communities in mainland Ukraine post-2014, diaspora politics underwent a transformation. The World Crimean Tatar Congress, established by Meclis as a transnational organization to amplify the diaspora’s voices and ideas, took on a renewed role in the decolonization efforts of Crimea (Bayar 2017). The Congress’ executive committee, composed of Crimean Tatars from various countries, assumed a permanent position and executed several strategic initiatives. These included countering Russian hybrid war tactics through the creation of an alternative Crimean Tatar diaspora organization, challenging Russian disinformation about the unlawful annexation of Crimea, enhancing the economic and cultural resilience of Crimean Tatar migrant communities in mainland Ukraine post-2014, safeguarding the rights of the homeland community against human rights violations post-2022, and extending humanitarian aid to Ukrainian society and the army, particularly in support of the Crimean Tatar and Muslim soldiers fighting for Ukraine. A significant aspect of the Congress was its potential to function as an alternative representative body for the Crimean Tatars should the occupation of Crimea persist. The Crimean Tatar diaspora even aspired to influence the conflict resolution process between the Meclis and the Ukrainian government, encompassing issues ranging from cultural policies for Crimean Tatar local communities in Ukraine to the finer points of a political autonomy and power-sharing agreement with Ukrainians.

As part of their anti-colonial struggle, the Crimean Tatar diaspora in Turkey took it upon themselves to ‘counter-frame’ Russia’s influence over Turkish foreign policy. For instance, the diaspora advocated for Turkey to join sanctions against Russia and worked diligently to prioritize Ukraine in Turkey’s foreign policy agenda as well as foster Turkish-Ukrainian relations. Simultaneously, Crimean Tatar Meclis and a network of activists in Kyiv emphasized their role in enticing Turkey to support Ukraine and their lobbying power with the Turkish government on the main issues such as negotiating with Russia, grain deal, and prisoner exchange (RFE/RL 2018; Presussen 2022). Since 2014, the relationship between the Crimean Tatar diaspora communities with Ukraine and Ukrainian diasporas has changed greatly. The Crimean Tatar diaspora has actively supported the conflict resolution process with Ukraine, serving as voluntary embassies of Ukraine and adopting Ukraine as their territorial homeland. They have staunchly defended Ukraine against Russia, particularly in the realms of information, politics, and humanitarian efforts, even promoting Ukrainian ethnocultural traditions to strengthen Ukrainian national identity (Aydin 2021b).

Some Crimean Tatar leaders, such as Eskender Bariiev, actively engaged in public diplomacy by ‘bridging’ their ‘Crimean Tatar frames’ with those of transnational indigenous, human rights, and environmentalist movements (highlighting Russia’s environmental crimes in Crimea) to delegitimize the Russian actions (Bariiev 2022).

## LONG-DISTANCE NATIONALISM AMONG CRIMEAN TATAR FORCED MIGRANTS

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By May 2022, a total of 948 Crimean Tatars had entered Turkey via Romania and Bulgaria from Ukraine. This number of immigrants surpasses the estimated count of a few hundred in 2014, with many of them having already returned. Presently, a substantial portion of immigrants utilize Turkey as a transit point to gather their documents before moving to Europe, driven by improved material circumstances. The Crimean Tatar men who faced the threat of mobilization by the Russian army also immigrated from Crimea to Turkey, occasionally accompanied by their families. Obtaining exact statistics is challenging as Crimean Tatars are often identified as Ukrainian or Russian citizens.

Due to the absence of robust protection regimes in Turkey and Europe before 2022, emigration was less prevalent, and some immigrants experienced hardships. Although Turkey intended to extend eligibility for permanent residence status based on Turkish descent to the Crimean Tatars, previously offered only to other Turkic groups such as Ahiska (Meskhetian) Turks, the Crimean Tatar Meclis and diaspora leaders did not support it, aiming to discourage further emigration from Crimea. However, in 2022, Crimean Tatar leaders demanded this status from Turkish authorities. Despite the lack of material support available in European countries, some Crimean Tatars chose to remain in Turkey due to cultural and religious affinities. However, their desire to return to Crimea once the conflict ends, coupled with the requirements of material sources and documentation necessary for naturalization applications, led many to apply solely for international protection granting them access to healthcare and educational services. Even those who were IDPs in mainland Ukraine before the war harbor intentions of returning to a de-occupied Crimea. One IDP from Genichesk explained a common view as follows:

Before my arrival, I had never been to Genichesk, and it was by mere chance we ended up there as a family. We were welcomed there. However, we would of course return to Crimea in case of liberation of Crimea because we left our homeland Crimea for political reasons. We were at risk of persecution or arrest if we stayed there. (Interview, Ayşe(pseud.), Eskişehir 2023)

The diaspora communities demonstrated resourcefulness in absorbing the shocks and managing the migration crisis caused by colonialism. The Crimean Tatar diaspora in Turkey, Romania, and the United States, which has historically provided shelter and support to waves of refugees and immigrants, also played a crucial role in the settlement of refugees in 2014 and 2022. The Crimean Tatar diaspora in Uzbekistan proved advantageous when Crimean Tatar men had to hastily leave Crimea to avoid forced conscription, finding refuge with their kin in Uzbekistan.

