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## **Türkiye's Search for Solutions and Strategies in the Russia-Ukraine War**

*Rusya – Ukrayna Savaşında Türkiye'nin Çözüm Arayışları ve Stratejileri*

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**Abstract:** After the attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Türkiye pursued an active and neutral foreign policy and engaged in mediation efforts between the parties. During this process, Türkiye faced pressure to take sides but attempted to maintain a balanced policy due to its NATO membership and good relations policy. Türkiye did not close its airspace, did not participate in sanctions, but voted in favor of Ukraine at the UN. In order to peacefully end the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Türkiye made significant efforts in mediating by holding talks with high-level officials of the warring parties. Additionally, Türkiye took a leading role in organizing the Black Sea Grain Initiative to facilitate the export of Ukrainian grain. Türkiye is expected to see the opportunity to assume the leading mediation role in solving this problem in the region and to evaluate this issue well. Türkiye's position in the Ukraine war is not only determined by its bilateral relations with Russia, Ukraine, and Western partners but also influenced by the fact that the Black Sea region is not the sole and main security concern. Türkiye has positioned itself as a successful mediator. However, there is uncertainty about how Türkiye will reassess its strategic balance. Türkiye's role in the Ukraine war has been shaped by its internal and external policy balance, mediation efforts, and regional security concerns. Türkiye's efforts to increase its strategic importance and maintain its diplomatic influence continue. Türkiye uses diplomacy to negotiate a ceasefire and reach an agreement between the warring parties. Türkiye's mediation efforts since the beginning of the war have aimed not only to serve its own interests but also to take into account the interests of all parties involved. Successful outcomes in intergovernmental negotiations cannot be achieved without diplomacy and open communication. This study will comprehensively examine Türkiye's significant role in efforts to end the war, including its efforts to reduce conflict, motivations, objectives, and reasons. Ankara has multifaceted relations with both Russia and Ukraine, particularly in trade. Therefore, since the beginning of the conflict between the two countries, Ankara has been striving to quickly end the conflict and restore order.

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**Structured Abstract:** During the Russian-Ukrainian war in the northern Black Sea region, Türkiye has played and continues to play a mediating role in maintaining peace and security between the parties. Türkiye historically has strong political, economic and trade relations with Russia and Ukraine. Mediation is both a theoretical and practical approach given the current global challenges and Türkiye's national interests. This study will attempt to identify the reasons for the re-emergence of tensions between Russia and Ukraine and evaluate Türkiye's mediation role and strategy in this war. Due to its historical, political, commercial and economic ties, Türkiye has been playing a mediating role in resolving the disputes between these two countries. Türkiye has taken active steps to create an environment of peaceful dialogue and reconciliation through its diplomatic efforts to resolve the current challenges of the region. This supports Türkiye's growing importance and reputation in the region, while at the same time providing it with an important opportunity to contribute to the stability of the region.

As partially mentioned above, the aim of this study is to highlight Türkiye's mediation role in the Russia-Ukraine war and analyze its strategy to resolve the problems. Focusing on its diplomatic efforts, Türkiye's contributions to the mediation process, the problems it faced and possible future solutions will be discussed. In addition, a theoretical framework dealing with peace, conflict and mediation will be presented and these theories will be analyzed through the Russian-Ukrainian war and Türkiye's mediation. The aim of the analysis is to help people understand and evaluate Türkiye's role in efforts to achieve regional peace and stability.

This study will try to answer questions such as why Türkiye took on a mediation role in the Russia-Ukraine war, what were its diplomatic efforts in this process, what was the purpose of its critical role and strategy in stopping the conflict, what challenges it faced in this process, and what could be its potential contributions to future conflict resolution.

The study utilizes a qualitative research approach. The study is based on Türkiye's official statements, press releases, similar studies and literature reviews on Türkiye's role in the resolution of regional conflicts and diplomatic initiatives, as well as international statements and writings on the Russia-Ukraine war. In addition to all these, expert diplomats in the field were reached and their opinions and assessments were also utilized. The data obtained were analyzed comprehensively and interpreted and evaluated in line with the questions and objectives of the research.

This study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the role Türkiye plays in the resolution of interregional conflicts and to make a contribution to the existing literature in this field. The methodological framework underlying this study provides a comprehensive approach to understanding and analyzing Türkiye's mediator role in the Russia-Ukraine war.

A portion of the study focuses on Türkiye's strong economic and political connections with the conflicting parties, given Türkiye's historically strong ties with Russia and Ukraine. Türkiye, with its sincere, heartfelt, and behavioral relationships with both sides, is in a unique position to mediate. This position has garnered trust in Türkiye from both countries. The goal is to assess Türkiye's mediation role in the war between Russia and Ukraine and generate literature on the management of the peace process. The study is expected to contribute to gaining further insights into sustainable peace, mediation diplomacy, and conflict resolution.

Türkiye, particularly in the 21st century, pursues foreign policy goals to become a strong actor first in its region and then globally. Geographically and strategically located, Türkiye can be categorized as a regional and emerging power. Playing an effective role in conflict resolution and conflict management is one of Türkiye's essential tools in foreign policy. Türkiye has pioneered in mediation, a peaceful resolution method for international issues, and has created significant awareness globally. This takes place in a region where active, frozen, and potential conflicts occur. Türkiye has engaged in numerous indirect mediation initiatives regionally and internationally. This study primarily focuses on Türkiye's mediation efforts as a regional power to end the war between Russia and Ukraine.

