

# **TURKEY'S MEDIATION ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND EFFORTS TO REDUCE ACTIVE TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS: CASE OF WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE**

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## **Abstract**

Reducing the tensions is challenging on the parties' side, taking the initiative to mediate the conflicting parties. Contradicting interests of countries cause conflicts unexpectedly nowadays. Rather than negotiation, escalating conflict and war are chosen. While analysing current disputes, the battle between Russia and Ukraine directly or indirectly affected many countries. Taking a precaution is a good step towards peace. Nowadays, Turkey would like to take a diplomatic way to put conflicting sides to the negotiation table. It won't be only for a country's sake but the sake of all. Because without diplomacy and open talks, it is impossible to negotiate with states. Turkey took the first step to solve or cease the war between Russia and Ukraine. Why Turkey is a crucial country for the resolution of this war and Turkey's initiatives, motivation, goals and reasons to reduce the conflict will be analyzed.

Keywords: Conflict, Turkey, Region, World, Diplomacy, Negotiation

## **Introduction**

Mediation is always one of the essential methods of achieving peace in international relations. When the two parties fail to reach an agreement or their interests do not match, there is a possibility of conflict. Especially the effects of historical events and the sensitivity of these issues should not mislead anyone that there will be no conflict. In addition to historical events, nationalist movements and countries' interest clashes have increased the risk of conflict (Bercovitch, 1996, s. 1-2). Despite today's conditions and the political, social and economic difficulties caused by the pandemic, this does not mean that no country will experience conflict or put itself at risk. The combination of overlapping economic and social problems with political problems has created a new environment of unrest and conflict. The best example that can be given at this point is the example of Russia-Ukraine. At the same time, the conflict between these two countries directly or indirectly affected many countries (Horobin, 2022). Such conflicts have triggered the possibility of other states entering into conflict or war.

Even though the conditions are harsh, the international community must take the initiative in such times, rein in the conflicting parties, and provide an environment of peace. Today's wars, border tensions, and conflicts of interest show that the international community chooses to be inadequate or take sides on specific issues in such times. In such periods, some countries may take the initiative on their own and take a step towards peace. In particular, Turkey tries to act as a mediator in the international community due to its geographical location, diplomatic relations and the problems that conflicts may cause on its soil. Being a cultural and political bridge between East and West Turkey can create an excellent example of mediation in this challenging period

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(Akçapar, 2021, s. 32). It will be a good sign of the importance of diplomacy and agreement in international relations.

This mediation role that Turkey uses can reduce the conflict environment in neighboring countries and even help take a step towards an utterly lasting peace. Turkey can use this role well, develop better commercial and political relations, and become a more vital state in its region. Of course, together with the difficulty of Turkey's economic conditions and the political problems Turkey is currently experiencing with other countries, these steps can play an influential role in solving such issues. In other words, when Turkey reduces the problems in its region and maintains good relations with neighbouring countries, it will create a win-win situation.

### **Mediation Role of Turkey in International Relations Today**

From the past to the present, Turkey has not remained indifferent to the conflicts in its own region and has actively taken responsibility for the resolution of conflicts. Today, especially after 2000, Turkey has started to play a mediation role in a more individual way. Even if this moves Turkey away from its role as an international and more institutional mediator, Turkey is one of the countries that should not be underestimated in the field of mediation as it is an experienced country in the field of mediation and regional power (Kiraz, 2020, s. 236). Turkey's capacity to act as a mediator is also due to the political, social and cultural characteristics it has shared with the countries of the region for a long time. Such features increase the importance of Turkey in mediation.

Specifically, from the Balkans to the Middle East, Turkey can use this power to bring peace to the region as a mediator. While having good relationships, including commercial, political and cultural, mediation is applied easily. These features will decrease the possibility of conflict (Böhmelt, 2011, s. 38). Nowadays, Turkey is looking for options to mediate the Syrian government with the Syrian opposition, even though it has received bad reactions from Syrian opposition groups (Şahin, 2022). Turkey and Syrian governments didn't have remarkably good relationships since the beginning of the conflicts in Syria. It can be a good step for stabilizing the conflicts and solving the issues that occurred during the conflict, such as the migrant crisis, terrorism and so on.