After learning about conscription, I bought a ticket to Kazakhstan on the same day. Due to limited time, I was unable to bring all of my documents with me. I transferred to Uzbekistan where I stayed with my cousins for almost two months. Then, I arrived in Istanbul and, after a few days, I went to my final destination. [The destination has been erased for the safety of forced migrants.] I stayed in the basement with Ms. ... and her sister from the Crimean Tatar association, who became like sisters and

mothers to me. They did everything to ensure my comfort. My family joined me in January 2023, but my kids had to leave school and their friends, and now they are bored at home. I hope they learn Turkish as it will aid them in speaking Crimean Tatar. I am seeking employment here. (Salim(pseud.), interview, Ankara 2023)

The Crimean Tatar diaspora in Turkey has unofficially partnered with Turkish migration agencies to assist in the settlement of Crimean Tatar refugees. They not only facilitated their settlement and hosted many of them in their homes, but also helped in the process of gathering the necessary documentation for those seeking transit to Europe.

A few days ago, I bid farewell to 200 Crimean Tatars who were leaving for Ireland. It was painful to see our fellow countrymen departing from our homeland with no hope of return. However, we assisted them in preparing all the necessary documents for their transit to Europe. I hope that one day our people will reunite in Crimea. (Interview with Ünal, Ankara 2023) (interview with Ünal(pseud.), Ankara 2023)

*Kırım Ailesi* ('Crimean Family'), an educational and cultural association of IDPs in Kyiv, migrated together with the majority of its female members and their children. Many of their husbands serve in the Ukrainian army, while others work in Ukraine to provide financial support to their families. Some of these women continue to work remotely for Ukrainian state offices. The Turkish migration administration settled this organization in Eskişehir, as requested by diaspora organizations, given that the city housed the largest number of Crimean Tatar diaspora members in Turkey. A teacher in this association expressed their perspective:

We do not wish to settle in Turkey, but rather long to return to our homeland. But, we are also making the most of our displacement by ensuring our children attend both Turkish and Ukrainian schools, allowing them to obtain diplomas from both countries. I am glad that they are also learning the Crimean Tatar language and culture at our 'Crimean Family' school. I believe that these children will play a significant role in our nation's future. (Interview with Saniye, Eskişehir 2023)

Here she indicated that Crimean Tatar language and cultural teachings are suppressed in Russia and instead, Russia propagates its own agenda to Crimean Tatar children in schools. As a result, mainland Ukraine, now Turkey has become an incubation center for nurturing individuals with a strong Crimean Tatar identity.

Another group of forced migrants in Turkey consists of those who fled from occupied Crimea rather than Ukraine. These migrants perceive Russia's colonial repression even in Turkey, fearing Russian agents may become aware if they participate in pro-Ukrainian rallies and subsequently persecute their families back in Crimea. Some immigrants from the partially occupied regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson in Ukraine also harbored concerns for the safety of their remaining families.

A significant issue is the social distance that emerged between the migrants from Crimea who have suffered under Russia's oppressive policies and the IDPs in mainland Ukraine, who are perceived to have taken an easier path but long for their homeland. An interviewee remarked: 'Yes, we had issues between us [the communities from

Crimea and mainland Ukraine] in the beginning, but we had very long talks. Now we are on the same page. The children of immigrants from Crimea participate in courses at “Crimean Family”. Some of them even become our teachers. We became one community again’ (interview with Gülnara (pseud.), Eskişehir 2023). This suggests that the division and displacement caused by Russia were overcome through increased communication and collaboration in Turkey.

Hence, the shared experience of immigration appears to have strengthened solidarity among various groups of Crimean Tatar immigrants. The large majority’s preference to live together in dormitory-style apartment buildings demonstrates their desire to raise their children in a Crimean Tatar cultural environment while awaiting the end of the war.

In summary, the Crimean Tatar community has undergone structural changes since 2014. While the migration process may lead to the alienation and disillusion of conflict-generated diasporas collective memories, ideologies, and diasporic national movement traditions were formulated in a ‘frame’ to reinforce intra-diasporic hegemonic discourses to prevent such occasions.

## CONCLUSION

The Crimean Tatar diaspora goes beyond the debate of peacemakers versus peacebreakers by contributing to positive peace through efforts to decolonization of their homeland and attaining transitional justice. The Crimean Tatar diaspora and forced migrant communities are also intertwined with state and nation-building in Crimea as they contest the Russian authority, advocate the demands of their co-ethnics under Russian occupation, support Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea, and establish a government-in-exile as a manifestation of de-territorialized sovereignty.

Diasporas, primarily located in democratic Western countries, use anti-colonial discourse against belligerent nation-states from Europe to the Middle East and East Asia. This issue demonstrates that no war is contained in a certain territory or region, and war is increasingly a transnational phenomenon. As war reached Europe, European welfare states funded the largest number of refugees to Europe from a single conflict. However, it is important to note that migration cannot be viewed solely as an economic stress on the welfare state. As Nordic countries shift from neutrality to active defense policies and increased collaboration with NATO due to the threat of Russian expansionism, the significance of Ukrainian and other diasporas in foreign policy making will become more pronounced. The case of Crimean Tatar diasporas and forced migrants would be a valuable case to compare the causal influences of the large number of Ukrainian, Middle Eastern, and African refugee-turned-diasporas in Europe, especially in the Nordic countries, both in understanding the globally emerging anti-colonial movement and in the foreign policy making of their host countries.

## ETHICS AND CONSENT

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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