During the Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye, instead of aligning itself with the West to impose sanctions on Russia, considered its geostrategic interests. It maintained strategic balance by continuing its connections with Moscow and Kiev without jeopardizing its relations. Despite the desire of NATO and Western countries, Türkiye has insisted on continuing this approach and preferred to take a separate path from Western allies. Understanding the determinants of Türkiye's strategic foreign policy towards the West and the role it plays is crucial to comprehend its approach to the war. Because this war significantly affects Türkiye's strategic

position, geographical location, historical and commercial connections, regional interactions, and foreign policy objectives. These factors make it imperative for Türkiye to manage its role in the Russia-Ukraine war and its relations with the West effectively.

Since the Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye has pursued a neutral and effective foreign policy. For this reason, it brought the foreign ministers of the parties together at the Antalya Diplomatic Forum and made efforts to resolve the disputes and end the conflicts. Since the beginning of the war, Türkiye provided the first meeting that brought the parties together. Later, Türkiye succeeded in bringing the parties together in what became known as the Istanbul Talks. Moreover, thanks to Türkiye's initiative in Russia, a grain corridor was established and Ukrainian grain was able to reach the international market.

All in all, Türkiye's peace efforts are commendable. It has played a successful role by raising its reputation in diplomacy. Although the negotiations have not yet yielded any concrete results, Türkiye's efforts to mediate the Russian-Ukrainian war on the basis of equality among other countries have been appreciated by the international community. In the ongoing process, Türkiye is the only country with the potential to bring the leaders of Russia and Ukraine together.

**Key Words:** International Relations, Mediation, International Dispute Resolution, Russia - Ukraine War, Türkiye's Solutions and Strategies

**Öz:** 24 Şubat 2022 tarihinde Ukrayna'ya yapılan saldırı sonrasında Türkiye, aktif ve tarafsız bir dış politika izlemiş ve taraflar arasında arabuluculuk faaliyetlerine girişmiştir. Bu süreç içerisinde Türkiye, taraf seçme baskısı altında kalmış ancak NATO üyeliği ve iyi ilişkiler politikası nedeniyle denge politikası gütmeye çalışmıştır. Hava sahasını kapatmamış, yaptırımlara katılmamış, ancak BM'de Ukrayna lehine oy kullanmıştır. Rusya-Ukrayna çatışmasının barışçıl bir şekilde sona erdirilmesi için Türkiye, savaşan tarafların üst düzey yetkilileri ile görüşmeler yaparak arabuluculuk konusunda büyük çaba sarf etmiştir. Ayrıca, Türkiye, Ukrayna tahılının ihracatını kolaylaştırmak amacıyla Karadeniz Tahıl inisiyatifinin organizasyonunda başrol oynayarak öncülük etmiştir. Türkiye'nin bölgedeki bu problemi çözmede baş arabuluculuk rolünü üstlenmeyi bir fırsat olarak görmesi ve kendisinden bu meseleyi iyi değerlendirmesi beklenmektedir. Türkiye'nin Ukrayna savaşındaki konumu, sadece Rusya, Ukrayna ve Batılı ortakları ile olan ikili ilişkileri tarafından belirlenmemektedir, aynı zamanda Karadeniz bölgesinin tek ve ana güvenlik endişesi olmadığı gerçeği tarafından da etkilenmektedir. Türkiye, başarılı bir arabulucu olarak kendini konumlandırmıştır. Ancak Türkiye'nin stratejik dengesini yeniden nasıl değerlendireceği konusunda belirsizlik söz konusudur. Türkiye'nin Ukrayna savaşındaki rolü, iç ve dış politika dengesi, arabuluculuk çabaları ve bölgesel güvenlik endişeleriyle şekillenmiştir. Türkiye'nin stratejik önemini artırma ve diplomatik etkisini sürdürme çabaları devam etmektedir. Türkiye, savaş halinde olan taraflar arasında ateşkes sağlanıp bir anlaşmaya varmaları için diplomasiyi kullanmaktadır. Savaşın başlamasından günümüze kadar Türkiye'nin gerçekleştirdiği arabuluculuk çabaları, yalnızca kendi çıkarlarını değil, aynı zamanda tüm tarafların çıkarlarını da göz önünde bulundurma amacını gütmektedir. Devletlerarası müzakerelerde, diplomasi ve açık iletişim olmadan başarılı olunamaz. Bu çalışmada Türkiye'nin savaşı sona erdirmeye çabalarında oynadığı önemli rolü, çatışmayı azaltma çabaları, motivasyonları, hedefleri ve nedenleri kapsamlı bir şekilde ele alınacaktır. Türkiye, hem Rusya hem de Ukrayna ile başta ticaret olmak üzere çok yönlü ilişkilere sahiptir. Dolayısıyla Ankara, iki ülke arasında başlayan bu savaşın başlangıcından beri taraflar arasındaki çatışmayı hızla sona erdirmek ve düzeni yeniden tesis etmek için uğraş vermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Uluslararası İlişkiler, Arabuluculuk, Uluslararası Uyuşmazlık Çözümü, Rusya - Ukrayna Savaşı, Türkiye'nin Çözüm ve Stratejileri

## Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war has emerged as a crucial juncture in regional stability and international relations. Influential actors like Türkiye, by focusing on seeking solutions and strategies during this conflict, have the potential to impact the dynamics in the region. This article aims to examine Türkiye's role in the Russia-Ukraine war, focusing on its search for solutions and strategies. The Russia-Ukraine war has brought forth a complex array of issues threatening regional stability,

including direct impacts of the war, shifts in power balances in the region, international reactions, and the regional and global consequences of the conflict. Türkiye's approach and search for solutions to these issues constitute a significant component towards resolving the conflict.