Recently, border tensions have happened between Kosovo and Serbia. This event was widely covered in the Turkish media. The tension was described as 'second wave breaking' (Güçlüer, 2022). One of the reasons for this is especially due to Turkey's relations with the Balkan countries and its policy towards this region. It can be traced back to the Ottoman legacy, which created a cultural tie and traditional unity with the people in the Balkans (Paçaoğlu, 2020, s. 44). Of course, culturally, Turkey's soft power policy in the region caused this event to make headlines in the Turkish media. In any problem that may arise in this event, Turkey will potentially be one of the countries that undertake the role of mediator. In addition, Turkey's good economic relations with the region are among the reasons why it is one of the countries that want to establish peace in this region (Koç & Önsoy, 2018, s. 360-361). Any disagreement or conflict will be to the disadvantage of both the region and Turkey economically.

Among all of these conflicts, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has a different role. This conflict has a large area of influence, and countries are directly or indirectly affected by this conflict. The entry of Russia and Ukraine into the war as two states increases the dimension of tension and fear, as well as the destructive effects of the war.

## **Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Turkey's Role as a Mediator**

There have been conflicts between Ukraine and Russia since 2014. Today's events can be explained as the accumulation of approximately eight years of the historical process. On 24.02.2022, Russia declared war on Ukraine for invasion (Zinets & Vasovic, 2022). Although there were smaller-scale conflicts before, the conflict has reached a large point since this date. This event increases the destructive effect of the war. As a country close to the region, Turkey is among the countries that carefully follow the events.

The breaking point of the relations between Russia and Ukraine was experienced in 2013 when Ukraine started the process of membership to the European Union. Former Ukrainian President Yanukovich stood against this decision and took a more pro-Russian stance (Smith-Spark, Gumuchian, & Magnay, 2014). After this event, the protests in Ukraine intensified. Yanukovich was dismissed after this incident; after that, he took refuge in Russia (BBC, 2014). This event triggered the uprising of the Russian minorities living in Ukraine, Russia's invasion of Crimea (Miller, 2014) and the desire of the Russian-majority Donbas regions in eastern Ukraine to unite with Russia (France-Presse, 2014). Until February 2022, there were conflicts and ceasefires in the region. After 24.02.2022, Russia and Ukraine entered the war at the state level. Russia blamed NATO and Western countries for provocation (Harding, 2022). Ukraine stated that Russia is threatening the people and land of Ukraine and that Russia intends to show its power to the world by realizing the invasion (Hughes, 2022).

The war's casualties are getting worse daily for both sides. In addition, destroyed cities and infrastructure, poverty and economic difficulties caused by the war, and the wave of migration are the results that emerged as a continuation of the war. These bad results have also affected other countries negatively, while the whole world is already trying to close the gaps created by the pandemic period. Countries opposing Russia preferred to impose an embargo on Russia rather than bringing the parties together and negotiating peace. Many types of embargo have been implemented against Russia, from the expulsion of Russian diplomats, the cutting of scholarships for Russian students, the confiscation of the properties of Russian businessmen, and the imposition of an embargo on those who sell Russian goods (Council of the European Union, 2022).

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenski emphasized the role and importance of the international community in this war process and stated that Russia poses a threat not only to Ukraine but also to European states (Dasgupta, 2022). In response, Russian President Vladimir Putin accused Europe of hypocrisy. According to Putin, the main responsible of these events is the EU states that caused provocation and did not try to find a solution (Amaro, 2022).

The countries that took the first steps in mediation were Belarus and Turkey. The first negotiations took place within the borders of Belarus. The first meeting happened on 28.02.2022, the second on 03.03.2022, the third on 07.03.2022 (Bloomberg HT, 2022). Turkey brought the parties together at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum on 10.03.2022 to prevent a second major migrant crisis and the safe delivery of food stocks (Aydogan, 2022).

The second meeting, mediated by Turkey, was also supported by the UN, and the main topic of this meeting was the safe transfer of grain stocks produced by Ukraine by sea (Tarhan, 2022). Turkey has taken this step towards mediation by targeting a possible food crisis. Even if the parties are at war, such steps are taken to prevent situations that may put each country at risk.

Ultimately, the grain corridor agreement was signed by the parties (Hurriyet Daily News, 2022). Grain stocks have been delivered to their addresses by sea as of 01.08.2022 (Bayar, 2022). As the second concrete step, Turkey has taken an important step by finding an issue that may be to the detriment of both sides and by ensuring that the parties agree on this issue.