This study on Türkiye's search for solutions and strategies in the Russia-Ukraine war will make a substantial contribution to the literature. By contextualizing Türkiye's role within a broader framework and focusing specifically on its policies and efforts during the conflict, this study adds depth to the existing literature. The methodology employed in this research is qualitative in nature. Academic literature, international reports, and Türkiye's official policy documents are utilized to examine Türkiye's efforts to find solutions and strategies in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Since ancient times, one of the most significant issues in international politics has been wars and conflicts. The involvement of third parties in conflicts with the aim of stopping them and achieving reconciliation among the parties has also been observed. International Relations, on the one hand, examines the reasons and mechanisms behind conflicts and wars, and on the other hand, explores how they can be prevented. In this context, traditional third-party interventions such as international mediation are integral to the discipline of International Relations.

The field of international relations focuses on how conflicts among international political actors can be prevented. Especially due to the destructive effects of the First World War, this issue began to be systematically addressed in academic circles and eventually led to the establishment of the discipline as a separate field. Initially centered around the fundamental question of how wars, the primary concern of international relations theory, could be prevented, the inquiry later expanded into a broader framework with the emergence of sub-disciplines. Numerous researchers have contributed to the literature through theoretical and experimental studies, particularly in areas such as conflict management or peace studies.

Among the various methods of conflict management, international mediation is a frequent and increasingly common method used by third parties. However, especially since the beginning of the 21st century, changes in the nature of conflicts and the increase in the negative consequences of these conflicts at the regional and global level have created the need for new perspectives in international mediation. First, the traditional understanding has changed as the objective of mediation has evolved from ending violence to resolving the factors that cause conflicts. In addition, the increased visibility of international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations and public figures in mediation activities has led to a broadening of the range of actors involved in mediation (Kiraz, 2020, p. 227-228).

Mediation, in a modern sense, became widespread, particularly in the United States, in the late 1960s. This method has been commonly used to resolve disputes among parties, primarily ethnic, religious, and commercial groups. The Roscoe Pound Conference (Wallace, 1982) held in 1976 was a significant turning point in this field. Courts, after this conference, not only focused on adjudication but also adopted new methods for resolving disputes (Yeşilırmak, 2017, p. 27).

It is not easy to find a precise definition of mediation in the literature. This is because the definition of mediation depends on the level of detail and complexity of the scholars. As a result, to define mediation, some scholars emphasize the role of the third party, while others state that the conflicting parties volunteer to resolve the dispute. However, scholars agree on certain characteristics of mediation processes. These features include components that make up the definition, even at a basic level (Davidheiser, 2005, p. 715).

Third-party intervention in a dispute is known as mediation. Mediation refers to the intervention of a third party in a dispute between the parties on a purely voluntary basis and without legal authority over the parties. This third party can be a state, an international organization or an official. Christopher W. Moore emphasizes the importance of the parties' acceptance of the mediator

at this point. This does not mean that the parties are fully committed to the mediator, but it implies a willingness and voluntariness to consider the different options presented by the mediator (Bercovitch, 2011; Moore, 2003; Tomas Princen, 2016; William Zartman and Saadia Touval et al., 1985).

The literature on mediation has focused on three primary styles that mediators can adopt: facilitative, formulative, and manipulative. A facilitative mediator provides a channel of communication between the parties, organizes the negotiation process but makes no substantive contribution. A formulative mediator offers new solution proposals to the parties when there is an impasse in negotiations. A manipulative mediator, in addition to making substantive contributions, forces the parties to reach an agreement using their position and leverage. There are differing views in the literature regarding whether mediators should have the ability to adapt to these styles or whether adopting a specific style might be more effective (Wilkenfeld et al., 2007, p. 293-284).

According to the United Nations, mediation is a critical tool for the peaceful resolution of disputes and conflicts. In this framework, mediation is an effective means of resolving both inter-state and intra-state disputes. In 1992, the United Nations published a book, *The Peaceful Settlement of Disputes between States*, which advanced the understanding of mediated settlement of disputes between states. Mediating actors are constantly changing their methods and skills to cope with changing types of conflicts. In this context, it is recognized that intra-state conflicts in particular threaten international and regional peace and security. General Assembly resolution 65/283 "Strengthening the role of mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes, conflict prevention and resolution", adopted unanimously, welcomed the increasing use of mediation and assessed current challenges in mediation efforts, calling on key actors to enhance their mediation capacity. The General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General, in consultation with Member States and other relevant actors, to develop guidelines for more effective mediation, taking into account lessons learned from past and current mediation processes (United Nations Peacemaker, 2012, p. 2).

With the 2000s, "dispute resolution and mediation", one of Türkiye's foreign policy goals, becomes a foreign policy instrument through which Türkiye engages in mediation efforts in various countries and regions. This policy is reflected in Türkiye's mediation initiatives in various locations, as well as the establishment of research centers focusing on international issues, international congresses, and a General Directorate within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the establishment of Istanbul as a hub for international mediation (Şahin, 2021, p. 222).

The important role of mediation in Türkiye's foreign policy stems from its adoption as an effective strategy for conflict resolution. This study aims to analyze the mediation efforts of the Republic of Türkiye in detail, especially in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian War. A broad perspective of the mediation strategy adopted by Turkish foreign policy towards the resolution of conflicts in the international arena will contribute to the understanding of Türkiye's role in this field.

Furthermore, this study will address debates surrounding Türkiye's mediation activities and various perspectives on issues such as neutrality or partisanship in mediation. The strategic choices regarding Türkiye's adoption of neutrality or partisanship in mediation will be examined. The aim of this study is to contribute to the literature of international relations by evaluating Türkiye's successes, strategic approaches in mediation, and proposing potential future solutions.

To better articulate the goals and objectives of our study and for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject, we will briefly delve into the historical development of Türkiye's relations with conflicting parties.

### **Historical Context of Turkish-Russian Relations**

While the historical development of Turkish-Russian relations may appear to have started with diplomatic contact between the Moscow Principality and the Ottoman Empire in 1492, in

reality, these two societies have a long history and relationship in the northern geography. Commercial relations between Russians and Turks seem to have begun in the second half of the 15th century. During this period, diplomatic meetings and correspondence took place between the Moscow Principality and the Crimean Khan, who was a vassal of the Turkish Sultan. In 1492, the letter sent by Ivan III to the Ottoman Sultan marked the beginning of Turkish-Russian commercial relations.

The Ottoman Empire's first diplomatic contact with the Russians began during the reign of Bayezid II when Ivan III sent Mikhail Pleşçeyev (1496-1498) and then Alexei Golohvastov (1499) to Istanbul as envoys to improve commercial relations between the two countries. These visits of the ambassadors marked the beginning of regular diplomatic relations between Russia and Türkiye and the first steps towards the development of trade (Kurat, 1987, p. 117-118). On the other hand, Russians and the Ottoman Empire have been rivals many times throughout history. Between 1568 and 1918, these two great powers fought against each other 13 times (Kurat, 2011; Широкоград, 2012).

In other words, the historical connections of Turks and Russians are based on a long history and interaction in close geography. This relationship between the two societies has been shaped by diplomatic contacts as well as trade, cultural interaction and occasional conflicts. Geographical proximity and cultural similarities have also been effective in the historical relations of the Turkish and Russian peoples. It is certain that this historical process constitutes an important place in the past of both societies and is reflected in today's relations.

From classical times to World War I, the idea of dominating the Marmara Sea and the Straits, which connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, has concerned the societies of the world and caused the rise and fall of some states. With the end of the largest global conflict in history in November 1918, the Republic of Türkiye, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, re-established its sovereignty over the Straits and aimed to meet the commercial and maritime concerns of Black Sea and non-Black Sea countries in an equitable manner. Despite the turmoil of Communism, Fascism and Nazism that was beginning to shake Europe, Atatürk's ability to compromise led to the signing of the Montreux Convention of 1936. Thanks to its well-thought-out text, this 88-year-old treaty is still valid and in force in the 21st century, despite periodic diplomatic complaints by signatory and non-signatory countries (Daly, 2022).

The establishment of the Soviet Union and its aftermath led to some changes in the relations between Türkiye and Russia. For instance, in the early years of the Republic of Türkiye, the Soviets provided Türkiye with material support and returned some territories as a result of negotiations.

On the other hand, the Bolshevik government attempted to cooperate with the Republic of Türkiye during the years of the War of Independence, while continuing its efforts to spread its propaganda in Türkiye. While the Bolsheviks promised to support the War of Independence, they also improved their relations with Greece. This situation reflected an interest-oriented approach. On the other hand, they supported the Republic of Türkiye in the issue of the Straits at Lausanne and advocated the closure of the Straits to all states, but other countries rejected this proposal. In addition to their alliance attempts with Türkiye, the Bolsheviks also continued their efforts to spread the Communist order in Anatolia and pursued an expansionist policy (Topsakal, 2016, p. 45; Kolesnikov, 2015).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Soviets aimed to establish dominance over the Straits and openly revealed their ambitions against Türkiye. However, the Turkish government's resistance to the Soviet demands led the US and the UK to side with Türkiye, and subsequently Türkiye became a member of NATO in 1952.

In the 1960s, the Soviets did not side with Türkiye on the Cyprus issue and cooperated with Greece, which became a member of NATO. Over time, Türkiye's strengthening relations with NATO and the United States led the Soviets to change their policy.

While the Arab-Israeli and Iraq-Iran wars were effective in the region in the 1980s, the Soviets were seen as a power supporting the former Baathist regime. However, the Soviet Union's economic difficulties in the early 1990s led to the beginning of the end of the bipolar world. Even during this period, the rivalry between the US and Russia in the Middle East continued, and the Soviet difficulties had positive effects on its relations with Türkiye.

During the Cold War, Türkiye was seen as a buffer against the Soviet Union in the process of rapprochement with the Western bloc and joining NATO. In the late 20th century, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye established relations with the newly formed Turkic Republics in the former Soviet territories and newly formed value countries such as Ukraine and maintained its contacts with this region while trying to keep its relations with Russia in balance. On the one hand, Türkiye has provided various aids for the integration of these countries into the economic and political systems, especially in the economic and cultural fields. On the other hand, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent formation of the Russian Federation, Türkiye has tried to improve relations by establishing new diplomatic contacts and this has played an important role in Türkiye's foreign policy. Relations with Russia progressed in a positive direction and important agreements were signed between the two countries until the plane crisis in 2015, and joint projects were realized in economic and cultural fields.