One of the reasons why these talks went well is that Turkey has good commercial and economic relations with these two countries and that Russia and Ukraine find Turkey more reliable and responsible than other states or international organizations. If Turkey chose a side, it could put itself in economic difficulties and weaken its existing relations. Supporting the Ukrainian side means staying close to the West but yielding to Russian sanctions; supporting the Russian side means confronting NATO and the UN in particular, facing the embargoes to be applied by the UN countries, and creating a handicap for Turkey for the problem of the island with Greece and the Cyprus problem. However, Turkey remained neutral and argued that the two sides should be reconciled. Turkish President Erdogan stated at the press conference that both states cannot be abandoned and that choosing sides will make peace more difficult (Işık & Gündoğan, 2022).

Belarus, like Turkey, is among the countries that undertake mediation. However, even though Russia and Ukraine were brought together three times for reconciliation by Belarus, sufficient steps could not be taken in these negotiations. In addition, Belarus supports and supplies Russia militarily. The statements of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko include an expression supporting Russian President Putin. Although he stated that Ukraine should make peace with Russia, on the one hand, he could not get a positive approach from Ukraine. An example is that Belarus celebrated Ukraine's Independence Day, but Ukraine defined this greeting as 'cynical' (Jones, 2022). This is a disadvantage in terms of ensuring peace and ending the war. Ensuring peace requires the conciliatory party not to take sides. If Belarus acts as a mediator like Turkey, the joint efforts of both Turkey and Belarus will accelerate the peace process.

Turkey wants to reconcile both countries through mediation and, at the same time, can express its wishes in this matter. Through its mediation role, the importance of the Crimea issue for Turkey has been revealed. President Erdoğan emphasized that Crimea is important for the independence of Ukraine. He stated that this region could not be under the control of Russia and defined the leaving of Crimea to Ukraine as a 'necessity of international law' (Euronews, 2022). The reason why Turkey focuses on the Crimean issue is because of the Crimean Tatar population living in the region. During the Ottoman period, good relations with the Crimean Khanate were developed, and the Crimea region became an important region for the Ottomans both militarily and commercially (Fisher, 1978, s. 8-9). Due to the old cultural-social relations with the Crimean Tatar people living in the region, Turkey looks after the interests of the Crimean Tatar People. Mustafa Abdulcemil Kırimoğlu thanked Turkey for this effort and emphasized that the Crimean Tatar people and the Republic of Turkey have always been one (Kaptan, 2022). Also, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan added, 'Ensuring the security and well-being of our Crimean-Tatar compatriots, who are among the indigenous peoples of Crimea, is also among Turkey's priorities...' (Euronews, 2022).

At this point, Turkey has clearly stated its own interests and presented reasonable reasons for the end of the war. In addition, it is a good diplomatic step for Turkey to gain the trust of both sides and asks for the elimination of its own concerns, especially regarding Crimea. Also, by pointing common problems that might leave countries under difficult circumstances, Russia and Ukraine are tried to get convinced. It is a good diplomatic tactic to bring these two countries to the negotiation table. Turkey has taken these steps so far in order to bring the parties closer to a ceasefire or peaceful environment day by day. Other developments to be experienced will show

over time how effective the steps taken are for peace.

## **Conclusion**

Although the international political environment is progressing under more difficult and challenging conditions day by day, it is now a necessity for some regional powers to take responsibility and try to establish a peace process in areas of conflict and disagreement. The war between Russia and Ukraine is just one example of this. Especially after the outbreak of this war, it is necessary to encourage the countries that have hostility between them and do not want to reach an agreement to conduct soft relations through mediation. Because the economic conditions that force people day by day can cause bigger crises exponentially with the start of other wars and conflicts, in order to ensure a sound diplomacy environment, more realistic approaches should be taken into account by not neglecting the possibility that war can always occur. Although the international community has heavily sanctioned, Russia has responded with similar sanctions. The manner of the international community on this issue should be more integrated towards both sides. At this point, some countries need to intervene and persuade both sides to negotiate.

At the moment, both Ukraine's and Russia's approach to Turkey is generally good. Keeping relations positive with both sides fasten the process of negotiation and peace-making initiatives. If other countries make the same efforts, at least a ceasefire can be allocated, perhaps a peaceful environment that is built on solid foundations later on.

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