In 2014, the annexation of Crimea by Russia drew reactions from the international community and was not accepted. Türkiye characterized Russia's action in annexing Crimea as unacceptable and against international law. Türkiye considered this as an act of Russia's disrespect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and did not recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea. However, given the complexity of Türkiye-Russia relations, Türkiye has tried to express its position on Crimea in a balanced manner. However, it has consistently emphasized that it does not support the annexation of Crimea and the importance it attaches to Ukraine's territorial integrity (Suyundikov, 2021, p. 73-151).

On the one hand, Türkiye maintained close defense ties with Ukraine and supported Ukraine's territorial integrity, while continuing to develop trade relations with Russia. Russia, on the other hand, has seen Türkiye as a counterweight to NATO, especially in recent times. However, the purchase of the S-400s from Russia exacerbated the already existing problems between Türkiye and the US. This even led to Ankara's exclusion from the F-35 fighter jet program (Swasti Rao, 2022).

### **Türkiye-Ukraine Relations**

In Turkish sources, the term "Ukraine" is seen as a geographical expression from the 16th century onwards. This term is explicitly mentioned in the Buchach Treaty signed in 1672. Later, in the appointment of Himelnitski in 1678, the term "Ukraine" replaced the previously used "Rus" (Russian). This change indicates that the term "Ukraine," which had long referred to a specific border region, now gained a new meaning as a country. (Bartl, Peter, 1998, p. 304) The word "Ukraina" literally means "border country" or "frontier region". Throughout history, Ukraine has indeed been a "border country". However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine positioned itself not only as a border region but also as a significant actor in the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia (Kınıklioğlu, 1996, p. 33).

Ukraine boasts the most beautiful shores of the Black Sea, with its borders defined by the river lines of Dnieper, Dniester, Donetsk, and Bug from north to south. Ukraine's history begins with the Kiev Principality between 882 and 1132, during which the country was referred to as Ruthenia. In the 12th century, the collapse of the Kiev Principality led to the division of Ukrainian territories

into distinct parts (Aydin, 2015, p. 31). In 1648, the first official treaty between Türkiye and Ukraine was signed, marking the initiation of Türkiye-Ukraine relations. In 1648, the commander of the Cossack Division in Chyhyryn, Hetman Khmelnytsky, sought assistance from the Turks to resist Poland. To achieve this, he initially came to Bakhchisarai and reached an agreement with Crimean Khan Islam Giray. This situation was reported to Istanbul on April 25, 1648. Upon Istanbul's approval, Tugay Bey and the Cossacks under the command of the Tatars jointly acted against Poland. The victories of the united army, particularly the Zovti Vody on May 12 and Korsun on May 26, were significant successes for Khmelnytsky. Following these victories, Kiev was taken from Poland, and Ukraine declared its independence.

During this period, Ukraine was organized into 18 regions with one regiment governing each region. Khatman Himelnitski sent a delegation to Istanbul headed by Fylon Celali, the most talented and effective regiment leader, and shortly afterwards, a treaty was signed in Istanbul in June 1648 between Türkiye and Ukraine, which was especially important for Ukraine. According to this treaty, Ukraine obtained the right to free trade on the Black Sea and Mediterranean coasts, the privilege of not paying any kind of tax in these regions, permission to operate warehouses in Turkish ports, the right to open a representative office in Istanbul, and the right to obtain a permit for the ports of Buğ and Dniester, and according to this agreement, Ukrainian merchants were exempted from all customs duties and other taxes for 100 years (Ukrayna İstanbul Başkonsolosluğu, 2020).

Historically, the Ukrainian region has been a "battleground" for conflicts between great powers such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Crimean Tatar Khanate and Russia. As a result of the Turkish-Russian wars, Crimea was captured by the Russians in 1783 and some of the Crimean Tatar population settled in the Ottoman Empire or were forced to emigrate. The Crimean War of 1853-1856 saw Russia militarily defeated by an alliance led by Great Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire, but the peninsula remained in the Russian Empire. With the end of the Cold War, Ukraine has become a focal point of geostrategic interests, virtually caught between the EU and Russia (Kurakcı & Dursun, 2023, p. 85).

In 1917, when the Ukrainian People's Republic was established, Türkiye became the first country to recognize it; however, relations were interrupted for about half a century after World War II. When Ukraine declared its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye once again became the first country to recognize it.

Relations between Türkiye and Ukraine have witnessed significant developments within the framework of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) (T.C.Dışişleri Bakanlığı, n.d.) established in 1992 under Türkiye's leadership. Ukraine is among the countries most positively inclined towards this organization. Both countries work towards advancing bilateral relations in the Black Sea Region based on common and mutual interests. In this context, Türkiye and Ukraine aim to create a stable, nuclear-free, environmentally sensitive, and prosperous Black Sea Region. Ankara and Kiev see BSEC as a platform and have pursued a balanced policy by establishing good relations with Moscow through this organization. Additionally, they believe that events in the region will shape themselves based on realities in the long term and that cooperation can be achieved around the principle of collaboration instead of confrontation (Kınıklıoğlu, 1996, p. 33; Tuncel, 2018, p. 31).

The friendship between Ukraine and Türkiye was further strengthened with the 1992 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (KAHAPOBA, 2019, p. 1536). With the 2011 Joint Declaration of the High-Level Strategic Council (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, n.d.-b), relations were elevated to strategic partnership. The two countries take joint steps in various fields, aiming to ensure security and stability in the Black Sea Region. Türkiye supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and does not support the referendum in Crimea. Ankara has shown sensitivity to human rights violations in Crimea, with a particular focus on the rights of the Crimean Tatar people. The official

website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that the referendum held in Crimea on Sunday, March 16, 2014 is considered illegal and devoid of legitimacy, and that the de facto situation that will emerge based on the steps to be taken in this direction will not have any legal validity and will not be recognized by Türkiye (T. C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, n.d.).

The High-Level Strategic Council Meeting (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, n.d.) held annually between Türkiye and Ukraine, platforms such as the Presidential-level meetings, and the Strategic Planning Joint Group of Foreign Ministers are important indicators of the intense and effective nature of political dialogue. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's visit to Türkiye in 2019 marked a significant milestone in bilateral relations, (bbc, 2021a) and following the meeting with Turkish President Erdoğan, a decision was made to advance cooperation further.

In 2020, President Erdoğan visited Kiev (BBC, 2022; ukrinform, 2022), and the 8th meeting of the High-Level Strategic Council was held. During this meeting, the leaders of the two countries pledged to deepen cooperation in strategic areas. Ultimately, with Volodymyr Zelensky taking over the leadership in Ukraine, further steps were taken in the already positive Türkiye-Ukraine relations. In the High-Level Strategic Council meeting held in Kiev on February 3, 2022, a free trade agreement was signed with the goal of increasing the \$7.5 billion trade volume between Türkiye and Ukraine to \$10 billion within 5 years (Lesage et al., 2022, p. 57; Mankoff, 2024).

### **The Start of the Russia-Ukraine War**

On February 7, 2019, the Ukrainian Parliament made significant decisions regarding the country's irreversible commitment to join NATO and the EU (BBC, 2019). In June 2020, in response to Ukraine's application, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) recognized Ukraine as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner (NATO, n.d.). This status facilitated increased military interoperability with NATO, participation in NATO exercises, and information exchange. Ukraine's military security strategy, published on March 25, 2021 (Президент України, 2021), emphasized that Russia still posed a military threat to Ukraine. The strategy also identified Ukraine's NATO membership as one of its main objectives.

Against this backdrop, in June 2021, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated after the summit in Brussels that the alliance had done its part to support Ukraine's reforms and was ready to do even more. However, he stressed the importance of Ukraine undertaking the comprehensive and irreversible reforms needed to fight corruption, centralize power based on democratic values, involve all political forces, respect human and minority rights, and strengthen the rule of law. The NATO Secretary General emphasizes the need for Ukraine to use all available opportunities to ensure compliance with NATO's principles and standards. In this context, Stoltenberg reiterates that Russia has no role or authority in the decision and process of Ukraine's accession to NATO (BBC, 2021b).

After South Ossetia, the invasion of Crimea led Putin's Russia to decisively create a secure ring under its control in the north of the Black Sea and in the south of Russia. In particular, Ukraine's efforts to cooperate with the EU and NATO, and the encouragement of Ukraine's efforts by both the EU and NATO, as well as the US, prompted Russia to pursue a more aggressive policy. Overcoming the sanctions it might face in the annexation processes of Georgia and Crimea would allow Russia to take further steps without hesitation (Çalışkan, 2022, p. 40). Thus, the Ukraine-Russia relationship, which started with the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, became increasingly tense as a result of the developing events. In this process, especially the US and the UK's statements in favor of Ukraine and against Russia brought the tension between the two countries to a peak. Anticipating that the tension between the two countries would turn into a war, US intelligence sources stated that Russian military activity on the Ukrainian border was unusual (Cuba Trade, 2021).

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced in a televised address at 05:55 Moscow time that they had launched a “*special military operation*” to “*demilitarize*” and

“denazify” Ukraine. This massive offensive took Western politicians by surprise and the question of how the organization could help Ukraine, since Ukraine is not a member of NATO, came up for discussion. It became clear that the issue of maritime navigation in the Black Sea basin - the freedom of access to this body of water for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic partners on the one hand, and the restriction of the entry and exit of the Russian navy on the other - would play an important role in Western support for Kiev. All these developments caused Türkiye to reassess its role in regional balances. In the face of this situation, Türkiye opts for a diplomatic balancing policy. This is because Türkiye's historical relations and economic ties with Russia on the one hand, and its good relations with Ukraine, especially in defense, on the other, differentiate its policy on this issue from that of Europe and the United States (Daly, 2022).

### **Türkiye’s Mediation Role and Strategy**

The new Strategic Concept adopted at NATO's Madrid Summit in June 2022 identified Russia as the most significant and direct threat to the security of NATO allies and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region. All NATO members, including Türkiye, accepted this definition. However, Türkiye intended to pursue a parallel approach between deterrence and dialogue in its relations with Russia. Ankara was in a different position than other NATO members because of the NATO-Russia conflict and its own relations with Russia. As a regional country, Türkiye had special relations with both Ukraine and Russia.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea, relations between Türkiye and Ukraine reached a higher level, especially in the defense sector. For example, Ankara's willingness to contribute to Kiev's military buildup, steps to procure and co-produce fighter jets, Türkiye's agreement to build two ADA-class corvettes for Ukraine as part of an October 2020 deal, and Türkiye's sale of drones such as Bayraktar TB2 to Ukraine. Indeed, after the Russia-Ukraine war broke out, Turkish combat drones became a symbol of Ukrainian resistance against Russia.

On the other hand, Türkiye condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, calling it illegal, and stated through official channels that it stood by Kiev on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Despite all these developments, Türkiye abstained from voting to expel Russia from the Council of Europe after the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia war and distanced itself from Western sanctions against Moscow.

One of the important factors that Türkiye has assumed in the conflict between the two countries has been the issue of the position of the Turkish-controlled straits connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. As a member of NATO, Türkiye has full sovereignty over the Straits in security matters as per the 1936 Montreux Convention on the Straits Regime. Under this convention, a clear distinction is made between commercial vessels and warships. In peacetime, the first group enjoys unhindered free passage. The second group is subject to a series of restrictions. These include whether the naval forces belong to the Black Sea littoral states or foreign countries. The Montreux Convention weighs heavily in favor of the navies of the Black Sea littoral states. In the new situation created by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the re-evaluation of this 88-year-old convention and demands for possible amendments have surprisingly come back to the agenda, including some Turkish politicians. However, Türkiye decided to unilaterally block the passage of military vessels through the Straits immediately after Russia launched a "special military operation" against Ukraine. This decision will undoubtedly influence the further course and outcome of the war.

Before the war started in November 2021, Türkiye had repeatedly conveyed to Russia and Ukraine that it could mediate to prevent any conflict between the two countries. As a matter of fact, a month before the war started, Turkish President Erdogan renewed his statement on January 21 that “*We can mediate between the parties*” (CNNTURK, 2022). Despite all these efforts, the war between Russia and Ukraine could not be prevented. Türkiye has continued its pre-war calls for mediation

and peace after the outbreak of the war. The Turkish President and relevant ministers were perhaps the only leaders of Türkiye who were able to meet frequently and easily with their counterparts in both countries. The focus of all these initiatives has been on stopping the war and what steps could be taken towards peace. At a time when Western countries were taking positions against Russia, Türkiye, as a NATO member, was the only country that managed to establish a dialogue with both Russia and Ukraine, and expressed the view on many platforms that a scenario without dialogue with Russia would bring a more problematic future for Europe and the parties to the war (Daly, 2022).

On March 10, 2022, as a result of Türkiye's initiatives, the Foreign Ministers of Russia and Ukraine met for the first time since the outbreak of the war at the Antalya Diplomatic Forum under the leadership of then Turkish Foreign Minister M. Çavuşoğlu (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2022). Türkiye's equal approach to both sides in this meeting was welcomed by both sides, and as a result of this meeting, Türkiye's hosting of the mediation in this critical war affecting the world had an important repercussion in international relations.

The appreciation of the warring parties for Ankara's stance and the success of Türkiye's diplomatic strategy was once again confirmed when Moscow, following Kiev, chose Istanbul for the negotiations (March 29). In other words, the choice of this city by the parties demonstrated Türkiye's success and signaled its acceptance as a reliable intermediary. Although an agreement was not reached and a ceasefire was not agreed upon, the Istanbul talks marked a new stage in Türkiye's peace initiatives and the impact of Erdoğan's call for a ceasefire to Putin became tangible (Duran, 2022).

On April 18, 2022, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated that Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu's visit to Washington will include a comprehensive discussion of bilateral relations, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war, noting that Türkiye is an important NATO ally and has a major role to play in holding Russia accountable for its war against Ukraine (Politik Yol, 2022). Türkiye, which has called for a ceasefire on both sides since the beginning of the war, also contributed to the opening of a humanitarian corridor for the evacuation of civilians in Mariupol. Türkiye called for a ceasefire from the beginning of the war (Independent, 2022) and contributed to the opening of a humanitarian corridor for the evacuation of civilians in Mariupol (Demir, 2023).

It is clear from the above examples that Türkiye has played an important mediation role between Russia and Ukraine with the trust of both sides. This role continued in the transportation of Ukrainian grain to the international market. In fact, Türkiye persuaded Russia in the talks held in Istanbul with the participation of UN Secretary General António Guterres, and an inspection commission was established with the participation of Russia-Ukraine and Türkiye, and the shipment of Ukrainian grain to the countries in need was realized. However, Türkiye's successful steps and the fact that it took a different path from other NATO members against Russia and did not participate in the sanctions, and as a result, its reputation in the eyes of the world in general and the gains it gained as a result, disturbed the Western allies to a certain extent (Isachenko, 2023). Ankara's effort to preserve the balance in the Black Sea has come to the fore as an indicator of the differences between Russia and the West. It remains to be seen how this policy will affect Ankara's security strategy within NATO.

On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposal to establish a natural gas hub in Türkiye in October 2022 brought about different debates. Due to the Western sanctions against Russia, Russia has started to use natural gas as a trump card against the West. On the one hand, the halt in natural gas deliveries to Europe has put many European countries, especially Germany, in trouble and pushed them to look for alternatives, and on the other hand, Russia has started to look for different ways to export the natural gas it produces. Putin's proposal was made to overcome these problems. After Putin's statement, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak stated that the road map for the project to establish a natural gas hub in Türkiye could be approved in the near future

and said, “*We hope that the project will be implemented in 2024*” (Vedomosti, 2022). Türkiye has also responded positively to the proposal to establish a gas hub. The planned gas hub in the Thrace region of Türkiye could help Türkiye become a central country in the energy sector (TASS, n.d.). While discussing the proposal for the establishment of the gas center in Thrace (Bloomberg, 2022), Ankara also begins to work on the necessary legal groundwork (haber365, 2024). Meanwhile, articles in some Western countries discuss Russia's potential to circumvent sanctions through its gas hub in Türkiye.

As mentioned above, Russia's proposal was generally welcomed positively in Türkiye. It is believed that this will further enhance energy cooperation with Russia, and that the establishment of a gas hub in Türkiye will contribute to the strengthening of the country by increasing its efficiency in the energy sector. If this project materializes, in our opinion, it could promote international cooperation in the energy field and make Türkiye a major player in regional energy trade. As the details of Russia's proposal emerge, a more comprehensive analysis will be possible. In any case, however, it should be borne in mind that Türkiye's room for maneuver will gradually shrink due to sanctions. Türkiye's sincerity towards the settlement process and its effective diplomacy have played an important role in the resolution of the problems. Russia's offer could mark a new era in international relations and strengthen Türkiye's role as an actor contributing to regional solutions. In this process, it is critical for Türkiye to act carefully and protect its interests.

Turkish diplomatic sources do not foresee a major change in the course of the war between Ukraine and Russia through 2024. These sources believe that Ukraine has been able to gain limited territorial gains despite Western support and that Russia has been unable to make the desired progress due to both military and economic problems. Moreover, this process is expected to continue in a similar manner until the presidential elections in the US on November 5, 2024 (BBC, 2023).

It can be seen that Türkiye's strategic position, with its location at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, has become more salient in the context of the economic difficulties caused by the Russian-Ukrainian War. Türkiye's pursuit of its national interests has also given it significant advantages in diplomatic and geostrategic maneuvering. Even in the face of the changing dynamics of the conflict, Türkiye has made successful strides in its foreign policy and security strategies. The balance of power between the West and Russia provided Türkiye with an opportunity to strengthen its position as a regional power outside both the West and the East. Türkiye's role in the Crimean crisis demonstrates the country's pursuit of greater strategic independence. Despite the passage of years, Türkiye continues to maintain relations with both the West and Russia, and in this way is moving closer to the global position it aspires to (Türkdoğan, 2023, p. 79; Dalay, 2022).

### **Instead of Conclusion**

The Russia-Ukraine war has been going on for two years and Türkiye has been acting decisively in line with the basic strategy since the beginning of the war. Due to its geographical location, it has assumed the role of an important mediator. By using diplomacy and neutrality effectively, it has taken important steps to put an end to this conflict and continues to work on this issue.

For now, Türkiye's primary security concerns lie in neighboring regions such as Syria and Iraq. Syria, in particular, remains a priority issue for Ankara. This is because Syria has become the center of the PKK under different names and with the help of foreign powers, especially the US. On the other hand, as a result of the internal conflicts in Syria, a significant number of refugees from both Syria and Iraq have arrived in Türkiye, placing a heavy burden on the country. Türkiye should follow a very careful policy and successfully exit from this issue, which may affect its economic, social and political future, without falling into certain traps.

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It would not be wrong to say that Türkiye's second most important security priority is the developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the Eastern Mediterranean, many complex issues such as an unresolved Cyprus problem, disputes between Türkiye and Greece over the islands, internal conflicts in Libya, and the sharing of the rich natural gas resources discovered in this region stand in front of the country.

These strategic priorities should be taken into account when considering Türkiye's importance in international relations and the repercussions of the war. Ankara's strategic moves not only affect its own security, but also regional stability.

Türkiye continues to move steadily in line with its core strategy. In the Russia-Ukraine war, Türkiye's geographical position brought it to the forefront as a mediator and its neutral policy during the war was effective and successful for Türkiye. From now on, Türkiye can take important steps to put an end to the conflict and gain from this war.

Türkiye's strategic role is to influence not only its own security but also regional stability. In this context, its diplomacy and policy of neutrality are important elements that not only protect the country against certain threats, but also contribute to its effective positioning in the international arena.

Türkiye's mediation role in the resolution of the war in Ukraine has increased its weight and responsibilities in international relations. In this process, it is important to consider how Türkiye's strategic moves can affect not only the current war but also the overall regional stability. In other words, Türkiye's diplomatic capabilities and policy of neutrality not only protect its own interests, but also stand out as a guarantee of regional peace and stability. In order to gain as a country as a result of the ongoing war, it is important to utilize strategic elements in an effective manner by keeping the balance in mind.

Türkiye has adopted a cautious attitude towards maintaining positive relations with both sides, taking into account the balance between the West and Russia, and seems to be inclined to continue to do so. Due to its traumatic experiences in the past, it aims to preserve its strategic autonomy by avoiding engaging in conflicts between great powers.

The instability and security problems surrounding the country in recent years confirm the correctness of Türkiye's policy in the face of this war. Its geographical location and economic difficulties support Türkiye's desire for the war to end as soon as possible. In conclusion, Türkiye's strategic position in the Ukraine-Russia war is very important and it seems to have gained the trust of both sides in this two-year conflict. Thanks to its mediation efforts and balanced diplomacy, it has created a positive perception among the parties and in the international arena. Its stance in this process has played and continues to play an effective role in contributing to the preservation of regional stability and the resolution of the conflict.

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